Honor Bound: Renegotiating Debt and Family Ties
in Asian American Literature

BY

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DISSERTATION
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>I. INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Background</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Project Overview</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Conclusion</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON CHINESE AMERICAN IMMIGRATION</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Labor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Introduction: Exclusionary Immigration Laws</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Low-wage Labor Versus Salaried Labor</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Economic and Professional Divisions in the Chinese American</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. The Chinese American Family: A Legacy of Work</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Work, Debt, and Family</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>III. BECOMING A NEW WOMAN IN FIFTH CHINESE DAUGHTER AND THE WOMAN WARRIOR</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Introduction</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. From “Dutiful Little Girl” to Independent Worker in Fifth</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Chinese Daughter</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Daughter Versus Mother in The Woman Warrior</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. The Myth of the American Dream in The Woman Warrior</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IV. DESTRUCTIVE DEBTS AND BROKEN FAMILIES IN FAE MYENNE NG’S

   BONE

   A. Introduction
   B. Breaking Free from the Ethnic Enclave and Chinese American Parents in Bone
   C. The Sisters’ Contrasting Responses to Debt
   D. Redefining Gender Roles through Work in Bone
   E. Conclusion

V. MORALITY AND THE RESTORATIVE NATURE OF DEBT IN TYPICAL AMERICAN

   A. Introduction
   B. The Pursuit of the American Dream and Identity Formation in Typical American
   C. The Failure to Be “American” in Typical American
   D. Unpaid Debts and Fractured Relationships in Typical American
   E. Conclusion

VI. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON KOREAN AMERICAN IMMIGRATION AND LABOR

   A. Immigration Laws for Korean Americans
   B. From College-educated Professionals to Model Minority Entrepreneurs
   C. Why Korean Americans Become Ethnic Entrepreneurs
   D. Interracial Tensions: Korean Americans and African Americans
E. African Americans’ Boycotts of Korean Americans’ Stores 189

F. Interracial Tensions: Korean Americans and White Americans 192

VII. MASCULINITY, FATHER FIGURES, AND DEBT IN NATIVE SPEAKER AND THE FRUIT N’ FOOD

A. Introduction 196

B. Opposing Responses to Debt in Native Speaker and The Fruit
   n’ Food 201

C. Role Models and Masculinity in Native Speaker and The Fruit
   n’ Food 209

D. The Diversity of American Dreams 217

E. The American Failure Story 229

F. Interracial Conflicts and The Struggle for Agency in The Fruit
   n’ Food 257

G. Conclusion 273

VIII. CLOSING STATEMENTS 277

IX. CITED LITERATURE 282

X. VITA 290
SUMMARY

My dissertation, *Honor Bound: Renegotiating Debt and Family Ties in Asian American Literature*, focuses on how symbolic debt in the context of the family impacts the Asian American individual. I focus on Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, Gish Jen’s *Typical American*, Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone*, Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker*, and Leonard Chang’s *The Fruit n’ Food*. First-generation Asian American parents believe that the American dream can be achieved through the model minority stereotype. I argue it is impossible to completely adhere to the model minority ideal; it is impossible to be completely self-sufficient and the strong work ethic has an overwhelming emotional and physical toll. The parents’ inability to adhere to this ideal produces a debt: the parents are dissatisfied with their lives in America, so their children are obligated to fill the void by becoming more successful model minorities, but this expectation is also impossible to fulfill.

The immigrant family’s dynamics revolve around conflicts regarding the best way to pursue the American dream. The parents’ love for their children is contingent on their children’s devotion to repayment of the debt. While the children may strive for their parents’ approval, they resent the contingency of their parents’ love for them, and view their parents as unfair for pressuring them to honor their debts. The authors demonstrate how the model minority stereotype does not work for the parents or the children, because it makes them feel alienated, unfulfilled, and unhappy, whether or not they become successful. The self-sufficient nature of the model minority makes it more difficult for these people to honor their debts to each other, especially when the children mistakenly believe their parents do not need the emotional support
that they pressure their children to provide. Since the parents “sacrifice” themselves in their work so that their children will have better lives in America, the children feel indebted to their parents. Without this sense of indebtedness, the children would not feel obligated to obey their parents or do the work that their parents want them to do
Chapter One: Introduction

Background

“Honor thy father and thy mother” is the fourth of the Ten Commandments. Jews believe that honoring one’s parents is comparable to honoring God. Catholics believe that obeying this Commandment will bring prosperity to the child who honors his or her parents, while dishonoring them will bring negative consequences to both the child and society as a whole, especially if other people also dishonor their parents. There are several ways to honor parents, including supporting them in their old age, while also expressing gratitude for what the parents have done for their children, thus setting up a sense of indebtedness on the children’s behalf. Breaking this Commandment is viewed as sinful and as a crime. Although the characters in the novels I will discuss in this dissertation are not Catholic or Jewish, they do feel as if they have committed a serious wrongdoing, even a crime, by dishonoring their family, especially if they dishonor their parents.

In my dissertation, I will focus on Jade Snow Wong’s memoir *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945), Maxine Hong Kingston’s novel *The Woman Warrior* (1976), Gish Jen’s novel *Typical American* (2008), Fae Myenne Ng’s novel *Bone* (1993), Chang-rae Lee’s novel *Native Speaker* (2008), and Leonard Chang’s novel *The Fruit n’ Food* (2010). The authors illustrate the myth of both the model minority stereotype and the American dream. First-generation Asian American parents believe that the American dream can be achieved through their emulation of the model minority stereotype, which is why they also pressure their children to become model minorities. The authors demonstrate how the second-generation Asian Americans realize that their parents misrecognize what it means to be an American; they mistakenly think that accumulating material wealth and achieving professional success is enough. They do not realize that it is impossible to
completely adhere to the model minority ideal. It is impossible to be completely self-sufficient (a trait that characterizes model minorities) and the strong work ethic (another trait) takes an overwhelming emotional and physical toll on the people who try to adhere to it. The parents’ failure to adhere to this model minority ideal produces a debt: the parents become dissatisfied with their lives in America, so their children are obligated to fill the void by becoming more successful model minorities than their parents, but this expectation is also impossible to fulfill.

The immigrant family’s dynamics revolve around conflicts regarding the best way to pursue the American dream. The parents want their children to work hard and become more successful than them. They want their descendants to stay faithful to their cultural heritage while also taking advantage of American opportunities. The children want to take advantage of American opportunities and become American. In some of these texts, the parents’ love for their children is contingent on their children’s devotion to repayment of the debt. While the children may strive for their parents’ approval, they come to question and resent the contingency of their parents’ love for them, and the authors demonstrate that the parents are unfair for pressuring their children to honor their debts to them. The authors demonstrate how the model minority stereotype does not work for the parents or the children. It makes them feel alienated, unfulfilled, and unhappy, whether or not they become successful. The self-sufficient nature of the model minority makes it more difficult for these people to honor their debts to each other, especially when the children mistakenly believe that their parents do not need the emotional support that they pressure their children to provide. There is also a contradiction between the model minority upbringing and the issue of debt: it is impossible to be self-sufficient if you are in debt.

It is important to look at what people “owe” their families, and explain how this sense of indebtedness affects their relationships as well as their own self-perceptions. When children
become dishonorable by disobeying or dishonoring their parents, their “value” as children decreases, at least according to their parents. The “honorable” thing for children to do is honor the terms of their debt, which includes doing the following things: obey their parents, value the latter’s labor and sacrifices, which includes recognizing that the children’s lives would be drastically worse without that labor and those sacrifices, and achieve their parents’ American dream by becoming model minorities. By challenging this sense of indebtedness, the children do not necessarily feel “bound” to their families: they do not feel obligated to obey their parents or do the work that their parents want them to do. On the other hand, it would be dishonorable for the first generation to ignore their obligations to their family. When one or both parents focus more on their own needs and desires than on the needs of the family as a whole, the parents are portrayed as selfish and immoral. Their actions also strain their relationships with their kids, who see these parents as hypocritical and selfish when the latter treats the ties that bind them as a one-sided debt that sets terms that only the children have to abide by and validate the parents’ authority and worth as workers. In the novels I will analyze, the Asian American family is the stand-in for the larger Asian American culture, because when these people do not completely adhere to the terms of their debts to their families, they feel like they are rebelling against their Asian culture, which their parents perceive as a betrayal and a rejection of their cultural heritage and the parents themselves. This sense of being “bound” to honor their debts often ends up making second-generation Asian Americans feel trapped within their own families and their Asian culture. Debt and honor can also cause relations to deteriorate when people do not feel that they can or want to meet the terms of that debt, even if it means becoming “dishonorable” to their families or threatening the family’s sense of honor as a whole.
“Bound” has a double meaning, because it makes the children feel as if they are held back by their parents’ expectations for them, which is why some of them, like Jade Snow, Kingston’s narrator, the daughters in Bone, and Henry Park in Native Speaker attempt to reinvent themselves by creating new, “better” expectations for who they could be in America, even if it means risking losing their parents’ love and approval and becoming “dishonorable” children. The other meaning of “bound” is that this “bond” is created by a sense of indebtedness and honor, which makes family members feel connected to each other. Without it, they feel lost, alienated, and disconnected from their family. That is why model minority workers like Theresa Chang in Typical American and Thomas Pak in The Fruit n’ Food, though burdened by the pressures of honoring their obligations to their families, nevertheless sacrifice themselves in their work in order to maintain that connection. Theresa and Thomas feel invisible and marginalized in an American society that refuses to recognize them as “real” Americans, which is why their place in their families becomes even more important to them. This family connection validates their work and their sense of self.

First-generation Asian American parents reject the concept of economic individualism, which entails individuality and autonomy, specifically the power to control your own economic decisions, rather than have those choices be controlled by outside forces, like the government or the community. Many first-generation Asian American parents, including the ones in the novels I will analyze, fail to understand the concept of self-interest, because they still value the community-oriented and family-oriented culture of their native countries, which puts the needs of the community (i.e., the family) above the needs of the individual. They can’t achieve economic individualism unless they are willing to uphold the importance of self-interest above everything else. Indebtedness is based on the idea that you sacrifice your own self-interest in
order to fulfill the needs or desires of other people that you are indebted to, which in this situation is your family, especially your parents. In other words, in order to be a successful capitalist, you have to adhere to the ideals of economic individualism, which takes children away from their families. Specifically, in order to succeed in the United States, the young people must detach themselves from their parents by leaving them and prioritizing their own interests and concerns over their parents, even if it means “dishonoring” them. Honoring the older generation is less important than achieving the American dream of material wealth, elevated professional status, and inclusion in the larger American society. The parents want their offspring to be fully committed to them, but they also want them to achieve the American dream, especially if the parents are not able to do it themselves. They do not understand how their children’s professional or personal interests could conflict with their families’ interests. The failure to understand economic individualism prevents these people from achieving the American dream. Most of the children try to become model minorities, but they fail whether they try or not. Therefore, the novels I will analyze in this dissertation all portray the way that debt is about both generations’ struggle to fit in and what that struggle means in America. Since the parents failed to fit in, they pressure their children to fit in, but only by becoming model minorities, which prevents the children from fitting in. The problem with being a model minority in America is that it classifies these people as separate, different, and “not-quite American,” because of their self-sufficient status and their racial identities.

The concept of the model minority was developed in 1966 by the writer and sociologist William Petersen. They do not understand how their children’s professional or personal interests could conflict with their families’ interests. The failure to understand economic individualism prevents these people from achieving the American dream. Most of the children try to become model minorities, but they fail whether they try or not. Therefore, the novels I will analyze in this dissertation all portray the way that debt is about both generations’ struggle to fit in and what that struggle means in America. Since the parents failed to fit in, they pressure their children to fit in, but only by becoming model minorities, which prevents the children from fitting in. The problem with being a model minority in America is that it classifies these people as separate, different, and “not-quite American,” because of their self-sufficient status and their racial identities.

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The concept of the model minority was developed in 1966 by the writer and sociologist William Petersen. The model minority concept distinguished Asian Americans from “problem minorities” like African Americans, who were demanding equal rights during the civil rights

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1 Petersen wrote an article for The New York Times Magazine, titled “Success Story: Japanese American Style,” where he praised the work ethic and family-oriented culture of Japanese Americans. The concept of the model minority was also applied to Chinese Americans in a 1966 article for the U.S. News and World Report.
movement. The implication of this concept was that if Asian Americans could become self-sufficient and successful despite marginalization and lack of aid from the government and other outside sources, other minority groups should be able to do the same as well. Years later, “the model-minority myth arose as an effective tool for legitimating the dismantling of affirmative action and welfare programs in the conservative 1980s. Asian Americans were trotted out, as demonstrated by the appropriately derisive language of Aiiiiiiieeee!, as ‘miracle synthetic white people,’ who, to cite the report’s third factor, were ‘unaggressive’ and were achieving the American dream through self-reliant pluck rather than agitating for rights” (Bascara 4). The problem with the phrase “miracle synthetic white people” is that “this association with whiteness is thrust upon them and may not ever be perceived as equality” (Rhee 159). No matter how “successful” these model minorities became, they were not recognized as equals to white American people, especially because they could not “blend in” as easily as other immigrant groups who were formerly identified as “not white,” like Jews or Italians. Their racial identities permanently marked them as “not white,” unlike these other immigrants, and white Americans assumed that these Asian Americans were less likely to assimilate to American culture.

No matter how successful the parents are (or aren’t), they fail to become model minorities, because the model minority ideal is impossible to achieve. Victor Bascara notes how the development of the model minority changed the way Asian Americans were viewed, because “from the 1890s to the 1980s, Asian difference goes from being a peril that should be excluded and exploited to being the imperiled that should be incorporated, uplifted, apologized to, and at times, literally healed. The transition from menace to model minority conveniently rendered state power not only legitimate but benevolent” (xxii). Although they seemingly credit Asian Americans for succeeding in the United States due to ambition and a strong work ethic, white
Americans also claim credit for model minorities’ success by making it seem as if the former laid the foundations that made this success possible. The model minority allows himself or herself to be exploited by capitalism, and thus the model minority does not change or challenge racial or economic inequality but rather preserves it. The model minority ideal is dehumanizing. It is impossible to be completely self-sufficient, because everyone needs help from other people in order to succeed, whether it is through financial assistance or physical labor that people perform for each other. Everyone also needs emotional intimacy and a sense of belonging. Without these things, people feel lost, alienated, and unhappy, and even material wealth and professional success are not enough to alleviate or eliminate these emotions.

Nazlia Kibria claims that one way second-generation Asian Americans define themselves is according to the image of the model minority, because “young Asian Americans may experience the model minority stereotype as an idealized and evaluative yardstick of achievement…Since these standards are inevitably generalized and imagined, one could almost inevitably come up short against them…This negative comparison then contributes to the student’s sense of personal failure, of not living up to expectations for Asians” (135-136). There are model minorities in all of the novels I will analyze, yet becoming a model minority fails to completely fulfill these people. Instead, they realize how limited the model minority is, because it not only continues to designate them as minorities (which emphasizes their sense of being outsiders) but also requires them to be subordinate to the (white American) majority. As model minorities, Asian Americans feel pressured to “establish themselves as respectable and achieving. They had also accommodated to the community, making sure not to appear threatening or challenging it in any manner. Rather than flaunt or display ethnic difference, they had tried to make themselves inconspicuous, to blend in” (Kibria 35-36). Another characteristic
is that they are self-sufficient, which often makes it more difficult for parents to relate to their children, because the emphasis is on the work that both the parents and the children do (particularly, the value of the work that they contribute to the family, as well as the ways that they value each other’s work), not on love. Second-generation Asian Americans, like Henry in Native Speaker and the narrator in The Woman Warrior, typically describe their parents as too cold, unloving, strict, or demanding, which alienates them from their parents. Their parents, on the other hand, believe that they demonstrate their love for their children through their work.

The identity of the model minority is shaped by work, and work shapes the debts that family members have to each other. The children are expected to repay their debts by following their parents’ examples and becoming model minorities or by becoming the successful model minorities that their parents failed to be. The children must continue to honor their debts to their parents by valuing the latter’s labor and sacrifices. Failure to honor their debts makes the children seem selfish, uncaring and a threat to the unity of the family as a whole. Since the parents “sacrifice” themselves in their work so that their children will have better lives in America, the children feel indebted to their parents. Without this sense of indebtedness, they would not feel obligated to obey their parents or do the work that their parents want them to do. The choices that the children make regarding work reflect the ways that they negotiate this problem. The younger generation chooses work over family or family over work when deciding whether or not to repay their debts to their parents. The Asian American family is the stand-in for the larger Asian American culture. When these people do not adhere to the terms of their debts to their families, they feel like they are rebelling against their Asian culture. Thus, these cultural conflicts develop due to family members’ different attitudes towards work and debt.
I argue that work is about fulfilling moral and economic obligations to one’s family, such as the Asian American immigrants who work to provide their children with a better life. The older generation connects their children’s “obligations” to economic debts. Family members are not literally indebted to each other, but there is a history of viewing parent-child relationships in economic logic. For example, “in the secular world, morality consists largely of fulfilling our obligations to others, and we have a stubborn tendency to imagine those obligations as debts” (Graeber 19). The refusal or failure to pay those debts, therefore, is “immoral” because it signifies selfishness and weakness. Debt is a way to study economic rationality and its effects on family dynamics and people’s sense of honor. Social relationships are not about money; they’re about a different kind of indebtedness. Asian Americans repay, refuse to repay, or renegotiate their debts to each other through their work.

Several of the parents, like Mr. Park in Native Speaker and the Rhees in The Fruit n’ Food, raise their children to become model minorities, believing that this identity is the best that Asian Americans can hope for and that it will be the best way for the children to achieve the American dream, especially if the parents failed to make the dream come true for themselves. Although the parents suffer due to racial and economic discrimination, they still believe in the ideals promoted by the American dream, which promises that an American education and a strong work ethic are all that people need in order to succeed. Model minorities are already characterized for working hard, and the parents work harder than the children in order to ensure that the latter will have an American education. The parents also believe that if the children try to break free from the model minority stereotype, they will be more likely to negatively affect other Americans’ perceptions of Asian Americans even more; the children will have fewer job opportunities due to their refusal to accept the status quo; the children’s rebellion will destabilize
or discredit the success the parents have already achieved in America. This added pressure regarding the American dream makes the children feel even more bound to their parents, because they feel like they are failed “Americans” and failed model minorities when they cannot make that dream come true.

The texts I will discuss in this dissertation all contend that it is unfair and misguided for the parents to pressure their children to conform to this identity, which sets the children up for a lifetime of subordination, disillusionment, and dissatisfaction with their work, social status, and the American dream. Also, the children have already witnessed the negative effects that the model minority identity had on their parents. The first-generation requires their children to honor their debts to them, no matter how flawed the parents are and regardless of how negatively it affects the children’s own needs and desires. I argue that the choices that the children make regarding work reflect the ways that they negotiate this problem. They make these choices because they have more choices than their parents did, who were held back by exclusionary immigration laws, racial discrimination, language barriers, and struggles with assimilation. The second generation does not have to deal with these problems to the same extent or at all. They also make these choices because they want to be free of their parents’ control, which they feel prevents them from pursuing their own desires or suppresses who they really are in favor of who their parents want them to be. The more professional options the children have, the less willing they are to pay the debt, partly because they feel that they do not have to pay the debt once they achieve economic independence apart from their parents. The younger generation cannot refuse or fail to pay the debt and still maintain close ties with their families, because the only way they can remain connected to them is by honoring the debt through their own work or by upholding the value of their parents’ work, which determines how much authority their parents have over
them. When the children refuse or fail to honor their debts to their parents, they feel lost or isolated, and they typically resent or look down on their parents for failing to claim this identity, or for pressuring their children to claim this identity.

Gish Jen reflects on the conflict between the self that finds meaning in the fulfillment of individual desires and the self that finds meaning in the sacrifice of those desires: “I think we all need to feel this tension to a degree: between an independent self that finds meaning in the truth within, and to whom rights and self-expression are important, and an interdependent self that finds meaning in affiliation, and duty, and self-sacrifice” (3). In the novels that I discuss in my dissertation, the main characters feel torn between this “independent self” (the economic individual who is motivated by self-interest) and the “interdependent self” that is bound to their family (in many Asian cultures, including Chinese culture and Korean culture, what is best for the family is often more important than what the individual wants), cultural heritage, and especially their families, which functions largely due to the members’ “sense of affiliation, duty, and self-sacrifice.” When family members, particularly the children, no longer feel bound to the interdependent self, their bonds to their own family weaken and in some cases are irreparably severed altogether. The struggle between the independent self and the interdependent self is parallel with the second-generation’s dilemma on whether or not to conform to the guidelines of the model minority. If they conform to these guidelines, they not only submit to their parents’ control and idea for who they should be (since their parents want them to become model minorities) but also to America’s authority and idea for the “acceptable” identity for Asian Americans (i.e., the model minority).

The family dynamic of debt negatively affects the children more than the parents, because the children struggle with the moral dilemma of whether or not to repay that debt. This
one-sided view of debt works in the parents’ favor, and this debt has a controlling influence on both generations’ work and relationships. The younger generation deals with their desires to claim an American identity and their parents’ demands that the children stay faithful to Asian cultural values while achieving the American dream. Though the debt can never be fully repaid, what matters is that the children recognize the debt’s importance. Doing so reinforces their parents’ importance and control over their children’s lives and identities. While the children may strive for their parents’ approval (they associate their parents’ approval with their parents’ love, because when the parents disapprove of them, the former withdraws emotionally or physically from the children, making the latter feel unloved and disconnected from their families), they come to question and resent the contingency of their parents’ love for them.

There are “right” and “wrong” ways to achieve the American dream, which are connected to the “right” and “wrong” way to deal with family relationships, which are controlled by debt. The “right” way means that workers have to follow the rules that are set for them by their bosses, and they have to be careful not to disturb the status of the people in power. Thus, many white Americans and first-generation Asian Americans believe that the “right” way to achieve the American dream is for the latter to become model minorities, though as my analysis will show, the “right” way has the wrong effect on family relationships and the members’ sense of obligation towards each other. The “right” way also includes paying off one’s debts. People who accumulate large debts are perceived negatively because of their inability or refusal to pay, and they are viewed as irresponsible or selfish for accumulating the debts in the first place. Thus, paying off their debts is crucial to maintaining a positive social image, because it shows that they

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2 “Therefore, a minority individual’s sense of alienation results not only from rejection by the dominant culture but also rejection of parental strictures. Minority parents’ own fear of losing their cultural heritage is intensified by the fear of losing their children to the ‘foreign’ culture, and therefore they insist with greater vehemence on their children’s acceptance of family traditions and Old World ties” (Ling 123).
are willing to honor their obligations to other people. The ability to pay off one’s debts indicates that their work has produced enough prosperity to enable them to pay off debts. The “wrong” way includes breaking the law or deceiving and hurting people in order to get what you want. The wrong way also includes avoiding repayment of your debts or accumulating more debts. The status you hold, the work you do, and public opinion of you are much more significant than how much money you have.

The authors that I will focus on all demonstrate that pursuing the American dream in the “right” way still results in disillusionment, alienation, and fractured relationships with family members. For some of the characters in these books, doing everything they were supposed to do, including honoring their debts to their families and becoming model minorities, isn’t enough to make the American dream come true for themselves. The fact that the American dream falls short of their expectations is something that happens to a lot of people, yet first-generation Asian Americans, like other immigrants, have a larger stake in the American dream. They took a risk by starting new lives in America. Their dreams of success were not just for them. Their families back home also relied on those dreams and expectations, and the immigrants are motivated by plans for their own children too. Therefore, when these immigrants fail to achieve the American dream or fail to become model minorities, their families suffer as well. Furthermore, first-generation Asian Americans face obstacles that native-born Americans do not necessarily have to face, such as the language barrier, conflicts with other minorities, cultural assimilation, sweatshop labor, and conflicts with their second-generation children. The depictions of model minorities in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, *The Woman Warrior*, *Typical American*, *Bone*, *Native Speaker*, and *The Fruit n’ Food* appear to uphold the ideals of the American dream and the model minority stereotype, but the reality of their situation undermines the dream as well as the
notion of the model minority. Many Asian Americans, such as Theresa and Ralph in *Typical American* and Mr. Park and John Kwang in *Native Speaker*, elevate their economic and professional status, but their identities as Americans (without “Asian,” “Korean,” or “Chinese” preceding “American”) continue to be denied. Bascara points to the problem with the American dream, which is that “American culture does not want the rest of the world to become American as such, but rather to become individuals in a world ordered by American ideals” (11).

America’s success relies on capitalism, which upholds the myth that anyone can become a successful capitalist, while obscuring the reality that only a select few will ever achieve complete success at the expense of all the other workers who are exploited.

The parents are not indebted to their children, but they do feel obligated to provide for them. This obligation is like an investment, with the expectation that the parents will see a return on their investment once their offspring become model minorities. Erin Khue Ninh focuses on the parents’ threat of “disownment”: when the children refuse or fail to obey their parents and live up to the latter’s standards, the parents threaten to disown them. Although I agree that the children are afraid of losing their parents’ approval, what should also be considered is what happens when the children disown (or threaten to disown) their parents by refusing to honor the debts that their parents lord over them or liberate themselves from their parents’ control by challenging the terms of those debts. Ninh discusses the ways that first-generation Asian Americans like Brave Orchid in *The Woman Warrior* use the threat of disownment as a way to control their children’s behavior: “The mother’s warning is an ultimatum in the sense that living under the threat of disownment is always already an ultimatum: behave or be disowned…Couched in these terms, disownment becomes an aggrieved family’s response to a wayward child’s wrongdoing, and Maxine’s sexual conduct is entered into an equation whereby,
in wreaking destruction upon herself, she will also bring harm to her family and oblige the family to injure her in order to preserve itself” (79). Ninh’s focus on the family’s control over their daughters’ sexuality is certainly pertinent but not the only thing that should be considered, especially since the parents do not use the threat of disownment for transgressive sexual behavior on their sons in the same way that they do towards their daughters. While sexuality plays an important role in identity formation, what is also important to both generations’ identity formation are work and how it is connected to the debts that shape family relationships.

Work is connected to debt because one thing that the first-generation and second-generation Asian Americans have in common is the controlling influence that the American dream has on their lives, and work is central to that dream. Lisa Lowe states that the pursuit of the American dream helps establish immigrants as citizens, because “it is through the terrain of national culture that the individual subject is politically formed as the American citizen: a terrain introduced by the Statue of Liberty, discovered by the immigrant, dreamed in a common language, and defended in battle by the independent, self-made man” (2). American immigration laws have a history of imposing racial identity on minority immigrants, especially Asian immigrants. In the novels I will discuss, the people’s racial identities are connected to their struggles and limitations as workers, because their racial identities are important determining factors on whether or not they succeed in America. Since the main characters’ lives revolve around work, their primary conflicts revolve around work and their attitudes towards the debts that they owe to their families, particularly their parents. I also argue that through their work and their interactions with other people, such as employers, customers, coworkers, white people, and African Americans, the Chinese American and Korean American workers learn what their

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3 The basis of the American dream is that anyone can become successful and elevate his or her social status, yet as my discussion of these texts will show, this dream is an unfulfilled myth for most first- and second-generation Chinese Americans and Korean Americans.
“place” is in America, which affects their perceptions of their racial identity and the model minority stereotype. Although the fact that these people are Asian Americans still plays an important role in their identity formation, their work and what class they belong to also need to be studied in order to get a fuller understanding of who these people are and what the authors are saying about their situations. Due to pressures to assimilate or be authentic, economic and racial constraints, and difficult work conditions, “success stories” are rewritten as “failure stories” in *Fifth Chinese Daughter, The Woman Warrior, Typical American, Bone, Native Speaker,* and *The Fruit n’ Food.* These books demonstrate how work, debt, family ties, and racial identity are all interpreted differently, depending on the historical context, the socioeconomic positions of the authors’ characters, and the work that the latter does. Even when the people do succeed, they are forced to make sacrifices that change who they are. The conflicts that the main characters in these novels face show that they cannot all be identified under a singular definition of what it means to be American or successful, because each of the characters define identity and success on their own terms, which contradict the notions of the dominant culture that attempts to identify and define all of them as if they were the same. Although the characters are discriminated against and mistreated because of their racial identities, nevertheless they would still be happier with their work if their work was what they wanted to do or if it made them more successful. Asian Americans are not the only people who want to make the American dream come true, but as these novels show, Asian Americans’ status as model minorities and immigrants complicate their pursuit of this dream and their attitudes towards debt and honor. The work that people do and the jobs that they want reveal what is most important to them and what they want their lives to be like. Race, identity, and family relationships evolve because of work.
Amy Ling asserts that “since racial characteristics have an immediate visual impact, race has always played a more significant role in the lives of minorities in white America than class. Thus, the experience of an upper-class Chinese émigré in white America is closer to that of a working-class American-born Chinese American than to that of any white person” (14). It is true that Asian Americans can relate to each other through their experiences with racism, prejudice, and discrimination from the rest of American society (particularly white Americans), and it is true that race continue to be an integral part of Asian Americans’ identity. For example, “that recent immigrants feel a sense of alienation and strangeness in a new country is to be expected, but when American-born Chinese Americans, from families many generations in the United States, are asked where they learned such good English, they too are made to feel foreign and alien” (Ling 105). Nevertheless, the racial solidarity between “an upper-class Chinese émigré and a working-class American-born Chinese American” is compromised by their class differences, which are marked by the differences in their lifestyles, economic status, and professions. Furthermore, “there’s a huge gap between those two groups of people, and at its most basic level, it’s not about numbers or percentiles or even the stuff they can buy; it’s about the freedom that comes with a higher income” (Kurtzelben). Thus, people with white-collar jobs have the option to live an upper-class lifestyle (such as Ralph and Theresa in Typical American and Mr. Park in Native Speaker), whereas people with blue-collar professions (or jobs that are designated specifically for illegal immigrants due to their exploitative nature) have far fewer options, because they struggle just to survive on their meager wages. These concerns regarding money, survival, work, and class status make important contributions to Asian American identity.

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4 However, the level or the circumstances regarding discrimination and racism are often contingent on Asian Americans’ professions and economic status, because although a Chinese American sweatshop worker and a Chinese American doctor may both be viewed as “forever foreigners” (Tuan), the latter will still be viewed more favorably by the rest of American society, which values white-collar, legitimate, and lucrative work.
formation that should not be overlooked in an analysis of racial identity. Asian American immigrants come to the United States to earn more money and work better jobs than they could have gotten in their native countries. The immigrants who work in Chinatown sweatshops and the service industry and the Korean American ethnic entrepreneurs who work in low-income, mostly African American neighborhoods are often resigned to the fact that there is only so far they can go in America. It is not necessarily race that helps people achieve the American dream. There are many white people who remain poor and uneducated or are unable to find jobs that match their qualifications.\textsuperscript{5} The sweatshop workers, ethnic entrepreneurs, and white-collar professionals may all be (theoretical) model minorities, but their “success” is measured differently due to their work. The white-collar professionals like Theresa and Ralph are more “successful” model minorities than the low-wage workers like Mah and Leon, because the former’s success and work are validated by American capitalist society, and the latter’s are not. They share the strong work ethic and desire to become self-sufficient, but they also all end up feeling alienated and dissatisfied with their work and their status as model minorities.

What the majority of second-generation Asian Americans in these novels have in common is that although they pursue the American dream in different ways, their common goal is to be recognized as Americans, not as Chinese Americans or Korean Americans, because the latter emphasizes their ethnicity more than their nationality. They aspire to be recognized as American equals, and they believe that the way they can do that is through work and education. Others mistakenly think that by assuming the model minority identity, they will become more “American,” till they develop a deeper understanding of what it means to be a model minority and how it distinguishes them from other Americans whose nationality is not questioned. None of the main characters in these novels achieve their goal of being recognized as an American

\textsuperscript{5} However, no one questions the white people’s American identity, unless the latter speaks with a foreign accent.
equal or an active participant in the public sphere. Instead, most of them accept (or are forced to accept) the confines of the domestic, privatized sphere, and some of them even retreat back into the model minority stereotype that they initially tried to escape from.

What is evident in all of these novels is that when the characters lack an emotional connection with family members, or when that connection is threatened, the characters subsequently feel alienated, resentful, or lost. Whether or not they are able to reestablish that connection with the people in their lives says as much about their personalities and attitudes towards debt and honor as it does about what they are and are not willing to do to achieve the American dream and conform to the model minority stereotype. The characters’ professional choices also reflect their decision on whether or not to honor their debts and repudiate their personal ties to their families, communities, or heritage. Some characters’ sacrifices for each other are contrasted with other characters’ selfish betrayals of each other. Their parents pressure them to achieve the American dream by becoming model minorities, making their relationships conditional yet they pressure their children to hold on to their Asian ideals. It is unfair for the parents to do this, especially when their love for their children should be unconditional. The parents feel this identity is necessary, and they think that making their children feel indebted to them is the only way that their children will stay bound to them and honor their parents’ wishes.

Ninh describes the “Asian immigrant family [as a] production – a sort of cottage industry, for a particular brand of good, capitalist subject: Get your filial child, your doctor/lawyer, your model minority here...What is it to leverage guilt or fear, to manufacture in a subject these very useful mechanisms of ingratitude or inadequacy?” (9). Ninh describes memoirists like Evelyn Lau and Catherine Liu who are driven to project their sense of “ingratitude or inadequacy” or rebel against the “guilt or fear” that their parents instill in them by dropping out of school,
running away from home, and becoming prostitutes or drug addicts. Lau and Liu resist the restrictions of the model minority identity that their parents try to force them to adhere to. I expand on Ninh’s analysis of the second-generation Asian American women’s resistance to include an analysis of both the first and second generations of Asian Americans, and Asian American men (specifically, Leon in *Bone*, Ralph in *Typical American*, John Kwang, Henry Park, and his father in *Native Speaker*, and Thomas and Mr. Rhee in *The Fruit n’ Food*) by explaining why the first generation typically aspires to become model minorities and why they pressure the second generation to follow their example. Ninh focuses on people who reject their debts to their families; I look at what happens when the children try to become model minorities, and I analyze how their success or failure affects their relationships with others, including their parents. I discuss the novels’ depictions of alternative ways to handle the model minority stereotype that do not include homelessness, drug abuse or prostitution.

**Project Overview**

My dissertation is divided into two sections: the first section is on Chinese American literature, and the second section is on Korean American literature. In the first chapter of the Chinese American literature section, I will provide a description of the history of Chinese American immigration and the jobs that they did when they arrived. I will provide details on the laws that discriminated against them, and I will explain why so many Chinese Americans went to work in the service industry and in sweatshops. I will also show how the inequality in the American workplace contributes to economic and social divisions within the Chinese American community and reinforces barriers between Chinese American workers and non-Chinese American workers. It is important to understand the background of these Chinese American immigrants and workers, in order to understand how and why first-generation Americans are
bound by their sense of duty to their families, which fosters a sense of indebtedness in their children. It is also important to understand the background of these immigrants and workers, in order to understand how the model minority stereotype affects them and why it is impossible to emulate this identity.

In the second chapter, titled “Becoming a ‘New Woman’ in Fifth Chinese Daughter and The Woman Warrior,” I will explain how the American dream defines the way the main characters in these books view themselves and their relationships with other people. It also helps them to liberate themselves from traditional gender roles for women and use their work as leverage to rebel against their culture’s (as represented by their first-generation Chinese American parents) definition of what women (specifically daughters and wives) should be. I will also address these issues: how do Fifth Chinese Daughter and The Woman Warrior address or define the value of Chinese women and their labor in both American and Chinese society, and why does the value seem to be much lower than what they think it should be? I will connect these issues of gender, labor, and racial identity to my overall theme of debt, with the Chinese parents in Fifth Chinese Daughter and The Woman Warrior as the creditors and their daughters as the debtors. How does being indebted to their parents affect these women’s views of the American dream or what it means to be Chinese, American, a worker, or all of these things?6

The upbringing of Jade Snow and Kingston’s narrator is paradoxical: their parents emphasize the importance of education and a strong work ethic, especially by setting an example

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6 “The American Protestant belief in individual responsibility gave rise to the gospel of success and the concept of the self-made man. ‘It was Anglo-Saxon Protestants,’ as Robert Bellah says, ‘who created the gospel of wealth and the ideal of success.’ The concept of the self-made man came to the fore in the Jacksonian years, Henry Clay first using the phrase in a Senate debate in 1832. Americans, countless opinion surveys have shown, believe that whether or not one succeeds in life depends overwhelmingly on one’s own talents and character. This central element of the American dream was perfectly expressed by President Clinton: ‘The American dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one – if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you’ (Huntington 70).
of both traits in their own lives, which characterize the well-educated, hard-working model minority who aspires to achieve the American dream. Jade Snow and Kingston’s parents also emphasize the superiority of Chinese culture over American culture, though they are willing to assimilate (and to let their children assimilate) to a certain extent. Both sets of parents tell their children that they will always be recognized as Chinese first in American society, regardless of their accomplishments, which reinforces the notion of the model minority, an identity that sets Asian Americans apart from other Americans and racializes them. The parents want their children to achieve the American dream, but they think the latter should be able to do this without letting go of the identity that their parents want them to have, not understanding that it is necessary for the children to focus on their individual desires (which Jade Snow and the narrator both do) in order to succeed. These parents make it clear that their children would not even be able to become successful were it not for the former’s support and work. Therefore, Jade Snow and the narrator, like the rest of their siblings, are made to feel indebted to their parents.

Kingston’s narrator and Jade Snow do not want to accept the terms of their debts to their parents, because they believe that doing so compromises who they are and forces them to give up the lives and careers that they want. Adhering to the terms of their debts to their parents pigeonholes them into singular identities, making them feel that their lives can only go in one direction. Challenging or rejecting the debts’ terms is both women’s attempt to redefine themselves and pursue different paths and opportunities. They mistakenly believe that by leaving the ethnic enclave and becoming college-educated workers, they will be recognized as Americans, not realizing until too late that their parents were right about the “separateness” of Asian Americans. Kingston and Wong demonstrate how in their attempt to break away from their debts, the narrator and Jade Snow do not find the American educational system and the
American workplace as liberating as they expected, and rather than be pigeonholed into the singular identity of the dutiful Chinese daughter, they become the model minority instead. It is impossible for them to completely adhere to the terms of the model minority ideal, because they feel alienated from white Americans and their families, and they realize that despite their academic achievements, they are discriminated against and exploited in the workplace.

In the third chapter in this section on Chinese American literature, “Destructive Debts and Broken Families in Bone,” when the daughters fail or refuse to meet all the terms of their debts, whether by leaving their parents behind or engaging in a forbidden romance and committing suicide, as is depicted in Ng’s novel, the children feel like they are being disloyal not only to their parents but also their Chinese heritage. In my analysis of Bone, I argue that unlike Jade Snow and Kingston’s narrator, who used their academic and professional success to renegotiate the terms of their debts to their parents, Mah and Leon’s children use their parents’ professional failures and limitations as justification for their refusal to pay their debts to them altogether. Both Mah and Leon fail in their attempts to become model minorities. They are like Brave Orchid, who expects her children to remain at home and value her labor while accepting her control over their lives. Mah and Leon’s status as exploited, low-wage workers defines their daughters’ views of them as well as their interactions with their daughters. As white-collar workers, Mah and Leon would not have had to toil in difficult work conditions for low pay, and they would not have expected their daughters to fill the void in their lives. Similar to Fifth Chinese Daughter and The Woman Warrior, Bone dispels the myth that hard work and education are all that people need in order to achieve the American dream. Ng’s novel illustrates the burden

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7 For example, in a confrontation with her parents regarding her right to go out with a male friend without their permission, Jade Snow emphasizes that her parents raised her to become a model minority (to receive an American education, excel academically, and become a self-sufficient worker), though her criticism of that upbringing is implicit. Her criticism of her parents relates to how the United States encourages Asians to be model minorities, but this identity restricts their freedom and status.
that second-generation Asian Americans like Leila, Ona, and Nina feel when they are pressured to provide their parents with the sense of belonging and validation that their parents do not get from the larger American society. The children also attempt to fulfill their desires, even if it means dishonoring their debts to their parents, but they end up feeling almost as lost, alienated, and bitter about their marginalized status in American society as their parents do.

In the following chapter, “Morality and the Restorative Nature of Debt in Typical American,” I argue that Gish Jen’s main characters, Ralph and Theresa Chang, ultimately recognize the restorative power of debt because of how honoring their debts to each other helps them to reconcile their differences. Similar to how Ng contrasts the three sisters’ responses to their debts to each other as a way to contrast the differences in the daughters’ personalities, values, and perceptions of their parents, Jen contrasts Ralph and Theresa’s values, personalities, and perceptions of honor and debt through their status as workers. Jen demonstrates how Ralph is indebted to his sister for introducing him to Helen, his future wife, and helping him to restore his academic career and his legal status in America. Both Ralph and Theresa become model minorities in that Ralph becomes a professor and Theresa becomes a doctor. Despite their professional success and material wealth, Ralph and Theresa feel dissatisfied with their status as model minorities, because they feel alienated in their workplaces, the white suburb that they settle in, and in their own families, which makes them unable to relate to most people and each other. Their so-called achievement of the American dream is not enough to make them happy, and instead it causes the ties that bind them to fray and threaten to break altogether.

Repayment of one’s debts means putting someone else’s needs before your own, which Ralph refuses to do because he becomes too self-centered and materialistic. Kingston’s narrator and Jade Snow find the terms of their debts to be too confining, whereas Theresa derives strength
from her sense of obligation to her family, because it helps her to maintain her connection to them. However, she abides by her role as the self-sufficient model minority a little too well, because she convinces her family that she does not need their emotional support. Their lack of understanding makes her feel isolated and disconnected within her family and home, which drives her into an affair with a married man, even if it means “dishonoring” her virtue. Ralph becomes weaker the more that he alienates himself from his family and rejects the terms of his debt to his sister. He personifies the notion of economic individualism. Self-interest and material gain become more important to him than debt and family unity.

As previously stated, the following section of my dissertation will focus on Korean American literature and will be divided into two chapters. The first chapter will provide a historical background on Korean American immigration. I will provide more information on the kind of work that Korean Americans did when they got to America, and I will compare their experiences in America to the experiences that Chinese American immigrants faced. I will then provide more details on ethnic entrepreneurship and explain why so many immigrants from Korea become entrepreneurs, despite their college degrees and professional experience. I will discuss their relations with white people and African Americans, and then I will provide information on the boycotts and the L.A. riots that occurred in the 1990s. It is important to include this information because several of the main characters in Native Speaker and The Fruit n’ Food are ethnic entrepreneurs whose work and identities as model minorities in America are strongly influenced by the boycotts, the L.A. riots, and the attitudes of white Americans and African Americans towards Korean Americans. The ways that ethnic entrepreneurs deal with all of these issues as well as their attempts to become model minorities (and their attempts to
pressure their children to follow their example) affects the second-generation Korean American children’s (particularly the sons’) views of them and defines their relationships with them.

In the second chapter of this section, “Masculinity, Father Figures, and Debt in Korean American Literature: *Native Speaker* and *The Fruit n’ Food,*” I will discuss the father figures and sons and their connections to debt, labor, and class, as exemplified through the relationship between Thomas Pak and Mr. Rhee in *The Fruit n’ Food* and John Kwang and Henry Park and Henry and his father in *Native Speaker.* Both novels emphasize the costs and the downside of the American dream, particularly the losses that the ethnic entrepreneurs suffer in their pursuit of material wealth and professional success: family, friends, and community. *Native Speaker* shows what Henry has to do in order to save himself and preserve his legal status in America: he has to betray John Kwang and the latter’s immigrant supporters, who are all forced to leave the country because of Henry’s betrayal. *The Fruit n’ Food* shows how Thomas’ refusal to betray the Rhees results in his own self-destruction, as well as the loss of their livelihood and any chance they had of making the American dream come true. My main argument in *Native Speaker* is that Henry feels more indebted to John Kwang than his own father, because although Mr. Park provided Henry with a suburban, middle-class lifestyle and a college education, John Kwang personified Henry’s masculine and professional ideal, which made Henry feel like he learned more from Kwang than he did from Mr. Park. Mr. Park’s passivity in his behavior around his rich white customers and his marginalized position in the public sphere reinforces his identity as a model minority. According to Mr. Park, the best Henry can hope for is to achieve a white-collar career without deviating from the confines of the model minority stereotype, similar to Theresa Chang in *Typical American.* Although Mr. Park achieves economic and professional success, his identity as a model minority is unfulfilling for him because his strong work ethic and self-
sufficient nature causes him to withdraw from all of his personal relationships, including with that of his wife, his son, and his friends, the latter of whom are also intent on becoming successful model minorities in America. Henry believes that he does not have to honor his debt to his father because of the latter’s self-sufficient nature, though as his narrative continues he comes to realize his father’s need for emotional and physical intimacy.

I interpret Henry’s work as a spy as a retaliation against his father and a rejection of his debt to Mr. Park. He spies on minority workers who are mainly on the same economic and professional level as his father, yet they deviate from the model minority stereotype, which puts them on the radar of shady companies like Glimmer and Company, Henry’s employer. As a model minority, Mr. Park taught his son not to rely on anyone, which showed that he did not trust anyone. Mr. Park is not the only one who becomes alienated and lonely as a result; Henry also inherits this sense of alienation and unhappiness in both his work life and his personal life, though he becomes the model minority in several ways, like his father, even though he does not become an ethnic entrepreneur. Similar to the daughters in Bone, Henry interprets his parent through the latter’s limitations and weaknesses as a worker, though unlike Leila, these limitations and weaknesses do not make him feel bound to his father, since unlike Mah and Leon, his father elevates his economic and professional status. In contrast, Henry emphasizes the importance of his role in Kwang’s campaign the more that he becomes invested in it. He believes that Kwang needs him in a way that his father never did; thus, Kwang’s success is due partly to the work that Henry does for him. Henry feels guiltier about his disloyalty to Kwang than to his father, because Kwang represents the type of worker that Henry wishes he could be. Ironically, Kwang’s failure in America is directly tied to Henry’s ultimate betrayal, when Henry chooses his own self-preservation over the preservation of his debt to Kwang, the latter’s work, and the lives
of the immigrants that rely on Kwang. Thus, Henry fails to honor his debt to Kwang, which was to remain loyal to him and keep his secrets, and Henry refuses to honor his debt to his father, which was to value his father’s hard work and recognize him as a man and a good father.

My main argument in my analysis of *The Fruit n’ Food* is that Thomas Pak, the Rhees’ surrogate son, is set up as a foil to the Rhees’ daughter, June, the latter whom they pressure to become a model minority. The Rhees’ American dream is to become successful entrepreneurs, and they hope that their daughter will excel in her studies and pursue the kind of white-collar career that neither of her parents could have in America due to language barriers, culture clash, and discrimination. June responds to their pressure by refusing to honor their debt and becoming a failed student instead, thus deviating from the model minority stereotype. In contrast, Thomas Pak feels indebted to the Rhees, particularly Mr. Rhee, despite the fact that they only provide him with a low-paying, backbreaking job. Thomas’ sense of indebtedness to Mr. Rhee causes them to develop an emotional bond, and he maintains that sense of indebtedness in order to combat his sense of alienation and dissatisfaction with his own life. Thomas comes to feel that his work and honoring his debt are essential to his parent-creditors’ survival and success as model minorities. June has a more apathetic attitude towards her parents’ situation and she resents the pressure they place on her to succeed, because it shows that their devotion towards their daughter is contingent on what they can gain from her success, not on what she wants for herself. Thomas risks his own life to protect them from antagonistic neighborhood residents, yet his attempts to honor his debt to them lead to the Rhees’ own downfall, specifically the loss and destruction of their store. Thus unlike the majority of the other second-generation Asian Americans that I discuss in my dissertation, Thomas has a more positive view of his debt to Mr. Rhee. When the Rhees’ business is destroyed by rioters, Thomas Pak identifies with their failure
and is physically and emotionally destroyed as well, due to his failed efforts to help and protect them. However, despite his failure, he is still portrayed as more moral and honorable than Henry Park, because unlike the latter, Thomas maintains his commitment to his debt and his father-creditor throughout the novel, even if it means sacrificing his own life and personal relationships, like the sexual relationship that he has with Jane.

**Conclusion**

What connects each of the chapters in my dissertation together is that all of these novels focus on family relationships, and these relationships are based on a debt that at least one or more of the family members expects one or more of the family members to repay. This indebtedness is rooted in the work that the family members do (or refuse to do) for each other. Work complicates people’s relationships with their families, because it can motivate their children to either work to repay their debts to their parents or their work can cause them to reject their debts, their parents, or their culture altogether. The majority of the second-generation Chinese Americans and Korean Americans in the novels that I will analyze are unwilling to accept the terms of their status as debtors to their parent-creditors, and they are more willing to defy, deny, or renegotiate those terms altogether, even if it means becoming “dishonorable.” The older and younger generations’ different circumstances, attitudes towards work, and work experiences define their relationships with each other. The first-generation Asian Americans work to support their families. Their work theoretically keeps the families together, though as my discussion of these texts will show, that is not always true. The second generation’s work pulls the family apart, partly because they leave their parents behind in order to work or because they develop values that are largely influenced by their observations of their parents’ work but also conflict with what their parents taught them about filial piety.
The characters’ work experiences shape their relationships with their families as well as their attitudes towards their debts to their families and their racial identities. All the authors that I analyze demonstrate how the characters’ refusal or failure to repay their debts or their renegotiation of the debts’ terms is directly related to the characters’ sense of self and purpose, as well as the strength of their family ties. The novels show the consequences of the model minority stereotype, which causes characters to feel alienated, unfulfilled, and unhappy, whether or not they become successful. This stereotype also makes people feel separate from other Americans, regardless of their professional and economic achievements, the latter of which are supposed to make the American dream come true for themselves and make them be recognized as Americans who are equal to other Americans whose nationality or citizenship is not questioned.
Section One: Chinese American Literature

Chapter Two: Historical Background on Chinese American Immigration and Labor

Exclusionary Immigration Laws

Chinese immigrants first arrived in America in the nineteenth century to work on the railroads and in the mines. Their arrival and status as laborers put them at odds with white American laborers who went on strike in order to demand better work conditions and higher pay. “Fortunately for the Central Pacific, Chinese immigrants provided a vast pool of cheap, plentiful, and easily exploitable labor. By 1865, the number of Chinese in California reached close to fifty thousand, at least 90 percent of them young men” (I. Chang 5). These Chinese American workers were treated worse than the white laborers because of the former’s status as minorities. For example, the “Chinese worked longer and harder than whites, but received less pay: because the Chinese had to pay for their own board, their wages were two-thirds those of white workers and a fourth those of white foremen…Worst of all, they endured whippings from their overseers, who treated them like slaves” (I. Chang 61-62). After the Chinese American workers completed work on the railroad, they did not get any credit for their work (unlike the white laborers) and were not even given enough money to return home to California. The Chinese American workers became known for their strong work ethic, but they struggled to survive on the pittance

8 “…when white laborers threatened to strike, Charles Crocker…ordered Superintendent Strobridge to recruit Chinese workers. The tactic worked, and the white workers agreed to return, as long as no Chinese were hired, but by then the Central Pacific had the upper hand and hired fifty Chinese anyway – former miners, laundrymen, domestic servants, and market gardeners – to do the hard labor of preparing the route and laying track. Many claimed the railroad did this as a reminder to the white workers that others were ready to replace them. Needless to say, this did not contribute to harmony between the whites and the Chinese” (I. Chang 55-56).
9 “Without Chinese labor and know-how, the railroad would not have been completed. Nonetheless, the Central Pacific Railroad cheated the Chinese railway workers of everything they could. They tried to write the Chinese out of history altogether. The Chinese workers were not only excluded from the ceremonies, but from the famous photograph of white American laborers celebrating as the last spike, the golden spike, was driven into the ground. Of more immediate concern, the Central Pacific laid off most of the Chinese workers, refusing to give them even their promised return passage to California. The company retained only a few hundred of them for maintenance work, some of whom spent their remaining days in isolated small towns along the way, a few living in converted boxcars” (I. Chang 64).
they were paid. These people hoped to prove their worth through their work, but their work was merely a commodity to their employers. Once that commodity was no longer useful, as was demonstrated in the situation of how the Chinese railroad workers were treated, the workers themselves were dispensable.

Since white workers objected to these immigrants’ “competitive” presence, racist exclusionary laws were developed. For example, the Exclusion Act (1882) discriminated against Chinese male immigrants who had already worked and lived in the United States for years. It also prevented them from bringing their wives to the country, because “if their husbands were categorized as ‘laborers,’ their wives would be too, making them ineligible for admission to the country…From 1906 to 1924, only about one hundred fifty Chinese women secured legal permission to enter the United States. Then the Immigration Act of 1924 was enacted, prohibiting the entrance of any foreign-born Asian woman…from 1924 until the end of the decade, not a single Chinese woman was admitted to the United States” (I. Chang 174).

Since the women were presumed to be only coming over to be wives and not as workers, their “worth” was less valuable. These women were also suspected of being prostitutes.

As a result of these exclusionary immigration laws, these Chinese immigrants’ status in America was uncertain. For example, the Scott Act (1888) “cancelled all certificates granting

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10 “The total Chinese-ancestry population had declined from a peak of more than 107,000 in the early 1880s to a low of 61,639 in 1920 as a result of the Chinese exclusion laws. From this nadir, the number began to climb slowly as more children were born on American soil, and in the late 1940s, as Chinese war brides entered the country. Only in 1950 did the Chinese-ancestry population finally outstrip the figure shown in the 1890 census” (S. Chang 158).

11 “After World War II, the U.S. government decided to overhaul this immigration policy to reward Chinese American veterans for their service. The 1945 War Brides Act permitted them to marry in China and bring their wives to the United States. Given the low number of ethnic Chinese women at home (the male-female ratio was three to one), many servicemen decided to wed foreign-born Chinese women. Before the act expired on December 30, 1949, almost six thousand Chinese American soldiers went to China and returned with brides” (I. Chang 234).

12 “Despite such discerned exceptions, the prevailing suspicion that all Chinese women were prostitutes fortified the transnational apparatus of interrogating and laborious certification and effectively limited the immigration of Chinese women as a group” (Kang).
Chinese laborers their right of reentry. Twenty thousand Chinese who had the misfortune to be out of the country when the legislation was enacted were unable to return” (I. Chang 135). Asian immigrants could live in America as workers, but they could not become citizens until well into the twentieth century, which prevented them from having the same rights as other citizens. Citizens are in a better position to protest exploitation. Non-citizens, especially illegal immigrants, live in fear of being deported. “Coded in terms of a regression or a reversed colonization, these degraded work conditions have been justified as (however unfortunately) ‘necessary’ to compete with lower-priced imports and to provide much desired jobs for ‘uneducated and unskilled’ immigrants from Asia and Latin America. These workers are not entitled to the same employment conditions and benefits as are ‘real’ Americans” (Kang 182). Asian immigrant workers have not felt that they can challenge restrictions that their employers inflict on them. The laws protect citizens. Even if the employer is convicted of abusing employees, the illegal employees will still most likely be deported. The employer may only serve a few years in prison. Being Chinese American does not necessarily make people feel disenfranchised, but being unemployed, underemployed, exploited, and invisible does make them feel disenfranchised.

13 “Notoriously, the immigration reforms of 1986, which made it illegal for an employer to hire an undocumented worker, have made the INS the perfect union buster... Should that worker then begin to speak up for her rights or seem to be interested in a union, the employer has many strategic resources. He can simply call ‘la migra,’ as the INS is called in Spanish street slang, and ‘drop a dime’ on the worker” (Ross 184-185).
14 “After checking, if any employer still hires an illegal worker, he has leverage over him... Now the employer is in a position to get away with all types of abuses: paying below the minimum wage, imposing long hours, or forcing the workers to accept cash payment, which means that when a wage dispute occurs, there are no records to prove the wrongdoing of the employer” (Kwong 173). In other words, sweatshop employers take advantage of workers’ illegal status, and the workers feel disenfranchised both because they are “non-citizens” and also because they are not treated like workers who are legal citizens would expect to be treated.
15 “The INS generally refuses to acknowledge the labor-law implications of its actions, insisting on pursuing deportation proceedings against workers involved in labor disputes. So if an employer is found guilty of withholding back wages by the Labor Department or the National Labor Relations Board, the victimized employee, if an illegal, is not able to collect on the judgment – instead, she risks being deported” (Kwong 179).
Chinese Americans were not allowed to become American citizens until the Magnuson Act (1943). \(^{16}\) “After the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan, China and the United States became allies...To boost the morale of Chinese troops in their war of resistance, efforts were soon under way to repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act...In addition, the War Brides Act of 1945 enabled many New York Chinese who had served in the U.S. military to bring their fiancées to the United States on a non-quota basis” (Wang 54). Legal status definitely puts people at an advantage. It gives them more professional options as well as the opportunity to pursue an education and receive government benefits. However, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters of this dissertation, even citizenship does not make Asian Americans immune to racism.

Since the white laborers drove them away from construction jobs, the Chinese immigrants had no choice but to work in the service industry. The immigrants’ first jobs were blue-collar jobs, such as dry cleaners, restaurant servers, railroad workers, and factory workers. Racist immigrant laws limited their opportunities, because “some states, such as California, had legislation against the employment of Chinese Americans in certain fields such as law, medicine, financial administration, dentistry, veterinary science, liquor store ownership, architecture, engineering, and realty, among others...some jobs required union membership, a stipulation that automatically precluded the Chinese because they were barred from joining unions” (Chun 173). \(^{17}\) These laws reinforced Chinese Americans’ subordinate status in their adopted country.

\(^{16}\) “After her tour, Senator Warren Magnuson (D-Wash) introduced a bill repealing the Chinese Exclusion Act...passed on December 17, 1943, the bill abolished exclusion, provided for an annual quota of 105 Chinese immigrants, and gave Chinese who had entered the country lawfully the right to naturalization...for the first time in six decades, foreign-born Chinese could become American citizens” (I. Chang 226-227).

\(^{17}\) “Census records indicate that during much of the 1920 and 1930s, most gainfully employed Chinese in the United States were classified under domestic and personal service occupations. More Chinese were listed as servants and laundry workers than in any other job category. According to the 1930 census, of the 19,470 Chinese American males in California older than age ten who were gainfully employed, 7,773 (40 percent) were in domestic and personal service. Among these nearly 1,000 were in laundry work, and 4,774 did domestic work. Others worked as barbers, room cleaners, janitors, elevator operators, and bellhops. Opportunities for women were even slimmer: fewer than 1,000 were gainfully employed” (Chun 173).
Since they could not get union membership or white-collar jobs, they could not be in positions of power, and they were less likely to have the resources and abilities to change their situations.

The authors of *Class Matters* connect the American dream to economic and social mobility and claim that “there are poor and rich in the United States, of course, the argument goes, but as long as one can become the other, as long as there is something close to equality and opportunity, the differences between them do not add up to class barriers” (16). However, prior to World War II, Chinese Americans’ academic credentials and skills meant little when compared to their race, which reinforced the class barriers that separated them from white Americans. For example, “before 1940, New York State banned aliens from engaging in almost thirty specific occupations…Very often, even second-generation Chinese in New York with advanced degrees such as engineering and accounting could not find jobs in U.S. companies but ended up working in Chinese laundries, restaurants, and grocery stores” (Wang 53). As a result, when these second-generation Chinese Americans completed their education, “more than 90 percent of its placements [in San Francisco] were for those in the service industries, mainly in the culinary trades. Instead of being employed in the areas for which they had been trained, many were carrying trays, washing dishes, cutting meat, ironing clothes, drying fish, and selling herbs” (Chun 166-167). Chinese Americans’ difficulties with discrimination in the workplace are also reflected in the situation of Jade Snow in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945), who was a second-generation college-educated Chinese American and could not find work that suited her academic qualifications. As a result, she had to resort to making and selling pottery in Chinatown.

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18 A result of such discrimination, along with the decline in tourism during the Depression, many were either unemployed or underemployed. For example, “the graduating class of 1936 at the University of California, Berkeley, included twenty-eight American-born Chinese, many of whom had earned degrees in engineering, economics, architecture, optometry, pharmacology, and commerce…Nate R. White of *The Christian Science Monitor* reported a similar situation in San Francisco. He found that for some five thousand young San Franciscan Chinese there seemed to be ‘no future worth of their skills” (Chun 166-167).
The establishment of the Communist government, which overthrew the previous government, made it impossible for most Chinese Americans to return to China. Many of them felt out of place and clung to their sense of home in their native country, but once the Communists took over, they had no real sense of home in China or in their adoptive country, the United States, which continued to exclude them and discriminate against them. America’s perception of the Chinese Americans was connected to its perception of China as a whole. During World War II, the national opinion of the Chinese became positive once China became an ally and Chinese Americans enlisted in the military. World War II not only changed the other Americans’ perceptions of them but also improved their employment opportunities, because the war “created a labor shortage at home since thousands of white men were sent to the front…Executive Order 8802, issued by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1941…outlawed racial discrimination in the defense industry. Consequently, some New York Chinese could find employment in factories and skilled occupations” (Wang 54). However, most Chinese Americans had to go back to their service jobs once the white soldiers came home.

Once the Cold War began, Chinese people were regarded with suspicions of being allies to the Communists. Before the 1965 immigration reform laws, people viewed race in essentialist terms. That was why white people discriminated against Chinese Americans, attacked them, and drove them out of most jobs and neighborhoods and into the service industry and ethnic enclaves. They thought that all Chinese Americans were the same: deceptive, unpatriotic “thieves” who took resources and jobs that supposedly belonged to the “real” Americans. The 1965 immigration reform finally allowed more Chinese immigrants to enter the country. It “established a quota of 20,000 for the Chinese, and the vast majority of those slots went to Taiwanese Chinese. After resuming diplomatic relations with the PRC, the American
government doubled the immigration slots for the Chinese, giving both mainland China and Taiwan their own quotas of 20,000 each” (I. Chang 314-315). The post-1965 immigration reforms brought in a new type of immigrant: college-educated, white-collar professionals who contrasted sharply with their earlier counterparts. They came from upper-class backgrounds, whereas the earlier immigrants came from poverty. The new immigrants were brought for the benefit of the American economy in a different way than the earlier immigrants were. Chinese Americans are not victimized because of their race as frequently as they were before the 1965 immigration reforms (though they are still not completely free of racism and discrimination). Recent Chinese American literature, such as Typical American, reflects these changes by portraying well-educated characters who work white-collar jobs. On the other hand, like their predecessors, many Chinese Americans who do not arrive in the United States as white-collar professionals (such as Mah and Leon in Bone and Brave Orchid in The Woman Warrior) continue to be victimized because of the conditions they work in, such as the people who work in sweatshops. This exploitation of Chinese American sweatshop workers and service industry workers is illustrated in another novel that I will discuss in greater detail in the third chapter of

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19 Furthermore, “no limit was placed on the number of Chinese traveling to the United States as non-quota immigrants, such as those on student, diplomatic, or tourist visas. After settling in the United States, many of these non-quota émigrés adjusted their status, first becoming permanent residents, and later U.S. citizens. By the end of the 1980s, more than 80,000 PRC intellectuals had arrived in the United States – the largest immigrant wave of Chinese scholars in American history” (I. Chang 314-315).
20 “Since the 1965 Immigration Act abolished the racially biased quota system, the Chinese American population has doubled every decade. The 2000 census shows a record high of close to 2.9 million Chinese, even though a significantly large number of undocumented immigrants were probably left uncounted” (Zhao 3). The problems that faced Chinese Americans before the immigration reform, such as the loneliness of the ‘bachelors,’ the lack of women and families, the uncertain status of legal immigrants who feared that they might be prevented from reentering the U.S., and the belief that Chinese Americans are incapable of assimilating are no longer as relevant in the latter part of the twentieth century and in the millennium than they were in earlier decades.
21 “Employed as professionals, this group tends to live in white neighborhoods and to have little connection with Chinatown. Thus, for the socially mobile American-born and the scholar/professional immigrants, the trend has been toward assimilation into the mainstream of American society” (Zhao 41). This trend is evident in Gish Jen’s novel Typical American. Ralph and his family are able to leave Chinatown and move to a predominantly white suburb in New York due to Ralph’s work as a professor and Theresa’s work as a doctor.
this section on Chinese American literature, Fae Myenne Ng’s novel Bone (1993). Even some of the Chinese American upper-class white-collar workers often cannot move beyond the glass ceiling due to racial discrimination. Juliana Chang claims that “what is subtracted and covered by this developmental narrative is capitalist exploitation on behalf of the nation-state, an exploitation that demands minimal wages for labor so that profits may be maximized…This exploitation of racial labor, enabled by the disenfranchisement of racialized populations, is unowned, disavowed, and covered by nationalist ideologies of democratic equality. Necessary yet unowned, the racial other is the melancholic object of the U.S. nation-state” (113). Racial domination operates through class domination. Class domination connects to work in that the work that people do is one of the things that determine which class they belong to. Therefore, although there are now many white-collar professional immigrants from China, at the same time there are still many blue-collar workers from the same country who continue to emigrate: “About half of the immigrants can be classified as working class, having been employed as service workers, operatives, craftsmen, or laborers in Hong Kong (Nee and Nee, 1974). After arrival, moreover, a significant proportion of professional, managerial, and white-collar immigrants experience a drop in occupational status into blue-collar and service jobs because of language and licensing difficulties (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1974)” (Glenn 41). The majority of people who work in sweatshops are minorities. They become the “racial other” as well as the “economic other,” which the rest of the country needs in order for capitalism to continue to thrive. America is not a “free country” to these sweatshop workers. Their work restricts their freedom. They work long hours every day; their low pay restricts their lifestyles.\footnote{Along with other ‘model’ minorities, notably the Japanese and Cubans, the Chinese seem to have offered proof that some groups possess cultural resources that enable them to resist the demoralizing effects of poverty and}
Mah’s daughters witness the negative effects that a lifetime of exploitative work in the garment industry has had on her. That is why they feel conflicted about not honoring their debts to her, because they know how hard she worked to support them and how she still needs their emotional support as well as their assistance in her work.

People who do not work or who fail to achieve anything according to American standards are unrecognized and invisible. Undocumented workers are invisible because they fear detection from immigration agencies and because the rest of society does not want to recognize how exploited, underpaid, and overworked they are. This sense of invisibility is apparent in Typical American, when Ralph’s immigration status is threatened due to his problems in his graduate program. He eventually resorts to becoming an illegal alien and underground worker who works in the basement of a chicken restaurant, killing chickens, out of sight of the “real” Americans who do not want to admit that the exploitation of low-wage (and in some cases, illegal) workers like Ralph is necessary in order for capitalism to continue to thrive.

Menial labor, such as the work that Leon does on boats, makes workers feel disconnected or isolated. When these workers do work that they do not benefit from but that does benefit their rich employers and the customers they provide services to or products for, they feel disconnected from the country. When their work is meaningful to them and they do benefit from it, they feel more indebted to the country and are more willing to stay out of choice rather than out of necessity. Therefore, the American dream makes distinctions between work that is “legitimate” and work that is not. Ralph’s work as a professor and Theresa’s work as a doctor are legitimate. These workers pursue the American dream in the “right” ways because they gained an American discrimination. By implication, the difficulties experienced by blacks and Hispanics are due in some measure to the cultural weaknesses of these groups” (Glenn 35).

23 In David Mura’s memoir Turning Japanese (2005), Mura’s white American wife expresses jealousy because he is work as a writer in Japan; she is unable to work as a doctor. Work can give people a sense of belonging and the opportunity to assimilate, but it depends on the kind of work that they do.
education and utilized their skills and intelligence in order to find lucrative careers. In *Bone*, Mah’s work in the sweatshops and Leon’s work as a menial laborer on ships are not viewed as legitimate, at least not by their American-born daughters, who understand the restrictions that were placed on their parents but nevertheless look down on them for not being able to improve their economic or professional situations. Although Americans object to illegal immigrants, as they do in *Native Speaker*, they do not necessarily object to the profits made off of illegal labor: “The indifference of American society to problems within the Chinese community is not all due to ignorance, but rather a result of the dominant neoconservative ideology making us not interested in seeing these conditions as problems. Faced with the economic and social problems of the country today, many Americans have identified the lack of a work ethic and the failure of family values as the central causes of the national malaise” (Kwong 135). Americans stress individual responsibility, because they do not want to recognize the fact that some forces, like racism, discrimination, and capitalism, are beyond the workers’ control. They also do not want to penalize the employers who are inflicting this abuse on the workers in the same way that they want to penalize the illegal immigrants who work for these employers, since the immigrants “chose” to enter the country illegally and try to claim jobs and opportunities that did not “belong” to them, though in reality these immigrants typically do the jobs that “real” Americans do not want to do.

**Low-wage Labor Versus Salaried Labor**

Geoff Mason and Wiemer Salverda define low-wage labor as “work for which the low pay is less than two-thirds of the gross hourly median wage” (35). I define “wage labor” as labor where the workers are paid by the hours, by the number of products that they work on (such as the sweatshop employees in the garment industry who are paid by the pieces that they complete),
or by the jobs themselves. Wage labor is more unreliable and subject to the employers’ discretion, who typically exploit the workers and profit off of their labor, though the employers, such as the garment industry supervisors, are not the ones who typically make much more money than the sweatshop workers. The employers who hire the supervisors and the latter’s workers as contractors profit the most from the low wages paid to these laborers. Wage laborers are thus identified by the large disparity between the amount of money that they earn and the amount of money that their employers earn. Salaried employees, on the other hand, can rely on a regular salary at a job that does not exploit them and that matches their qualifications (whereas wage labor is often done by workers who are overqualified for the work yet are unable to find better jobs due to language barriers, lack of education, and discrimination). Low-wage labor is central to my analysis of work, debt, and the Chinese American family, particularly in my discussion of *Fifth Chinese Daughter, The Woman Warrior, and Bone*. In all three novels, the Chinese immigrants work low-wage jobs, which define their lifestyles as well as their attitudes towards America, labor, and debt. *Typical American*, on the other hand, includes salaried employees (Theresa and Ralph, who both work white-collar jobs as a doctor and a professor, respectively), yet I argue that money is an overriding concern not just for low-wage employees but for salaried workers (especially Ralph) instead. It is not always specified in these novels how much the low-wage workers are paid. The authors provide detailed descriptions of the workers’ poverty, which highlights the fact that their wages are not enough to live on.24 According to the American dream, wage labor theoretically allows workers to become independent in that they are supposed to earn enough money to support themselves and maintain their lifestyles. Kingston, Ng, and Jen demonstrate how Chinese American workers often do not earn enough money to support

24 “In this chapter, we defined persistently low earners as those prime-age workers earning $12,000 or less in each of at least three years. Not surprisingly, these workers are more likely to be minority, female, foreign-born and/or younger than those with higher earnings” (Andersson, Holzer, and Lane 45).
themselves and struggle with poverty and difficult work conditions. Mason and Salverda also point out that the workers are particularly unable to control their own schedules due to the demands of the industries that they work in. They are thus dependent on their employers for giving them work and money, and the employers can take these resources for survival away from low-wage workers for any reason, however flimsy, whereas salaried employees have more security in terms of a legal contract. Central to this chapter as well as my argument as a whole is the issue of wage labors and what novels like *Fifth Chinese Daughter, Bone, Typical American, Native Speaker*, and *The Fruit n’ Food* say about that. Wage labor makes workers dependent on other people, not just their employers but also their family members, who provide both emotional support and financial support (the latter in terms of their own wage labor or, if the low-wage parents are able to raise model minority children, salaried labor); this dependence thus affects the formation of debts that family members owe one another or are owed.

Robert Pollin discusses the evolution of low-wage labor and shows how it has been a primary concern throughout the twentieth century: “In 1934, a well-known U.S. political figure…asserted that ‘No business which depends for its existence on paying less than living wages to its workers has any right to continue in this country’…The person making this argument in 1934 was President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Can you imagine George W. Bush, or for that matter Bill Clinton, George Bush Sr., Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, or Richard Nixon making such a statement?” (16). As capitalism evolved in America and the economic gap widened, the presidents in the latter part of the twentieth century became less concerned with the

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25 “Another source of high work intensity for low-paid workers is pressure to work unsocial hours such as evening, nights, weekends, and public holidays. EWCS data for the five European countries under consideration show that workers in low-paid occupations are less likely than better-paid workers to be able to influence their own work schedules” (Mason and Salverda 57).

26 “Indeed, the concept of a living wage was the motivation behind the passage of the initial minimum wage laws in the 1930s – minimum wage laws were established to create decent living wage standards” (Pollin 15).
interests of the working class and the underclass, particularly in terms of ensuring that they were paid a living wage. Pollin discusses outsourcing, which could relate to the development of the garment industry and the sweatshops that Chinese American immigrants work in.\textsuperscript{27} Sweatshops are private contractors, since the sweatshop proprietors do not follow federal or local regulations concerning labor and regularly force their workers to labor in exploitative conditions, such as underreporting the hours that these people work and not paying them enough for all the hours that they work. The private sector ensured that “workers’ wages went down when the same jobs were done by private firms as opposed to public entities” (Pollin 17). There is very little chance that taxpayers would be willing to pay higher taxes to cover the cost of higher wages for sweatshop employees like Mah and Leon since they do not value their labor, though that labor is necessary in order to lower the costs of the clothes that these sweatshop employees make. The authors of \textit{Class Matters} claim that “the once tight connection between race and class has weakened, too” and point to “immigrant success stories” as proof that mobility has changed. Although circumstances have certainly improved for some immigrants, the fact remains that many immigrants, including Chinese American immigrants, continue to toil at dead-end jobs in sweatshops or struggle to maintain small businesses and subsequently live in poverty, yet the “immigrant success stories” get a lot more attention than the “immigrant failure stories,” in order to promote the idea that the American dream is possible for everyone.

\textsuperscript{27} “This is when public entities such as city government or universities that used to hire workers directly to perform a wide range of services began to contract this work out to private firms. Initially, when this sort of outsourcing started in the United States in the 1980s, proponents offered a straightforward analytical justification. This justification was that the private sector is more efficient than the public sector – governments are bad at doing things, whereas the private sector is good at doing things. Because of this, outsourcing to private entities the performance of public sector services will enhance efficiency” (Pollins 16).
Economic and Professional Divisions in the Chinese American Community

Work can also create economic divisions between the “haves” (the people with high-paying jobs and authority) and the “have-nots” (the people with low-paying jobs and no authority). The authors show how these divisions are maintained and preserved, and they illustrate the conflicts that are caused when people try to overcome these divisions. Race is not enough to bring people together as a community, especially when they have different jobs and are on different ends of the economic and social spectrum. “If, during the exclusion period, Chinese immigrants’ success in the United States largely depended on the ability of their community to combat discriminatory laws and practices, then in the post-civil rights era, one’s socioeconomic resources become crucial to his or her chances. Perhaps because there is a clear understanding that not everyone in this world is given the same opportunities and rewards, Chinese Americans have become quite class conscious” (Zhao 45). Class takes precedence over race, because although they may share the same racial identity, they do not have the same resources to rely on, which affect their class status. This segregation is evident in Typical American. When his old classmate, Old Chao, achieves academic, professional, and economic success long before he does, Ralph becomes jealous and insecure, which drives a wedge between them. Ralph may have been willing to socialize with the likes of Mah and Leon when he is still a low-wage laborer, but once he moves his family out to the suburbs and becomes a professor, he would not have maintained any social connections with them. Indeed, the Changs become more isolated once they elevate their economic status, because they lack the support of the Chinese community that was in the ethnic enclave that they originally lived in once they move to a suburb populated mostly by white Americans who tell them to “go back to their laundry” when
they attend a baseball game. Therefore, economic and professional divisions also need to be studied because of their effects on relationships and identity formation.

I define class status according to several factors: lucrative, socially acceptable work that match the worker’s qualifications, material wealth, inclusion in the public sphere, and permanent and legal status as a citizen and nonresident. “Schools, neighborhoods, and the price tags of one’s material possessions are all markers of a person’s class profile” (Zhao 47). Where a person lives is reflection of his or her class status, because wealthy people tend to live in the same area, whereas poor people are forced to live on the margins. Education is also a “marker” because the lack thereof affects what kind of work people can get. If they can’t get good jobs, then they can’t afford to live in nicer neighborhoods or accumulate material wealth. They are also less likely to be included and accepted by the majority. Class is also about rights, specifically the right to have a voice in society, the right to speak out against oppressive forces, like exploitative employers, or a discriminatory government, the right to live in America, the right to access any job one is qualified for, and the right to justice. When Chinese Americans, as well as some other Asian Americans, first arrived in the United States, they lacked all of these rights (and some of them still do), which put them in the lowest class, even below poor white Americans, who were not discriminated against in the same way that minorities were. Work helps people to elevate their class status, though it is not the only factor. Not only can work help them accumulate wealth and poverty, but it can also be a reflection of their skills, intelligence, and resourcefulness, especially if they manage to climb the corporate ladder and earn raises or promotions.

The most important aspect of class is social acceptance and approval, which validates and secures a person’s class status. The only person who comes close to gaining social acceptance is the Korean American politician, John Kwang, in Native Speaker, but his social status remains
precarious throughout the novel. His status ultimately crumbles when the secrets regarding his campaign and his “Korean money club” are revealed to the “real” Americans whose acceptance he hoped would validate his status as a worker and as an American. Even when people attain everything else – wealth, education, home ownership, lucrative careers, and so forth – these things do not matter as much as social acceptance and equality do.\(^{28}\) If Asian Americans continue to be viewed through a stereotypical lens or as “not American,” their class status will not be as high as it could be. Their racial identities are also intertwined with their work. When white workers resent them for working for lower wages, for working as scabs, or for taking away “their” jobs, Asian Americans’ racial status or their status as foreigners (even if they are American-born) are emphasized. When they succeed as “model minorities,” the emphasis is still on their so-called Asian traits that contribute to their work.

The people in power are the ones at the top of the economic and social hierarchy, because they have the power to make decisions over other people’s work. The ones at the top of this hierarchy can drive people out of neighborhoods or even the country. They can prevent other people from getting the jobs that they are qualified for, or they can withhold the money that they earned. The people in power can create laws that discriminate against minorities and immigrants. People in the working class have the least desirable jobs, and as a result, they have the least power or no power at all, which reinforces the division between them and the upper classes.

**The Chinese American Family: A Legacy of Work**

The first and second generations of Chinese Americans have different conceptions of race and work, partly because the first generation was born and raised in China, and the younger

\(^{28}\) This is true not just of Asian Americans but also of African Americans. For example, when some African Americans became prosperous store owners at the beginning of the twentieth century, their work and elevated economic status did not come with equality but suspicion and retaliation from violent and racist white merchants who saw them as competition.
generation was born and raised in America. One might think that these groups could relate to each other through work, especially when they work together or when the younger generation sees the effect that work has on their parents. However, it is precisely because of these work experiences and the effects that they have on the first generation that the American-born Chinese children find it more difficult to relate to their parents and more conflicted about honoring their debts to them. Work shapes the children’s perceptions of America, their parents, and their culture even more than cultural traditions or practices. Through work, the children learn what their parents expect of them, how other people view them, what their parents are really going through at their jobs, as well as their parents’ “place” in American society. In other words, the second generation sees how their parents’ work racializes them, and the children develop a greater understanding of the limitations imposed on their families as well as immigrants and Chinese Americans in general. Based on these observations, the children draw their own conclusions about what they want and don’t want from their own work, which affects their decision to honor their debt to their families by staying with them and doing what the parents want or by rejecting or renegotiating the debt by leaving the parents behind, rebelling against them, or pursuing their own desires that usually conflict with what their parents want for them.

29 The exception is the second-generation Korean American Thomas Pak in The Fruit n’ Food, who relates to Mr. Rhee through their work. Unlike other second-generation Asian Americans (such as Henry Park in Native Speaker), Thomas little hope or aspiration of elevating his economic and social status. Unlike the Rhees, he’s primarily focused on survival.

30 “During the period from about 1920 to the mid-1960s, the typical immigrant and first-generation family functioned as a productive unit in which all members, including children, worked without wages in a family business. The business was profitable only because it was labor-intensive and members put in extremely long hours” (Glenn 40).

31 This issue also relates to June Rhee, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Rhee, in The Fruit n’ Food. As difficult as their work as ethnic entrepreneurs is, they pin their hopes on their daughter, who they hope will become a model minority and achieve academic and professional success beyond the confines of their grocery store. June is not the model minority they want her to be, due to her academic failures, drug use, partying habits, and sexual relationship with their low-wage employee, Thomas.
The second generation, as exemplified by the daughters in *Bone* and the narrator in *The Woman Warrior*, typically want to leave Chinatown not just because they reject Chinese culture (unlike Jade Snow in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, where although she adopts American ideals, she continues to utilize certain Chinese cultural practices as assets to her professional advantage when she is living and working outside of Chinatown) but because they reject the poverty that they associate with it. Both generations of Chinese Americans form their definitions of what it means to be Chinese Americans through their work experiences, and the second generation in particular, if they grow up in poverty because of their parents’ work, associate Chinese Americans (including their own parents) with exploitation, low pay, and difficult work conditions, because most of the people they know experience these things. The second generation witnesses their parents’ suffering, disappointment, passivity, or subordination in the workplace, which negatively affects their perspectives of their parents as well as their debts to them. The children witness the disparity between how Chinese Americans are treated and how white American workers are treated. Seeing white Americans live in wealth and luxury while they suffer in poverty reinforces the separation and difference between Chinese Americans and white Americans. It makes both generations think that they will never be like the white Americans who enjoy the benefits of the Chinese American workers’ exploitation (e.g., lower prices, avoidance of jobs that other Americans do not want to do, such as service jobs and sweatshop work, and so forth), or it motivates the second generation to pursue the American dream in order to attain the lifestyle that rich white Americans enjoy. Calling these people model minorities is a refusal to accept responsibility for the conditions that forced them to become self-sufficient and to work harder than most people just to survive.
A legacy was very important to Thomas Sutpen in William Faulkner’s novel *Absalom, Absalom!* because it meant that his work, wealth, and identity would live on in his male descendants. Without it Sutpen believed that he would disappear and eventually be forgotten, and his work and wealth would mean nothing. By a similar token, a legacy is very important to Chinese American immigrants. They view their children as reflections of themselves and their work. When their children try to break away from them or rebel against them, their legacy is threatened, undermined, or undone altogether. The characters in novels like *The Woman Warrior, Fifth Chinese Daughter, Bone,* and *Typical American* claim certain things or traits as Chinese and others as American. When the parents lecture or scold their children, it’s often because they think that the children resist Chinese culture or exhibit American behavior. When the children in *The Woman Warrior* and *Bone* speak negatively of their parents, it’s because they associate them with a Chinese identity, whereas the children believe American culture and an American identity will give them the freedom to do and be what they want, unlike Chinese culture and a Chinese identity. Their parents, on the other hand, view American identity and culture as oppressive, exclusive, and discriminatory. Unlike their American-born children, the parents know firsthand what life is like in China, so they have something to compare their lives in America to. In America, the first generation is automatically classified as “not-American,” and because of this, their opportunities are limited. Immigrants like Mah and Leon in *Bone* and Brave Orchid in *The Woman Warrior* feel that they lose their agency when they come to America. The lack of respect, negative attitudes from native-born Americans (and in some cases, from their own American-born children), low-level and low-paying jobs make these members of the first generation feel that they lack agency, because they have no control over their work conditions or over how other people treat them. One reason these Chinese Americans do not rebel against the
professional and economic restrictions that were imposed on them is because of their precarious status as Americans. Some of them entered the country illegally or through deceptive measures, such as papers sons, like Leon does in Bone.\textsuperscript{32} Rebellion would put them in the spotlight and cause their past to be scrutinized. Their lives in America would be threatened as a result and they could be deported. Furthermore, their work often prevents them from assimilating. As Glenn points out, “retention of Chinese language and custom is a logical outcome of ghetto life and denial of permanent membership in American society” (37). When they are prevented from becoming citizens or from participating in the public sphere, and when they have no choice but to live and work in ethnic enclaves, then they have little motivation or few opportunities to assimilate to American culture. In China they automatically felt a sense of belonging.

The second-generation Chinese Americans are aware of the hardships that their parents suffered as workers in America. But rather than question or challenge the capitalist structures that inflicted these hardships on their parents, they aspire to join the American workforce at higher levels than their parents were able to achieve. Their desire to become American professionals signifies their implicit acceptance of the capitalist structures. The second generation often criticizes or looks down on the first-generation for not becoming fluent in English or for not finding better jobs, as is evident in the narrator’s embarrassment in The Woman Warrior at being forced to translate in English for her mother to American pharmacists and shopkeepers, and in Leila’s contempt in Bone for the mostly unassimilated immigrant parents that she attempts to counsel as a cultural liaison at their children’s school. The children’s observations of their parents’ victimization at low-wage jobs, often in ethnic enclaves like

\textsuperscript{32} “The 1906 San Francisco earthquake reduced Chinatown to rubble, but opened the door to illegal Chinese immigration. The destruction of the city’s birth records permitted some Chinese to emigrate during the exclusion era: they could buy false papers and assert they were children of U.S. citizens fathered during visits to China. Such immigrants, mostly men, were known as ‘paper sons’” (I. Chang 145).
Chinatown, lead them to believe that a college education and a career outside of Chinatown will not only make them Americans but give them more power and status than their parents ever had. They associate the Americans who oppress and control their parents with the power that they want for themselves, not necessarily so they can go back and change their parents’ lives, but so they can gain control over their own lives.

Although they see how their parents’ racial identities and immigrant status put them at a professional disadvantage more often than not, the second-generation Chinese Americans are typically more optimistic and seek through work what they cannot gain through their racial identities alone: recognition, more money, higher social status, better jobs, and an escape from their parents’ communities and control. They see themselves as having more autonomy over their lives and work, yet by working for other people, they must surrender some of the autonomy. The first-generation Chinese Americans like Kimberly’s mother and Brave Orchid are not autonomous. Some, like Brave Orchid, run their own businesses, but they are subject to racist laws against them (such as the fact that Brave Orchid’s laundry was shut down and her land was taken away by the city planners) and the white customers who patronize them. There is no work available where a person can be completely autonomous. Even if you’re the boss, there is still someone else that you have to answer to. In addition to pressuring their children to excel in school, the parents also pressure their children to pursue careers that were not open to them and that will guarantee financial security and elevated status. The parents measure their children according to their own definitions of success. The parents work hard at these exploitative, low-status jobs in the hopes that their efforts will eventually pay off in the form of better lives for their children. Many first-generation Chinese American parents (as well as many other first-generation Asian Americans) try to make their children adhere to the parents’ terms by making
the children feel guilty or disloyal for disobeying them, because to do so would be to disregard
the parents’ suffering and sacrifice in their work and lives in America. The parents’ own work,
particularly the work done by the parents who fail to become model minorities, denies them the
right to assert control over their work and themselves, so by trying to determine what kind of
work their children should do or how or where the children should live, the parents try to reclaim
that control by exercising their authority as parents:

Whatever its long-term benefits, immigration often led to some loss of parental status. It
was less acute for mothers, whose nurturing and domestic roles were as important in the
new country as they had been in the old, but for fathers, who had looked up to their own
fathers as role models who taught them a trade, the inability to do the same for their sons
in America may have led them to over-compensate by demanding absolute obedience.
Subject to employment, periodic or long-term, unable to control his own life, a foreign-
born father could at least control his children. (Berrol 82). When their children rebel and choose their own careers or renegotiate the boundaries that their
parents have set for their lives, the parents view that as a loss of control all over again, especially
when their children’s careers literally take them away from them. Rebellious children are
typically the children who leave, because work and education are viewed as a way out. The
dutiful and obedient children stay and continue working for or near their parents.33 When
Chinese Americans learn to fear, resent, or hate white Americans for the latter’s treatment of
them, it is not so difficult to understand why they do not want their children to become like them.
They think that their children’s rejection of their culture is a rejection of them, and that they are
encouraged by white Americans. Their heritage is something that is entirely their own, one that
is not determined by the rules set by their employers. A life bound or controlled by their work
makes it difficult to hold on to that cultural heritage. The first-generation Chinese Americans do

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33 “Although still more urban than average Americans, the vast majority of Chinese Americans are no longer residents of inner-city ethnic enclaves. New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Honolulu, and San Jose are cities with large Chinese populations, but their proportion of Chinatown residents has declined significantly. New York City’s Chinatown accommodates 14 percent of the Chinese population in the city, but only 8 percent of San Francisco’s Chinese and 2 percent of Los Angeles’ Chinese reside in Chinatowns” (Zhao 136). These people are no longer being driven out of white neighborhoods in the way that their parents and grandparents were.
not completely oppose assimilation, because they send their children to American schools and make sure that their children are fluent in English. In their minds, assimilation will make it easier for their children to succeed. Nevertheless, the parents pressure their children to retain their Chinese heritage because they want to protect them from the disappointment, failure, or alienation that the parents experienced in American society.

College degrees make the younger generation less willing to accept jobs that do not require their qualifications. However, as the authors of *Fifth Chinese Daughter, The Woman Warrior, Bone,* and *Typical American* demonstrate, a college degree and a job outside of Chinatown will not necessarily provide the second generation with the “American” identity and agency that they thought they would get. If everyone got the jobs that they were qualified for, the American capitalist structure would be unable to function. When college-educated Chinese Americans were forced into menial labor due to a lack of other options, work taught them more about America than cultural assimilation ever did. Work educates people about the professional, social, and economic hierarchies in the United States and what needs to be done (or what cannot be done) in order to change their own class status. Assimilating to American culture is not enough to change their class status. Even the first- or second-generation Chinese Americans who become successful in lucrative careers that match their academic qualifications, like Ralph and Theresa do in *Typical American,* soon discover that work is not enough to gain them social acceptance in America. To most other Americans, especially white Americans, Asian Americans will be “forever foreigners” (Tuan) due to the latter’s physical appearance.

**Work, Debt, and Family**

Work for many first-generation Asian Americans who fail to achieve the American dream or to become model minorities is, for the most part, self-sacrificing. They work at jobs
and for employers who overwork and underpay them. The first generation does it not only so they can survive but so their families can survive, particularly their children. They do it with the hope that their children will be able to pursue more lucrative careers and more comfortable lifestyle. Their children have the opportunity to pursue work from a more self-serving standpoint, because they can pursue work that they want rather than work that they need. The parents’ work is not completely selfless. They also expect their children to honor their debts to their parents by providing a comfortable lifestyle for them and the rest of the family. They spend the first half of their children’s lives instilling a sense of indebtedness through the parents’ work, and once the children grow up, they are expected to start honoring that debt by obeying their parents’ wishes and valuing their parents’ labor and sacrifices. The implication is that the parents’ sacrifices for their children are so great that that debt can never be fully repaid, no matter what the children do for their parents, which can foster the children’s sense of resentment or ambivalence towards their parents and the debts that they owe.

The older immigrants spent their lives working hard in the United States, thinking that eventually they would get what they wanted and have the lives they dreamed of, which is evident in the aspirations of the eternal low-wage laborer and first-generation Chinese American Leon in Bone. It is only after they work for several years that they realize that dream will never come true for them and that America has broken its so-called promise to them. The first-generation Chinese Americans typically associate their unhappiness and disappointment in their work with their unhappiness and disappointment in America. They came to America to pursue professional opportunities, because they thought that work would provide them with the life that they did not have in China. As demonstrated in three out of the four novels that I will discuss in this section on Chinese American literature, the work that they end up with prevents them from having the
life that they want. As a result, they (and in some cases their children) view their lives as wasted, as is evident in novels like *The Woman Warrior*, when Brave Orchid reflects regretfully on the loss of her medical career in China in exchange for her work as a laundress and later as an agricultural worker in America. These immigrants transfer their expectations and dreams to their children, thinking that their children are more likely to fulfill their dreams because of their American-born status. When the children defy them by rebelling against Chinese traditions, pursuing work that they want rather than what their parents want for them, or moving out to live on their own, the parents think that like America, their children have broken their promise to them and dishonored their debt to their parents. However, neither America nor the children agreed to the terms of that promise.

As I previously stated, the children’s debt to their parents is instilled by the intertwining of labor and family life, as is evident in *Fifth Chinese Daughter, The Woman Warrior, and Bone*. In *Typical American*, where the debt is between siblings and spouses rather than parents and children, the debt is still shaped by the controlling nature that work has over all of their lives. It isn’t as if one or both of the parents go to work every day and the children are left to play and enjoy their childhood. Instead, Chinese American families are expected to work together as a cooperative unit in order to function in their work and maintain the survival of their family. This cooperative unit is not unique to Chinese American families. It is also evident in Korean American families. Chinese Americans and Korean Americans are more likely to become small business owners, and this type of work affects the way the family relates to each other:

The small-producer family had several distinct characteristics. First was the lack of any clear demarcation between work and family life. Child care, domestic maintenance, and income-producing activities occurred simultaneously in time and in the same location. Second was the self-contained nature of the family as a production and consumption unit…Third was the division of labor by age and gender, with gradations of responsibility according to capacity and experience. Elder siblings were responsible for disciplining and
taking care of younger siblings, who in turn were expected to defer to their older brothers and sisters...With so many individuals working in close quarters for extended periods of time, a high premium was placed on cooperation. Self-expression, which might render conflict, had to be curbed. (Glenn 40-41)

“The small-producer family” is present in *The Woman Warrior*, when the family works together to operate their laundry business, spending so many hours there that the children sleep there during breaks. This sense of responsibility over younger siblings is also evident in *Bone*, when Leila, the eldest daughter, blames herself for her younger sister Ona’s suicide, though she also blames her parents for their unwillingness to accept Ona’s individual desires and needs, which conflicted with their own. As the oldest daughter, she was expected to care for her sisters when her parents were busy with their work. Even after Ona and Nina are grown, she still feels a sense of obligation towards both of her sisters.

Song claims that helping in their parents’ business reinforced the children’s senses of their Chinese identities, but I disagree because as my analysis of these novels will show, work does not make the children more Chinese. Instead, work magnifies their parents’ hardships, work ethic, poverty, and disillusionment. For these immigrants, “working for and with one’s family has a twofold significance: work for economic sustenance has an instrumental value, and work on the basis of family membership and obligations has a symbolic value” (Song 83). Children’s work, education, wealth, and status (or the lack thereof) are also viewed as reflections of their parents’ upbringing. If their parents “raised them right,” then it is assumed that upbringing is why the children are successful. When the children fail to become model minorities or achieve the American dream, the parents see themselves as failures.

Through work the children learn about the importance of family loyalty and a sense of their debt to their parents. The parents keep working in order to reinforce their status as parent-creditors, which makes the children-debtors feel guilty if they dishonor their debt to their parents.
The fact that they often still seek their parents’ love and approval, as is evident in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, *The Woman Warrior*, and *Bone*, demonstrates that the children are incapable of repudiating the control that the debt has over them or their relationship with their parents. That is, when the children are faithful to the terms of the debt by doing what their parents want, they are more likely to get validation and respect from their parents, whereas rebelling against or renegotiating the terms of that debt often causes the parents to view their children with disappointment, bewilderment, frustration, anger, or disgust. Thus, without validation or approval from their parents, the children feel incomplete, dissatisfied, or alienated from them. Therefore, the second generation wants their parents’ approval as well as their acceptance of the children’s desire for independence; the first generation wants their children’s loyalty and respect, and they view their children’s desire for independence as incompatible with their debt to the parents. The children often view their parents as prioritizing their own work over their relationships with their children, whereas the parents view their work as a way to preserve and honor their relationships with their children. The children also learn to prioritize work over family, which often means leaving the family behind, betraying them, or rejecting them, in order to get what they want and succeed.
Chapter Three: Becoming a “New Woman” in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior*

**Introduction**

In this chapter, I will explain how work not only defines the way the main characters in these books view themselves as well as their relationships with other people, it also helps them to liberate themselves from traditional gender roles for women and use their work as leverage to rebel against their culture’s (as represented by their first-generation Chinese American parents) definition of what women (specifically daughters and wives) should be. I will also address these issues: how do *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior* address or define the value of Chinese women and their labor in American and Chinese societies, and why does that value seem to be much lower than they think it should be? I connect these issues of gender, labor, and racial identity to my overall theme of debt, with the Chinese parents in both novels as the creditors and their daughters as the debtors. Specifically, how does being indebted to their parents affect these women’s view of what it means to be Chinese, American, a woman, a worker, or all of these things?

Brave Orchid sacrificed a life that she loved: a fulfilling career as a doctor in China, which enabled her to live independently, for a life that she felt was degrading: exploitative, low-paying work as a laundress and a field worker, which forced her to sacrifice her own desires in order to provide for her family. Jade Snow’s parents are more prosperous than Brave Orchid in that Jade Snow’s father runs a factory, yet the implication is that he does this work not because he wants to and it interests him but because it enables him to support the family. Since they worked hard to ensure that the children would have a better life in America than they did, they believe that Jade Snow and the narrator are indebted to their parents.
According to these parents, the best way for their daughters to honor that debt is to uphold Chinese culture over American culture and remain the obedient Chinese daughters that they raised them to be. The parents fear that if their children completely assimilate to American culture, their connection to their Chinese heritage will be lost; the parents could end up “losing” their children as well, since the latter will be less inclined to obey them and more inclined to pursue an American lifestyle that focuses on their own needs. The older generation sacrificed what they wanted for their families’ sake, so they believe that once the children are grown it is their turn to do the same. It would have been easier for them to control their children if they had remained in China, which emphasizes filial piety. It is unrealistic and unfair for them to expect that their children will take advantage of American opportunities without being influenced by American ideals. Jade Snow’s parents try to prevent her from completely assimilating by arranging a marriage for her, and Brave Orchid emphasizes that the “ghosts” (white Americans) are not to be trusted, which results in making the daughters feel alienated from Chinese people and white Americans, due to their opposing beliefs on these issues.

Kingston’s narrator and Jade Snow associate American culture with work, because it is through work that they become exposed to other Americans and the cultural traditions and beliefs that often contradict their parents’ Chinese traditions and beliefs. While neither author necessarily promotes a complete rejection of one’s cultural heritage, they do emphasize that the parents’ upbringing of their daughters negatively impacts their daughters’ success in America: by pressuring their daughters to uphold Chinese traditions and remain subservient and passive in their families, they hinder their daughters’ ability to succeed as individuals in the American workplace. That is, it is not possible for Jade Snow and Kingston’s narrator to achieve the American dream and become successful individuals if they have to spend their lives conforming
to other people’s desires and beliefs rather than their own; doing that would reinforce their subordinate status as women, as daughters, and as workers, and that status would make it that much more difficult for them to speak out against exploitative or discriminatory employers. Instead, they are taught to accept difficult work conditions, work hard, and not ask for anything more than what people in positions of authority (parents, employers, and husbands) are willing to give them, a mentality that shapes them into model minorities. But due to their exposure to American ideals and opportunities, the daughters come to disagree with their parents’ methods for raising their children, though Kingston’s narrator is even more defiant, individualistic, and uncompromising, while Jade Snow is willing to concede to the authority of her employers and her parents on some points. She credits her parents for teaching her to work hard and be self-sufficient (though there is a sense of bitter irony in her praise of them), while Kingston’s narrator blames her mother for making her afraid to speak up for herself, especially in front of the “real” Americans whose acceptance she wants for herself. The parents believe that it is important for Chinese Americans to be self-sufficient workers, either because they have little faith that a discriminatory, racist government and American community will help Chinese American immigrants to succeed or because they believe that becoming self-sufficient workers will earn them praise and validation from the government and the American community (or both). The daughters believe that it is important for them to be self-sufficient workers because it is the only way they can free themselves from their parents’ control. Once they achieve financial independence, they are no longer reliant on their parents, which embolden them to challenge or reject their debts to them.

Kingston’s narrator and Jade Snow do not want to accept the terms of their debts to their parents, because they believe that doing so compromises who they are and forces them to give up
the lives and careers that they want. These women become college-educated American workers
to avoid spending the rest of their lives passively accepting the terms of their debts to their
parents, which means surrendering to their parents’ control. Kingston’s narrator and Jade Snow
are influenced by the purpose of their parents’ work ethic but use the purpose of their own work
ethic as a way to liberate themselves from their parents’ control. Subsequently, these women do
not feel as indebted to their parents. Adhering to the terms of their debts pigeonholes these
daughters into singular identities, making them feel that their lives can only go in one direction.
However, both Kingston and Wong demonstrate how in their attempt to break away from their
debts to their parents, the narrator and Jade Snow do not find the American educational system
and the American workplace as liberating as they expected. Both daughters think that they can
escape their parents’ control by becoming American workers but they end up becoming like their
parents instead, since both the parents and the daughters lack authority and equality in the
American workplace and American society in general. The narrator in particular blames her
mother for not succeeding in America due to the latter’s individual choices, not fully
understanding the larger structural limitations (racism and discrimination) that were placed on
Brave Orchid and other first-generation Chinese Americans. Thus, these daughters end up
reproducing the socioeconomic status of their parents.

Although Wong’s book was published in 1945, before the concept of the model minority
was developed, Jade Snow nevertheless embodies several characteristics of the model minority
due to the fact that her life revolves around her family, her education, and her strong work ethic.
She becomes self-sufficient in her pursuit of the American dream. She becomes the model
minority that William Petersen would praise decades later, yet Wong’s book demonstrates the
limitations of this identity by showing how it makes Jade Snow complacent in her own
subordination. *The Woman Warrior* was published in 1976, and although the narrator never actually explicitly states that she aspires to become a model minority, her efforts to become self-sufficient and well-educated and her strong work ethic do characterize her as a model minority.

Kingston’s novel was published after the civil rights movement and the women’s liberation movement, which is why Kingston could be more open in her critique of how women and Chinese Americans were treated. Jade Snow, on the other hand, was writing during a time period when China was considered an ally of America during World War II but Chinese Americans still felt the need to distinguish themselves from the Japanese Americans in internment camps. Chinese Americans felt pressured to emphasize their “American” identities and pledge their loyalty to the United States, so that they would not be marked as possible spies or traitors too. That is why *Fifth Chinese Daughter* presents a more optimistic portrayal of white Americans and the American dream than *The Woman Warrior* does. Although both books portray discrimination and racism against Chinese Americans, the ending of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* portrays Jade Snow as happy and proud of her achievements, whereas by the end of *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator remains disappointed and dissatisfied with her life, and she aspires to become the woman warrior who is powerful enough to defeat adversaries and fight injustice, though she never succeeds in doing this. In other words, as the predecessor of the model minority concept, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* makes it seem as if Chinese Americans can achieve their goals by becoming model minorities (though as I will discuss later, Wong’s portrayal of Jade Snow’s “happy ending” is questionable and illustrates her underlying critique of the discrimination against Asian Americans and women), while *The Woman Warrior* emphasizes that the identity of model minority does not make Chinese Americans like the
narrator more “American” or successful. Instead, this identity is one of the reasons for the narrator’s isolation, because it sets her apart from other Americans and her family.

Kingston’s narrator realizes that her “American life is such a disappointment,” because she lacks authority in her jobs and feels alienated from other Americans, despite her academic achievements. Jade Snow has difficulty finding a job outside of Chinatown and has to resort to a pottery business in the ethnic enclave, but she still achieves economic independence and gains the approval of her parents. There are few white people in The Woman Warrior, other than the racist employer who fires the narrator when she refuses to obey his orders regarding a racist sign and the pharmacist who takes pity on the narrator’s family and gives them candy, making the narrator feel that he and other white Americans view them as poor. In Fifth Chinese Daughter, many white Americans are portrayed as benevolent, though they do not necessarily view Jade Snow as an equal. They promote the individualism that contradict the notions of subservience and parental authority that her parents emphasized, and these white Americans encourage Jade Snow to pursue her dreams, whereas the narrator feels out of place in the American school system and in the workplace. The narrator tries to assimilate to American culture by adopting cultural practices and becoming fluent in English, but Kingston emphasizes the narrator’s ambivalence over this assimilation. She shows how difficult it is for the narrator to lose her self-consciousness over speaking English in public and how she worries that she will never be accepted by the “real” Americans. Jade Snow does not express the same difficulties with assimilation, except in regards to her parents’ opposition to her attitude towards American individualism, which she favors over their Chinese community-oriented culture. She is not as critical of her Chinese culture as the narrator is, and she actually manages to market her culture to her professional advantage. The narrator is critical of Chinese culture because she associates it
with her mother, who she believes is preventing her from assimilating by holding onto Old World traditions and superstitions. Both the narrator and Jade Snow feel alienated in a society that discriminates against them, yet Jade Snow still manages to make connections with her white American classmates and employers, believing that despite their exoticized view of her, they are good people who care about her. The narrator is conscious of the fact that something needs to change, which is why she rebels against the racist bias of her employer. Kingston makes it clear that the narrator is marginalized and critiques that sense of marginalization that the narrator and other second-generation Chinese Americans feel.

Jade Snow does not rebel against her bosses, nor does she try to change things. Although she thinks it is unfair that she is discriminated against in the workplace, she does not encourage other Chinese Americans or other minorities to band together and fight against discrimination in their quest for equality. Instead, she accepts her subordinate status as a minority in postwar America and resorts to the one of the few jobs that is available to Chinese American women. Jade Snow rebels against her parents by insisting on her right to choose her own friends and husband, but she does not completely try to undermine their authority. The narrator undermines her mother’s authority by confronting her at the end of *The Woman Warrior* and rejecting her in order to pursue her own academic and professional goals. When Jade Snow leaves the ethnic enclave, she soon discovers that the only professional options for Chinese American women are servant work and secretarial jobs, which reinforce her subordinate status. Due to affirmative action and the civil rights movement, the narrator has more work opportunities than Jade Snow and thus it is easier for the narrator to break away from the debt. 34 Jade Snow rebels against her parents to some extent but maintains a connection with them, and her “happy ending” is her

34 Affirmative action was first developed in 1961, and in 1965, affirmative action was implemented into the hiring practices of employers, due to orders from President Lyndon B. Johnson.
father’s approval of her achievements, even though he credits his own efforts for making her achievements possible. The narrator is unable to relate to white Americans, because she feels tongue-tied and unable to communicate effectively with them. She is unable to relate to Chinese Americans, such as the mute girl and her mother, because she believes that they are trying to impose a Chinese identity on her that she does not want for herself. The narrator aspires to become completely Americanized, which is why she rejects the Chinese culture that she associates with her mother. Jade Snow only assimilates to American culture in that she asserts her independence as a student and as a worker, while still retaining enough Chinese culture to market her worth as a worker to white Americans, such as when she cooks Chinese food for her employers. She allows her employers to exoticize her, whereas the narrator’s prediction that the mute girl will never be a cheerleader or popular with boys illustrates her own desire to become the all-American girl rather than an “exotic” minority who is marked by difference.

Although the narrator is more disappointed and disillusioned with her life than Jade Snow is, the narrator is still more independent than Jade Snow because unlike her, she refuses to adhere to other people’s standards for the kind of woman, Chinese American, daughter, and worker she should be. The narrator has more freedom to be the kind of person that she wants to be, even if she doesn’t gain validation and approval from white Americans and Chinese Americans like her mother. In that sense, despite her earlier aspirations to be a model minority, she actually fails to be a model minority since she refuses to be the passive, subordinate worker that Jade Snow was decades before. *Fifth Chinese Daughter* does not present alternatives to the main character’s choices, other than the prospects of marriage to a Chinese suitor of her parents’ choosing. However, Wong does demonstrate the problems with being the kind of model minority that Petersen would praise years later: it leaves people like Jade Snow with a limited life and a
limited identity, so that they are not able to significantly improve their social, professional, or economic status in America. This identity constrains Jade Snow’s agency and individualism, because she has to stay silent when she is exploited and discriminated against; to speak out would mean that she would be ostracized from American society and her professional opportunities would be even more limited. Before the civil rights movement and the 1965 immigration reform, most Asian Americans were afraid or unwilling to speak out against inequality and discrimination, due to anti-Asian sentiment and the knowledge that they would be told to “go home” if they did not like their lives in America. The changes that were made for minorities during the sixties emboldened writers like Kingston to create characters that may have set out to become model minorities but eventually refused to accept the debilitating terms that those identities would have consigned them to.

Jade Snow’s parents refuse to pay for her education, which is why she chooses to become a self-sufficient worker and college student. Her father emphasizes the value of an American education, and she seeks to honor him by excelling in school and earning a college degree. By raising his daughter to be self-sufficient, Jade Snow’s father upholds one of the tenets of American individualism, yet this makes her feel even more pressured to succeed on her own rather than ask for help from other people. The cost of being a self-sufficient, independent individual is that she must work long hours for low pay, with little time for a social life, which increases her sense of isolation. One of the only ways she can connect with other people is through her work, which is why Jade Snow cooks for white Americans in an attempt to demonstrate her worth and skills as a worker. Furthermore, it is contradictory and unrealistic for her father to expect that his daughter would not be influenced by her American education. American individualism opposes the idea of parental authority and an arranged marriage, which
would consign her to life as a dutiful Chinese housewife and mother, where her educational credentials would not necessarily be relevant. Jade Snow resists the notion of an arranged marriage, which would only make her even more bound to her debt to her parents, as well as create new debts to her husband and in-laws. Her husband would provide for her, and she would be expected to repay him by being subservient to him and his parents. Their needs would always come first before hers. She eventually does marry a Chinese man, yet she makes the choice on her own terms. She views the suitors that her parents find for her as their attempt to restore the original terms of her debt to them. By getting married to a man of their choice she will go back to doing what they want, rather than what she wants, and she will subsequently stop rebelling against them. As an educated worker, Jade Snow “ultimately uses labor and the rise in value of labor power as a means of breaking free from her parents’ discipline and establishing her own identity” (So 44).

The narrator witnesses her aunt Moon Orchid’s extreme dependence on other people, including her husband and her sister, and how her inability to survive on her own in America drives her to madness. She also creates a narrative about her no-name aunt, based on the fragmented story that her mother tells her, where she imagines that the only alternative for her aunt, who was ostracized by her family and community, is death. Brave Orchid tells her the story of the no-name aunt in order to warn her against following the latter’s example, and she insinuates herself into Moon Orchid’s life; in both instances, she prioritizes family and duty, believing that it will influence her children to do the same. But the narrator sees how Moon Orchid’s husband rejects and abandons her, and the no-name aunt’s family and community condemn her. Rather than take sides with the Chinese family and community in these situations, the narrator empathizes with Moon Orchid and the no-name aunt, and she believes that
prioritizing family and duty could still lead to the loss of family, sanity, or life. The narrator avoids their fates by becoming a college-educated American worker, yet similar to Jade Snow, her attainment of an American education and a job outside of Chinatown does not fully satisfy her in the way that she thought it would. Jade Snow and the narrator continue to be treated differently and unequally in the American workplace due to their identities as Chinese American women, and their status as minorities reinforces their subordination to their employers. They think that honoring their debts to their parents means surrendering control over their lives to their parents, yet by becoming model minorities, they surrender control over their work and their lives to their employers.  

Both women feel alienated rather than liberated in the American workplace, which does not help them fulfill their American dream of professional success and equality. The parents in both books remind the children of the latter’s “debts” to them, which are shaped by the former’s work experiences and cultural values. The parents worked hard to provide good lifestyles for their children, which is why they believe that their children should recognize the parents’ authority by valuing the parents’ work. To disobey the parents would be to discredit the value of their parents’ work, and to disobey the parents would dishonor the parents themselves, because both generations associate the parents with the work that they do. Jade Snow and the narrator’s parents “do not encourage individualism. Continuing the pattern of life in their homeland, and feeling vulnerable in their familiar surroundings, most immigrant families emphasized the welfare of the group over that of any specific member. Their own inclinations muted, children in most families were taught to value security over individuality” (Berrol 80). Chinese families believed that the family’s survival was more important than the individuals’ (particularly their children’s) concerns or desires. When the children do not repay their debts to

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35 As I previously stated, Jade Snow would not have been defined as a model minority at the time Fifth Chinese Daughter was published, but she does accept the subordinate status that model minorities feel pressured to accept in their work.
their parents, their parents feel as if other first-generation Chinese Americans will look down on them for not raising their children to respect the family’s honor and their debts to their parents.

Kingston’s narrator and Jade Snow do not want to accept the terms of their debts to their parents, because they believe that doing so compromises who they are and forces them to give up the lives and careers that they want. Both women become college-educated American workers in order to redefine themselves as “Americans,” rather than solely as the Chinese daughters of immigrants who spend their lives honoring their debts to their parents. They feel that their parents are unfair and unwilling to understand who their daughters have become, because their parents refuse to change completely in their adopted country and expect their daughters to follow their example by preserving Chinese cultural traditions and values over the contrasting American cultural traditions, practices, and economic individualism that the second generation has more exposure to at work and at school. On the other hand, both sets of parents emphasize the importance of a strong work ethic, education, and a self-sufficient nature, which Kingston’s narrator and Jade Snow believe will enable them to “earn” their status as Americans, only to realize that their identities as model minorities continue to designate them as “not-American.” As Chinese Americans and as women, they soon realize that they may have achieved financial independence, but it is not enough to gain them agency and equality in the workplace.

In The Woman Warrior and Fifth Chinese Daughter, the main characters resist becoming wives because they believe that they are more valuable as workers. By becoming workers and model minorities, they can assert their worth through their own work. They are still dependent because they seek validation for their work from both their families and other Americans. Kingston’s narrator emphasizes how sons were valued much more than daughters in her family. Chalsa Loo explains that women were viewed in this way because “girls were of lesser value,
since, by custom, they could neither carry on their father’s lineage nor be of economic value…” (191). Chinese American wives often fared better in America than they would have in China, where the wife “was expected never to be freed from male domination, as her duty was to obey her father at home, her husband after marriage, and her eldest son when widowed” (193).

Theoretically, Jade Snow and Kingston’s narrator have more freedom as a Chinese American wife in America than in China, yet they still fear that their life would be under other people’s control (husband, in-laws, and parents) if they were to agree to arranged marriages.\(^3\) That is why both women work so hard to pursue an education and Jade Snow creates a professional niche for herself (whereas the narrator drifts from one unsatisfying, low-level job to another), despite all the obstacles that stand in the way, such as gender and racial discrimination as well as their parents’ attempts to extend their control over their daughters’ social lives. Jade Snow believes that an education and a career give her more options than marriage would. She is not opposed to getting married, but she insists on asserting control over her own life, which her parents view as a violation of the terms of her debt to them. Therefore, both women believe that adhering to the terms of their debts to their parents will weaken them, and they think that challenging, renegotiating, or rejecting the debt altogether will make them stronger and give them the opportunity to become new people. However, their subordinate status as workers does not make them “new”; it reinforces the stereotype about Asian Americans.

The narrator’s jobs are never actually identified, though it is implied that her work is not as fulfilling and liberating as she thought they would be. She describes an incident with her racist employer where she attempts to stand up to him and gets fired as a result, which demonstrates

\(^3\) Most liked the “idea of an early marriage because it was a change to get out of their parents’ house and manage one of their own. Others, less eager to exchange parental domination for a husband’s rules, might insist on marrying later but, in the long run, acquiesced in parental decisions. There were certainly exceptions, but until fairly recently it took considerable courage for a girl to opt for ‘spinsterness’ and live independently. For this reason, most of the girls in foreign-born families married early to a man approved by their parents” (Berrol 93).
that she does not have a voice as a Chinese American worker. The narrator thought that if she became a well-educated, hard-working model minority, it would be enough, but she finds her voice in the workplace to be as restricted there as it was at home with her mother, because she is not free to say whatever she wants. Model minorities are known for the fact that they do not disturb the status quo. Instead, they accept the limitations on their lives and their work and do not try to change them, which is why Americans honor them instead of the minorities who disrupt the status quo by demanding equality for all races. The narrator and Jade Snow’s academic achievements are still not enough to legitimize their status as “Americans,” not to their parents and definitely not to their white American employers. Wong describes some of the limitations that she faces in her pursuit of a career, yet she takes on an overly optimistic tone in her description of her work experiences as a maid and as a secretary. The fact that she has to resort to making and selling pottery in Chinatown is portrayed by Wong as evidence of her independence and resourcefulness, but the underlying message is that her pottery business is a last resort.37

Becoming an American college student and worker is not necessarily a rebellion, since immigrant parents encourage their children to educate themselves and work hard. The income provided by their work enables the children to support their families. On the other hand, while it is true that children like Jade Snow and the narrator feel indebted (or are made to feel this way), at the same time their personal desires often take precedence over any "debt.” Their education, work, and income provide them with leverage over their parents. There may be a debt to their parents, but the children do not always feel obligated to pay it. The more that Jade Snow learns about American culture and work, the more both teach her that she does not necessarily have to

37 Monica Sone is also quick to point out the academic opportunities that were available to second-generation Japanese Americans, though she also demonstrates how those opportunities were not necessarily available for the first generation and how difficult it was for children like Kazuko to leave their parents behind and be unable to improve their situations in the internment camps or free them from those camps.
do everything that her parents say. Although she is afraid that her parents will make her marry a Chinese suitor, her parents raised her to be self-sufficient and hard-working, which significantly affects her identity and her attitude towards Chinese culture and her parents.38 Similar to the narrator, Jade Snow views American culture and its workplace as an alternative opportunity for her to gain honor and redefine herself in opposition to her parents. Jade Snow renegotiates the terms of her “debt” to her parents by emphasizing that she is not as indebted to them as they think she is, because they refused to pay for her college education so that her brother would have enough money to go to medical school. They imply that his worth as a doctor is more valuable, because it would be more difficult for her to land as prestigious a career as her brother’s. Indeed, once she completes college, she has difficulty finding anything but secretarial work outside of Chinatown, yet she firmly believes that her work and her status as a worker make her even more valuable as a woman, because these things prove that she does not need her family or a husband to define her worth as a woman. If she had done what they wanted, she never would have gone to college or become self-supporting. As a result, she would have resigned herself to a continuation of the almost nonexistent social life and daily chores that she had to live with when she was a child. She would have married a Chinese suitor that her family chose for her rather than one that she chose for herself. Her parents view their attempt to choose a husband for her as another way for them to provide for her and ensure that she will live a comfortable life, while Jade Snow views an arranged marriage as merely an extension and reinforcement of her debt to her parents rather than an opportunity for herself to carve out a new identity as a married woman apart from her family.

38 Other first-generation Chinese Americans also raised their children to be self-sufficient and hard-working, due to the discrimination and lack of support they faced in America. That is partly why they eventually were characterized as model minorities.
From “Dutiful Little Girl” to Independent Worker in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*

Ronald Takaki interprets *Fifth Chinese Daughter* by focusing on Jade Snow’s defiance of traditional gender roles for Chinese women. In Chinese culture, “Sons perpetuated a family’s ancestral heritage, and thus it was necessary that they have priority over daughters. Wong sons made pilgrimages to ancestral graves, while Wong daughters left home at marriage and joined their husbands’ families. But, by then, Jade Snow was no longer the ‘dutiful daughter.’ She thought it was unfair to have gender determine her destiny, making her the carrier of the ‘heritage’ for other names” (261). Jade Snow describes how her parents raised her and how she was taught that “one did not dispute one’s daughter if one were a dutiful little girl taught to act with propriety” (Wong 4). Jade Snow breaks away from traditional gender roles and redefines herself as an independent American college student, a worker, and an entrepreneur. Her parents view Jade Snow’s defiance of their rules as a violation of the terms of her debt to them and disrespectful of their roles as parent-creditors, but she views it as a different way to honor her parents. At the same time, she sees it as an opportunity to gain honor for herself, by identifying herself as an individual who defines herself by her accomplishments rather than accept the identity that her parents try to impose on her. She views her parents’ authority as an obstacle to her self-interest, which is why she tries to renegotiate the terms of her debt to them.

Jade Snow feels grateful for the opportunity to work, even as a servant with little time to study, because it allows her the opportunity to become self-sufficient. She does not rely on loans or financial support from family or friends. Instead, she earns all the money that she needs for school and living expenses. Although she is still doing “women’s work,” at the same time she is still undermining gender stereotypes, particularly stereotypes for Chinese American women, in that she does not let the lack of her parents’ financial support stand in the way of her education.
Iris Chang points out that many Chinese American women from Jade Snow’s generation did not have the opportunity to go to college: “As was true of other immigrant groups, and the majority of native-born white Americans as well, many Chinese American families employed a double standard, urging their sons to go to college while expecting their daughters to either stay at home or to marry, preferably an educated man” (189). Away from her parents’ supervision, she learns to question their authority, especially through her work not just as a servant to white employers but also as an American college student. Even though Jade Snow still has to do work for her white employers that is similar to the work that she did in her parents’ household, the former is still preferable to her because it gives her access to a world that up till then had been closed off to her. If she had remained at home and under her parents’ control, she would only have viewed American culture through the lens that her parents created for her and the other children. Venturing out into the American workplace and into the American college classrooms gives her the opportunity to see what this culture is really like and to prove that her parents are not right about everything, contrary to what they told her before.

Although Jade Snow comes to accept the status quo for Chinese American women and women in general as well as her debt to her parents, Wong’s memoir contests the terms of these things. For example, although she fits the model minority stereotype in that she becomes well-educated and self-sufficient, these traits make her realize how limited her life in America is. Her educational achievements mean little in a workplace that continues to discriminate against Asian Americans and women. She has no choice but to become self-sufficient, which denies her the opportunity to have a more active social life in college and makes her more isolated as a result. Her self-sufficient nature creates a distance between herself and her parents, even though they taught her to be self-sufficient. They didn’t realize that raising her in this way would foster her
desire for independence and her rebellion against the terms of her debt to them. Her parents assumed that they would be able to continue to control her, despite the fact that they do not support her financially. Despite the encouragement of her white employers, they do not help her find a job that is better suited to her qualifications in the American workplace, and she is left with few other options but to start her own pottery business in Chinatown. Americans praise her resourcefulness, while overlooking the reasons why she became resourceful. Her work as a potter shows that although she did everything she was supposed to do to achieve the American dream, that dream was impossible to achieve. Furthermore, she is unable to be completely self-sufficient, because she still feels upset and alienated from her family when they do not validate her professional and academic achievements. She still needs that sense of belonging that her family and Chinese community provide.

Jade Snow describes an argument with her parents when they try to forbid her from leaving the house without permission. Rocio Davis interprets this argument by focusing on Jade Snow’s subjectivity as an Asian American: “The Asian American child’s need to identify with the American ethos of individual freedom – which includes the liberty to choose his or her cultural affiliation – becomes part of the itinerary of subjectivity” (116). Davis also claims that although Jade Snow is “Americanized” in that she defies her parents in order to go to a movie with a male friend, she “positions herself clearly as a Chinese subject who gazes upon America as a land to be discovered, rather than as exclusively a Chinese person who explains her culture to Americans…[Jade Snow has] ambition to be her own woman, even as she is buffeted on the one side by her family’s strict adherence to tradition and, on the other, by America’s racialized glee” (116). I disagree with Davis’ claim that Jade Snow identifies as Chinese rather than as American. She is not just interested in “exploring America.” She wants to be recognized as a
Chinese American, with both halves of her identity being recognized as valuable, even if both white people and Chinese people (particularly her parents) prioritize each half on unequal terms. However, it is clear from her descriptions of her work and her home life that she also prioritizes each half on unequal terms, because she utilizes her knowledge of Chinese cuisine to impress her white American employers, and she continues to respect certain aspects of her father’s authority. Though she contests the terms of her debt to her parents and renegotiates the terms, she does not completely break away from it altogether. There is irony in her descriptions, because she demonstrates her awareness of her exoticized appeal to her American employers as well as her implicit resentment against her parents for severely restricting her social life in order to uphold their Chinese traditions and parental authority over her.

Davis interprets Jade Snow’s ambivalence towards both American culture and Chinese culture in terms of her loyalty to her parents, but he does not fully account for the ways that Jade Snow’s subjectivity is connected to her debt to her parents. Her father tells her, “Do I have to justify my judgment to you? I do not want a daughter of mine to be known as one who walks the streets at night. Have you no thought for our reputations if not for your own? If you start going out with boys, no good man will want to ask you to be his wife” (Wong 129). Her mother supports her husband by adding, “Never having been a mother, you cannot know how much grief it is to bring up a daughter. Of course we will not permit you to run the risk of corrupting your purity before marriage” (Wong 129). Both parents emphasize Jade Snow’s femininity through her role as their daughter and her future role as a “pure” wife. They attack her sense of honor, which they associate with her virtue, because they believe that her honor will be compromised if she goes on a date that is not approved by her parents. They believe that once her honor is “corrupted,” her “worth” as a daughter and as a wife will be severely devalued. Jade Snow’s
parents believe her desire for independence can only damage her own reputation but also those of her parents. Her mother emphasizes the “grief” of raising a daughter, trying to make Jade Snow feel guilty for disregarding the difficulties that Jade Snow’s mother and father had in raising daughters (the implication is that raising a son, such as Jade Snow’s brother, gives them less “grief”). By focusing on the suffering that Jade Snow is supposedly inflicting on them, her parents attempt to make her feel guilty enough to honor her debt to them and go back to being their “dutiful daughter.” The second generation, as represented by Jade Snow, wants to be free of their parents’ control, yet they also want their parents’ approval and validation, which their parents withhold from them by making them feel guilty for disobeying instead. Similar to how Ralph Chang attacks his sister’s “honor” in Typical American after learning that she has been having an extramarital affair, Jade Snow’s parents attack her “honor” in an attempt to control her and make her accept the terms of her debt to them.

In her confrontation with her parents, Jade Snow uses her position as a worker to support her claim for independence. She tells them, “Both of you should understand that I am growing up to be a woman in a society greatly different from the one you knew in China. You expect me to work my way through college – which would not have been possible in China. You expect me to exercise judgment in choosing my employers and my jobs and in spending my own money in the American world…You must give me the freedom to find answers for myself” (Wong 129). She emphasizes that her parents raised her to participate in American culture, which she benefits from in her work and education. Her criticism of that upbringing is also clear. She emphasizes that her parents raised her to become self-sufficient, and she has grown to realize that being self-sufficient forces her to work harder, with less time to relax and socialize, and overall makes her suffer more. Her criticism of their upbringing also relates to how the American dream and
America as a whole encourages Asian Americans to become model minorities, but this identity restricts their freedom and status and forces them to work harder than other Americans. Her upbringing also teaches her to accept her employers’ authority (since she spent her childhood accepting her parents’ authority), which is why she views her employers as benevolent rather than as exploitative. Her repeated use of the phrase “You expect me” illustrates the fact that she has turned the tables on them. Rather than feel guilty for her own disobedience, Jade Snow implies that her parents should feel guilty for expecting her to be independent without allowing her to enjoy the full benefits of that independence. She challenges her debt to her parents by making it seem like they have dishonored her. Her father accuses her of being “shameless” (another attack against her honor) and reminds her that her “features are forever Chinese,” as if her “purity” can only be maintained if she adheres to Chinese traditions. Her father’s comment regarding race also reflects Americans’ attitudes towards Chinese Americans: though the latter may achieve professional and economic success, they will never achieve total equality and social inclusion due to their “Asian” physical appearance.

Davis points out that Jade Snow’s exposure to American culture and the independence that comes with it negatively affects her view of Chinese culture, which:

leads her to attribute all the negative aspects of her family or community to Chinese culture, rather than evaluate if these might actually be particular to her own family or conditioned by the social and economic restrictions that affected the Chinese American community in the early decades of the twentieth century. Her admiration for American democracy leads her to disregard the contradictions of her own position as a domestic servant and unquestioningly accept that all of the kitchen workers at the Hall of Residence at Mills College are Chinese. The difficulty, she acknowledges, centers on her ‘desire for recognition as an individual’ (91) in contrast to her family’s perspective of her as part of a group. (117-118)

It is true that Jade Snow’s view of American culture is overly optimistic compared to her view of the Chinese culture that she grew up in, and her work as a servant to white families puts her in a subordinate status. However, Jade Snow’s “optimism” does not necessarily reveal Wong’s true
feelings on the subject. If she truly believed that American culture was as liberating as she had thought it was and that there was still hope for Chinese American workers in the workplace outside of the enclave, Wong would never have portrayed the discrimination and restrictions that she experienced in the first place. Instead, her book would have been the “assimilationist narrative” that Frank Chin accuses it of being, by only portraying Chinese stereotypes. Chin characterizes her as “another Chinese American ventriloquizing the same old white Christian fantasy of little Chinese victims of ‘the original sin of being born to a brutish, sadomasochistic culture of cruelty and victimization’ fleeing to America in search of freedom from everything Chinese and seeking white acceptance, and of being victimized by stupid white racists and then being reborn in acculturation and honorary whiteness” (xi-xxi). Chin views authors like Wong as “puppets” that tell Americans what they want to hear about Chinese culture and American culture, upholding the latter as superior in their books. Chin’s interpretation of Wong’s work is inaccurate because it fails to take into consideration the context of the time period that books like Fifth Chinese Daughter and Monica Sone’s Nisei Daughter (another memoir, this one written by a Japanese American and published in 1953, which Chin also accuses of catering to a white American audience) were published in. Wong and Sone provide anthropological views of their Chinese culture, and both provide descriptions of the opportunities that are available to second-generation Chinese Americans. Sone and Wong are very selective in how they portray both cultures, as well as how they critique them, especially American culture, due to the time periods

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39 What Chin does not fully account for is that even authors like Sone were critical of the conditions and prejudice that forced Japanese Americans into internment camps and that prevented first-generation Japanese Americans from having access to the same educational opportunities that their children have.

40 “Memoirs like Fifth Chinese Daughter do not simply reproduce historical events, social realities, or ethnic identity. They must also be analyzed to unveil their efforts to shape the collective memories of the group, which harnesses the memories to establish their particular sense of identity, or promote political agenda...Family memoirs, by telling the group’s story over decades or centuries, remind the group of its history and of the characteristics of its identity. The stories typical of Asian American family memoirs, which most often include narratives of revolution, wars, immigration, and assimilation, are also narratives of personal victories and endurance” (Davis 28).
that these books were set in and published (World War II and the Cold War, respectively), when the anti-Asian sentiment was still very strong. For example, Yoon Sun Lee interprets the themes of the book in relation to the historical context, since the book was published in 1945, when attitudes towards Chinese Americans were changing, due to China’s position as an ally to the United States during World War II. Lee points out that although white Americans’ perspectives of Chinese Americans had become positive, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* reflects the limitations that people still had to live with. Wong’s memoir “reflects a time before identity politics. It sometimes seems as though acceptance by the mainstream audience is the most that any minority could hope for. Likewise, the book can be read as suggesting that individual striving, humility, and force of will can overcome institutional racism and inequities of power” (Y. Lee 90).

However, Wong shows how Jade Snow is not able to completely overcome institutional racism and inequities of power, due to her struggles to find work outside of Chinatown.

Through labor Jade Snow is thus able to defy gender stereotypes but also gain the courage to defy her parents’ authority. The book not only illustrates the intergenerational and cultural conflicts that Jade Snow faces, particularly in her disagreements with her parents, it also shows how her life has been defined by labor. *Fifth Chinese Daughter* “can be mapped through the labor that Jade Snow performs. Divided into five stages – the labor for her family, for other (white) families, for a college, for the nation, and finally for herself as a writer and potter – the work enables Jade Snow’s assertion of self and community” (So 41). Second-generation Chinese Americans like Jade Snow assumed that their situation would be better than their parents due to their native-born status in the United States. These young people “hoped that education and employment in the professions and skilled occupations would advance them toward equality in American education, but…they were still unable to find employment in the higher-paying jobs
and fields of their choices. Seeking to be judged on the basis of merit, they sadly discovered that employers were color conscious” (Takaki 265). Wong also emphasizes that Jade Snow’s identity as a woman prevents her from advancing in the workplace. Despite her work experience and her college education, she soon realizes that “as a secretary she could not always do the work she wanted. Neither could she hope for advancement except as secretary to a more important person” (Wong 234). The implication is that that “important person” will be a man. Therefore, although she is able to defy traditional Chinese gender stereotypes by pursuing a college education and becoming self-supporting and working, her difficulties with work outside of Chinatown reinforce gender inequality and her subordinate status as a woman. Her employer confirms this issue when he tells her, “If I were running a business, of course I would favor a man over a woman for most jobs. You’re always taking a chance that a woman might marry or have a baby…a man will stay with you, and you won’t lose your investment in his training. Moreover, he’s the one who has to support a wife and family, and you have to make allowances for that in the larger salary you give him. It’s not a question of whether he’s smarter than a woman or whether a woman is smarter than him. It’s just plain economics!” (Wong 234). Similar to Jade Snow’s parents, this employer emphasizes that a woman’s primary role is as a wife and mother who is dependent on her husband. Jade Snow resisted her parents’ attempts to marry her off to a Chinese suitor. She undermines gender stereotypes by feigning ignorance of “women’s work” during the suitor’s visit, but her employer nevertheless assumes that she will be like “all women” who will leave her work in order to become a wife and mother. Therefore, due to traditional roles set for women in post-war America, where women were usually only expected to work until they got married or had children, Jade Snow’s status as a worker is undervalued. Even when she works for the white American families, who show more appreciation for her value as a worker than the white
employers that refuse to hire her, these families are still similar to those other white employers because they define Jade Snow through a racial and gender lens. They assign her to do “women’s work” (cooking and cleaning). Thus, she is viewed as a “separate” and “different” worker from the society of white American workers that she seeks to join, which is why they fail or refuse to view her as an equal.

Her American employers find Jade Snow’s work, particularly the Chinese food that she cooks, appealing because it is foreign to them and she has more knowledge and skills in preparing it than they do. Her work for these white American families helps her to accumulate cultural capital and develop a new identity that is separate from the ones her parents created for her. Her work “becomes a crucial way for marking Jade Snow’s trajectory toward ‘independence’ and identity formation. She becomes an ‘intimate member of an American household,’ a title that cannot be used to refer to her membership within a Chinese household and one that loses meaning altogether without the ethnic qualifications. Wong’s suggestion that her household labor is paid for by the identity she gains also functions as a means of asserting the material value of ethnic or racial knowledge, specifically as a means of payment or wage” (So 45-46). Jade Snow’s employers are kind to her, but referring to her as an “intimate member” of their households is stretching it, because her employers do not recognize her as an American equal. They treat her as a servant and as someone who is exotic, due to her racial identity. They express interest in her Chinese culture, emphasizing her difference from them, and she educates them about Chinese culture by cooking a meal for her classmates and other people. Jade Snow’s “labor becomes valuable only when it is marked as ‘Chinese,’ and her transformation into ‘individual’ is predicated on her ability both to alienate herself from that labor and to construct
the Chinese as alien” (So 46). This work foreshadows her future work in her pottery business, where she utilizes her cultural capital in order to get what she wants.

Although Jade Snow achieves success through her pottery business within the ethnic enclave, she is never truly “accepted by the mainstream audience.” White American tourists buy her pottery, which helps her business to thrive. She is still not included as an insider in the American workplace, which is someone who is able to find a job that fits her qualifications, regardless of her racial identity. Jade Snow is left with few other options but to use her Chinese culture to her professional advantage. Her work as a potter is similar to the Chinese food that she prepares for her white employers, because she utilizes her knowledge of Chinese culture to gain recognition for her work and profit off of her employers’ unfamiliarity and fascination with Chinese culture. Davis claims that Jade Snow’s pottery business signifies her outsider status in both Chinese culture and American culture, because her work “highlights the independent ethnic female subject as an oddity to be observed through glass, as though she herself were a continent to be discovered, but which will remain unknown and unreachable. She thus occupies an even more indeterminate position: still a denizen in the eyes of Americans, she has now become also an outsider to the Chinese – though she alone seems unaware of this position, claiming that she has actually managed to achieve a balance” (116-117). She is exploiting her Chinese culture for her own gain. She makes pottery for an audience made up mostly of curious white Americans, who come to America looking for “spectacles” like the one that she provides for them. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong emphasizes the exotic nature of Jade Snow’s work, which appeals to outsiders because “to the gawking tourists in quest of titillating but ultimately safe cultural encounters, however, Chinatown means spectacle, a diverting, exotic side show. The gaze of cultural voyeurs effectively ‘disappears’ the people: every Chinese in its sight is reduced to a specimen
of Otherness devoid of individuality and interiority.” While it is true that Jade Snow’s work provides a “spectacle,” she does not “disappear”; her work enables her to challenge her debt to her family and makes her parents see her in a new light. She redefines herself and also her parents’ perception of her, from the “dutiful Chinese daughter” to the “self-supporting college student” and the “Chinese American entrepreneur.” Her work makes her more visible, not less.

Wong portrays the pottery business as a “resolution” to Jade Snow’s problem, though the implication is that this resolution is problematic and incomplete. Her college degree is irrelevant and unnecessary for her work as a potter, which suggests that all the hard work that she did as a servant and all of her academic achievements are wasted on the job that she turns to as a last resort. As a minority entrepreneur, she continues to be set apart from Chinese Americans and white Americans, which heightens her sense of alienation, when what she wanted was a sense of belonging in the American community and workplace. She demonstrates the resourcefulness that is characteristic of entrepreneurs, but her work as a potter emphasizes the lack of resources that are available to Asian Americans during this time period. The so-called happy ending in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* shows that Asian Americans still have a long way to go and that becoming a model minority will not make them “Americans”; it will only remind them that they are not recognized as such.

Jade Snow’s story critiques capitalism because it emphasizes the fact that she started her business as a last resort. She follows all the rules regarding the American dream and capitalism in that she worked hard and got a college education, but it still wasn’t enough to help her advance in the workplace outside the ethnic enclave, nor was she able to gain equal consideration and pay for work due to gender discrimination. Thus her experiences as a Chinese American worker illustrate the problems that Chinese Americans, particularly Chinese American women,
faced during this time period. Before she starts her pottery business, she becomes a “good” worker and a model minority, which means that she allows herself to be exploited in her work as a servant yet acts grateful to her employers for providing her with housing and an income. Similar to the model minorities who are praised for their passivity decades later, Jade Snow more or less has no choice but to accept the status quo for Chinese American workers during this time period rather than continue to attempt to change it, because her difficulties finding a job convince her that changing the status quo is risky or impossible, considering the sentiment against Chinese Americans. It also shows that despite the ideals promoted by the American dream, only a select few can climb the professional ladder and achieve their goals. The capitalist society could not function if everyone achieved their goals.

There is also the issue of Jade Snow’s talent as a writer. One could view the book as her “repayment” to her parents, because it describes her parents in positive terms, particularly in terms of their strong work ethic, such as her father’s work as a factory owner and the benevolent way he treats his employees. There is also the fact that they instill a strong work ethic in her and her other siblings, which is partly why she was able to achieve as much as she did. I also interpret Wong’s memoir as a “repayment” of her debt to her parents that comes with strings attached. Her resentment towards her parents for treating her and her sisters unequally compared to her brothers as well as their attempts to control how much (or how little) she can assimilate to American culture is very much evident in the book. Similar to how she did not leave out the restrictions and discrimination against Chinese Americans in the workplace, Jade Snow does not describe her parents in completely glowing terms, in order to show that several of their parenting methods, attitudes towards the Americanization of children, and sexist view of women were problematic and out of place in their adopted country. The implication is that she blames her
parents more for the debt that bound them together than she blames herself for renegotiating the terms of her debt to them, because she viewed her pursuit of independence and an American identity as necessary and more important. Although the work that she does for white American families is similar to the work that she does for her parents, the latter is more gratifying to Jade Snow because her efforts are validated and appreciated by her employers. Her parents expect her to do these tasks without their payment or gratitude for her efforts, because she is their daughter and they think of her labor for their household as not only necessary but obligatory. Her parents spent their lives working hard in America with little or no recognition, which may explain why their children’s appreciation of the value of their parents’ work is even more important to them. Although Jade Snow’s parents do not necessarily take as much pride in her work as she would like them to, one of the terms of her debt to them is that she honor them for their work, similar to how Leon expected his daughters to spend their lives honoring him for all the hard work that he did for the family in Bone. Their status as the parent-creditors puts them on a higher level than Jade Snow’s status as the daughter-debtor, at least according to her parents.

Yoon Sun Lee interprets Jade Snow’s identity through the nature of her life, where “the repeatability of actions, viewed schematically, forms the basis of knowledge – as well as the unproblematic basis of her own identity. Observing herself from the outside, Wong claims modernity by presenting herself as an anomaly in an almost statistical sense, as an unlikely daughter of Chinatown” (22). Wong does repeatedly describe several habits and cultural practices, yet the basis of her own identity is not based on this repetition but on her work and its connection to her racial identity as a Chinese American. For example, she provides a detailed description of the chores that she does for her family, which illustrates her role as the dutiful Chinese daughter who does “women’s work,” such as cooking and cleaning. The work that her
parents make her do also shapes her work ethic, because it teaches her that long hours of hard work are necessary, important, and not to be questioned. It also helps her to accept her work as a servant for white American families when she is working her way through college. Jade Snow does the lion’s share of the housework and receives very little money in return. Her upbringing teaches her not to complain and to accept the terms and conditions that her employers set for her. She is trained to be a model minority in both the labor that she performs for her parents and her white American employers.

Ninh claims that Jade Snow never truly becomes free and equal, even after she gains a college education and a career, because “her logic is too fixated on the rhetorical glitter of the wage to see that its promises do not apply to her – that its presence does not make her a free and endowed individual in either family or nation” (40). So claims that Jade Snow finds a voice through her work outside of Chinatown, because “while her domestic labor (her own and other families) results in her silencing, the other forms of work enable her to find a ‘voice’ one heard only outside the confines of her family and Chinatown. The linking of “voice” to labor, that voice can only be achieved through non-Chinatown labor, demonstrates the interconnections between identity, economic exchange, and ethnography” (41). In actuality, Jade Snow’s “non-Chinatown labor” is less about gaining a voice and more about a reflection of the discrimination against Chinese Americans (particularly Chinese Americans), due to her difficulties finding a job. “Both narrators, as critics have pointed out, try to assert a measure of independence from their families despite their gender, or because of it; both are driven to do so primarily by the subordinate and undervalued status of daughters” (Lee 96). Fifth Chinese Daughter, even more so than Jade Snow’s work as a potter, a servant, or a college student, provides her with a “voice” to criticize the “subordinate and undervalued status of daughters” and of Asian Americans. It
implies the pitfalls of the model minority stereotype outweigh the benefits. The fact that the book ends with her work as a potter suggests that there is only so far that Asian Americans (and women) can go in America, yet the publication of this book demonstrates her determination to contest her status as a model minority.

A strong work ethic and ambition are not exclusive to Chinese Americans. Immigrants feel even more pressure to succeed and work hard, though a lot of that pressure is self-imposed. They think that they have to “prove” themselves as workers in order to be accepted as Americans. Park points out that although American “ethnocentrism” takes credit for the success of model minorities, their accomplishments are actually based on what they learn from their parents: “A more nuanced socio-historical understanding shows that upward social or economic mobility of children of immigrants is, in fact, the hard-won struggle of children following Asian (e.g., Korean or Chinese) based on ideals as passed down by their immigrant parents and communities” (7). Therefore, it is impossible for Jade Snow and the narrator of The Woman Warrior to sever ties with their parents or their culture, despite their efforts to do otherwise, because of everything they learned from their parents about their culture and model minorities.

When Jade Snow’s father finally “approves” of her, she finally feels that she has reconciled with her parents, despite her earlier attempts to break free of their control, and that they validate her work. Jade Snow’s father “approves” of her achievements by taking credit for them. He tells her about a letter he wrote to a relative, stating, “You do not realize the shameful and degraded position into which the Chinese culture has pushed its women. Here in America, the Christian concept allows women their freedom and individuality. I wish my daughters to have this Christian opportunity. I am hoping that someday I may be able to claim that by my stand I have washed away the former disgraces suffered by the women of our family”” (Wong
Her father recognizes the ways that Chinese culture “dishonors” women, but he takes credit for the restoration of his daughter’s “honor” by allowing her to have a Christian American upbringing, overlooking his opposition to her earlier attempts to deviate from his standards. By a similar token, Americans believe that they can take partial credit for the model minority’s success, by creating an environment that is supposedly conducive to the self-sufficiency and work ethic of the model minority, though their belief is ironic, due to the isolation of the model minority’s work life and how emotionally and physically draining it can be. Jade Snow’s father has not entirely wavered from his status as the parent-creditor. His love and approval for his daughter is contingent on her status as a model minority, though this identity has to be on his terms. He takes credit for raising her to be a model minority, which lowers the value of her own efforts to be self-sufficient and hard-working; he sees these traits as a reflection of the way he raised her. The first and second generations want recognition from Americans, particularly white Americans, for their work. The second generation wants their parents’ approval, and the first generation wants their children’s loyalty, admiration, and obedience. They also want recognition from other Americans, which they think would validate their work and themselves. The second generation believes that they can prove their worth to their parents through education and work. The first generation values work and education. Nevertheless they value personal ties even more. That’s why they expect their children to honor their debts to them by doing what the parents want and by conforming to cultural traditions and rules. It is difficult for them to understand why their children would even want to defy those rules and separate themselves from their parents. The first generation, for the most part, never wanted to separate themselves from their children, yet their children yearn to break free of them. This issue is particularly evident in Maxine Hong Kingston’s novel *The Woman Warrior*. 

246)
Part Two: Daughter Versus Mother in *The Woman Warrior*

Brave Orchid, the mother of Kingston’s narrator, gives up her medical career in China and spends her life in America working hard to provide for her family at jobs that she dislikes, which is why she feels that her children are indebted to her. Brave Orchid believes that they should honor their debts to her by favoring Chinese culture over American culture, living with her even after they become adults, and following her rules. Her beliefs regarding family unity are ironic considering that the happiest years of her life were when she was away from her family in China, living independently as a medical student and then as a doctor. She relates the story of her educational and professional achievements to her daughter with pride, not realizing that this story motivates the daughter’s own desire to free herself from family responsibilities by getting an education and a job away from them. The narrator believes that as long as she feels indebted to Brave Orchid, she will remain under her mother’s control and live the life that her mother wants her to live or live a life that is for her mother and their family as a whole rather than a life that is for herself. Furthermore, she sees how her mother failed to become a model minority in America. Rather than find a lucrative, satisfying job that fit her academic and professional qualifications, Brave Orchid becomes a manual laborer, first as a laundress and then as a field worker. Her life in America is defined by hard work, poverty, and marginalization in contrast with her earlier life in China where she still had time for leisure activities and had an elevated economic and social status. The narrator believes that she will become more successful than her mother, not realizing until later the discrimination and racism that limited her mother’s options in America.

The narrator aspires to become a model minority because she believes that an education and a career outside of Chinatown will not only allow her to become an “American” but will also allow her to challenge and negotiate the terms of her debt to her mother. The narrator’s pursuit of
an American education and career demonstrates her self-serving perception of work and debt. The narrator believes her debt to her mother prevents her from becoming an American individual. Similar to Jade Snow, the narrator uses her academic achievements and professional aspirations as leverage in her rebellion against her mother. She also uses these things to redefine herself as the model minority that she thinks her mother failed to be. Kingston’s protagonist is similar to Jade Snow in that she is unwilling to accept the confines of the traditional Chinese female identity and seeks to redefine herself as a Chinese woman unbound by the debt that her family (specifically, her mother) holds over her. Bonnie Khaw-Posthuma contrasts Chinese culture and American culture in her analysis of *The Woman Warrior* and claims that the narrator “will loosen her tongue and symbolically free her identity, just as her bound-footed Chinese American female predecessors unbound their feet and ‘wandered outside their traditional sphere and concomitantly into a new world’” (269). In this sense, Chinese culture is viewed as oppressive and silencing, whereas American culture represents freedom. American culture upholds freedom, but the conditions of people’s work, particularly when they are model minorities, prevent them from being completely free. Like Jade Snow, the narrator initially has an optimistic view of American culture and what it means to identify as a college-educated American. Despite their optimism, Kingston, like Wong, demonstrates that “the grass is not greener” in American culture, because the narrator’s life as an American worker falls short of her expectations. Unlike Jade Snow, her disillusionment with American culture and the workplace outside of the ethnic enclave is not enough to make her return to the confines of her debt to her mother, partly because she blames the way her mother raised her for the limitations and fears that she faces in the American classroom and workplace. Being away from her mother means that she feels less guilty about renegotiating the terms of her debt to Brave Orchid. Unlike Jade Snow’s
parents, who raised her to become a model minority by emphasizing the value of education and making her become self-sufficient, the narrator believes that Brave Orchid raises her children to be dependent on her by suppressing their individuality and “silencing” them, making them afraid to speak up for themselves and making them feel guilty for leaving the ethnic enclave (and her) behind in order to work.

The first and second generations form their definitions of what it means to be Chinese Americans through their work experiences. Since many of them are low-wage laborers, they associate Chinese Americans with exploitation. Kingston witnesses her mother’s physically and emotionally draining work as a laundress, and determines that in order to avoid the same fate she must set herself apart from her mother. Despite her mother’s strong work ethic and self-sufficient nature, she believes that her mother has failed to become a model minority in America due to her family’s poverty, her mother’s devalued work as a laundress, and the fact that she could not find a job in America that fit her academic and professional qualifications. The narrator defies her mother’s wish that she uphold Chinese tradition by remaining at home until she marries.

The narrator pursues the American dream by assimilating to American culture and becoming a model minority, and by accepting the standards of American capitalism. She accepts the fact that low-wage workers like her mother are exploited, as long as she is able to avoid the same fate by becoming a successful model minority. When her mother complains about working hard and how her laundry business was taken away by city developers, the narrator points out the benefits of gentrification and believes that her mother can live off of Social Security. Although she is not completely “free” in her work due to her subordinate status as a worker, nevertheless her work gives her the courage to challenge her debt to her mother by refusing to live the life that her mother wants for her. The main character’s belief that she will be able to become a
successful capitalist due to her own academic success makes her think that she has other options. The narrator also recoils at the idea of marriage, such as when she becomes convinced that her parents are trying to marry her off to a Chinese man. One reason for her repulsion towards marriage could be her observation of what happened to her aunt, Moon Orchid, who was incapable of living as an independent woman in America after her husband abandoned her, which is why she eventually loses her sanity. Kingston’s protagonist does not want to be completely dependent on anyone, unlike Moon Orchid, and believes that accepting the terms of her debt to her mother means that she will remain dependent on her mother, because the narrator will rely on her for validation and permission to venture outside of the boundaries that her family set for her. In that way she is similar to Jade Snow, who also wants to control the terms of her own life and identity rather than accept the terms of her debt to her parents, which would define both her life and her identity.

Previous critics and audiences analyze Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior in several different ways, highlighting issues that they see as the main themes in the text: generational conflict, culture clash, immigrant struggle, feminism, and family relationships. They say that the main conflict in the text centers on the narrator’s dual “race consciousness”: her identity as the daughter of Chinese immigrants and her identity as an American. “Caught between a Chinese immigrant family and the ‘American normal life,’ the young narrator seems more attracted by the ‘American normal life’” (K. Lee 115). Paul Outka describes how the narrator’s repulsion towards stories that her mother tells her about Chinese life, such as the one about the monkey feast, is evidence of her ambivalence towards her Chinese heritage: “The complexity of Maxine’s cultural position as a Chinese American – and the complexity of her

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41 At the end of Moon Orchid’s narrative, Brave Orchid’s daughters (which presumably include the narrator) vow to excel in school, believing that an education and a career will enable them to escape their aunt’s fate.
autobiographical quest – is reflected in her ambiguous feelings about what’s on her plate. The immigrant Brave Orchid feels no such ambiguity. She can seemingly eat almost anything; she survives Chinese as an ongoing act of resistance to Western cultural norms. (468) King-kok Cheung describes the narrator as “a young girl caught between an immigrant Cantonese culture that denigrates daughters and another culture that insists on a single given (white) standard of femininity, beauty, and intelligence” (79). Since the narrator is growing up in two different cultures, she often feels pressured to choose one over the other and becomes aware of her differences from people like her mother, who make different choices.

Thus, many critics, such as Frank Chin, analyze the text as an assimilationist narrative, specifically the narrator’s desire and efforts to assimilate to white American culture in order to be viewed as an American equal and not as a Chinese outsider. While I do not disagree that there are cultural conflicts present within the text, in an economically stratified society such as America, the issue of class status and how it influences the characters’ racial identities and their places in society have not been emphasized enough in the analysis of The Woman Warrior. Both the Chinese culture and the American culture emphasize class stratification, upward social and professional mobility, and the identification of people with their social, professional, and economic status. It isn’t just the second-generation Chinese Americans who suffer professional and cultural disillusionment in America. The first generation, as represented by Brave Orchid in The Woman Warrior, also suffers racial discrimination and inequality in the workplace. Similar to Jade Snow and the narrator of Kingston’s book, Brave Orchid defies gender stereotypes for the traditional Chinese woman by not remaining at home the entire time that her husband is away in America. Instead, she achieves independence through education by going to medical school and becoming a doctor. The type of work and the status that is associated with it help to define a
person’s identity and perspective of work, as is evident in Brave Orchid’s situation. Her attitude towards her work as a doctor in China contrasts sharply with her attitude towards her work as a laundress and a migrant worker in America.

The Myth of the American Dream in The Woman Warrior

Similar to Jade Snow, Kingston’s narrator’s idea of a happy ending is an American education and a career, rather than marriage and motherhood. Cheung focuses on how the narrator’s rebellion against her mother and her desire to escape her Chinese culture is connected to the influence of American ideals that she has been exposed to. The narrator “sees an ‘American education precisely as her ticket out of the Chinese community. When her throat finally does ‘burst open,’ she vocalizes her preferences for American ideals and institutions…Implicit in her vocal assertions is an America that epitomizes enlightenment, freedom, and opportunity” (Cheung 90-91). Similar to Jade Snow, the narrator makes herself unattractive to potential Chinese suitors in order to avoid marriage. She asserts herself as a model minority to her mother. “Not everybody thinks I’m nothing. I’m not going to be a slave or a wife…I’m going to get scholarships, and I’m going away” (Kingston 201). She associates marriage with servitude, which parallels her view of her debt to her mother. Specifically, her debt to her mother requires her to “serve” Brave Orchid by doing what the latter wants her to do. As a wife, the narrator would be expected to do what her husband and her in-laws want her to do. Like Jade Snow, the narrator believes that an arranged marriage would result in the surrender of their control over their lives and the sacrifice of their true selves. Kingston’s protagonist believes that she will only be able to get the career and the American identity that she wants by leaving. The implication is that she is not only trying to escape her family, but the conditions that are holding her back from achieving the American dream and becoming successful in American
society, such as her family’s poverty, their laundry business, and their lifestyle in Chinatown. However, as is hinted in brief references to her life as an adult outside of the ethnic enclave, the narrator continues to feel a sense of inadequacy and alienation even after she achieves her academic goals and leaves Chinatown. Jade Snow, on the other hand, is not ashamed of her family and admires her father’s achievements as a factory owner, which is why she does not completely reject their authority like the narrator does.

The narrator believes that becoming a model minority will enable her to escape the life that her mother wants for her, because she will be defined by her own achievements rather than the debt that she owes her mother. As a young student, the narrator defines herself by the skills that her American teachers praise her for, and believes that these skills in education and work will enable her to become a model minority, which she mistakenly thinks will enable her to gain recognition as an American. Cheung states that “Maxine (who, naturally, does not wish to be perceived negatively) is ‘educated’ to identify with the dominant culture and to dissociate herself from her kin and kind. She later sees an ‘American’ education precisely as her ticket out of the Chinese community” (91). It is also her ticket out of her socioeconomic situation. The narrator views the pursuit of American education and financial independence as a way to change herself and her status in society. When her mother expresses her desire for all of her children to live with her, the narrator responds, “I’ve found some places in this country that are ghost-free. And I think I belong there, where I don’t catch colds or use my hospitalization insurance. Here I’m sick so often, I can barely work.” Her desire to live far away from her mother relates to her desire to separate herself from Chinatown and Chinese culture. She believes that she can’t work in the environment that she grew up in due to the oppressive “ghosts,” or fears and superstitions regarding the outside world, particularly white people, which her mother instilled in her. The
implication is that being away from Chinatown makes her feel less bound to the debt that she owes to her mother, because her mother is not there to make her feel guilty. She can focus on her own self-interest. She does not have to worry that other people will associate her with her more traditional mother, which the narrator believes would derail her plans of becoming a model minority. Away from Chinatown and her mother, the narrator believes that she is a more efficient worker, if not a more powerful one. She finds her voice through education and work, as well as by separating herself from her mother.

It is impossible for her to repudiate her cultural and familial ties, due to her mother’s lasting influence on her values and identity. As Park states, “In reality, their achievements are made despite the barriers in occupational structure and racial/gender/class discrimination imposed by U.S. society; it is the resources brought from the emigrant country that plays a key role in the adjustment within the host country” (Park 7). If it had not been for the “resources” that Brave Orchid brought from China, i.e., her skills and experience as a working woman, then the narrator may have had a very different attitude towards work and different (and possibly less effective) techniques for survival in America. For example, if she had been raised by a woman like Moon Orchid instead of a woman like Brave Orchid, then the narrator may very well also have grown up to be someone who was completely dependent on other people, to the point that she would have been driven to insanity if she was forced to live on her own (like Moon Orchid was). Therefore, despite the narrator’s critical perception of her mother’s stinginess (such as her forcing her children to eat rotting leftovers), the negative effects that laundry work and field work in America have had on Brave Orchid, and the poverty that the family lived in, Brave Orchid is actually more of a model minority than the narrator gives her credit for. She manages to survive in her adopted country, unlike other Chinese immigrants like Moon Orchid who
becomes too afraid of her new environment to survive on her own. She manages to support her family and establish a new business without help from the government or charity. In that way, she personifies the model minority ideal, yet it is far from Brave Orchid’s ideal of what work should be, because it does not bring her the same status and recognition that her work as a doctor did. The narrator does not view her mother as a model minority or as a success in America, due to the latter’s unhappiness and dissatisfaction with her work and their family’s poverty. She also recognizes that her mother is not completely self-sufficient, despite her brief life as an independent medical student and doctor in China, because Brave Orchid upholds the importance of family above everything else, including her own professional aspirations and personal desires. When she does not achieve success in the workplace nor gain social inclusion as an American, she feels as alienated outside of Chinatown as she did inside of it. Nevertheless, she is more indebted to her mother than she is willing to admit, because her mother’s survival skills teach her to become a self-sufficient model minority as she grows up.

The narrator does not fully realize that her mother’s influence is partly why she is able to do well in school and achieve more in work than her mother did. Although she is still “tongue-tied,” like when she fails to stand up to her racist white employer, at the same time her mother’s influence and her Chinese culture give her strength or at least the desire to become strong, such as the fact that “her verbal power are traditionally male prerogatives, the fantasy opens Maxine to unconventional ways of asserting herself” (Cheung 87). However, the narrator’s work fails to help her “assert herself,” unlike the woman warrior’s work. Cheung claims that the narrator’s failure to overpower her racist white employer is because of her race: “Like Yamamoto’s Miss Sasagawara, Maxine is considered aberrant by both her white society and the ethnic community, because she departs from the norms of both. Neither woman fulfills the gender expectations of
her ethnic community; both are persecuted because of their race” (93). Cheung fails to recognize that the narrator does not just depart “from the norms” of “the white society” but also “the norms of the workplace.” The boss does not fire her because she’s Chinese (if that were the case, he would not have hired her in the first place). He fires her because she refuses to obey him, which goes against the model minority ideal that preserves the status quo and is a passive, subordinate worker. She is thus unlike Jade Snow, who never dared to talk back to her employers or defy their orders. They were willing to show kindness to her, as long as she did not question their authority. As a disobedient worker, the narrator is out of place in the workplace. She connects her professional failure and inability to stand up to her boss with personal weakness, especially in comparison to the woman warrior, saying, “If I took the sword, which my hate must surely have forged out of the air, and gutted him, I would put color and wrinkles into his shirt. It’s not just the stupid racists that I have to do something about, but the tyrants who for whatever reason can deny my family food and work. My job is my only land” (Kingston 49). The narrator’s dependence on her employers for “food and work” is something that she wishes to overcome. She associates work with ‘land,’ which could be interpreted as property, power, and an elevated status in society. Without it the narrator cannot access any of these things. Even though she leaves Chinatown and her mother behind, as a model minority she is not completely independent. She may be self-sufficient in that she can support herself financially, but she is still subject to the authority of her employers. The only way that she can survive in capitalist society is to be the “good” worker (i.e., the model minority) who accepts the limitations and restrictions that are placed on all the workers in subordinate positions; accepting the status quo ensures that the capitalists at the top of the professional and economic hierarchy will benefit the most from
capitalism, whereas the lower-level subordinates, including the model minorities like the narrator and her mother, will hardly be able to access any of these benefits.

The narrator’s sense of inadequacy compared to the woman warrior illustrates her mother’s controlling influence over her. Kingston’s protagonist seeks to free herself from the terms that bind her to her debt to her family, particularly her mother, but her idolization of the woman warrior, an icon of filial piety, could also be construed as the narrator’s own guilt for failing to be the honorable daughter that the woman warrior was. The narrator makes excuses for the fact that she fails to live up to the woman warrior’s example, stating, “I mustn’t feel bad that I haven’t done as well as the swordswoman did; after all, no bird called me, no wise old people tutored me. I have no magic beads, no water gourd, no rabbit that will jump in the fire when I’m hungry. I dislike armies” (Kingston 49). Unlike the woman warrior, minorities like the narrator lack professional mentors who can help them, and they do not always have their own “armies” (unions) to help them fight economic inequality in the workplace. The narrator does not view her mother as a professional mentor, despite the latter’s educational and professional achievements in China, mainly because those achievements are disregarded in America.

Yoon Sun Lee contrasts the “ideal identity” with the “everyday” in her analysis of the scene between the mute girl and the narrator, because “we can see the gap between an ideal identity and the disappointing actuality of the everyday…But the girl’s thingness conquers the narrator, who finally breaks down into tears and confessions of her own weakness” (102). It isn’t just about the ideal versus the reality. It’s about the narrator’s fear that she will be associated with someone who is a non-worker and not a model minority. Her fantasy is to be like the woman warrior, who is the ideal worker due to her training, her strength, her abilities, and her commitment to others. Ironically, the narrator admires the woman warrior’s commitment to her
sense of honor and her obligation to her family, while the narrator attempts to break free of her own obligations to her family, no matter how “dishonorable” her efforts may seem to them. Despite her refusal to speak up for herself and fight back against her adversaries (such as the narrator who torments her), the mute girl is similar to the woman warrior in that she remains committed to her family and spends the rest of her life with them. The narrator is more committed to her ideal of the American dream and redefining herself as an American and insists on leaving her family behind. The narrator tries to force the girl to become a “worker” by telling her all the things that she won’t be able to do: “Yeah, you’re going to have to work because you can’t be a housewife…if you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality…And you have to talk for interviews, speak right up in front of the boss” (Kingston 180-181). The narrator associates having a “voice” with becoming an American worker. The lack of a voice results in the lack of a personality, because without a personality, the narrator believes, the mute girl will be invisible and worthless. Kingston’s castigation of the mute girl echoes the ideals of the American dream and its emphasis on the American work ethic. In American culture, Americans look down on people who remain dependent on other people (such as the government, charity, or family) even when they are capable of working. As someone who is dependent on her family, the mute girl will never be a model minority who is known for being independent and self-sufficient. Rather than view the mute girl as honorable and devoted to her family, the narrator views her as disgraceful and foolish for refusing to stand on her own two feet and become the model minority that the narrator aspires to be. For the narrator, there is only one “right” way for second-generation Chinese American women to live, and therefore the mute girl is “wrong.”

The protagonist of this novel connects typical aspects of an American girl’s life, such as dating and cheerleading, with work; not talking means that she cannot do any of these things.
Cheung relates the narrator’s torture of the mute girl with the narrator’s hatred of her Chinese identity. The narrator’s “gratuitous cruelty can only be understood in terms of Maxine’s virulent self-contempt at being Chinese. The very words used to lure the girl to speech: Don’t you ever want to be a cheerleader? Or a pompon girl?’ (180) bespeak the narrator’s aspiration to be a member of a white sorority” (Cheung 89). Cheung does not acknowledge the connection between the narrator’s desire to be not just an American but an American student and worker, though “Will Kymlicka in 1995 argued that prior to the 1960s, immigrants ‘were expected to shed their distinctive heritage and assimilate entirely to existing cultural norms,’ which he labeled the ‘Anglo-conformity model.’ If they were thought incapable of assimilation, like the Chinese, they were excluded” (Huntington 61). The narrator is excluded from American society due to her Chinese heritage, but she still aspires to be recognized as one by internalizing the American values that she perceives as being not only different from but also contradictory of Chinese values. Children learn by example. As model minorities characterized by a strong work ethic, Chinese American immigrants teach their children to work, not to play, and they expect their children to work alongside them. In *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior*, there are long descriptions of the work that the children do. The descriptions of their play time are fewer and far in between. When the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* terrorizes the mute girl, the event is associated with the time they “stole” to play. In her attack on the mute girl, the narrator attacks the “silencing act” that she believes her mother inflicted on her, because she believes that

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42 “The current situation in New York City’s Chinatown is not much different. Betty Lee Sung, author of the HEW report previously cited, commented on the lack of space for play. Columbus Park, one block square, is the only green space in Chinatown. This tiny area and a few school playgrounds are the only places where Chinese children can safely play. The narrow streets of the district are terribly crowded, and at peak periods of the day they are dangerous. If children were allowed to play freely in Chinatown, the terrible street accidents that occurred on the Lower East Side in earlier years would recur. For this reason, children stay with their working mother after school, and her workplace becomes, in a manner of speaking, their play space, where they can mingle with other children and, if work is slow, play ‘make believe’ in empty cartons. As a result of the limited space for play and the dangers of the streets, some youngsters told Rose Chao, who interviewed them for the HEW project, that they had less freedom in New York than they could remember having in Taiwan or Hong Kong” (76).
her mother’s own difficulties communicating in English have negatively affected the narrator, and also because she believes that her mother somehow cut her tongue in order to silence her.

Her bad behavior toward the mute girl is linked to the latter’s bad behavior as a worker as well as the former’s failure or refusal to be the stereotypical all-American girl that the narrator strives to be.\textsuperscript{43} “In suggesting what would become of a Chinese-American woman in an American context and how a Chinese-American woman should cope with American culture and society, Kingston as the narrator does not simply teach the little girl of the social reality in the United States but also validates the logic of the woman warrior in her own version in the sense that women should achieve what the patriarchal society as important and successful” (Shu 217). I agree with Shu and Cheung’s analyses to an extent in that the narrator insults the mute girl and tries to warn her about what her life will be like in America if she does not talk. I extend the analysis since she is not just trying to assimilate to American patriarchal culture or a “white sorority.” The narrator is trying to assimilate to the American dream of education, professional success, wealth, and economic opportunities. Rather than change herself to become more attractive to white American men for dates or more socially acceptable to white American women for friendship, she focuses on redefining herself as a successful, educated American professional, but what she actually becomes is a model minority. Lee argues that “only when the narrator comes to realize her ‘ghost-like’ situation can she gradually know who she is and where she belongs. In leaving the term \textit{Ho Chi Kuei} untranslated in her text, Kingston signifies the cultural distinctiveness and the nature of Chinese American experience” (111). I argue that the narrator’s identity formation stems not only from “knowing who she is” but knowing what she wants, particularly what she wants to change about herself. From the narrator’s perspective,

\textsuperscript{43} “In spite of the efforts of school boards and superintendents, some children never liked school. The difficulty of learning a new language in addition to geography, arithmetic, and other such subjects was ‘a heavy burden for the children who could not connect their studies with their home lives” (Berrol 46).
using her voice is an opportunity to be heard and to become an equal to white Americans, or at least to not be viewed negatively by them. She views the mute girl’s silence as “dumb” because she thinks that the girl will never become successful and independent if she refuses to talk. In at least one aspect, though, the mute girl is the daughter that Brave Orchid wants the narrator to be: the mute girl presumably spends the rest of her life honoring her debt to her parents by living her life on their terms rather than on terms that are influenced by American ideals and which would presumably conflict with what her parents want for her. Unlike the narrator, who pursues an education and a career, the mute girl stays at home and is dependent on her family. She does not have a job and her socioeconomic status does not change, so she does not have to change.

Cheung claims that the narrator’s torture of the mute girl exemplifies her acceptance of the “American norm,” because ‘just as the fantasy warrior can exercise her prowess only in male armor, young Maxine can become articulate in Western discourse only by parroting self-denigrating Western assumptions. Her tussle with her ethnic double represents a phase in the narrator’s life when her racial self-hatred is most acute and her acceptance of white norms ostensibly complete” (90). Cheung claims that the narrator bullies the mute girl by using “Western discourse,” yet she also says that the narrator’s tyranny “echoes” that of other bullies, two of whom are native-born Chinese men, which is why this parallel troubles me. On the one hand, you could argue that Moon Orchid’s husband also uses Western discourse to repudiate his wife, because he believes that he can pay her off for her disappearance from his life. Although the Chinese man who supposedly raped her no-name aunt may have threatened her not to tell anyone as Cheung points out, he did not necessarily do so by “parroting self-denigrating Western assumptions.” What this imagined rapist, Moon Orchid’s husband, and the white bosses have in common is that they are all in positions of power over women, which says more about the
patriarchal systems of authority present in both the United States and in China than about the
culture clash between the two. Shu acknowledges that “most readers do not realize that both
Western imperialism and Chinese feudalism have exploited and oppressed Chinese women”
(270). The narrator makes references to Chinese American girls who become typists, which
shows how many educated Chinese American women were only able to get low-paying, low-
status administrative jobs during this time period. Kingston’s protagonist does not specify what
her career turns out to be. Through encounters with people like her racist white employer, it is
clear that she is not in a position of authority, since talking back to her employer gets her fired.
As a Chinese woman, the odds are stacked against her in the workplace, which echoes Jade
Snow’s difficulties of finding a career in the American workplace, despite her college education.

Cheung connects the narrator’s fear of talking at school with her ambivalence towards
her Chinese and American identities. “Kingston, however, suggests another reason for Maxine’s
problem: to be Chinese and a girl in American schools leaves one tongue-tied.’ While Brave
Orchid teaches her daughter by dosing her with dollops of fantastic detail, Maxine’s American
teacher calibrates her students with intelligence tests. Unable to speak English, Maxine is
accorded a ‘zero IQ.’ She responds with a form of self-obliteration” (Cheung 81). What also
needs to be recognized, though, is that being “Chinese and a girl” in the workplace “leaves one
tongue-tied,” particularly in the narrator’s case. Specifically, being a model minority leaves one
tongue-tied, because model minorities are not praised for speaking out against injustice or
racism; they are praised for succeeding in spite of it while also remaining quiet about injustice
and racism. The narrator and Jade Snow cannot complain about their subordinate status, for fear of losing their jobs and being misconstrued as the “ungrateful” Chinese Americans.44

Outka highlights the cultural divide between Brave Orchid and her daughter, because “for Maxine’s parents, China is real, America ghostly. Conversely, for Maxine – and the Western reader China is mythic, exotic, the often threatening seat of imagination” (469). I take Outka’s analysis of this cultural conflict a step further by associating it with class issues. “China is real” for Brave Orchid because that is where she can regain her elevated socioeconomic and professional status. She tells her children, “Someday, very soon, we’re going home, where there are Han people everywhere. We’ll buy furniture then, real tables and chairs” (Kingston 98). In China they can have “real” possessions, and they will not have to spend day and night working in a laundry, serving American customers. Despite her struggle to be recognized as an equal in the American workplace, the narrator is more afraid of going to China because contrary to her mother, she sees her social and economic value going down in a place where girls are viewed as worthless. In a country that upholds filial piety, the narrator would feel oppressed due to her desire for independence and her resistance to the terms of the debt that she owes her mother. She favors the individualistic society of America over the family-oriented society of China, because in the former she is encouraged to leave her family and focus on her self-interest, whereas in the latter it would be dishonorable for her to do so.

Class consciousness is formed not only through the narrator’s encounters with white Americans, but with native-born Chinese people as well. She believes her parents view her as property that could be sold, not as their daughter with real value. “But if I made myself unsellable here, my parents need only wait until China, and there, where anything happens, they

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44 Many ethnocentric, native-born Americans believe that immigrants and their children should be “grateful” to them for “allowing” them to live in American and bestowing work on them, regardless of the restrictions against immigration and the “bamboo ceiling” that many Asian Americans encounter in the workplace.
would be able to unload us, even me – sellable, marriageable” (Kingston 90). She focuses on what she wants and can get for herself, rather than letting someone else decide for her. She tries to “depreciate” her value by acting like a rebellious, troublesome American daughter who defies the wishes of her traditional Chinese family. Chinese American mothers like Brave Orchid educate their daughters by protecting “her family and traditions against the dominant culture of Western ‘ghosts’ in the United States – often perceived as a greater common enemy to the family collective. Euro-American ‘ghosts’ introduce a different value system, language, and culture found in the United States” (Cheung 119). It is true that Brave Orchid tries to prevent her daughter from becoming too “Americanized.” It is also important to recognize that not only the ghosts but also the work in America brings “a different value system and culture.” Through work both Brave Orchid and her daughter learn what America expects of them as well as the sacrifices they have to make in order to succeed. They learn about their own limitations as well as the restrictions that are placed on them by American culture, as exemplified through a discriminatory system that favors white workers over Chinese American ones.

Although Brave Orchid disapproves of what she perceives as her daughter’s self-centered ambitions and lack of regard for her mother’s sacrifices, she has her own experiences of being a subservient Chinese wife who is controlled by her obligations to her family. Specifically, her obligations include remaining faithful to her husband while he is away in America, until he can send for her (especially so that she does not end up like the “unfaithful” no-name aunt who “dishonored” her own debt to her family) and serving her in-laws. When Brave Orchid moves to America to join her husband, she is not free of her obligation to her family. Instead, her duties expand, because she is expected to repay her husband for his labor that brought her to America by working alongside him to support them and by sacrificing her fulfilling medical career in
China. She is also expected to honor her husband and family by bearing children, even though she is apparently past typical child-bearng age (the narrator indicates that her mother is already in her forties when she starts having children) and by helping to provide for her children. Their indebtedness to her for her own sacrifices and hard work transfers the burden of obligation to her children. These issues with debt and family where Brave Orchid is expected to accede to everyone’s wishes but her own motivate her to take a break from her family and pursue her own career as a doctor, leading her to her true vocation and her true self, which she loses once she gives up her career and life in China in order to join her husband in America. In China, Brave Orchid is able to become a doctor and is more fortunate than women whose lives and work that are devoted to serving others are not “honored” in the same way by their families because it is already expected (if not required) that wives and mothers will take care of their families.

Through her education, independent lifestyle, and medical career, Brave Orchid elevates her economic and social status. She transcends gender boundaries by forgoing the identity of the typical Chinese housewife and mother and forming a new identity for herself, not as a daughter-in-law, wife, or as a mother, but as a doctor. Her new life in China is not too different from her own daughter’s later desire to establish a life away from her family in her pursuit of an education and a career, thus showing that independence and work should not be viewed exclusively in Western terms, since the value of upward professional mobility and education are valued in both societies. Changing one’s status in society thus coincides with changing one’s identity and life.

The narrator describes Brave Orchid and her classmates as “new women, scientists who changed the rituals” (Kingston 75). Their “new” identities are associated with their professional status, which in turn elevates their class status in society and also affects their consciousness of themselves. “Shaman” describes the material possessions that Brave Orchid accumulates in order
to illustrate her changing class consciousness. “The Revolution put an end to prostitution by giving women what they wanted: a job and a room of their own…Free from families, my mother would live for two years without servitude” (Kingston 62). Brave Orchid’s training and career as a doctor enables her to become self-sufficient. Without the burden of her obligation to her parents, in-laws, husband, or children, it is easier for her to redefine herself as an educated doctor. Changing her identity in order to become a doctor changes her status in her village. To the people in her village, Brave Orchid “had gone away ordinary and come back miraculous, like the ancient magicians who come down from the mountains” (Kingston 76). The narrator’s description of her mother’s education and work in China signifies her own sense of inadequacy, because Kingston implies that despite the narrator’s good grades, she does not become the professional success in America that her mother was in China. Her sense of inadequacy increases when the narrator compares herself to Brave Orchid’s slave girl, who became the former’s apprentice when Brave Orchid was practicing medicine; the narrator believes that her mother does not value her daughter’s labor as much as the labor of the slave girl, especially because the slave girl proved to be more efficient and thus more “honorable” in Brave Orchid’s view.

Brave Orchid tells her daughter, “You have no idea how much I have fallen coming to America” (Kingston 77). Losing her career and identity as a doctor lowers her status and her own perception of herself. Brave Orchid expects her daughter and other children to honor their debt to her by staying with her and living the life that she wants them to live, but Brave Orchid was happiest and most fulfilled when her life was not controlled by her sense of obligation and duty to her family. She accepts her life in America, which is defined by hard work, poverty, and the sacrifice of her own medical career, in order to provide for her family. Honoring her obligations to her family leaves Brave Orchid feeling dissatisfied and disillusioned with the so-called
American dream, especially because she spends her life working hard in America with little to show for it but pain and poverty. By giving up her medical career in and life in China, Brave Orchid gives up an essential part of herself, and her daughter “rewards” her by rebelling against her and rejecting the values that Brave Orchid tries to instill in her. Contrary to the narrator’s beliefs that her mother tried to silence her, Brave Orchid points out to her daughter during their confrontation that the Chinese suitor that she invited to their house were for her other daughter, not the narrator. She is unimpressed by her daughter’s accomplishments, but when the narrator explains why it is easier and healthier for her to live far from home, Brave Orchid accepts the terms of their relationship with resignation. Even though she is resigned to the fact that her daughter has challenged and renegotiated the terms of that debt by leaving home (and her mother) behind, Brave Orchid still reminds her that that does not mean that the latter is not free of the debt altogether.

Shu argues that despite changes in her living situation and socioeconomic situation, Brave Orchid “maintains her illusion of honor and glory by working hard and showing an aggressive attitude” (214). While Brave Orchid does demonstrate strength and perseverance in her new life and work in America, Shu seems to be too optimistic when analyzing this character’s perspective of her situation, since the transition from independent doctor to laundress and mother is not as “readily” smooth as Shu makes it out to be. Brave Orchid associates America with loss: the loss of her career as a doctor and the elevated socioeconomic status that came with it, the loss of her children who moved away, and the loss of her laundry business. Unlike when she was in China, here Brave Orchid regrets her self-sufficiency because she has no choice about living any other way. She thinks that this American lifestyle lowers her status since everyone does it, “even the ghosts.” In China, only a few women had this opportunity, so their
uniqueness elevated their position. Even though Brave Orchid may technically become a model minority in America, her difficult work conditions and poverty prevent her and her daughter from viewing Brave Orchid as a “successful” or “honorable” model minority, especially because both women view the work as degrading.

Although she did more than just survive and support her family by running a laundry business, Brave Orchid still views her life in America as a failure because she is not able to practice medicine, unlike in China. Her work as a laundress holds no meaning for her, unlike her work as a doctor. “Kingston shows the persistence of that tradition among those few Chinese women, like her mother rejects the status of woman – as wife and slave – and transforms her role from one of victim to one of self-empowerer. Moreover, rather than submitting to the central belief in familism, she places her needs above those of her family in achieving her dream of a medical degree” (Khaw-Posthuma 267). When she moves to America, her family takes precedence, not to mention discrimination prevents her from continuing her medical career. The loss of her medical career leads to a loss of her power.

Also, the fact that she has to work even harder in America partly motivates her return to China, where her life would not necessarily be defined by work. She tells her daughter, “This is terrible ghost country, where a human being works her life away…In China I never even had to hang up my own clothes. I shouldn’t have left” (Kingston 104). Ninh argues that Brave Orchid’s complaints to her daughter, who dismisses them, revolve around debt, specifically the daughter’s unwillingness to recognize the debt that she owes to her mother. It is true that the daughter’s insistence that the loss of the laundry is connected to her ambivalence towards her debt to her

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45 “Additionally considering that many of these women are college graduates, with some having worked as professionals before emigration, their entry into these low-paying, insecure job markets is thoroughly mediated by their immigrant status, racist and sexist hiring practices, and institutional barriers to recertification by professional licensing boards in the United States” (Kang 182). Thus, the odds are stacked against Brave Orchid before she comes to America. Her professional accomplishments in China mean nothing in America.
mother, partly because the destruction of the laundry means that the narrator and her siblings are no longer obligated to work there. The narrator believes that it is better for her parents to focus on their retirement, disregarding the fact that they are not prosperous enough to live a life of leisure. Furthermore, as a model minority, Brave Orchid works twice as hard in America as she did in China for less than half the reward and recognition that she earned in her native country. Her decision to honor her obligations towards her family “represents a deplorable falling-off, a drastic and prolonged construction of being, that silently calls for redress. All of a sudden, she is transformed from a human being enjoying the exercise of all faculties into a work machine” (Wong 122). One reason that the narrator strives for independence is she sees how honoring her obligations to her family became a lifelong burden for Brave Orchid to carry, which means she spent her life suffering in order to accommodate other people’s needs while sacrificing her own. The narrator believes that if she has a life that is centered on her self-interest rather than her debt to her family, she will not be unhappy and disillusioned. Brave Orchid’s status as a model minority does not necessarily make her a role model for her daughter, especially since the narrator views the woman warrior as a role model instead. Both Brave Orchid and the woman warrior’s lives were defined by their commitment to their work and their families, yet the woman warrior willingly gave up her career as a warrior and became a housewife, mother, and daughter-in-law once she successfully sought vengeance against her family’s enemies. Brave Orchid unwillingly gave up her career as a doctor in order to join her husband in America and take on work that she disliked and was overqualified for but which enabled her to provide for her children. The narrator aspires to be strong and free like the woman warrior, and she believes that the best way to gain “honor” for herself is not by repaying her debt to her family but by redefining herself as an educated American career woman. As Wong and Kingston demonstrate
in their work, this “solution” is not actually a solution, because it ends up creating a whole new set of problems for both Jade Snow and the narrator. The implication is that there is no one-size-fits-all resolution for these people, especially not in a capitalist society that is specifically designed to ensure that only a select few will ever actually turn the American dream into a reality for themselves.
Chapter Four: Destructive Debts and Broken Families in Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone*

**Introduction:**

Unlike Jade Snow, who still respected certain aspects of her parents’ authority, the daughters in *Bone* do not respect their parents’ authority (especially Leila, who feels that in her role as the caregiver to her parents, she has more authority over them than they do over her) and are more willing to break away from their parents’ control in order to live their own lives, without constantly seeking approval and validation from their parents like Jade Snow does. The daughters in Ng’s novel are similar to Jade Snow and Kingston’s narrator because even when they honor their own debts and attempt to repay them, they end up feeling like they sacrificed their own well-being in order to preserve the family. In Gish Jen’s novel *Typical American*, Theresa accepted self-sacrifice as a necessary aspect for the unity of her family. Mah and Leila’s sacrifices of their personal desires cause them to feel like their entire lives revolve around their obligations to their families, to the point that they feel like they’ve lost control over their own lives and their individual identities. *Bone* portrays the family’s survival of poverty, though they are not successful professionals, unlike the Changs in *Typical American*. Asian Americans do not necessarily have to become white-collar professionals or ethnic entrepreneurs in order to become model minorities, but it is significant that Mah and Leon are never really able to improve their social or economic status, even though Mah’s store that sells baby clothes does not fail in the same way that Leon’s store does. They toil away at low-wage, dead-end jobs with little to show for it, which is why they lack the self-sufficiency and “honor” that are associated with model minorities, at least according to their oldest daughter, Leila. Although their daughters look down on them for their lack of success, the dysfunction in this family is due to structural factors: poverty, low-wage work, and discrimination against immigrants and Chinese Americans. Leila
recognizes that her parents’ work and lives are not entirely within their control, yet her ambivalence regarding her debt to them causes her to view them negatively. Nevertheless, Mah and Leon both believe that their daughters are indebted to them, because the former’s hard work and sacrifices ensured the family’s survival of poverty. Furthermore, Leila, Nina, and Ona do not have to work in the sweatshops or in the service industry like their mother and father did. Instead, they all become college-educated, financially independent workers, and Nina is even able to leave the ethnic enclave and gain some measure of professional success as a flight attendant. The implication is that the children’s achievements would not have been possible without the support of their parents, which is why their parents believe that the children should support them (not necessarily financially, since the parents are still wage earners, but emotionally) once they grow up. Mah and especially Leon seek validation for their efforts from their daughters, especially since their low-wage work gets them no recognition or validation from the rest of society, even though that work is necessary for capitalist society to function. Although Leila, Nina, and Ona become more successful than their parents, they are prevented from fully enjoying the benefits of their success due to the guilt trips and obligations that their parents impose on them. Subsequently, all three women feel burdened, unhappy, and unable to relate to each other (due to the sisters’ contrasting responses to their debts) and to their parents (due to their anger and resentment at their parents for trying to force them to adhere to the terms of the debt in the first place). They also find it difficult to maintain connections with people outside the family, especially if those relationships conflict with the terms of the debt, which is evident in Nina’s abortion (which “dishonors” her parents) and Ona’s forbidden relationship with Osvaldo (which “dishonors her father, because he associates Ona’s boyfriend with his failure to become a successful model minority).
Second-generation Chinese Americans, like Leila, Nina, and Ona, feel pressured to honor their debts to their parents, Mah and Leon, by valuing their parents’ work, taking care of them when they get old, and honoring their parents’ wishes, even if it conflicts with what the daughters want for themselves. Nina and Leila want lives outside of the ethnic enclave, where they do not have to prioritize their parents’ needs over their own; they can focus on their own relationships and work with Americans who are not stuck in dead-end, low-wage jobs. Ona does not necessarily separate herself from her parents in the same way, but she wants the freedom to pursue a relationship with Osvaldo, the man she loves, with support from her parents rather than their opposition. When they refuse to honor the debt, whether by leaving their parents behind or by engaging in a forbidden romance and committing suicide, as is depicted in Ng’s novel, the children feel like they are being disloyal not only to their parents but also their Chinese heritage.

Unlike Kingston’s narrator, who rejects her mother and was motivated to become a successful model minority due to her mother’s inability to become one, the daughters in *Bone* feel even more bound to honor their parents due to the latter’s inability to become successful model minorities. Since Mah and Leon continually try and fail to escape low-wage work, they become more dependent on their daughters for emotional support and validation for their efforts. If Mah and Leon had been white-collar workers, their financial independence would have made it easier for them to live independently. Their poverty makes it more difficult for their daughters to leave them, because the latter feels guilty for focusing on their own desires while their parents’ desires remain unfulfilled.

Allen Gee focuses on the distinctions that the narrator Leila makes between Chinese culture and American culture by claiming that Leila “privileges those who can best negotiate traditional Asian and American spaces, but although she does not dismiss all that she recognizes
as Chinese, she still privileges American values” (133). In *The Woman Warrior* and *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, the main characters struggled with their desire to be American against their parents’ desire for them to be Chinese. In *Bone*, the issue isn’t just whether to be Chinese or American, though Leila often makes distinctions between Chinese culture and American culture. Leila and her sisters do not face the same pressures to assimilate that Jade Snow and Kingston’s narrator did. In fact, as a cultural liaison, Leila works with her school to enforce assimilation on students’ families. She accepts the fact that in order to fulfill the American dream, people have to assimilate by becoming fluent in English, getting a college education, adopting American values (specifically individualism), and finding work outside of the ethnic enclave. That is why she looks down on first-generation Chinese American workers like Leon and her students’ parents, who do not assimilate and are thus consigned to low-wage labor and unable to fulfill the American dream. She is similar to Kingston’s narrator in that she does not fully recognize the difficulty of assimilation and the effect of discrimination on first-generation Chinese Americans.

In *Bone*, the issue is how debt and labor define families’ relationships with each other and contribute to the breakdown of family ties. Mah and Leon are stuck as members of the underclass, due to Leon’s sporadic jobs, his precarious citizenship as a “paper son,” his failed business, and Mah’s work in the sweatshop, all of which define their identities in America. Both Mah and Leon are exploited, overworked, and underpaid. The American dream promotes the myth that hard work will enable people to achieve their goals and elevate their economic and social status, but all the authors that I discuss in this dissertation show why this myth is not a fact, especially not for Asian American immigrants. Even native-born Americans struggle with the myth of the American dream. Ehrenreich points out how even two minimum-wage jobs are not always enough to enable people to support themselves, let alone change their economic or
social status: “No one ever said that you could work hard – harder than you ever thought possible – and still find yourself sinking even deeper into poverty and debt” (220). By a similar token, then, Asian American novels like *The Woman Warrior*, *Bone*, and *Typical American* show that certain types of work can prevent people from improving their situations. People work to gain agency over their lives and to support themselves. Financial independence is one form of agency.

That is why, when Jade Snow becomes a self-supporting worker, she feels emboldened enough to challenge and renegotiate the terms of her debt to her parents. She is no longer reliant on them for the “allowance” they gave her for her household work, because she can earn more money (though not much more) doing the same work for white American workers. Leon (and Ralph, when he is an undocumented restaurant worker) spends his life working hard but never achieves financial independence, which leaves him with less agency than his breadwinner wife and more dependent on her income as well as the emotional support of his daughters. The people who really have agency, particularly in American capitalist society, are the ones who pay these low-wage workers and the ones who create the laws that govern all the workers. Although their work as low-wage laborers is necessary for America’s capitalist society to thrive, other Americans, particularly salaried employees like Nina (who works as a flight attendant) do not want to acknowledge the uncomfortable truth of the low-wage laborers’ exploitation and poverty. Other salaried employees, like Leila, who works as a cultural liaison for schools in Chinatown, spend less time empathizing with the low-wage workers’ difficult situations and more time emphasizing how their situation makes the workers’ children (like Leila herself) feel more burdened by the personal and cultural ties that bind her to her debt to her parents.

Similar to how Kingston’s narrator does not view her mother as a successful model minority due to the latter’s “fallen” status as a worker in America, Mah and Leon’s status as
exploited workers negatively affects their daughters’ views of them as well as their interactions with their daughters. Leon continually tries and fails to become a successful model minority. Ng implies that if Mah and Leon had been native-born Americans and salaried, white-collar professionals, they would have had more respect from their daughters. Also, there would be less tension because their daughters would not feel as indebted to them. In Typical American, Ralph is initially indebted to his sister because she saves him from his life as a low-wage worker and an illegal immigrant, but once his economic and professional status improves, he no longer feels indebted to her and believes that he has earned his success. In his attempt to assert his manhood as the male provider, he discredits his sister’s financial and emotional support. He also does not think that she needs him as much as he initially needed her, due to her white-collar work as a doctor, which makes her financially prosperous and successful. Theresa is not indebted to Ralph, but she does feel an obligation to continue helping him and his family. However, when he attacks her honor and refuses to break ties with the unscrupulous Grover Ding, she uses her status as a wealthy doctor as leverage. That is, she withdraws her financial support from her brother, which she would have felt much more conflicted about doing if he was still a struggling low-wage worker, and leaves him and his family in order to express her disapproval of his corruption and selfishness. Once the two siblings reject that sense of obligation, the ties that bind them are weakened. It is only when they have hopes of reconciliation with each other that they feel less alienated and stronger. In other words, in Typical American, Ralph and Theresa Chang ultimately recognize the restorative power of debt because of how honoring their debts to each other helps them to reconcile their differences. In Bone, on the other hand, debt causes family members to resent and reject each other. Unlike Theresa, who feels that her obligation to her family makes her stronger and keeps her connected to them, the daughters in Bone feel that the ties that bind
them to their parents are a burden and prevent them from developing healthy relationships and being independent. The more that they try to honor their debt, the unhappier and more alienated they feel as a result, and they blame their parents for forcing them to honor their debt. Leila stays with her parents and honors her debt to them, but it alienates her from her sisters, who do not want to adhere to the terms of their debt in the same way.

Song claims that second-generation Chinese Americans are less likely to blame their parents for expecting their children to assimilate to American culture so that they don’t have to because the parents’ suffering, poverty, and exploitation at work occur because of the kind of work that they do and their identities as Chinese immigrants, which increases the children’s sense of obligation towards them: “Rather than simply blame their parents for relying upon them, many Chinese young people who were ambivalent about helping out tended to stress their families’ situations. The shop and the way of life it entailed were not seen to be of their parents’ choosing, as immigrants” (Song 114). While children feel indebted towards their parents and feel guilty when they do not honor their debts, it is evident in Bone, The Woman Warrior, and Native Speaker that many of the young people do “blame their parents for relying upon them.” The younger generation’s attitude shows how the second generation has internalized prejudice against Chinese Americans. It is easier to blame the immigrants for their professional or cultural shortcomings and failures than to look at how or why their work prevents them from fully assimilating to American culture, which would theoretically improve their employment opportunities. The immigrant workers tolerate the abuse, exploitation, and low pay because they have no other choice or few other options, especially if they are undocumented. Ehrenreich, who discusses the reasons why low-wage employees do not rebel against their employers in Nickel and Dimed (2001), argues that “if low-wage workers do not always behave in an economically
rational way, that is, as free agents within a capitalist democracy, it is because they dwell in a place that is neither free nor in any way democratic” (210). The situation is even worse for low-wage employees in Chinatown, whose status in America depends on their work, because with no protection or consideration from their employers or the government, these workers often feel that they have no choice but to accept what is inflicted on them. They also know that there are other people lined up to take the work if they refuse to do it. The employers claim that the workers should be grateful to them for “helping” them. The employers also enjoy the privileges and material wealth that they gain from exploited labor. They are unwilling to give up these privileges and wealth just because of shared cultural heritage or racial identity with their employees. Ninh claims that Asian Americans’ families’ professional goals are formed through these experiences with capitalism: “Read through the family’s economic aspirations, or a parent’s class and national investments, Asian American intimate relations reveal themselves to be profoundly ordered by a capitalist logic and ethos, their violence arranged around the production of the disciplined and profitable body” (6).

As white-collar workers, Mah and Leon would not have had to toil in difficult work conditions for low pay. Their success as workers would have fulfilled them so that they would not have expected their daughters to fill the void in their lives. Leila and Nina, while not financially prosperous or fully satisfied with their jobs (Nina even switches careers from a flight attendant to a tour guide), do not face the same struggles as their low-wage laborer parents. They do not face the same discrimination and racism that Jade Snow and Kingston’s narrator faced in the workplace, which is why it is easier for Leila and Nina to find work that matches their

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46 “The newcomer is expected to return these favors when he is in the position to do so – to begin with, by being a compliant, hard worker. Respectful and loyal behavior ensures special consideration when it comes to individual job assignment, workload, wages, and benefits. Thus traditional Chinese regard for ren-qing transforms a typical labor-capital relationship into an association based on personal favor and obligation” (Kwong 117).
academic qualifications. Nina in particular feels more emboldened to reject her debt to her parents, because unlike Jade Snow, she knows that she does not have to remain in Chinatown in order to succeed. She can have a career and a life outside of the ethnic enclave. Nina and Leila’s attitudes towards work, poverty, and the American dream are thus deeply affected by their parents’ experiences, but are also affected by their own experiences as salaried employees. The two generations have different conceptions of race because one generation was born and raised in the United States, and the other grew up in China. Work shapes the children’s perceptions of America, their parents, and their culture even more than their cultural traditions, though as I will show in this chapter, both Chinese cultural beliefs regarding filial piety and American work conditions define the children’s perceptions of their parents, honor, and debt.  

**Breaking Free from the Ethnic Enclave and Chinese American Parents in Bone**

Yoonmee Chang claims that “for Asian Americans, ‘ethnic enclave’ and its vocabulary of cultural community have been preferred over ‘ghetto’ to describe their racially segregated, economically impoverished spaces. This preference reflects a denial that racialized class inequity exists in America.” By creating ethnic enclaves for themselves, Asian Americans can foster a sense of community. They are free to express their cultural identities, which may distinguish them as “alien” outside of the enclave. That does not account for the fact that the ethnic enclave limits economic opportunities. The people who live in ethnic enclaves like Chinatown are constrained to racialized occupations like sweatshop workers, restaurant owners, and ethnic

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47 Asian American families’ lives typically revolve around work, especially if the family is made up low-wage workers or ethnic entrepreneurs. “During the period from about 1920 to the mid-1960s, the typical immigrant first-generation family functioned as a productive unit in which all members, including children, worked without wages in a family business. The business was profitable only because it was labor-intensive and members put in extremely long hours” (40). Ng and Kingston illustrate this issue by showing how the children help their parents in their businesses, which would not survive without the children’s unpaid labor.

48 “Housing segregation and discriminatory laws forced Asian immigrants into urban ethnic enclaves...These communities evolved into centers for residential housing, community and religious organizations, ethnic shopping, and employment” (Liu and Geron).
entrepreneurs, which keep them from moving beyond the enclave. They become invisible, except when curious white tourists visit the enclave, expecting to see “authentic” Asians.49

In Fifth Chinese Daughter, Jade Snow returns to Chinatown after she is unable to find a suitable job, and she starts her own pottery business, selling her wares to American tourists. Therefore, she utilizes Chinese culture and the ethnic enclave to her professional advantage; the fact that she made a positive impression on her white American employers and their friends by cooking Chinese food to them teaches her that she does not have to reject her Chinese culture to succeed. However, by utilizing her culture in this way, she reinforces her status as a minority worker, which distinguishes her from the American workers whose ranks she aspired to join. The daughters in Bone, understand that they do not have to stay in Chinatown in order to find lucrative work that matches their qualifications. The only thing that keeps them in the ethnic enclave is their debt to their parents, who pressure them to stay with them. The historical contexts that are illustrated in novels like Bone illustrate how the ethnic enclave affects work opportunities for Chinese Americans, as well as their relationships with each other and what they want out of life. Like Chu’s novel, Ng’s novel Bone is set in Chinatown, though it is in California rather than New York. The novel’s tones and themes are different from Chu’s novel because it is set decades later. What the novels have in common are the characters’ conflicted loyalties towards their parents, which they feel are magnified because they live in Chinatown. They feel “trapped” in their families and in their Chinese cultures, and they think that they can liberate themselves if they move out of Chinatown.50

49 “the appearance of Chinatown today is due in large part to Chinese merchants who, after the 1906 earthquake, paid white architects to come up with an Oriental look that would be appealing and acceptable to a general public that had come to view the Chinese with racist eyes” (Tsui 21).
50 “In the past five years, the number of Chinese immigrants to the U.S. has been on the decline, from a peak of 87,307 in 2006 to 70,863 in 2010. Because Chinatowns are where working-class immigrants have traditionally
Leila and Nina associate Chinatown with their parents’ culture and with poverty. According to them, Chinatown is not on the same level as the rest of Americanized society: “When I suggested Chinatown, Nina said it was too depressing. ‘The food’s good,’ she said, but the life’s hard down there. I always feel like I should rush through a rice plate and then rush home to sew culottes or assemble radio parts or something…‘I don’t want to eat guilt,’ Nina said” (54). Unlike their parents, Leila and Nina do not feel the same nostalgia for a culture and country that they do not feel like they completely belong to; they have that in common with Kingston’s narrator, who only feels a sense of dread and fear when her mother talks about what their lives will be like if they return to China. Both daughters associate Chinatown with work, specifically the work that their mother did in sweatshops. Unlike the narrator in *The Woman Warrior*, however, the daughters value the sacrifices that she made, which is why they feel more conflicted about rejecting their debt to her than the narrator does. The daughters’ attitudes towards the ethnic enclave demonstrate that “Chinatown is not a mythologized space punctuated with happy rituals but a place of hardship, a reminder of endless worries and the perpetual rhythms of work” (Li 135). Chinatown reminds the daughters of their parents’ labor and suffering and makes them feel guilt over the debts that they owe their parents. Nina has even more reason to feel guilty than Leila, who stays home and honors her debt to their parents by taking care of them, whereas Nina abandons the family by moving to New York and working as a flight attendant. Her guilt over forsaking the debt ultimately motivates her to give up her job and become a tour guide in China, where she offers to escort her mother and other first-

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51 “Food has nothing to do with pleasure to gastronomic exoticism, and everything to do with exploitation and social subalternity” (Izzo 145).
generation Chinese Americans on a trip. This offer signifies her attempt to atone for her past “sin” of dishonoring her parents by leaving them.

In *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, there were few opportunities for the people outside of Chinatown. Bone raises the question of why people like Leila choose to stay in Chinatown, now that they do not face the same obstacles that Chinese immigrants used to face. Leila’s debt to her parents keeps her in Chinatown, which negatively affects her attitude towards her parents and the ethnic enclave. Since her sisters rejected their debts to their parents, Leila feels even more bound to honor the debt. The irony is that the ties that bind her to her family become even more frayed with her decision to stay with her parents, because she expresses anger, resentment, and confusion towards her parents and her sisters for putting her in that position in the first place.

Many children of immigrants, Chinese as well as immigrants from other countries, continue to live with their parents even after they become adults and get full-time jobs. They distinguish themselves from “typical Americans” who leave their parents’ homes when they are old enough to live on their own. “While the native born generally see moving away from their parents as a necessary step in attaining adulthood, children of immigrants often see living with their parents as being responsible and mature. They sometimes talk in terms of repaying their parents for the care given them when they were children or taking responsibility for the family” (Kasinitz et al. 217). Unlike her sister, Nina, who focuses on living her own life, Leila feels responsible for Mah and Leon and does not feel that she can abandon them. She believes that

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52 The Chinatown in Chu’s novel also illustrates the social isolation of his community, which is both self-imposed and imposed by white American outsiders, particularly by the latter’s racist immigration laws and discrimination against Asian Americans in the workplace. Their jobs and living situations illustrate the limitations that were imposed on Chinese immigrants, and they also show how their relationships with white people were either nonexistent or strictly controlled, with the white people having the upper hand.

53 “Enclaves tend to house the most exploited, least advantaged sectors of Asian American populations. Southeast Asian populations in urban enclaves tend to have particularly low socioeconomic indicators (Ong and Hee, 1994; Lee and Arguelles, 2003), and the influx of immigrant workers, many with low educational attainment and uncertain legal status, has led to numerous labor issues” (Liu and Geron 32).

125
repaying her debt to her parents means being their caregiver and cleaning up the messes they leave behind. She thinks that if she abandons her debt to them, the fragile family ties that were already weakened by her sisters’ refusal to honor their debts to their parents will be severed altogether. Despite her best efforts, Leila is unable to get her parents to change, because their work does not require them to change. The fact that they do not assimilate to American culture keeps them in these jobs, and their failure to assimilate prevents them from becoming successful model minorities. Leon and Mah identify as Chinese, not as American, in their work. The work that people like Nina pursue, on the other hand, requires them to assimilate to American culture. Chinatown is viewed as part of the problem for these characters, whether they leave or stay, because in both cases the ethnic enclave is connected to their sense of obligation towards their family. Characters like Nina and Leila believe that once they leave Chinatown, their lives will improve and they will be free. However, there is also the implication that their lives will be even more difficult once they become racial outsiders in a white society, as it was for Nina and Leon. Nina breaks away from her family and avoids forming connections with most people, as is evident in her abortion and lack of long-term relationships. Her isolation is something that she has in common with her parents, who are also isolated in their work. Mah and Leon’s immersion in their work leaves them with little time for a social life, which is partly why they rely on their children for emotional comfort.

Neither Mah nor Leon is able to find jobs that provide financial security. Robert J. Ross notes that “a choice to take bad work is not so free when structural or cultural obstacles prevent one from taking better work” (177). These obstacles include language barriers, poverty, the capitalist system that thrives on their labor, and discrimination. Even when they are “praised” for their self-sufficiency and hard work, their status as “model minorities” still distinguishes them
from the “real” (white) Americans. First-generation Chinese Americans like Mah and Leon in
*Bone* and Brave Orchid in *The Woman Warrior* came to this country hoping for a better life,
better jobs, and more power. Their failure or inability to achieve success in America leads to
their sense of alienation. Donald Goellnicht claims that this failure motivates their desire to
return to China:

The desire on the part of immigrants for this ‘reverse’ immigration vividly conveys their
sense of rejection by and alienation from North America, the promised land, the Gold
Mountain, as much as it indicates a patriotic desire to return ‘home’ to China. This sense
of rejection is evident not only in Grandpa Leong’s life story in America, which begins
with success in gold mining and farming but ends in failure and poverty; it is also evident
in the current life stories of Leon and Mah, both of which point up the huge disparity
between the dream and the reality of America for many Chinese immigrants. (307)

Like Brave Orchid, Leon and Mah idealize China as the site where they still held optimism about
life in America. As immigrants, they are expected to not only survive but thrive in America. The
failure to do so makes them feel less than equal to other Americans and Chinese immigrants.

When things go wrong in their work, other aspects of their lives also go wrong.

Mah and Leon’s inability to become successful model minorities are why their daughters
refuse to repay their debts to them. Lisa Sun-hee Park acknowledges the effect that the children’s
indebtedness has on their relationship with their parents and that “whether the discussion focused
on immigration, their relationship with their parents, their work experience at the family store, or
their future career goals, repayment for parental sacrifices was a central motivation for their
actions” (3). Park claims that “it is noteworthy that whether or not a business is successful
generally has little bearing on how the child views the parent. A failed business does not
necessarily result in a failed parent…the parent continued to hold the role of hero” (147). This
claim does not apply to Leon and Mah’s daughters. After Leon’s business fails, his children do
not feel the same sense of obligation to honor their “debt” as they did before. Ona defies her

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54 The model minority is used as a way to shift blame from the system that discriminates against other minorities
to the minorities (particularly African Americans) themselves.
father by continuing a relationship with Osvaldo. Nina moves to New York and becomes a flight attendant. Leila stays in Chinatown, but she becomes more disillusioned with her father, whom she had been able to love and admire more easily before she realized his limitations as a worker.

Since Mah and Leon are not able to help their family rise out of poverty, they feel that they have failed not only in their mission as immigrants who came to America in search of a better life but also in terms of their failure to become “honorable” Chinese parents, because “for the Chinese it’s very ‘whatever you suffer is for the benefit of the children’…It’s all for the potential of what they can bestow to their kids” (Kasinitz et al. 25). Mah and Leon spend their lives suffering in their work, yet they are unable to bestow much more than their legacy of suffering as well as the disillusioning reality that a lifetime of hard work in America will not enable them to become self-sufficient model minorities. Instead they become and remain low-wage laborers who are dependent on their children. It is one thing to raise their children to become model minorities whose economic success will enable the parents to retire in comfort. It is another to raise children who feel so burdened by their debts to their parents that they cannot fully realize their potential as model minorities; instead they become resentful of their parents while also feeling pity for them, and guilt because the children were not able to alleviate their parents’ pain and increased it instead. In that way, the daughters in Bone are similar to Kingston’s narrator and dissimilar from Jade Snow, who becomes a model minority, though even Jade Snow resents her parents for the pressure they put on her to honor her debt to them.

By immigrating to America, Mah and Leon sacrificed their status in their native country. Ninh states that immigration contributes to the debt that the children owe their parents, because “the debts of filiality and peonage present themselves equally as the costs of becoming an American – that is, the unredeemable fares of immigration come due. Such are certainly the
implications of the parental rhetoric of having *sacrificed to come to this country for the sake of their children*: a martyrdom for which they are entitled repayment” (39). Leon upholds himself as a martyr because of what he has suffered in America. As witnesses to his suffering, his children are expected to acknowledge the value of his hardships by remaining loyal to him. Similar to how Brave Orchid emphasizes her sacrifices and the hard work she has endured in America in order to honor her obligations to her family and also make her children feel guilty for leaving or disobeying her, Mah and Leon use the hardships they suffered as low-wage laborers to make their children feel indebted to them. As a result, the daughters feel guilty when they do not fully repay their debts to their parents and deal with that guilt in contrasting ways.

Leon’s inability to maintain steady employment is connected to his desire to control his life. His constant search for the solution to his problems is connected to his continual search for the “right” kind of work for him, which he thinks will complete his identity. Mah becomes the “center” of her family due to her breadwinner status. Leon loses his wife and daughters’ respect due to his sporadic employment and the failure of his laundry and grocery business. Leon’s failures as a worker undermine his sense of masculinity, whereas Mah’s status as the breadwinner allows her to assert a leadership role in the family. These changes define her relationships with her daughters, who view her more as a worker than as a mother.55 In an attempt to complete her work and earn more money, she enlists her daughters’ help. Not helping her means that Mah and the family will suffer. Mah’s work in the sweatshops does not encourage independence. It fosters dependence on the paltry wages that the workers earn as well as the so-called beneficence of their exploitative employers. This dependence carries over into Mah’s

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55 Chinatown’s women are highly segregated into low prestige occupations. Nearly half (47%) of the working women were employed as sewing machine operators in the apparel industry, primarily for small sweatshops located within the enclave. One-fifth (22%) worked in services (janitoring, dishwashing, waitressing, or doing health service work). Another fifth (19%) had jobs in clerical or sales positions. Six percent were professionals, and another 6% were private household workers (cooks or maids)” (Loo 194).
personal life, because Leila believes that her mother will not be able to function on her own if Leila moves out.

It isn’t just the daughters who define Mah and Leon according to their limitations and failures as workers; Mah and Leon define themselves in the same way. Leila pities Mah when she thinks of how her mother will return to Hong Kong in “disgrace”: “Twenty-five years in the land of gold and fortune, and then she returned to tell her story: the years spent in sweatshops, the prince of the Golden Mountain turned into a toad, and three daughters: one unmarried, another who-cares-where, one dead” (Ng 22).56 Mah works because the men in her life (her first husband and the father of Leila, who abandoned them when Leila was still a baby, Leon, her second husband, whose many get-rich-quick schemes fail and make them even poorer, and Tommie Hom, her employer and extramarital lover, who never asks her to marry him) prove to be unreliable sources of support. Leila “watched the years of working in sweatshops change her body. Her neck softened. Her shoulders grew heavy. Work was her whole life, and every forward stitch marked time passing. She wanted to get out before her whole life passed under the stamping needle” (160). Mah lives the life that the Japanese American Ichiro in John Okada’s No-No Boy (1956) avoids: a life that is defined and burdened by work, which limits her freedom.57 Ng’s description of Mah’s work conditions critiques the notion that a job and a strong work ethic enable immigrants to achieve their personal and professional goals in America. The work that Mah and the other women in the sweatshops do is physically demanding,

56 “Most of the jobs in New York, about 70% according to Lee, are owned by ethnic Chinese, and 40% of their products go to two major buyers: Wal-Mart and K-Mart. Virtually all pay by piece rate, and only a handful of workers are able to produce enough to approach the minimum wage of $5.15 an hour. For most, ‘the pay has dropped to $2 an hour or less. Work laws are no longer enforced, and crippling injuries have soared,’ says Peter Kwong, a professor who studies Chinatown” (Barnes). The work that people like Mah do in Chinatown sweatshops keeps them exploited and poor, with little chance of improving their situations.

57 “While the official narratives of immigrant inclusion propose to assimilate immigrants as citizens, the conditions of Asian immigrant women in the United States directly contradict these promises of incorporation, equal opportunity, and equal representation. Asian ‘American’ women, even as citizens, continue to be located at the cultural, racial, and political boundaries of the nation” (Lowe).
unappreciated, and isolating. It does not allow them to “become American”; it reinforces the barrier between them and the more affluent Americans who would never tolerate such work conditions. In their case, the job is the problem, not the solution.

Park discusses some children who do not honor their debts, but she focuses more on the children who succeed. She acknowledges the importance of work, but she focuses more on their “consumption,” i.e., their materialism: “For many immigrants, consumption of particular items in a particular context is a powerful symbol of their identity as a ‘good’ immigrant who contributes greater benefits than costs to the larger U.S. society” (4). Ng, however, goes more in-depth on the effects that this debt has on the children of immigrant workers and how this debt complicates their relationships with their parents. Park connects the children’s indebtedness with their education and careers because “it is the repayment of familial obligations to which the second generation so consistently refers…it is the social status that children can buy that is crucial here. In this way, education is ‘conspicuously consumed to lift off their modest social position’” (34). Since Nina is the absent daughter and does not provide emotional or financial support, she is dishonorable and increases the burden of the ties that bind Leila to the debt, since she knows that Leila is less self-centered and more willing to provide emotional support for their parents. Their parents, particularly Leon, connect their children’s debt to them not just in the form of the children’s work but also in an appreciation of the parents’ work. Mah and Leon believe that appreciation should be exemplified through loyalty, even if it overrides what the children want (for example, Leon forbids the relationship between Ona and Osvaldo because Leon expects her to be loyal to him instead). Ng also shows how workers like Leon and Mah focus not on the “consumption” of luxury goods (which they can’t afford anyway), but on their work in order to prove themselves as model minorities in America.
Many immigrant parents, not just Chinese American ones, worry about losing their children in America. They do not fear the literal loss of their children, though Mah and Leon do lose Ona, who dies. They fear an emotional disconnect from them, because an emotional bond is necessary to keep the children bound to their honor and their debts: “Anyone spending time in America’s growing immigrant communities will hear parental concern over the second generation. ‘We are afraid for our kids,’ we have been told. With a mixture of awe, fear, and disdain, immigrant parents say their children are ‘becoming American’ (Kasinitz, et al. 4-5). The problem with “becoming American” is that it implies that the children will be more likely to rebel against their immigrant parents, and that rebellion will include a separation or even an estrangement from them (the latter is possible if the parents refuse to accept the changes in their offspring). Also, “strong kinship ties among the Chinese…constitute ‘social capital’ that increases the ability of the first generation to instill loyalty and obedience in their children” (Kasinitz, et al. 9). Parents like Brave Orchid, Jade Snow’s parents, and Mah and Leon want their children to have the advantages that Americans have, yet they fear that “becoming American” will cause their children to reject their parents and focus on their individual desires rather than on what is best for the family as a whole.

Goellnicht interprets Nina’s move to New York “as a form of escape, a fleeing of familial responsibilities, an abusive assertion of voice” (318). I expand Goellnicht’s interpretation of Nina to include her response to her debt to her parents. Nina is more “American” than any of the other members of her family, because she breaks away from the community-oriented Chinese culture that upholds the family’s interests over the individual interests to focus on what she wants. Nina is similar to Kingston’s narrator, who leaves the ethnic enclave and her family in
order to pursue her dreams and interests, disregarding the needs and poverty of her mother, who continues toiling for low wages in her old age. She seeks to redefine herself by separating herself from the family geographically and professionally, which makes her indifferent and disloyal to them. Her career gives her freedom, unlike Leila, whose work helping Chinese immigrants and their American-born children mirrors the work that she does to help her parents. Mah and Leon cannot be dependent on Nina. By “dishonoring” her debt to her parents, Nina becomes an outsider in her own family. She may come close to fulfilling the “successful model minority” stereotype, but it does not make her feel connected to American society or comfortable with her decision to reject her debt. Her career change from flight attendant to tour guide in China signals her attempt to reconnect with her heritage as well as her family, such as when she offers to take her mother to China with her.

Unlike the narrator of *The Woman Warrior*, who viewed college as her way out, Leila lives and works in Chinatown after completing college. She envies Nina’s freedom, though she disapproves of Nina’s rejection of the debt because it increases her own burden of paying it. Leila’s work as a cultural liaison is based on her own experience as a cultural liaison for her parents. She becomes a college-educated professional, but her economic and social status is not significantly better than her parents, especially because “those who were employed in coethnic jobs were generally paid less than those working outside of Chinatown” (D. Kim 58). Unlike her relationship with her sister Nina, which is fraught with anger, resentment, and guilt because of their contrasting responses to their debts to their parents, Leila’s relationship with Mason is

58 “The Chinese were the second generation group most likely to work among co-ethnics” (Kasinitz et al. 202).
59 “An English-speaking child, even one quite young, is of inestimable value to parents, especially mothers, buried at home with the burdens of raising a large family on a small income. Thanks to the children, information on health care, manners, proper dress, and food preparation, although not always welcome, penetrates the immigrant household and accelerates the melding of old and new. American children, as they mature, can often be mediators between their foreign-born parents and the outside world, a pipeline for American ideas” (Berrol 100).
loving and stable because he understands her loyalty to her parents. He helps her honor her debt to them by taking care of them. Nina’s refusal to honor her debt to her parents gives Leila the moral high ground. The “honorable” children stay with their parents because “securing a good reputation mattered a great deal…not only did they take pride in it, but those who claimed the moral high ground as committed children could be in a position to judge and criticize siblings whom they perceived to be irresponsible or uncommitted” (L. Park 142). The sisters’ responses to their debt negatively affect their relationship. Leila views Nina as selfish and uncaring, while Nina views Leila as too subservient to their parents’ needs. Leila’s work as a community liaison and caregiver to their parents designate her as the dutiful Chinese daughter. Nina’s work as a flight attendant and neglect of their parents designates her as the self-centered, dishonorable traitor who has rejected her Chinese American identity.

Leila’s work reinforces her identity as a Chinese American, though she is ambivalent about it. Her work “is about getting the parents involved, opening up a line of communication…The job sounds great on paper, but sometimes, when I’m face to face with the parent, I get this creepy feeling that I’m doing a bit of a missionary number” (Ng 14). Leila feels “depressed” by their living conditions, because “I’m reminded that we’ve lived like that, too…The money talk at dinner time, the list of things they don’t know or can’t figure out. Cluttered rooms. Bare lives. Every day I’m reminded nothing’s changed about making a life or raising kids. Everything is hard” (15). Leila’s description of the parents’ homes and work reflects the poverty that Chinese American immigrants live in due to their low-wage jobs, which make their lives difficult. The depressing similarity between the lives of the former immigrants and of the new ones points to the inexorable continuity of immigration as an enduring economic structure rather than mere personal experience. Contradicting the hidden teleology inherent in the
whole tradition of immigrant autobiographies, which portray the individual’s economic progress and successful assimilation, Bone unveils the serial, repetitive quality of the immigrant experience when regarded in terms of ethnic community” (Izzo 143). Leila also notes the occupations of her students’ parents: “Most of my students are recent immigrants. Both parents work. Swing shift. Graveyard. Seamstress. Dishwasher. Janitor. Waiter. One job bleeds into another. They have enough worries, and they don’t like me coming in and telling them they have one more” (Ng 14). Rather than feel sympathy for their situation, Leila complains that it makes her job as a community liaison harder, because the parents are too preoccupied with their work to handle their children’s problems at school. They leave it to Leila to help their children. Leila’s attitude reflects “a racial judgment in this case, but also one of class since she has little understanding or patience for the poverty (or the most affordable housing) for a new generation of immigrants. Her feeling like a ‘missionary’ also reveals how she speaks with an American sensibility, as if believing that she represents and should promulgate ‘the city upon a hill’” (Gee 132). Although she was raised by low-wage laborers and saw how their work precluded them from taking more active roles in their children’s lives, Leila still adopts the American perspective of personal responsibility, due to her adherence towards the model minority stereotype. If the model minority fails to succeed, Americans believe it is that person’s fault, disregarding the forces that are beyond that person’s control.

Her negative attitude towards her students’ parents also reflects her attitude towards debt. Leila believes that if her parents were self-sufficient and successful in their work, she would not feel indebted to them. Her attitude towards her parents contrasts with the narrator’s attitude towards her mother in The Woman Warrior, who refuses to recognize that her mother needs her and believes that honoring her debt to her mother by taking care of her in the way that Leila
takes care of her parents would mean resigning herself to a life of servitude and unhappiness. Leila’s work as a community liaison is a daily reminder of the suffering and poverty that her parents have experienced, which makes her feel even guiltier for wanting to be free of the ties that bind her to her debt to them. Her criticism and contempt for her parents as well as the other immigrant parents reflects her resentment regarding her debt to her work, because she identifies her students’ parents with her own parents:

The parents came to depend on their children as mediators in relation to the outside society. As a result children gained a great deal of status at an early age, in contrast to the subordinate position of children in China. American-born Chinese report that, starting at age eight or nine, they helped their parents in business and domestic matters by reading documents and contracts, accompanying them to the bank to fill out slips, negotiating with customers, and translating notices in stores. (Glenn 41) Without Leila’s help, Leon and Mah would not have been able to understand all the paper work and red tape associated with citizenship. Leila’s work as a community liaison turns her into a surrogate daughter for other immigrant parents, who rely on her assistance in navigating American society. Although she thinks it is unfair that her parents are dependent on her, her job helps her understand that cultural assimilation is more difficult than it appears to be. Leila is the only one among her sisters to become a cultural liaison. Nina and Ona are aware of their parents’ hardships, yet they expect their parents to overcome them. Leila understands that it is not necessarily possible for them to do this. This understanding does not lessen her resentment towards Mah and Leon; it just makes her feel more bound to stay with them.

Leila is unwilling to be like Nina, yet she recognizes that they do not have the same connection to their Chinese heritage that their parents do. She refers to herself and her sisters as “the lucky generation. Mah and Leon forced themselves to live through the humiliation in this country so that we could have it better. We know so little of the old country. We repeat the names of grandfathers and uncles, but they have always been strangers to us” (Ng 34). Her
parents’ “humiliation” makes her feel indebted to them. Leila’s repayment of her debt to her parents shifts the terms of her relationship with them. She gains more authority over them in that she becomes their “parent” when she takes care of them. She makes sure that Leon has enough food to eat and manages his living situation. Leon’s status as a low-wage worker without a steady income makes him weaker and more helpless in Leila’s eyes, which is why she views him less as a father and more as a child that she has to take care of.

Goellnicht interprets Ona’s suicide as a failure to connect to American society because “Ona’s ‘very broken’ body’ (107) becomes for the first generation Chinese Americans in the novel the sign of failure to claim ‘America.’ This is more than simply a failure to succeed at a material level. It is a failure to be incorporated into the national body, so that the physical body is fragmented beyond recognition, as Leila discovers when she goes to identify her dead sister” (163). Ona’s family interprets her suicide in different ways:

The novel offers a multiplication of intertwined, contradictory, subjective explanations: Mah’s reading of Ona’s suicide in terms of guilt – her own for her ‘bad choices’ (51) and her affair with Tommie Hom, the owner of the sweatshop, and Leila’s for the ‘bad example’ she set her younger sister by leaving home to go and live with Mason; Leon’s twofold explanation, both in terms of traditional Chinese culture (the ‘bad luck’ brought by his failure to ship his adoptive father’s bones back to China) and of America’s failure to fulfill its promises; Leila’s conflicted and contradictory effort to interpret Ona’s suicide as an act of free will by reiterating the notion of ‘choice,’ simultaneously emphasizing the opposite reaction of Ona’s yielding to the inescapability of family pressures, outer prevarication, or fate. (Izzo 40)

Izzo interprets Ona’s suicide as “not just a terribly self-destructive gesture, but also a gesture that willfully destroys her connection with the past, and particularly with the father and with the whole Confucian tradition” (147). I interpret Ona’s suicide as her response to the debt, which becomes too much for her as she is forced to decide between honoring her debt to her father by remaining loyal to him and honoring her own desire to be with her true love, Osvaldo.
Leon connects his business partner’s professional betrayal with his daughter’s “betrayal.” “When stripped of his laundry business by Osvaldo’s father, Leon turns on the world, and most viciously, he turns on his beloved daughter, Ona, as a scapegoat for his failures. In assuming the traditional patriarchal role of father, of absolute authoritarian, he attempts to control, compete for, and all else failing, commands his daughter’s love and loyalty by threatening to disown her. In this effort, he fails…” (Ho 221). Leon mistakenly connects the failure of his laundry business with his failure as a father. Nina “disowns” her parents by leaving them in order to work in New York. Leila does not disown them, but the burden of honoring her debt to them makes her view her parents as dishonorable and selfish for caring more about their needs than those of her daughters. Ona continues to love Leon, despite her defiance of him through her relationship with Osvaldo. The fact that he intertwines his work (his laundry business) with his relationship with Ona ultimately drives her away. Her love for Luc’s son, even though Luc swindled Leon, is an unforgivable betrayal of the terms of her debt. Leon disregards Ona’s personal feelings for Osvaldo and believes that by maintaining her relationship with Osvaldo, she cares more about him than about the suffering that her father endured when his laundry business failed due to Luc’s machinations. Ona and Osvaldo thought that they could keep love, work, and family separate. For Leon, all of these things are interrelated. The loss of one means the loss of everything else. He thinks that family should come first, yet his attempt to prevent his daughter from continuing her relationship with Osvaldo shows that work comes first for him. Leon’s attitude towards Ona exemplifies Graeber’s analysis of blood feuds: “Among the Nuer, so free with food and everyday possessions, if one man murders another, a blood feud follows. Everyone in the vicinity will often have to line up on one side or another and those on opposite sides are strictly forbidden to eat with anyone on the other…lest terrible results ensue” (113-
Leila reflects on Ona’s alienation and how her debt changed her view of them. Leila understands that “being in the middle, Ona felt more stuck than either Nina or me. I think Ona wanted to be equally divided by her loyalties to Mah and Leon. But in the end Ona felt disappointed by Leon and betrayed by Mah. Why hadn’t Leon seen his selfishness? Why hadn’t Mah come to Ona’s defense?” (Ng 109). Since Ona is expected to be loyal to her parents, she believes that loyalty should be extended to herself. Her parents’ demand that she honor her debt to them, even if it means sacrificing the love of her life, makes her recognize their flaws. Ona realizes that their love for her is conditional. They are similar to Jade Snow’s parents and Brave Orchid, because their love for her is contingent on whether or not she honors her debt to them by doing what they want, rather than what she wants.

Goellnicht claims that Ona is not solely responsible for the decision to end her life because “neither Ng nor Lee presents suicide as a form of existential control by the individual over her own body, a self-determining of fate. In each case suicide becomes the sign of an incestuous community undermining itself from within because the forces of racism and sexism attack it from without” (320). I disagree because I interpret Ona’s suicide as her response to the debt that her parents expect her to repay. Eventually the debt becomes too much for her. 60 Juliana Chang interprets Ona’s suicide in terms of the loss of not only the future but also the past, because “while Leon’s broken promise to Grandpa Leon mimics the broken promise of America, Ona’s shattered body materializes such a broken promise. Ona is the child who no longer signifies the promise of the future, but literalizes – demetaphorizes – the losses of the ages”

60 “Suicide is the leading cause of death among Asian American women aged 15-24 and...Asian American women aged 15-24 and over 65 have the highest female suicide rates across all racial/ethnic groups...Dr. Aruna Jha from the Asian American Suicide Prevention Initiative cites the complicity of the community (including that of her own South Asian) and the family in enforcing model minority standards upon their children, thereby contributing to the mental distress of their daughters. ‘The model minority stereotype...that’s a stereotype that the Asian community is also buying into, because it is a source of pride’” (Ninh 165).
Ona’s suicide also symbolizes her “broken promise” to her father, though she never entirely agrees with the terms of that promise, which is evident in her relationship with Osvaldo. Her “shattered body materializes” not only the loss of the future and the past but also her decision to forsake the debt that her father believes she owes him. If she stayed with Osvaldo, it would mean severing ties with her father and the ties that bind her to her debt. If Ona broke ties with Osvaldo it would mean sacrificing her own happiness for her father’s sake. She loves her father, but she is not willing to give up what she wants like Leila does. Ona does not follow Nina’s example either, because Nina focuses on what she wants with little regard for how her actions affect her family. Instead, Ona chooses the only path she thinks is left for her: suicide, because she thinks it is the only way to free herself from her debt to her parents. She punishes her parents for trying to force her to honor the debt in the first place. Her suicide is her attempt to assert control over her body and her life, which is similar to the no-name woman’s decision to end her life in The Woman Warrior, who loses control over her life after she becomes pregnant out of wedlock and is attacked by her community and family for losing her “honor” as well as forsaking their “honor.” Ona loses her life and her true love, but even in death she refuses to back down to her parents. Her suicide illustrates her alienation and desperation and is not the best choice for someone seeking to gain agency over her life. But her death weakens her parents’ authority over the two surviving daughters, because Nina and Leila blame them for driving Ona over the edge. Ona fights back against Leon’s threat to disown her by disowning him.

Leila, Ona, and Nina’s status as model minorities also enables them to challenge the terms of their debts to their parents. Nina and Leila have established careers, and Ona is a full-time college student with her own job. They are no longer children who are financially dependent on their parents, and they can choose to stay at home or live on their own. Therefore,
as independent workers, they feel less indebted to their parents. They still feel guilty over their parents’ unfulfilled dreams, yet they also realize that they are entitled to their own dreams and lives, even if it conflicts with what their parents want for them. As model minorities, they become self-sufficient enough that they cannot understand why their parents cannot also be self-sufficient, and the daughters believe that honoring their debt to their parents will force them back into their dependent roles as the “dutiful daughters.” The sisters’ contrasting responses to their debt illustrate the differences in their personalities and their attitudes towards debt. However, the model minority ideal is not ideal for the daughters. None of them are able to completely adhere to its terms. Leila and Ona are unable to be self-sufficient, because to be completely self-sufficient would mean forsaking their debts to their parents. Nina is close to being self-sufficient, but this results in her sense of alienation both inside and outside of the ethnic enclave. Their parents raise them to become more successful than them, yet they do not want their daughters to fully enjoy the benefits of that success, because that would include an independent life away from Mah and Leon. Their parents already feel professionally and socially marginalized in American society, which is why they hold on to their daughters even more. Ng demonstrates that this hold, or this bind, is the primary cause of the three women’s unhappiness and loneliness.

**Redefining Gender Roles through Work in Bone**

Vivian Fumiko Chin praises Leon’s resourcefulness and claims that “he can transform what is devalued by others as junk into something that works, just as he can transform what has been excluded by law into a viable identity” (370). This is not true, since Leon hoards certain materials with the intentions of using them for projects that he never completes. Leila is disgusted by the things that clutter his room, because of its “old-man-smell, and junk all over. Leon was a junk inventor. Very weird stuff” (Ng 3). To her, Leon’s inventions are unfinished,
unsuccessful, or useless. Wendy Ho takes an optimistic view of Leon’s hoarding because “Leon fixes in new ways what other people throw away, and in his inventive spirit he sees the making of a syncretic American identity, culture, and community as well. It is symbolic of Leon’s ways of dealing with his own feelings of rejection and exploitation in society” (226). Ho fails to note that Leon begins each project with the belief that through his work he will finally gain his family’s love and respect, yet each incomplete project reveals not simply his laziness or lack of dedication but also the fact that none of his work is enough to get him what he wants. His unfinished or failed projects are proof of his inability to become a successful model minority. If he had achieved that identity, his daughters would not have felt so pressured to take care of him. The more that Leon works, the more he thinks his family is indebted to him. But he becomes even more indebted to them, especially Leila, in that he becomes even more dependent on her as he continues to fail and grow older. Therefore, his unfinished projects project his “feelings of rejection and exploitation.” Chin is more optimistic about Leon’s situation because he “is limited by a system, and yet he is not completely subordinate to it. He can make the best of a bad situation…” (369). The novel focuses on how Leon fails to make the best of a bad situation: he fails to become a model minority, and he fails to be a good husband and father. He is subordinate to his wife, who is the primary breadwinner, and he is subordinate in his work. As a model minority, he still would have been subordinate, but at least if he had become a successful business owner he would not have been subject to an employer’s exploitation.  

Ho believes that subordination of men like Leon reflects a capitalist system that forces these men into “feminine” work (like restaurant and dry cleaner jobs):

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61 “Women’s employment in the garment industry became indispensable for the well-being of their families, on account of both their economic contribution and the benefits, particularly the family health insurance, that came with their employment in the unionized garment industry, which their families would not otherwise have been able to obtain” (72).
These modes of racializing, sexualizing, and genderizing subordinate Chinese American men with subordinate Chinese women seriously affected the relationships between them. In certain Asian American masculinist, nationalist, and racial-ethnic discourses, this constant association of men with feminine disempowerment and with women is seen as a barrier to a reclamation of a specific type of authenticating warrior manhood (and womanhood). (197).

While Asian American men’s work “emasculated” them, especially when compared to the work that white men did (which minorities were barred from), Ho does not account for the fact that Leon is a failed model minority because he simultaneously internalizes the capitalist ideals while refusing to conform to them completely. He believes in the American dream, as exemplified through his attempt to become an entrepreneur. He refuses to conform to those ideals by not settling for unsatisfying work. Despite Mah’s strong work ethic, she is also unable to become a self-sufficient model minority. She still needs her husband’s income to supplement her own to provide for their family, and she needs her daughters’ emotional support. It is easier for her to find steady work in the garment industry than it is for Leon to find steady work in the service industry. Part of the problem with Leon is that unlike the model minority stereotype who does not try to disrupt the status quo (like Jade Snow), he aspires for things that are out of his reach. This is not an indictment of his beliefs. Rather his situation reflects the limitations that are inflicted on minority immigrant workers like him.62

Leon is similar to Ralph in Typical American because both men associate work with American identity. When they fail in their work, they think they fail to be “American.” His children implicitly agree with his perception of his “un-American” identity, especially Leila, who is contemptuous of her parents for not assimilating to American culture. Similar to Jade Snow,

62 “Most Chinese contractors hired only Chinese women to work in their shops. Many of the workers, most of whom were married, had husbands who worked long hours in restaurants for wages insufficient to support their families. Working wives thus made absolutely vital contributions to the family economy, contributions enhanced by the health benefits the women acquired through the union. Chinese employers also offered flexible hours that enabled women to care for their children as they worked. By the late 1970s the garment industry had become a major factor in the Chinese community, with the needle trades employing 85 percent of wage-earning Chinese women. Forty percent of area Chinese households included at least one garment worker” (Soyer 20).
who is unable to find work that she was qualified for, discrimination and prejudiced employers prevent Leon from succeeding at work and at being “American,” or even at being a model minority, thus keeping him “Chinese.” Unlike Leon, Ralph achieves his American dream to a certain extent by earning an advanced degree in America and achieving his professional goal by becoming a professor, thus turning him into a homeowner in the white suburbs (though these accomplishments do not come with social inclusion in the white community that continues to recognize Ralph and his family as “foreign”). Despite his education and professional achievements, Ralph, like Leon, puts his trust in the wrong person, because both men mistakenly believe that people will always honor their obligations to each other, even if these people are not related by blood.

Leon places all of his hopes on Luc, his business partner, because “Leon’s desire to be Luc’s ‘last man’ (165) to complete Luc, function as a fantasy of his own completion, fulfillment, and success” (J. Chang 122). Leon believes that entrepreneurship will “complete” him and free him from low-wage labor, allow him to provide for his family, and elevate his class status. Leon’s admiration of Luc and his wish to emulate the latter’s success is evident because he “talked about Luc all the time. Every story he heard Luc tell at the Square he repeated for us at dinner. Luc tipped Paul Lim twenty dollars for parking his car. Luc bought snakeskin shoes at the Florsheim…He didn’t want the things Luc had, he wanted Luc’s secret to success, his good fortune” (Ng 162). For Leon, Luc’s material wealth illustrates his success as an entrepreneur. He believes that if he goes into business with Luc, he will be a success as well. Leon and Mah associate success with masculinity. Since Leon is unable to fully provide for his family, Mah has to work long hours to support their family. As a result, Mah and Leon feel that he is less of a man. Being an entrepreneur and a model minority will also make him feel less indebted to his
wife, because he will finally surpass her income with his own earnings. Despite his goals and plans, “business was bad. Food went stale on the shelves. Salesmen cheated Leon, smooth-talked Mah. Kids stole candy and cigarettes. I sneaked baseball cards to the boys I liked” (158-159). Luc and everyone else who is associated with the store manipulate Leon, which makes Leon and the rest of his family view him as weak, gullible, and powerless.

Ho connects Leon’s inability to be a model minority with his sense of emasculation. “His hard work fails again to achieve the comfort, security, and recognition he has sought all his life. Leon feels he cannot protect his family and children from long, exhausting hours of work. He cannot command or control the love, respect, and loyalty of his wife and children as a traditional man should do” (Ho 220). In this way, his work is connected to his identity, specifically his manhood. When he fails to be a model minority, he believes he also fails as a husband and father because he cannot honor his obligations towards his children nor repay his debt to his wife. Leon’s subordinate status causes his wife and his daughters to lose respect for him, so that they become less dependent on him and less bound by their obligations to him. Mah is especially tough on Leon, telling him that his earnings are “not enough,” though she takes for granted that her income is more stable than his.

Since Mah cannot count on him for financial or emotional support (his work on ships makes him absent from the family), she embarks on an affair with her employer, Tommie Hom. Mah knows her affair is a betrayal of her husband and her daughters. It also signifies her attempt to fill the void in her life that was created by both her work and her husband. She seeks love and fulfillment from someone who does not make her feel bound to him, unlike Leon, who expects her to honor him even though his unstable employment and low income makes him indebted to
her. Leila and her sisters are thus not the only ones whose sense of obligation and self-sacrifice burdens them. Juliana Chang claims that Mah’s’ sense of obligation is permanent:

Ona’s literalized status as sacrificial object reveals how Mah is positioned by a gendered and racialized moral economy as the fallen Third World woman who must sacrifice herself to pay off her moral debt to that nation…Mah’s domestic sphere can never be pure, for it is penetrated and ‘contaminated’ by capitalist relations of production. Thus, Mah’s moral debt cannot be fully paid off, and she must continue to pay. (126)

Mah’s affair illustrates her desire to escape her identity as the self-sacrificing breadwinner who is bound to honor her family. Her infidelity shows that for once, she puts her own desires above her family’s. Leon views his wife’s infidelity as a selfish betrayal, not understanding that “in her loneliness and desperate fears, the exhausted mother turns not only to an adulterous affair with her sweatshop boss, Tommie Hom, but also to her daughters, wanting them all home, especially the oldest, Leila, who is her intimate social and emotional confidant and witness” (J. Chang 214-215). Mah’s guilt over her relationship with Tommie, which is similar to Theresa’s extramarital affair, threatens her sense of honor.

As Tommie’s lover, Mah is an individual who is motivated by love and desire. As her family’s breadwinner, she is subservient to her family’s needs and is motivated by what is best for them, even if it overrides what she wants. That is why it is more difficult for her to understand Ona and Nina’s responses to their debts to their parents. Since she sacrifices what she wants for the sake of restoring and preserving their family, she cannot understand why her daughters are not willing to do the same. It is understandable that she would want emotional support from her daughters, but they think it unfair for her to expect that they would give up their independence to be with her. Since she has firsthand knowledge of the burden of duty and honor, they think she should have given her daughters freedom to pursue their own desires, rather than disapprove of them for doing so. If she had, Leila would not have compromised her relationship with Mason in order to continue living with her mother instead of with him. If she had
understood her daughters’ desire for independence, she might have been supportive of Ona’s relationship with Osvaldo, and Ona would not have felt so isolated within her own family. Even after Ona dies, Mah does not fully consider the reasons why Ona did it. Instead, she believes that Ona’s suicide is punishment for Mah’s failure to honor her obligations to her family.

Leila compares Mah to Leon in their abilities as workers: Mah provides for the family, but Leon cannot. Unlike Leon, Mah has the patience to continue working for low pay. Leila describes her mother primarily as a worker rather than as a mother, and she “learns to recognize Mah’s impatient ‘sewing-factory voice,’ which continually reminds her how Dulcie’s work crosses over into the emotional relations between mother and daughter” (Ho 215). Bone “portrays Chinatown sewing women who provide labor for a transnational consumer market in which they scarcely participate and who bring home work and solicit the help of children and relatives, making the ‘private’ domestic space of the immigrant home an additional site of labor” (Lowe 168). Mah accepts the limits on her work and her life, which makes her closer to being a model minority than Leon, who is unwilling to accept the limitations and expresses his anger over how they prevented them from achieving his American dream, which was to make a name for himself as an independent entrepreneur. Kang notes how women’s work in fields like the garment industry are designated as “unskilled” and “inferior”: “…women do not do ‘unskilled’ jobs just because they are the bearers of inferior labor; rather, the jobs they do are ‘unskilled’ because women enter them already determined as inferior bearers of labor” (193). As a woman, it is easier for Mah to find steady work in the garment industry than Leon, though her work is not necessarily more profitable. There are few options for Leon, since he is not a business owner like

63 “Of the working-age Chinese residents in San Francisco who do not speak English well, two-thirds earn less the $20,000 a year” (Tsui 50). Even though Mah is a “better” worker than Leon, her efforts do not pay off much better.

64 “…the cost of labor represents only 6 percent of the total garment’s cost. Since all gross profits from retailers must first be filtered through manufacturers, contractors, and subcontractors – as well as licensers and endorses if applicable – the garment workers are usually not left with any profit” (Adachi, Ruta, and Lo).
Tommie Hom or one of the “pressers.” He is forced to seek sporadic work elsewhere, which reflects the disparity in the job situation for Chinese American men and women in the ethnic enclaves who are limited to low-wage work due to language barriers, lack of education, poverty, and “professional” skills and knowledge that are connected to white-collar work.  

Bread-winning wives like Mah change the structure of their families, and their “prolonged absence from the home, caused by their long hours of work, also led many women garment workers to play a dual role as both the major ‘rice winner’ and the major care provider in the family. Hence, a new type of mother-centered culture began to emerge in many Chinese working-class families” (Soyer 72). Mah is the “center” of her family because her daughters can rely on her work more than their father’s. Thus, “patriarchal and racist ideologies consign women to a secondary and inferior position in the capitalist wage-labor market. On the other hand, their very disadvantage enhances women’s employability over that of men in certain industries, thus affording them an opportunity to sharpen their claims against patriarchal authority in their homes” (Espiritu 90). Mah’s role as the primary breadwinner allows her to challenge Leon’s “patriarchal authority”: “Men’s loss of status in both public and private arenas has placed severe pressures on the traditional family, leading at times to resentment, spousal abuse, and divorce” (Espiritu 94). Mah looks down on him for failing to fully provide for their family, which means that as the breadwinner she has more “honor” than he does. He becomes angry at Mah for challenging his manhood as husband and a father, thus making him more insecure and anxious to prove that he is an even more successful worker than she is.

Leon keeps a collection of all the rejection letters that he receives from prospective employers, but he continues to believe that he will become rich and successful. Leila “recognizes

65 “Ong states that the reasons why numerous Asian immigrants become trapped in low-income jobs, including the garment industry, are their low levels of education when they immigrate, lack of marketable job skills, and high rates of illiteracy in the home country that results in difficulty learning English” (Adachi, Ruta, and Lo).
that these letters are all that Leon has to prove his presence…Leon’s existence of lies become Leila’s truth, a legacy she can no more escape than Leon feels he can of Chinese Americans if she is to come to terms with her own sense of identity and her own place in America” (Goellnicht 308-309). Unlike Mah, Leon continues to hope even after he fails to succeed at his work. Leon continues to be more optimistic than Mah, who is a realist that accepts things as they are. These rejection letters demonstrate not only how Leon failed to be a model minority but how the model minority stereotype failed him. Even though he was rejected for those jobs, they show that he made many efforts to achieve the American dream. The fact that he could not make it come true shows that circumstances were beyond his control. Despite his wife and daughters’ critical views of him, his failures were not based solely on his personal flaws and weaknesses.

After he fails to become a model minority, Leon “blamed all of America for making big promises and breaking everyone…He’d kept his end up of the bargain: he’d worked hard. Two jobs. Three. Day and night. Overtime. Assistant laundry presser. Prep cook. Busboy. Waiter. Porter. But where was his happiness?” (Ng 100). Leon believes in the American myth that a strong work ethic will enable him to succeed, but even after a lifetime of hard work, all he is left with are unfulfilled goals, a failed business, and poverty. His anger towards his adopted country shows that he thought that his hard labor would be “repaid” with “happiness,” specifically lucrative, satisfying work that would validate him in his family’s eyes, restore his sense of masculinity and honor, and make his wife and daughters feel indebted to him for being able to provide for them, which would strengthen the ties between them. The irony is that his attitude towards America is similar to Ona’s attitude towards him. Both thought that if they honored their debts (Leon to America for allowing him to live and work there, Ona to her father for trying to provide for her), they would receive something in return, not realizing that their status in those
relationships were contingent on what they did for their creditors. Since Leon “fails” to be a successful model minority, America blames him rather than takes responsibility. Since Ona “fails” to be the dutiful daughter, Leon blames her instead of himself. Ona is dependent on her family for emotional validation. Without it, she loses the will to live.

Loo distinguishes between the ways that Chinese American men and women respond to professional failures or inequality, which is that “the majority of women blamed their own race for lacking skills and abilities, for not having prepared themselves to make use of opportunities, and for not adapting to white American customs. By contrast, the majority of men blamed the system for not providing Chinese with as many opportunities as are provided whites” (203). Mah blames herself for her failures in America. Leon blames everyone else, including his family and the American capitalist system. Loo connects the income that workers earned with their self-esteem, because “the lower the personal income of the individual, the lower his or her perceived personal effectiveness” (206). When workers do not earn enough to support their family, they do not feel “effective.”

Leon emphasizes his status as a martyr who sacrifices himself for his family. His insistence that his daughters honor their debts to him damages their relationships with him, because they are unwilling to accept the terms of their debts. As they grow older, they see how his work weakens him and exposes his flaws, and they blame not only the system that exploits him but also Leon for failing to change it. The daughters feel more indebted to Mah because of her status as the breadwinner, yet they also resent her for the guilt she imposes on them when they try to assert their independence. Her failure or refusal to defend them against Leon’s demands implies her complicity in his behavior, which negatively affects her daughters’ relationships with her. They view her as weak and selfish for her affair with Tommie Hom, for
her inability to become truly self-sufficient even after she opens her business (which, unlike Leon’s business, does not fail), and her insistence that their debts to her are more important than what they want or anything else they have already done for her. Whatever the daughters do for Mah and Leon will never be enough, because Mah and Leon never achieve the emotional and financial independence that they need to survive on their own.

**Conclusion**

*Bone* dispels the myth that hard work and education are all that people need in order to achieve the American dream. The novel demonstrates what happens when people try to become model minorities but everything still goes wrong. Mah has years of experience in a sweatshop and as the proprietor of her own store, but she continues to rely on Leila for emotional support. Leon goes from one menial job to another. When Ona dies, Leila’s debt increases because her parents’ grief over Ona’s suicide makes them even more dependent on Leila. Leila is ambivalent about her parents and does not reveal the truth about her attitude, which honors the terms of her debt to them. Her “domestic responsibilities form a kind of grave for her suppressed feelings, covering over and encrypting any emotion that is judged extraneous to family survival” (J. Chang 29). Leila resents her parents’ dependence on her, but she assumes responsibility since her sisters refuse to do so.\(^6\) Leila develops an understanding of her parents because their work has a controlling influence (primarily a negative one) on them, their family, and the ties that bind them as a whole. Gee claims that “what primarily causes Leila to construct a rationalized hierarchy with herself at the top is that she is a second-generation Chinese American, caught between traditional Chinese female submissiveness and middle-class American individualism” (130). Gee does not fully address the fact that Leila analyzes Mah and Leon not just as Chinese immigrants

\(^6\) “If the withdrawal of labor was seen to be irresponsible or selfish, as in Andrew’s case, doing so was regarded as tantamount to breaking away from the family...Some children sought parental approval and special relationships with their parents, and were gratified by being able to occupy the “moral high ground” (Park).
but also as workers and how their status as Chinese immigrants affected their status as workers. Leila emphasizes that their disillusionment, poverty, personal and professional failures, troubled marriage, and absence in their children’s lives develop due to the low-wage work that they do. Chin analyzes Leon’s status as a paper son and how that contributes to his identity in America, because “as a paper son, Leon is able to reinvent himself and give himself an identity that begins with his arrival in the United States” (371). It is true that his identity as a paper son affects his life, such as his quest to repay his paper father by having the latter’s bones buried in China, but his work, particularly his failure to be a successful model minority, define him even more.

Leila, Ona, and Nina feel bound to honor their parents due to the suffering that their parents endured to provide for them. Low-wage workers like Mah and Leon cannot choose any job they want because their survival needs outweigh their professional desires and because discrimination and racism prevents them from pursuing the jobs they want. As they grow up, the daughters realize that their parents’ work and sense of duty towards their family is not as selfless as their parents made it out to be. When Leon begins his quest to become a successful entrepreneur and model minority, his goal is more about himself than his family. A successful business where he has agency over his work and the money that he earns will restore his sense of masculinity and self-worth. When Ona defies his insistence that she honor him rather than Osvaldo, she realizes he cares more about his hurt pride and failed business than he does about preserving the ties that bind him, and Nina and Leila realize this as well. If Mah and Leon had become successful model minorities, their daughters may have had a greater admiration for their parents and felt less indebted to them. Since Mah and Leon’s work weakens them and makes

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67 “The 1906 San Francisco earthquake reduced Chinatown to rubble, but opened the door to illegal Chinese immigration. The destruction of the city’s birth records permitted some Chinese to emigrate during the exclusion era: they could buy false papers and assert they were children of U.S. citizens fathered during visits to China. Such immigrants, mostly men, were known as ‘paper sons’” (I. Chang 145).
them suffer more as they grow older, the daughters feel contempt for them instead. They realize
their parents are only human, and there are limits to how much they can achieve in America,
which limits their abilities and willingness to foster good relationships with their daughters.
Chapter Five: Morality and the Restorative Nature of Debt in *Typical American*

**Introduction**

Unlike the Leong family in *Bone*, Gish Jen’s main characters, Ralph and Theresa Chang, ultimately recognize the restorative power of debt because honoring their debts to each other helps them to reconcile their differences. Similar to how Ng contrasts the three sisters’ responses to their debts to each other as a way to contrast the differences in the daughters’ personalities, values, and perceptions of their parents, Jen contrasts Ralph and Theresa’s values, personalities, and perceptions of honor and debt. In *Typical American*, Ralph has two daughters who are too young to repay their debt to him. Instead, Jen illustrates the indebtedness between brother and sister: Ralph and Theresa. Unlike the daughters in *Fifth Chinese Daughter, The Woman Warrior*, and *Bone*, Theresa does not want a life and identity that is separate and distinct from her family. When Ralph becomes obsessed with the prospect of lucrative entrepreneurship, the price he ends up paying is the relationship that he has with his sister, because he rejects his debt to her by devaluing her labor, income, and emotional support. Although she is his sister, Theresa is similar to the first-generation Chinese Americans in that she disapproves of Ralph’s focus on his individual interests rather than on what is best for their family. Honoring their obligations to each other keeps them connected to each other, though Jen does not necessarily indicate that it is good for them to be connected in this way. One reason Ralph rejects his debt to his sister is that it makes him feel inferior. She becomes more successful as a doctor before he does as a professor, which is why he seeks to surpass her success by becoming a rich business owner. Furthermore, his attempt to become a successful model minority results in his personality transformation, from a loving brother and husband to a hot-tempered, violent narcissist who attacks his wife and sister when he suspects them of betraying him.
Theresa’s attempt to honor her obligation to their family also negatively impacts her, because she does not feel free to express her loneliness and unhappiness. When no one in the family honors her for what she has done (and what she has given up) for them, she moves out of the house and into her own apartment, where her sense of isolation and unhappiness increases. She is a professional success, yet the model minority ideal fails to fulfill her because it does not give her what she wants most: a sense of belonging and love within her family. She is not able to completely adhere to the model minority ideal either. Otherwise she would have been able to be completely self-sufficient and her personal relationships would have been less important to her.

In Typical American, Jen demonstrates how Ralph is indebted to his sister for saving him after his academic downfall reduced him to an illegal worker who works in the basement of a chicken restaurant, introducing him to Helen, his future wife, and helping him to restore his academic career and his legal status in America. Similar to Mah in Bone, Theresa does not feel indebted to the male patriarch in her family (Ralph), since both women’s families largely depend on their income. However, it is this dependence that makes the women feel bound to sacrifice themselves in their labor for their family’s well-being, even at the expense of these women’s own health or happiness. Mah and Theresa’s sense of obligation is not completely selfless. In exchange for their own sacrifices, they expect other family members to value their labor with their own work and personal sacrifices. When family members do not fully value these women’s labor and focus more on their own desires instead, Theresa and Mah become disappointed or resentful of their families and withdraw from them emotionally and physically. Their attitudes make them similar to Brave Orchid in The Woman Warrior, because she expects her children to honor her by valuing her labor, which the narrator refuses to do because of her preoccupation with the negative effects that that labor has had on her mother and also with her overriding
concern that she may suffer the same fate as Brave Orchid. Ralph is similar to the second-generation Chinese American children who focus more on their own careers and self-serving desires, and attempt to justify their actions by attacking the terms of their debt to their families. Ralph goes one step further than the children by attacking his sister’s sense of honor; that is, he associates her feminine virtue with her honor and when she has an affair with a married man, he uses that as an excuse to degrade her honor and devalue her work and her contributions to their family. Jen shows how Ralph’s disregard of his debt to his sister reflects his selfishness and greed. Theresa’s willingness to honor her debt to her brother (until he attacks her honor) reflects her integrity, selflessness, and morality. Jen suggests that Ralph deserves to fail in his business venture and to be betrayed by his partner because he does not honor his debt to his sister.

Without their parents or extended relatives in America, Theresa and Ralph rely on each other as a support system, which helps them to survive in their adopted country and gives them a sense of belonging. Theresa honors her obligation to her brother by using her work not as a way to gain happiness or material wealth for herself but to provide financial support for their family so that they can move out of a rented apartment in Chinatown and into a home they own in the suburbs and so that Ralph can continue his studies and become a professor. Ralph fails to honor his debt to his sister due to his greed and his desire to emulate his manipulative partner Grover Ding, rather than the honest worker, Theresa. Jen shows how Ralph and Theresa’s conflicting attitudes towards work and honor drive them apart, so that neither feels the need to honor the ties that bind them to each other.

In Typical American, Jen demonstrates through Ralph’s treatment of his sister how disregarding a debt or refusing to pay it altogether reflects his selfishness and greed, as well as his moral corruption. Ralph is indebted to his sister because before they are reunited in America,
he loses everything: his friends, his education, and his legal status in his adopted country. He becomes an “invisible” worker living on the fringes of society. When he is reunited with his sister, “life itself unfurled. As he apparently, finally, deserved. How else could it be, that he should find himself embracing – of all people – his sister? Saved!” (Jen 46). Ralph disregards his debt to his sister as he becomes more immersed in his quest to become a successful, rich restaurant owner, and Grover Ding takes advantage of Ralph’s obsession by refusing to honor his own promises. Ralph “saw past the present moment as though with a magic scope; through this special lens he saw an empire rise, grander and mightier than anything his father had commanded, even in his heyday. Ralph tingled with anticipation. Small doubts rained on him from time to time, but mostly he floated in hope, fabulous hope, a private ocean, gentle and green” (Jen 193). Ralph equates money with power, specifically an “empire” that surpasses his father’s accomplishments; that is his American dream. The irony is that he is already successful. He worked his way up from poverty to join the middle class as a professor at an American university and as a homeowner in a white American suburb. Grover cons Ralph by presenting him with his own version of the American dream, making Ralph think that his white-collar job as a professor will not bring him nearly as much success, money, and prestige as being a business owner would. The loss of Ralph’s restaurant, similar to the failure of Leon’s laundry and grocery store, shows the limitations of the American dream, because both Ng and Jen illustrate the negative consequences that occur when people like Ralph and Leon put their faith in racial solidarity (both of their business partners are minorities and represent the Asian American men that Ralph and Leon aspire to be) rather than on economic reality and business sense.

Theresa honors her obligation to her family by putting their needs first and considering how her actions affect them. Ralph is similar to Leon in that he focuses on how his family’s
actions affect himself, which is why he alienates himself from them and nearly kills his wife and sister. When Theresa cuts ties with her brother and moves out of their house, she feels guilty, as if she has become dishonorable for refusing to support them. Ho emphasizes the differences between Ralph and Theresa and that “Asian Americanization cannot be reduced to choosing between assimilation and ethnic nationalism; rather, the process of Asian Americanization, like a dish du jour, is unique, varied, and individual for each person” (136). I argue that through their contrasting perspectives on work, debt, and family, Theresa and Ralph struggle to become “American” in different ways.

**The Pursuit of the American Dream and Identity Formation in Typical American**

Rachel Lee argues that “the American national narrative of ‘home’ encourages homeownership as part of capitalist production. This national narrative enlists the male homeowner as ‘hero,’ with the female homemaker-consumer as his patriotic counterpart. In other words, proprietorship and consumerism, rather than the production of a communal living space, underwrite the American Dream, even as communitarian values enshrined in the discourse of ‘family values’ masks this underlying economism” (54). Ben Loy and his father in Louis Chu’s *Eat a Bowl of Tea* live on the fringes of American society and rarely venture outside of Chinatown, and Mah in *Bone* works in a sweatshop, which keeps her within the boundaries of the ethnic enclave. Ben Loy and his family and Mah and her family live in rented apartments in Chinatown, which illustrate their poverty and low-wage status in America. Their homes in Chinatown also show that neither Ben Loy’s family nor Mah’s family changed their professional or economic status, despite spending the majority of their lives in America. Their homes in Chinatown also show that neither Ben Loy’s family nor Mah’s family change their professional or economic status, despite spending the majority of their lives in America. In contrast, Ralph
Chang and his family participate in “capitalist production” by buying a home in the suburbs, which they believe validates their work in America and their identities as middle-class Americans. Ralph and Theresa elevate their economic status by becoming salaried employees. Due to the Changs’ status as homeowners, the stakes in their American dream are different than they are for their poorer literary counterparts. Mah and Leon are focused on survival, though they want to elevate their status. Ralph and his sister, on the other hand, earn more than enough money to survive. They focus on what they can gain from their elevated economic and professional status, and the house in the suburbs shows what they have accomplished in America. The Changs’ interpretation of work, debt, and what it means to be American are also strongly affected by the fact that their professional success enable them to become successful model minorities, though this does not necessarily make them feel happier or less alienated. Furthermore, by the end of the novel, they fail to preserve that success. When Theresa breaks away from the family, she is not there to help save their house from being taken by Grover Ding, who also profits off of the failure of Ralph’s restaurant (which had been Grover’s plan all along). All of their hard work and education does not save them from professional and financial ruin, not to mention Ralph fails to become completely self-sufficient as well, due to his misplaced trust in the unscrupulous Grover Ding. If he had been more independent, like Henry’s father was in *Native Speaker*, he might have been more clear-sighted and able to see that Grover was scamming him. Instead, he relies on his business partner for guidance and ignores the warnings of Theresa, who is not so easily swayed.

Jen shows how racial solidarity is fragmented, and each character’s beliefs in what it means to be (Chinese) American destabilize their relationships with other Chinese Americans.

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68 Even for the children of Ralph’s work in Chinatown signifies how far he has fallen: he has gone from being a graduate student with promising job prospects to an illegal alien who is working off the books in dire conditions.
Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that “challenging the dominant racial ideology inherently involves not only reconceptualizing one’s own racial identity, but a reformulation of the meaning of race in general” (91). Economic success has always been important to Americans, but now Asian Americans have more economic opportunities than they did before, which changes the way their identities are defined. Similar to Jade Snow and the narrator, who feel more emboldened to challenge their debts to their parents once they have more professional options, Ralph believes that his career as a tenured professor and his opportunity to become a business owner means that he does not need Theresa’s help anymore, and therefore he mistakenly thinks that he is no longer indebted to her.

At first glance, Jen’s novel could be viewed as a coming-of-age story about a Chinese immigrant. Ralph Chang arrives in America naïve and innocent, only to be corrupted by the cruelty of other Americans, as well as his pursuit of the American dream. His desire to become a rich business owner rather than a middle-class academic overrides his sense of honor and indebtedness towards his family. Ralph changes the longer that he lives in America, but he expects his wife and his sister Theresa to conform to his traditional ideas for how Chinese women should act. Ralph incorrectly believes that the women in his family are indebted to him. He believes he is the provider. He disregards his wife’s emotional support and his sister’s financial and emotional support, which make him indebted to them. Helen and Theresa also change. Their resourcefulness and independence change their perceptions of debt, honor, work, and family and fray the ties that bind them to him.

Mah in Bone is similar to Helen in that both women have extramarital affairs. Mah is more moral than Helen because she never forgets her obligation to her family. Helen’s infidelity keeps her from being the “moral center” of the family. Her affair is different from the affair that
Theresa has with the married Old Chao, because Theresa turns to him when she becomes alienated from her family after they fail to honor their debt to her. Helen’s affair is more about the ways that Grover boosts her ego, especially since her inability to find a job (unlike Theresa and Ralph, she lacks the fluency in English and advanced education that would enable her to find work in civil-rights-era America more easily) make her feel less appreciated than her husband and sister-in-law. Helen is impressed that he is “a man with monogrammed shirts, a maid, a mansion, and all he wanted was to finger her belly button. She felt herself to be someone else, someone much prettier. A commanding presence. What power in pliancy!” (Jen 214). She associates Grover’s manhood with his wealth, which makes him more attractive to her. Unlike Ralph and Theresa, who have no voice of their own in the public sphere, Grover passes himself off as someone with authority and worthy of admiration and honor, which is ironic considering how he gains his wealth through dishonorable means, such as manipulating Ralph and seducing Ralph’s wife as well. Similar to Leon’s wife and daughters, who feel less inclined to honor him due to his failures as a husband and father, Ralph’s wife Helen feels less inclined to honor her marriage vows and loses her honor (her virtue) as a result. If Helen had been able to see past her infatuation with Grover, she may have been able to prevent Ralph from going into business with him. The only person left to be the moral center of the family is Theresa.

Through her narrative, Jen critiques the ways that the characters misinterpret American and Chinese ideological principles and use them to control or hurt each other. The Changs initially support each other through encouragement, sacrifice, and loyalty, but their conflicting views of American ideologies and what it means to succeed nearly tear their family apart. The Changs’ beliefs that adhering to American ideological principles will help them fulfill their desires destabilize their relationships. Like the other authors I analyze in this dissertation, Jen
shows how pursuing the American dream and becoming model minorities may bring professional and financial success, yet it still results in disillusionment and alienation. Ralph and Theresa’s conflicting attitudes and methods regarding work contribute to their family’s breakdown because their differences break down their sense of obligation and love for each other. Theresa’s sacrifices for the family contrast with Ralph’s selfish betrayal of them.

The Failure to Be “American” in Typical American

Xiaojian Zhao contrasts the mindset of Chinese immigrants before and after the civil rights movement: “If, during the exclusion period, Chinese immigrants’ success in the United States largely depended on the ability of their community to combat discriminatory laws and practices, then in the post-civil rights era, one’s socioeconomic resources become crucial to his or her chances. Perhaps because there is a clear understanding that not everyone in this world is given the same opportunities and rewards, Chinese Americans have become quite class conscious” (45). The more resources that Asian Americans have to their disposal, such as education, fluency in English, professional connections, and professional experience, the more likely they will succeed (though this is not a guarantee, as is evident in the situations of people like Jade Snow and Kingston’s narrator). These resources set them apart in mindset and labor from Asian Americans who do not have these things. Race is linked to labor. Chinese Americans who work white-collar jobs and live in rich suburbs do not view themselves like the ones who live in Chinatown, work in sweatshops, and suffer in poverty. For example, despite his insecurities, Ralph feels a sense of accomplishment when he earns his Ph.D. and becomes a professor. That sense of accomplishment is one that he hopes to expand on when he attempts to become a successful restaurant owner, because his work as a professor, particularly as one who
has not achieved tenure, constantly makes him feel he is at the mercy of his tenured colleagues, who are the gatekeepers to his future success as a scholar and teacher. When Ralph becomes a professor, he thinks, “Now, finally, he was truly Professor Chang; he wasn’t sure he was ready to return to plain Ralph, or worse yet, Yifeng” (Jen 195). Ralph develops a new identity through his work. He believes that the loss of his career will cause him to revert back to his former Chinese identity as Yifeng. In contrast, Leon defines himself as a failure and less of an “American.”

Ralph and Theresa’s model minority status is not enough to make them happy or change their social status. For example, their professional success and material wealth do not improve their social status, which becomes evident at a ball game, where “people had called them names and told them to go back to their laundry. They in turn had sat impassive as the scoreboard. Rooting in their hearts, they said later. Anyway, they preferred to stay home and watch…’Can see better,’ they agreed” (Jen 128). The Changs’ neighbors are ignorant of the former’s accomplishments and identify them with the likes of Mah, Leon, and Brave Orchid, which shows that being model minorities reinforces their racial identities. Tuan emphasizes that Asian Americans “are still marginalized because their assimilation has lacked validation by the dominant white mainstream that continues to classify and treat them as ‘other’…an ethnic identity is imposed on them by virtue of their physical appearance, and ultimately they are seen as less authentically American than their white ethnic counterparts” (28). The fact that they are told to “go back to their laundry” shows that white Americans associate them with work that Asian immigrants did in the past, and “when they are not accepted by their white community despite their accomplishments, the Changs’ self-esteem takes a major hit; they learn to keep to themselves and continue working quietly rather than speak up for themselves and risk the wrath

69 “McCarthy’s accusations fueled suspicions in Washington that the government was infested with subversives who had assisted China’s fall to communism...In Chinatowns, U.S. government surveillance of left-wing organizations began as soon as the People’s Republic was founded.” (I. Chang 247-248).
of their racist white neighbors. Their class status had done little to validate their authenticity as long-time Americans in the eyes of the public” (Tuan 154). This experience at the ball game helps shape them into model minorities who “continue working quietly.” They know that their status in America is contingent on their willingness to be the “silent” model minority. Park argues that being “consumers” helps Chinese immigrants to find a sense of belonging. “This ideology presents a singular notion of success: economic upward mobility. In this way, the proof of social citizenship or ‘belonging’ is presented through possession of material goods that symbolize that one contributes to rather than burdens the United States – thereby making one a ‘good’ (versus ‘bad’) immigrant” (Park 4-5). As this scene at the ball game demonstrates, however, the Changs have ample proof of their economic upward mobility but are unable to achieve that sense of “social citizenship or belonging.” Social acceptance secures class status. People can achieve everything else – wealth, education, homeownership, meaningful work – but if they are not accepted by the majority, these things do not mean as much. If Asian Americans like Ralph and Theresa continue to be viewed as model minorities rather than as official “Americans,” their social status will not be as high as it could be. Jen demonstrates how race is defined partly by how Asian Americans are treated by people of other races.

Partridge focuses on Jen’s novel to show how immigrants adapt to their new environment: “It appears, therefore, that Ralph is being ‘Americanized’ in a negative sense – that all the greed and materialism of American capitalism are seducing a pure and innocent Chinese native…Ralph’s embrace of a materialist American dream, while coming upon him with a force of hypnosis and cultic devotion, is in fact a survivalist response to a new and threatening environment” (176). Partridge does not fully acknowledge Theresa, who is aware of that dream
but is not corrupted by it. She becomes estranged from her family because of her disgust with what materialism has done to them and her brother’s refusals to honor his debts to her.

Partridge claims that Ralph’s greed reflects his desire to achieve the status in America that he had in China. Ralph’s “determination to make money is less a mindless capitulation to American cultural norms than a desperate attempt to regain the social position he lost when fleeing China before the communist takeover” (176). I argue that Ralph’s greed is in fact a “capitulation to American cultural norms,” because he seeks to emulate successful, wealthy Americans rather than focus solely on regaining his former social status. He seeks to become an American by becoming a capitalist. He envies his friend Old Chao, who finished his Ph.D. and got a tenure-track job, moving on to become the chair of their department. When Grover Ding asks Old Chao what his “secret” to his “luck” is, Old Chao replies, “‘I just do what people tell me, and I don’t ask too many questions.’ Old Chao said this pointedly, but then as if remembering himself, continued in a more amiable tone. ‘Maybe that’s the trick. You know, American people, they always ask this, ask that. Not me’” (Jen 99). Old Chao is thus upheld as a model minority because he is obedient and unquestioning of what his employers want him to do. He takes what America is willing to give him and makes do with what he has, unlike Ralph.

Unlike Mah and Leon in Bone, Theresa and Ralph achieve their initial career goals and become a doctor and an academic, respectively, which inflates their opinions of themselves and their lives in America. Whereas Mah and Leon become more dependent on their daughters for their own self-validation and emotional support, Ralph and Theresa’s work allows them to become financially independent, though before Ralph’s academic career becomes secure, he is dependent on Theresa’s income. Before Ralph becomes a professor, he works as an illegal low-wage labor in dire conditions, which affect his sense of reality. Robert Lee claims that Ralph’s
“‘unlife’ in the blood-spattered abbatoir where he is forced to work to pay for his studies fails to give him a working hold on American reality” (273). This job actually does give Ralph a good sense of what America is really like. In his previous work as a graduate student, he had been more optimistic about his prospects in America. His work as a low-wage laborer makes him realize that it will be much more difficult to achieve the American dream than he thought, and it also educates him about inequality between illegal immigrants and citizens, as well as low-wage laborers and salaried workers. After his academic downfall, he is forced to resort to working in the basement of a chicken restaurant, killing chickens; his later ambition to become a chicken restaurant owner signifies his desire to claim not only material wealth and entrepreneurship but also security that he will never have to work in the basement again. In other words, transitioning from an underground chicken killer to a chicken restaurant owner who is visible to all of his workers and customers signifies how far he has come in America, which means more to him than his work as a professor ever did. When he loses his business, “each of Ralph’s reeling, comic pratfalls…bring him to a hard-won acknowledgement of illusion, the snares built into desire. He sees, accordingly, that China has become ‘a thing recalled,’ that America as he has believed it is ‘no America, and that he himself cannot be the fantasy success he ‘made up his mind to be’” (R. Lee 273). As Ralph fails in his work, his family and colleagues become more aware of his personal limitations and weaknesses. Like Leon, Ralph refuses to admit his own mistakes to himself until it is too late.

Ralph’s professional and financial struggles during his early years in America make him more willing to compromise his morals and sacrifice his relationships with his family in order to achieve his professional and financial goals. Ralph is defined not just by what he wants, but the

70 “However, even before the 1965 amendments were enacted, global political events and Cold War politics created a category of political refugees that enabled some five thousand Chinese college and graduate students, predominantly from the upper and middle classes, to seek asylum in the States” (R. Lee 46).
fact that he never stops wanting more, contrary to how model minorities are supposed to act. Li claims that:

Ralph’s appropriation of possessive individualism as the self-made King of Fried Chicken, therefore, is not merely an assimilation of core national values but a measured social response to racial disregard as well. His unironic cautionary tales to his daughters, ‘you have no money, you are nobody. You are Chinaman!’ (199) are as much a realistic admission of some ‘innate racial depravity as they are an expressed desire to overcome it through class respectability. (105).

Ralph’s statements to his daughters regarding money shows that he equates being Chinese with being poor and a “nobody,” which is how he saw himself when he was an underground worker and an illegal alien. Being wealthy and successful makes him somebody, and he believes it makes him an American. To Ralph, “China and America thus offer him a new, if chastening synthesis: ‘A man was the sum of his limits; freedom only made him see how much so’” (Lee 273). Ralph believes that he can make the American dream come true by following the dishonest advice of Grover, and as a result, he becomes corrupt, greedy, and abusive. Subsequently, he loses his money and his house.

Theresa, on the other hand, becomes a successful model minority, though Jen shows how this identity is not enough to make her emotionally fulfilled, which is why she engages in an extramarital affair with Old Chao. The model minority gains a very limited social acceptance within American society, though this acceptance is conditional, because “the ideology of the American dream implies that those who succeed according to its tenets are considered virtuous, and virtuous success would seem to offer a passport to assimilation, to acceptance by the dominant society and integration into its ranks” (Bascara 132). As the model minority, Theresa obeys the rules and remains under the radar in her work, whereas Ralph’s underreporting of his

71 “Emerging in the 1960s, the model-minority myth arose as an effective tool for legitimating the dismantling of affirmative action and welfare programs in the conservative 1980s. Asian Americans were trotted out, as demonstrated by the appropriately derisive language of Aiiieeeeel as ‘miracle synthetic white people,’ who, to cite the report’s third factor, were ‘unaggressive’ and were achieving the American dream through self-reliant pluck rather than agitating for rights” (Bascara 4).
Theresa views the American lifestyle as a threat to her own well-being: “She had always been nice about her morals; she grew nicer still. How dangerous a place, this county! A wilderness of freedoms. She shuddered, kept scrupulously to paths” (Jen 142). Ralph utilizes the freedom in America to redefine himself. Theresa veers towards the restrictions of “paths” that govern her behavior, which is why she is more willing to honor her duty to her family than Ralph is. By honoring it, Theresa accepts the fact that she cannot necessarily do everything she wants to do, such as take much-needed time off from work or spend more time with her family. Theresa’s devotion to her work and family illustrate her sense of honor and self-sacrifice. Kingston’s narrator and Jade Snow find the terms of their debts to be too confining. Theresa finds strength within the confines of her debt. Ralph becomes weaker when he moves beyond them. Nevertheless, being a model minority who honors her obligation to her family makes Theresa feel restricted and isolated, because she fails to connect with her colleagues and patients and is unable to relate to her brother and sister-in-law, who have devolved into selfishness and greed.  

Theresa’s work as a doctor is more stable than her brother’s work as an entrepreneur. By a similar token, she is a source of stability for her family, whereas her brother destabilizes the foundation that their family is based on. Theresa dedicates herself to her work, but she is still devoted to her family and Old Chao. Ralph is dedicated to making money, so that all he sees are numbers while his wife makes love to someone else upstairs. He becomes so consumed with

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72 The differences between Ralph and Theresa are similar to the differences between Kenji and Ichiro in John Okada’s novel No-No Boy. In Okada’s novel, Kenji sacrifices himself for his country by becoming a soldier. When he comes back from the war, his body literally deteriorates due to injuries he suffered, and it becomes clear that he will die soon. Even though he becomes a model minority and does everything that he was supposed to do as a worker, unlike Ichiro, who refused to conform to the government’s rules and became a “nobody” because of his refusal to be a soldier and a model minority, Kenji’s efforts are “rewarded” with death. Ichiro is viewed as “selfish” because he was unwilling to sacrifice himself for a country that was hostile to Japanese Americans. Other people think that he is more concerned with his own interests than with the national interests or the interests of his local Japanese American community.
work and his idea of success that he criticizes his sister for focusing on her personal life (her adulterous affair with Old Chao). By the end of the novel, his “happy ending” is not a successful career but the possible reconciliation with his family after he loses everything else. Theresa’s success as a model minority alienates her from her brother, who ultimately fails to preserve his status as a successful model minority. Despite their shared cultural heritage, work and their differing responses to debt drive them apart and negatively affect their perceptions of each other.

**Unpaid Debts and Fractured Relationships in *Typical American***

Ralph is indebted to his sister for helping him to survive and succeed in America, but he does not feel indebted to her because she becomes a self-sufficient model minority and doctor who is not financially dependent on him. Ralph’s professional struggles make Theresa feel bound to help him, similar to how in *Bone* Leila feels bound to help her parents because of the latter’s failures to become successful model minorities. Ralph forsakes his sister due to their clash in values. He also fails to completely adopt the pragmatic perspective of the capitalist, who would be more suspicious of Grover Ding. His trust in Grover despite all the red flags shows that he has not completely let go of his Chinese ideals of loyalty, honor, and trust in other Chinese people. Although he trusts Grover, he becomes increasingly suspicious of his wife’s infidelity and his sister’s relationship with Old Chao. Grover is just as (if not more so) guilty of the affair as Helen is, but Ralph blames Helen and vents his rage on her by throwing her out the window of their home. When he realizes that Theresa is having an affair, he becomes verbally abusive to her and refuses to allow her to have a voice in any of their family’s decisions. The affair gives him an excuse to claim the moral high ground for once, though his repudiation of her does not actually make him more moral. Nevertheless, he uses it as an excuse to reject his debt to her.
Ralph tries to silence both women, yet when he finally confronts Grover for scamming him, he does not react with violence or verbal abuse. He allows Grover to maintain the upper hand, because “economic emasculation (the foreclosure of the house) and symbolic castration (Helen’s infidelity) drive Ralph Chang to mindless violence. Helpless before Grover, the America that sedates and then swindles him of his self/house, Ralph vents his defeat and dispossession on Theresa, the China that mortgages and nurtures his house/life” (Li 106). Ralph initially feels indebted to Grover for helping him open the restaurant, whereas he does not have the same sense of indebtedness towards his sister, though she does much more for him.

*Typical American* also illustrates the limitations of entrepreneurship, because not all-self-employed Chinese Americans succeed. Unless they are familiar with how scam artists work and have the resources to keep their businesses afloat, they will lose everything. Theresa judges Ralph with more logic and sense than anyone else. It is easier for her to see that what he is doing in his work is wrong. Their perspectives of work and debt reflect their values. For Grover Ding, work is about exploitation, manipulation, and money, in order to fulfill his own needs. When Ralph confronts Grover Ding after realizing that the latter sold him “a store that was sinking,” Grover expresses no remorse for scamming Ralph out of his money. Ralph notices that “Grover was the big shot. He strode on; he surveyed his surroundings” (Jen 273). Grover displays his confidence because he is able to get away with his scams. He taunts Ralph by referring to his affair with Helen, saying, “‘I did enjoy your…upholstery’” (Jen 274). By referring to the affair rather than the failed business, Grover attacks Ralph’s sense of masculinity, reinforcing Ralph’s weakness in front of a “big shot” like Grover. When Ralph’s restaurant fails, his view of America changes and he thinks that “a man was as doomed here as he was in China…He could not always see, could not always hear. He was not what he made up his mind to be. A man was
the sum of his limits; freedom only made him see how much so. America was no America. Ralph swallowed” (Jen 296). When he fails to preserve his status as a model minority, he realizes how mythical the American dream really is. Theresa believes that her purpose in America is to honor her debt to her family, while Grover exploits Ralph’s sense of indebtedness to deceive him and steal from him. Grover has no sense of honor or loyalty to anyone but himself, which is why he feels free to act however he wants and is not “bound”; he does not feel guilty over his betrayals. Ralph initially adopts Grover’s attitude, which is why he disregards his sense of honor and debt to his sister. He realizes, after he loses everything that matters to him, that if he had honored his debt to his sister, he would not have lost everything.

The characters’ work experiences shape their relationships with their families as well as their attitudes towards their debts to their families and their racial identities. For example, Theresa perceives herself differently from Mah in Bone, yet what these characters have in common is their sense of honor and loyalty towards their families and how they honor their obligations through work. These women feel that they need to provide for their families, even at the expense of their own health or happiness. Theresa sacrifices some of her own accomplishments out of her sense of duty to her brother. She gives up a prestigious scholarship so that she won’t upstage him, and he only feels motivated to work again once he mistakenly believes that she failed in her work. When Ralph develops a partnership with Grover, Theresa isolates herself from the family in order to allow that partnership to flourish, due to Grover’s rejection of her. “But now they’d all gotten used to the idea that Theresa would do this – hide herself away, for her brother, for her family, and as they’d gotten used to it, it began to seem silly to treat the invisible Theresa as company. Theresa had said so herself” (Jen 204). Theresa’s sacrifice is not honored by her family, and her ties to them, particularly Ralph, break down as a
result. If they truly appreciated her, they would not make her feel “invisible.” Theresa’s lost connection with her family makes her feel even more isolated and unhappy in America, especially because the only reason she works so hard is to provide for her family. When that hard work is unappreciated, she feels as if she no longer has a primary purpose in life.

Although she uses her work to honor her family, her work and her attitude to it also weakens her sense of obligation to her brother. Rather than accept Ralph’s corrupt behavior and control over their family, Theresa moves out of the house when he refuses to honor his debt to her. She and her brother reject the terms of the debt to punish each other, though for different reasons. When she says, “‘This is Grover’s influence’” (Jen 208), she sees what the others cannot: Grover has corrupted the family and poisoned their relationships with each other. Ralph retorts, “‘And how about you? Two boyfriends now, one wasn’t enough, huh?’” (Jen 208). Similar to how Grover uses his affair with Helen to taunt Ralph when the latter confronts him about his disloyalty, Ralph uses Theresa’s affair with Old Chao to challenge his debt to her. Similar to Leila, who believes she has the moral high ground over her sister Nina due to the latter’s refusal to honor her debt to their parents, Theresa believes she has the moral high ground over her brother because she honors her duty to her family and he does not. Although he provides material wealth for his family through his work as an entrepreneur, he does so through dishonest means. Similar to Leon, he becomes an absent father, husband, and brother, which makes his wife and sister less inclined to honor him. Theresa continues to value her connections to her family and misses them after she becomes estranged from them. “In this context, Ralph Chang’s Americanization entails less a forsaking of old political allegiances than an active consent to new cultural definitions of self. What this means in practical terms is that he abandons the precapitalist mode of production, in which kinship relations play a major role, and adopts the
capitalist mode of production, in which market relations dominate all forms of human exchange.” (Li 104). Ralph redefines himself as an entrepreneur and a capitalist, which makes him believe his ties to his family are less important than his work and financial success. When Theresa agrees to return to the Changs’ home, she thinks, “It was her duty…She was in so many ways Americanized, but in this respect she was Chinese still – when family marched, she fell in step. And wasn’t this what she’d longed for?” (Jen 265). Theresa associates her duty to her family with her Chinese identity, because the “American” way would have been to focus on her individual desires rather than those of her family’s. In that sense, she fails to completely achieve economic individualism, since she is more concerned with the interests of her family than her own. She does engage in an extramarital affair, though that is less about dishonoring her family and more as a result of her sense of alienation from her family and colleagues. Specifically, her affair reflects the negative consequences of the model minority stereotype: she is not completely self-sufficient and still desires emotional intimacy and belonging.

It is only when Ralph endangers Theresa’s life by running over her with his car that he realizes how much damage he has done to their family. He changes from a materialistic, self-absorbed, and dishonest entrepreneur to a remorseful, unemployed man who realizes that his family and his debts to them are more important than all the money he accumulated before. He thinks, “Until he pictured Theresa alive; then a sense of unutterable good fortune settled over him. Hidden pleats of his spirit expanded. She was alive. Alive, alive, alive! Now this was a miracle, this was a gift” (Jen 294). Despite everything else that he has lost, Ralph still feels fortunate once he finds out his sister has survived. In that moment, his values change, and although he fails to become a successful model minority, his failure and loss are less important than the possibility of reconciliation with his sister and the rest of his family. Thus, Jen
demonstrates the restorative power of debt. The refusal or failure to honor one’s obligations to one’s family leads to the family’s breakdown. Recognition and payment of that debt not only restores the Changs’ relationships with each other, it also restores their sense of honor. Ralph has not yet repaid his debt to his sister, but he now recognizes the value of the debt and his sister.

**Conclusion**

Therefore, it is important to analyze the ways that the identity of the model minority is connected to morality, honor, and debt as well as the negative consequences of adopting this identity. Ralph tried to achieve the American dream through dishonest means and did not honor his debt to his sister, who could have protected him from the likes of Grover. Ralph destroys his honor and his family when he disregards his debt to his sister and his obligation to the rest of his family when he focuses on his own self-serving version of the American dream. Theoretically, achieving the American dream by becoming a successful entrepreneur would have benefited the entire family, but like Leon, Ralph’s American dream is less about helping his family and more about reinventing himself and making his family (especially Theresa, who makes him feel inadequate) indebted to him. Ruthless, exploitation, selfishness, and manipulation, which are all traits that some people (like Grover Ding and Ralph) utilize or exhibit in their pursuit of the American dream, weakens the ties that bind people to their sense of honor, their debts, and their families. If a person succeeds or achieves economic individualism, his or her success also begs the question of who he or she had to hurt or exploit in order to achieve that success. Work can corrupt people and turn them into the opposite of what they set out to be. They do not just change because of cultural assimilation (and some characters do not completely assimilate). They change because they sought to reinvent themselves as workers but their transformations went wrong because of their own flaws, mistakes, and circumstances that went beyond their control.
In *Typical American* and *Bone*, the authors depict characters who fail to become model minorities, but Jen and Ng emphasize that the characters’ greater failures are their treatment of their families. The authors portray the characters’ exploitative work conditions and their disappointment over their unfulfilled professional aspirations, but Jen and Ng emphasize that these problems do not justify their mistreatment of their families.
Chapter Six: Historical Background on Korean American immigration and Labor

Immigration Laws for Korean American Americans

Koreans came to America “in 1903, when American sugar planters in the Hawaiian Islands imported Koreans as contract laborers for their labor-intensive sugar plantations. Between 1903 and 1905 a total of 7,226 Koreans arrived in the islands; then the Korean government, which was degraded by 1905 to a de facto Japanese protectorate, suddenly forbade emigration; the Japanese government wanted to protect Japanese immigrants in the Hawaiian islands from the competition of Koreans” (I. Kim 20). The American government allowed Koreans to emigrate because they wanted to break down the strikes that were initiated by Japanese workers who wanted more pay and better working conditions on the plantations. Koreans were troubled by the reality of labor on Hawaiian plantations and the fact that their wages did not cover most of their living expenses. Similar to Chinese Americans, Korean Americans “engaged in rice and vegetable farming, railroad construction, and in the restaurant and hotel business. Like the Japanese and Chinese, their economic ventures were greatly limited by white nativistic racial discrimination. And like the Japanese, the Koreans were successful in agriculture” (I. Kim 21). White laborers felt that these new immigrants’ success came at the expense of white men, who felt that Korean Americans were “stealing” jobs away from them. Koreans also emigrated for religious reasons, and “most were Protestants regardless of whether

73 “A small number of students, some political refugees, and a few ginseng peddlers were the first Koreans to land in the United States: several political refugees sought asylum in the United States after they led the abortive Gabsin coup in 1884, the object of which was an attempt to modernize Korea by fashioning it after Japan; and in 1881 North Korean ginseng peddlers came to the West Coast via China in order to sell their product to the Chinese immigrants, but their numbers were too small to be designated as an immigrant contingent” (I. Kim 20).

74 “…workers probably received meals, board, and incidentals from the employer, and perhaps gifts or a small stipend in addition. Hence the surprise of many Korean workers to discover that the wages of $16.00 in Hawaii did not include food or other expenses” (Pomerantz 310).

75 “...the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League was formed in 1905 in San Francisco, and membership expanded to more than 75,000 within a year. The Exclusion League, supported by foreign-born white laborers, declared as one of its aims that “the Chinese exclusion laws be extended so as to exclude all classes of Japanese and Koreans, exempted by the terms of the Chinese Act, from the United States and its insular territories” (I. Kim 21).
they were political refugees or laborers. American missionaries had encouraged and persuaded Korean Christians to depart from their homeland, which was deeply imbued with the Confucian culture of ancestor worship” (I. Kim 23). When the Japanese took control, many Koreans who had intended to stay temporarily in America decided not to return home.

Racist laws prevented Chinese women from joining their husbands at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Korean War and the 1965 immigration reforms made it easier for Korean women to emigrate, which is why “during the period 1952-1970 a total of 14,554 Korean women came to the United States as wives of American citizens. Most of the citizens, as we have noted, were American soldiers” (I. Kim 41). Not all younger Korean women came to America as wives of American soldiers. Some came because Korean men often returned to their native country, preferring Korean women to Korean American women. These men, “still concerned with the traditional Korean virtue of female chastity, tend to distrust ‘Americanized’ Korean women, who, they think, are too aggressive and disobedient” (I. Kim 44). Kyeyoung Park disagrees with Light and Bonacich’s perspective on why Koreans came to America and argues that “developments in the world system, particularly the American labor market, prompted emigration. On the one hand, U.S. government policies allowed the Korean middle class, not the poor, to emigrate; on the other hand, the Korean government was not able to absorb its mass-produced professional managerial class” (14). These immigrants came to America because there

76 “Although Christian missionaries began working in Korea in the 1880s, only after the Sino-Japanese War did their efforts bring results...The Protestant denominations with greatest success were the Presbyterians, centered in Pyongyang, and the Methodists, centered in Inchon and Seoul” (Pomerantz 291).
77 “In all, about 15,000 persons returned to Korea between 1905 and 1915, but the vast majority stayed abroad (Moon 1976: 83). Thus the original community of migrants and sojourners was transformed into a community of exiles” (Pomerantz 305).
78 “The great number of females in the age groups of fifty years and over is mainly due to the tendency of Korean working couples in the United States to send for their mothers in order to use them as baby sitters or housekeepers...a genuine ‘filial piety’ is also responsible for this phenomenon” (I. Kim 42).
were not enough jobs that fit their qualifications in Korea. The 1965 immigration reforms brought in Korean immigrants who were well-educated professionals, though they could not always find high-status jobs in America. For example, “Korean and other Asian medical professionals in New York filled vacancies in the periphery specialties and low-income minority neighborhoods, not attractive to native-born white professionals. They usually worked for second- or third-rate public hospitals, which recruited ‘cheap’ foreign medical professionals” (Pomerantz 156). Many Koreans who were not able to find jobs that met their qualifications turned to ethnic entrepreneurship, which I will discuss in more detail later.

The 1965 immigration reforms made it easier for Asians to come to the United States, but the Immigration and Nationality Acts of Amendment placed new restrictions on them. For example, “although Asians made up a large percentage of the health professionals admitted before 1977, the amendment limited their chances of getting an immigrant visa on the basis of their skills. Therefore, an increasing number of Asian doctors, nurses, and pharmacists now attempted to enter under family reunification criteria instead” (K. Park 16). Since it was harder for Korean professionals to enter the country, the diversity among Korean immigrants increased. “While the pre-1976 wave of immigrants included mainly middle-class professionals, the later...

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79 “For instance, if a person leaves a job as a high-level executive, he or she will have difficulty finding a similar post in Korea...Other professionals found it difficult to obtain jobs in the Korean labor market due to its skewed development. For example, some doctors did not want to serve at public health centers in the countryside, preferring private practice in Seoul” (K. Park 14).

80 “In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many well-educated Korean immigrants worked as janitors, gas station attendants, waiters or waitresses, seamstresses in garment factories, and truck drivers because they could not find meaningful white-collar occupations. They began to launch labor-intensive small businesses, such as wig stores, grocery and produce shops, and garment factories, as alternatives to blue collar occupations” (Min 33).

81 “Facing deep economic problems like the energy shortage, high unemployment, and inflation, some segments of the native population have shown negative reactions to the new immigration. For instance, Zero Population Growth Society expounded in 1976 a restriction on immigration in order to protect American jobs from immigrants and conserve national resources. In response to these economic problems and to complaints that illegal aliens were stealing ‘American’ jobs, Congress in 1976 amended the Immigration Act of 1965” (I. Kim 30).

82 “One amendment downgraded professionals such as nurses, physicians, and dentists from third to sixth preference. This means that before entry they, too, would have to find an American employer willing to hire them” (K. Park 16).
wave included Koreans from a variety of class backgrounds and educational and skill levels” (K. Park 92). Due to these restrictions, Koreans relied on family members who were already in America to help them get into the country, because “according to American immigration law, people can come to the United States if they have relatives here or a sponsor” (K. Park 74). Families also help these immigrants start their own businesses, since initially they cannot afford to hire paid employees. Not all Korean Americans elevate their economic and professional status when they come to the United States, including “15 percent of Korean families [who] had incomes below the poverty level, a proportion nearly twice that of white Americans, which was 9 percent” (K. Park 63).

From College-Educated Professionals to Model Minority Ethnic Entrepreneurs

Claire Jean Kim claims that “race in America has always been about who gets what” (15). Furthermore, “Korean Americans could avail themselves of the market demand for small businesses because as middle-class immigrants they had the financial resources and professional skills to perform the complex work of running a shop” (Chang 57). Kim does not account for the economic disparities among Korean American entrepreneurs, especially since not all of them succeed. In Native Speaker, Henry’s father becomes a successful entrepreneur with multiple grocery stores. In The Fruit n’ Food, Mr. Rhee struggles to keep his one store afloat and fails to acquire a second store. Their success and failure, respectively, shape their perspectives of America as well as the conflict in the books, particularly in relationships with their sons (Henry Park and Thomas Pak, the latter who becomes like a son to Mr. Rhee due to their emotional connection and empathy for each other). In my discussion of both novels in the following chapter, I will address the following questions: why and how does Mr. Park become successful, and why does Mr. Rhee fail?
Korean American ethnic entrepreneurs typically opened stores in low-income neighborhoods that were primarily African American, whereas the more expensive chain grocery stores catered to rich neighborhoods that were primarily white. It was easier for these ethnic entrepreneurs to obtain bank loans than it was for African Americans, who were typically denied loans to open their own stores. African Americans’ struggles in their own neighborhoods as well as their difficulties finding employment in more prosperous areas reinforced their belief that they were stuck in the lower classes because of their race. They thought Korean Americans were able to elevate their class status because they were not African American:

Some Koreans were very successful in small business and proved that hard work and willingness to invest in it paid off. The American dream, a faded illusion for most locals, truly worked for some immigrants. As a result a certain amount of resentment was stirred up among local residents, who saw the immigrants as grabbing opportunities and attaining the kind of social mobility they could not...Success in small business had its own price: hostile relations with the surrounding community. (Light and Bonacich 370) In contrast, “blacks have one of the lowest self-employment rates of all U.S. ancestry groups, while Koreans have one of the highest. In 1990, in fact, Koreans had the single highest rate of self-employment out of ninety-nine U.S. ancestry groups” (C. Kim 39). These “hostile relations” between African Americans and Korean Americans are evident in Native Speaker and The Fruit n’ Food, with references in both novels to the looting and destruction of ethnic entrepreneurs’ businesses, the antagonism from local African American residents who believe that these Korean American workers are encroaching upon “their” territory, and the accusations from many of these residents that these Korean Americans are not actually “American” due to the latter’s foreign origins, regardless of how many years the entrepreneurs have lived and worked in America or whether these Korean Americans are actually native born Americans. The African Americans who believe Korean American entrepreneurs are “privileged” do not always know
how difficult it is for most entrepreneurs to keep their stores running.\textsuperscript{83} Espiritu points out that “in reality, few Asian American business owners manage to achieve upward mobility through entrepreneurship. The majority of the businesses has very low gross earnings and run a high risk of failure.” Therefore, Leonard Chang’s novel portrays the unsuccessful model minority, which the United States refuses to recognize because this identity conflicts with the American dream. The Rhees struggle to be self-sufficient model minorities even before the riots, which suggests that their chances of becoming as successful as Mr. Park is in \textit{Native Speaker} are highly unlikely.

Yoonmee Chang defines Korean Americans’ racial identities through their work as ethnic entrepreneurs and claims that “‘Ethnic’ in this case denotes causality, suggesting that Korean Americans are entrepreneurs \textit{because} they are ethnic. Korean Americans are culturalized as shopkeepers, their small business ownership constructed as a cultural proclivity” (136). Chang also claims that this form of ethnic entrepreneurship is a form of class containment and discipline. It is a limited and limiting niche that results from American racial exclusions rather than Asiatic racial virtues. Specifically, small business ownership enables Korean Americans to advance economically, but it keeps them marginalized socially and politically” (137). When the 1992 L.A. riots occurred, there were few resources available to help Korean American store owners. The fact that the government did nothing to help them reinforced their marginalization. Korean Americans were blamed for their own victimization.

A strong work ethic is necessary for ethnic entrepreneurs to succeed, and it is central to their identification with the model minority. The model minority’s work ethic not only promotes

\textsuperscript{83} “Because of their middle-class backgrounds and strong aspirations for upward mobility in the United States, which inspired their immigration, Korean immigrants tend to distance themselves from blacks, who are seen to have the lowest economic and social standing. Such attitudes cause resentment among blacks, who feel that Koreans have a free ride because of the social and economic justice that they achieved through the Civil Rights movement (Jo 1992)” (Yoon 204).
American values but also castigates other minorities, particularly African Americans, for not “earning” more than they already have:

Perhaps the most pointed ideological message to be gleaned from the Korean experience is the importance of hard work. Koreans were touted in the media as paragons of this virtue. And they were shown as benefiting from their work ethic, by being able to climb the social mobility ladder. Needless to say, the promotion of hard work was not just value-free journalism. It carried a heavy ideological message to U.S. working class: ‘Work hard, and you, too, shall succeed. Don’t join unions or make political demands. Don’t rely on state handouts. Don’t be so lazy and irresponsible. Instead, accept the values of capitalism, just like the Koreans, and you will prove the American system works. (Light and Bonacich 400).

The underlying message of the model minority stereotype makes it clear that Koreans must learn to be self-reliant rather than expect the government or the local authorities to help them, which emphasizes their alienation from the rest of society. In Native Speaker, Mr. Park is almost entirely self-sufficient. He emphasizes to Henry that they cannot rely on anyone but themselves, which also illustrates Mr. Park’s distrust of almost everyone else, particularly people who are not Korean. Mr. Park and the Rhees devote their lives to being self-sufficient and working hard, despite the emotional and physical toll it takes on them, and despite the fact that their workaholic habits cause both parents and children to make it more difficult to relate to each other. Even if they improve their economic status, they do not “climb the social mobility ladder,” because they continue to be outsiders in American society.

Unlike the African American protestors who unite and make public demands, Korean American ethnic entrepreneurs isolate themselves. This self-imposed isolation and self-sufficiency contributes to the Rhees’ undoing, because if they had more social connections, resources, and support, they might have been able to save their livelihood. This realization was evident in many Korean American entrepreneurs’ efforts to end their social isolation and change their businesses after the riots. They became more willing to hire African American employees than they were before, in an attempt to promote racial harmony. Furthermore, “shopkeepers are
conversing more in Spanish because of the increasing number of Spanish-speaking customers” (Fong 181). Being a model minority is not enough to protect people from discrimination or violence, and it is not enough to protect or improve their status in America. A life that revolves around the model minority stereotype is not a good life, even if it provides economic stability, because this identity causes Korean Americans to sacrifice or lose almost everything else. As model minorities, “immigrant entrepreneurs and their families must work much harder than other members of the society to which they have moved. They also work harder than they did in their homelands. The long hours they must put in not only deprive these people of many of the joys of life but sometimes positively threaten their health. Being an immigrant entrepreneur is a joyless existence” (Light and Bonacich 431). The Korean Americans’ pursuit of the American dream through ethnic entrepreneurship fails to make them feel happy and complete.

**Why Korean Americans Become Ethnic Entrepreneurs**

Immigrants do not want to be wage laborers, which is what the service workers and sweatshop workers that many of the immigrants in Chinatown become. They want to be subsistence farmers with an independent means of living, which is why many of them become entrepreneurs. Their work as model minorities is based neither solely on class traits nor ethnic ones but on both. By becoming their own bosses they do not have to rely on the low wages that exploitative employers give them. Entrepreneurs can determine their own wages. They often end up as exploited laborers nevertheless because they have no choice but to work long hours every day for low pay to keep their businesses running. They also have to exploit their families’ labor, because without their families’ support, many of these entrepreneurs would not

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84 “...many Koreans have achieved middle-class status in the United States through the lower-class occupation of ethnic entrepreneurship, an otherwise effective way to overcome labor market disadvantages like limited English-language proficiency, nontransferable professional credentials, and nativistic racial discrimination” (N. Kim 141).

85 “That Koreans in other countries do not concentrate in small businesses means that the high self-employment rate of Korean immigrants cannot be attributed to cultural traditions” (Min 33).
be able to survive. This is evident in *Native Speaker*, where Henry sacrifices time with his friends in order to help his father at the store. In *The Fruit n’ Food*, the Rhees’ daughter, June, helps her parents in the store, though they allow her time off in order to attend school. They transfer the burden that would have been hers onto their surrogate son, Thomas, who is more than willing to accept it, despite the low wages that are barely able to sustain him. Thomas does not resent the Rhees for exploiting him, because he understands their economic status is not much better than his own. Many Korean American employees who work for these entrepreneurs accept the low wages and long hours with the understanding that eventually they will be able to utilize their work experience to open their own businesses. These exploitative conditions are viewed as a rite of passage in their pursuit of the American dream. When that American dream of becoming a successful model minority is not the children’s dream (Henry seeks to dissociate himself from his father; Thomas is mainly concerned with his own survival, while June is more immature and focuses on a life of leisure than work), their work-centered relationships with their parents become strained, and they chafe under the pressure of becoming a model minority.

Many Korean Americans earn college degrees in their native country. Several even have work experience in the field that they were educated for. When they come to America, it is a different story. It is now easier for Koreans to immigrate to the United States. It is not easier for them to find work that meets their qualifications and expectations. For example, the “California Advisory Committee to the U.S. commission on Civil Rights investigated licensing boards in the four health professions (pharmacy, medicine, nursing, and dentistry) in which Korean immigrants were most likely to have been trained. In the case of pharmacists, the foreign-trained were not even permitted to take the licensing examination, while the others’ command of English played the most critical role in determining one’s chances of passing. Consequently, many
Korean immigrants were unable to practice the profession for which they are trained” (Light and Bonacich 362). This issue is evident in Mr. Park’s situation, who trained as an engineer in Korea but was unable to pursue that career in America, especially because he never becomes fluent in English. Entrepreneurs like Mr. Park “were overeducated for their role; managing a small business hardly requires a college education or formal training. The mismatch between education and employment must be understood as a result of their difficulties in finding appropriate occupations in the United States” (Yoon 123). Unlike other Asian immigrants, like Filipinos, who come to the United States with a solid grasp of English, many Korean Americans’ knowledge of English is more limited, which prevents them from pursuing most white-collar careers. That is why these immigrants “were crowded into a narrow, highly competitive labor market, driving down the price of their labor” (Light and Bonacich 362). Their positions as immigrants make it more difficult for them to improve their economic and professional situations, because “immigrants must undergo a probationary period before they can become citizens, during which they are under considerable pressure not to make trouble” (Light and Bonacich 362). Similar to the Chinese immigrants who work in sweatshops, Korean immigrants are at the mercy of their employers, who have the advantage not just because they are the employers but also because they are more secure in America as citizens. Thus, as I previously stated, work teaches people what their “place” is in society.

Many Korean Americans become ethnic entrepreneurs with the financial assistance of rotating credit associations, otherwise known as “kyes” (though it is referred to as a ggeh in Native Speaker). This type of group consists of several aspiring ethnic entrepreneurs who

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86 “Although South Koreans learn a great deal about written English, their training in speech is considerably weaker. The predominantly foreign-born status of the group in the United States (82 percent in 2000) also accounts for their relatively low-level of English-speaking proficiency (P. Ong and Azores 1994). Census data from 2000 reveal that among adults eighteen years of age and older, 29.3 percent of Korean Americans speak English ‘not well’ (UCLA Asian American Studies Center& Adachi, 2004)” (N. Kim 160).
contribute a set amount of money. The members rotate amongst each other, so that eventually they will each be able to access money for their own businesses. Koreans utilize the services in kyes in Korea as well, and “a 1969 survey by the Bank of Korea reported that 72.3 percent of adult respondents were active kye members” (Light and Bonacich 245). The entrepreneurs’ funding is not based entirely on kyes. Several of them, particularly members of Korea’s upper class, smuggled thousands of dollars they had saved out of their country, despite legal restrictions against smuggling.

These immigrants are known as ethnic entrepreneurs because of their racial identities and the ethnic products that they sell. Since many “Korean immigrants are unable or unwilling to accommodate themselves to American foods, they try to maintain old dietary habits that call for hot, salty sauces such as garlic, hot pepper, mashed-bean, and soy sauce, which are essential ingredients of Korean foods” (I. Kim 106). Other entrepreneurs cater to African Americans and Hispanic Americans in poorer neighborhoods. These store owners “import such consumer goods as wigs, false eyelashes, clothing, handbags, gloves, and other similar goods from South Korea and ‘dump’ them in the larger inner cities of the United States” (I. Kim 106-107). In 1971, Korean Americans also began to operate fruit and vegetable stores, like the one that the Rhees operate. These stores “can be opened with little capital and can be operated and managed without much knowledge of English. Given the small amounts of capital available, Korean immigrants with high economic motivation have entered this business” (I. Kim 114). Running these stores often prove to be more difficult than running other types of stores, because “no matter how much energy, health, and stamina one may have, one cannot stand more than two years of this daily toil. [Korean greengrocers] use expressions such as ‘bloody urine,’ ‘drastic loss of weight,’ and

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87 “Growth of kyes was so strong that the Korean government and Korean banks regarded their proliferation as an obstacle to economic development” (Light and Bonacich 245).
88 Korean Americans also enlisted family and friends to smuggle more money for them (Light and Bonacich 261).
‘benumbed fingers like a ‘leper’s’ when they describe the daily struggle of operating their businesses” (I. Kim 119-120). Thus, their pursuit of the American dream takes a drastic physical toll on them, which reinforces their self-sacrificing nature.

Latino Americans do not necessarily view Korean American entrepreneurs as racist antagonists or an economic invasion, especially since they “share the immigrant ideology, that if they work hard they can make it in the United States…In Yoon’s survey, Korean merchants reported experiencing far less frequent clashes with Latino customers than with black customers” (Min 84). However, many Latino Americans participated in the L.A. riots by looting Korean American stores, alongside African Americans. For example, “Latinos made up 45.2 percent of the arrests during the 1992 riots, compared with 41 percent blacks and 11.5 percent whites…The commission concluded that the United States was separated into two nations, one black and one white. Chang’s analysis of the 1992 L.A. riot found the implications were far beyond black and white, and beyond individual race relations and antagonism” (Fong 174). Still, the riots did reflect African Americans’ anger and frustration over the death of Latasha Harlins, the beating of Rodney King at the hands of police officers who were later acquitted of their crime, and the poverty and job losses that African Americans in South Central Los Angeles suffered.89

**Interracial Tensions: Korean Americans and African Americans**

When the 1992 L.A. riots occurred, “2,300 Korean-owned stores in Los Angeles’ Koreatown [were] targeted by African Americans [and Latino Americans] and burned during the rioting that followed a not-guilty verdict in the 1992 trial of four white police officers charged with the brutal beating of [Rodney King]” (Portes and Rumbaut 148). Even before the 1992 L.A.

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89 “...South Central...[lost] 70,000 high-wage, stable jobs between 1978 and 1982...The 1990 census reported that approximately one in three South Central residents lived in a household with an income below the official poverty line, a rate over twice that for the country as a whole. In 1990, only 59 percent of adults (ages 20-64) in South Central worked, a figure 16 percent lower than the rate for the country (Ong 1993)” (K. Park 63).
riots occurred, Korean American ethnic entrepreneurs in Los Angeles were at risk of being robbed or attacked when they went into work each day. Also, “in the 18 months prior to the 1992 L.A. riots, 12 Korean merchants had been killed while working in their stores” (Fong 178). Many people accused these store owners of racism, but the latter countered that they were afraid of suffering the same fates as the ones who had been robbed or killed.

African American customers who shopped at Korean Americans’ stores described experiences of the ethnic entrepreneurs’ rudeness and prejudice, such as the fact that black customers were more likely to be regarded with suspicion and followed around every time they visited these stores, and that ethnic entrepreneurs did not make eye contact with these customers or touch them. Many, though not necessarily all, immigrants from Korea form their own perceptions of African Americans before they leave Korea. Since Korea is not nearly as diverse as America, these immigrants’ early exposure to African Americans is through the stereotypical version of them that has been depicted in the media. While it is true that many of these ethnic entrepreneurs are guilty of prejudice and discrimination against African American customers, polite behavior among Koreans includes maintaining a reserved demeanor, not looking people in the eyes, and placing change on the counter rather than in the customer’s hand. In addition, Korean Americans acknowledge that their lack of fluency in English can cause miscommunications and unintentional problems. Most importantly, Korean American merchants do not see themselves as exploiters of the community, but as hardworking immigrants trying to run a small business. Kyeyoung Park claims that “the movement from a society where being Korean is taken for granted to one where Koreans are a minority lumped with other Asians has sharply heightened Koreans’ consciousness of their racial and ethnic identity” (140). Korean
Americans develop a stronger awareness of their racial identity when the latter is used by non-Koreans to attack them, despite their hard work as entrepreneurs.

Heon Cheol Lee argues that African Americans and Korean Americans’ conflict is “the result of power relations between blacks and Koreans in a white dominant society. It should be stressed that, regarding the power relations between them, both blacks and Koreans are categorized as racial minorities in the United States. But the degree of their minority statuses is different, and they are inconsistent in different dimensions” (94). In other words, it is actually more about power than race. Korean Americans who elevate their economic status have “different minority statuses” than African Americans who are unable to elevate their own economic status. Due to the differences in these two minority groups’ power, work, and financial means, their own perceptions of race contrast with each other.

**African Americans’ Boycotts of Korean Americans’ Stores**

In *The Fruit n’ Food*, the Rhees’ American dream includes expanding their business to a second grocery store and sending their daughter to college, so that she will not become an ethnic entrepreneur like them. By raising a daughter who is a more successful model minority, the Rhees hope to elevate their economic status, yet Chang illustrates how their plan quickly falls apart, partly due to their own professional shortcomings, their fears and prejudice towards African Americans, and the latter’s hostility towards them after Mrs. Rhee falsely accuses two black customers of stealing and Thomas threatens them with a gun. The incident with these customers in *The Fruit n’ Food*, which is what sets the boycott against the Rhees’ store in motion is reminiscent of what precipitates the Big Apple boycott in New York. This boycott began due to a confrontation between a Haitian American customer and a Korean American ethnic
entrepreneur who was accused by the former of racial prejudice and causing the customer’s physical injury (though it was later proven that the customer’s claims regarding her injuries were exaggerated).” When a particular Korean store owner exhibited what Black activists thought was open disrespect or abusiveness to black customers, however, all bets were off. Through his or her own exercise of racist agency, that Korean merchant declared allegiance to the White power structure and denigrated Blacks, inviting community censure” (C. Kim 127). During the Big Apple boycott, the boycotts of Korean American entrepreneurs’ stores were not just about gaining power for African Americans. The leaders intended for the power to go to specific African Americans, because “What is at stake in this conflict is not just black control of the black economy. It is, much more importantly, the political control of black communities. The crucial underlying issue in the conflict is who controls black communities politically, in the broadest sense of the word. More specifically, the issue is which blacks control black communities in urban America” (H. Lee 99).

Similar to how not all Korean Americans can achieve racial solidarity due to the differences in their work, class status, and assimilation into American society, not all African Americans develop the same “black consciousness” due to the differences within their own group. That is why “the real challenge for ‘Powerists and black ‘political entrepreneurs’ now is to generate and reinforce ethnic solidarity among diverse blacks in America and to construct and reconstruct blacks as a racial-ethnic group in order to politicize it as a power group” (H. Lee 103-

90 “The hospital report showed that Felissaint was treated for a facial scratch, although she claimed that her injuries were more serious than the report indicated. Historically, exaggerated rumors have played an important role in galvanizing crowds and collective action. This suggests a certain readiness among subordinated groups to credit accounts about the unjust or abusive behavior of the dominant group” (C. Kim 248).

91 “In May 1990, Sonny Carson came with his supporters to protest the white judge’s ruling on the fifty-court injunction imposed on black boycotts of Korean stores. Two separate protest rallies, one led by Sharpton and one led by Carson, were held in the same courtyard, providing a vivid example of the power struggle for black leadership in New York City” (H. Lee 102).
It was difficult for all African Americans to reconcile their different interests and concerns during the Big Apple boycotts and the struggle for control over their neighborhood. Many African American local residents noted that the majority of the protestors who led the boycotts did not even live in the neighborhood, not to mention some of the people involved were Haitian American immigrants who did not completely identify with African Americans who were born in the United States.

Although Mr. Park in Native Speaker eventually expands his business to cater to rich white customers, most ethnic entrepreneurs, such as the Rhees, typically establish businesses in minority neighborhoods rather than white ones, due to the fact that they cannot compete with major chain grocery stores that are prevalent in white neighborhoods:

In low-income neighborhoods, due to the low spending capacity of the residents, high crime rates, and vandalism, large grocery chains are unwilling to invest in opening stores…For the same reasons, independent white business owners are also reluctant to open grocery stores in these areas…Moreover, the capital needed to operate a store, including commercial rents, is significantly lower in a low-income minority area than in a middle-income white area, allowing disadvantaged Korean immigrants to start grocery businesses with a smaller amount of capital. (Min and Kolodny 139).

Many African American residents resent that it is easier for Korean Americans to get loans and start their own businesses, though not all of these residents are aware of the keys that many entrepreneurs rely on. When the boycotts started, the point was not just to protest ethnic entrepreneurs’ racism but also emphasize that the lack of lucrative work (or any work) disenfranchised African Americans. Many black nationalists also made it their goal to drive out all businesses that were not owned by African Americans:

Black nationalism generally refers to a philosophy that encourages blacks to see themselves in a positive light as blacks first, not Americans…The advocates of this philosophy interpret black poverty as a result of the failure of society to provide education and employment for blacks rather than a result of loose morals and economic mobility in the United States can be achieved through the social and economic self-
reliance of blacks in their own communities…Koreans are rejected not simply because they are Koreans but because they are part of a larger system that creates and maintains injustice against blacks. (Yoon 207)

Actually, black nationalists are not the only ones who think of themselves as “separate” from other Americans, since Korean Americans, especially ethnic entrepreneurs, often view themselves as “separate” from other Americans due to their marginalized status in America. They may be praised for being model minorities, but this identity also distinguishes them from white Americans who are not classified as minorities. Nadia Y. Kim argues that Korean Americans are invisible in America because many other Americans do not have much or any knowledge of either North or Korea, and their “invisibility is also a byproduct of the U.S. racial binary in which people who are neither White nor Black are erased and muted’’ (151). Many people viewed Asian Americans who fit the model minority stereotype as “honorary whites,” particularly because although Asian Americans, including Korean Americans, certainly suffered from discrimination and racism in the United States, they did not suffer these things to the same extent that African Americans did. Identifying Korean Americans or Asian Americans as a whole as “honorary whites” is too simplistic because it “denies the unique combination of nativism and racism they experience and the myriad ways they continue to be marginalized by the racial and cultural center” (N. Kim 163). Korean Americans are not “honorary whites,” especially because they are not viewed in the same way that white Americans are.

**Interracial Tensions: Korean Americans and White Americans**

European immigrants, such as the Irish, Italians, and immigrants from Eastern Europe suffered from discrimination, prejudice, and exclusionary immigration laws when they first arrived in America. Their modern descendants’ situation has greatly improved, and “even successive generations of immigrants from southern, central, and eastern Europe, once despised
and seen as distinct and unassimilable races, have successfully merged with others of European ancestry and are seen today as Americans and members of a singular *white* race. Today, white ethnics possess what Mary Waters (1990) has coined as a plethora of ‘ethnic options,’ the ability to choose whether or how ethnicity will matter in their lives’’ (Tuan 4-5). These European immigrants, similar to Asian immigrants, faced severe pressure to assimilate to American culture in order to be accepted. The difference between the two groups was that no matter how much the Asian immigrants assimilated, they would never be fully accepted because they could not shed their racial identities. Discrimination is an experience that African Americans also experience, because “white American continues to exclude and shun middle-class blacks, despite blacks doing all the things (assimilating to white middle-class values and norms and accruing educational capital) they were told would bring social acceptance. While the quality of their lives has improved materially, race, contrary to the predictions of William Julius Wilson (1978), remains significant” (Tuan 5). Despite this discrimination, “blacks may be many things in the minds of whites, but foreign is not one of them. As far as racial positioning goes, Asians’ designation as ‘model’ minorities, the best of those in the ‘racial other’ category, says it all – all ‘racialized other’ groups are not equal in the eyes of whites” (Tuan 8). Regardless of whether Asian Americans are native-born Americans or immigrants, they “are relegated to the margins based on race and on what I call an *assumption of foreignness*. That is, they continue to be seen as somehow more Asian (or Chinese or Japanese) than American” (Tuan 18). While Asian Americans have made many academic, professional, and economic advances in America since their predecessors first immigrated to this country, many other Americans still question these Asian Americans’ nationality by saying, “Where are you from?” Even when Asian Americans respond by saying that they were born and raised in the United States, that answer is still not
enough to pacify many people, who will persist in wanting to know their ethnicity. Their questioning is partly based on curiosity, but African Americans and European Americans do not face these questions. Chang-rae Lee and Leonard Chang demonstrate that Asian Americans’ “foreign” status” is emphasized once they are perceived as adversaries, regardless of their other accomplishments or years living in America.

Asian Americans have been victims of violence for decades before the L.A. riots even occurred. In 1982, Chinese American Vincent Chin was mistaken for being Japanese by two white American autoworkers who used him as a scapegoat for their anger towards the negative consequences they associated with Japan as a rising economic power and the rising unemployment rate in the American auto industry. These two white Americans, Ronald Ebens and his stepson, Michael Nitz, beat Chin to death and were “punished” with probation and a minor fine. After they were convicted of civil rights charges, Ebens and Nitz were later acquitted upon appeal. As a result, Asian Americans felt that they were perceived as “second-class citizens – tolerated as long as they remain a quiet and passive model minority, but patronized, or worse, when they attempt to exercise their rights” (Fong 152). There have been other crimes against Asian Americans, as shown in:

the recent 1999 audit [which] found 486 incidents of anti-Asian violence, up from 429 incidents found in 1998. The latest NAPALC report counted 101 incidents of hate-related vandalism, nearly tripling the number of incidents in 1998. In addition, the incidents of aggravated assault and robbery increased during the same period…In 1999 52 reported incidents involved South Asians, up from 41 reported incidents in 1998…The issue of anti-Asian violence is a major concern for Asian Americans, even though it is met with considerable ignorance and insensitivity among the general public and law enforcement authorities. This is because anti-black, anti-Semitic, and anti-gay and lesbian hate crimes still clearly dominate government statistics on hate crimes. (Fong 152)

It is clear that Asian Americans still have a long way to go before they can ever achieve complete social acceptance, despite their other achievements.
It is important to develop an understanding of interracial tensions between Korean Americans and white Americans and African Americans, because these tensions are visible in *Native Speaker* and *The Fruit n’ Food*. Lee and Chang describe the negative effects that discrimination, racism, theft, violence, and social and economic exclusion have on the ethnic entrepreneurs in these novels, and the authors show how these problems affect their families. The main characters, Henry Park and Thomas Pak, define themselves according to or against the model minority stereotype, depending on their attitudes towards the ethnic entrepreneurs who also serve as the father figures in their lives.
Chapter Seven: Masculinity, Father Figures, and Debt in Native Speaker and The Fruit n’ Food

Introduction

In their portrayal of debt, labor, and Korean American families, particularly in father-son relationships, Chang-rae Lee and Leonard Chang demonstrate how the main characters’ failure or refusal to repay their debts to their families leads to the breakdown of their family ties, causes them to lose their sense of self and purpose, and leaves them with either the option of starting over or accepting defeat by surrendering completely to opposing forces. The main characters’ (Henry Park and Thomas Pak) commitment (or lack thereof) to their debts to their father figures is directly related to the strength of their family ties, sense of self and purpose, and racial identities as Korean Americans. Samuel P. Huntington stated that “the processes of economic modernization and social change throughout the world are separating people from long-standing local identities. They also weaken the nation-state as a source of identity.” I shall study the circumstances that “separate people from long-standing local identities,” specifically identities as model minorities, by comparing and contrasting Mr. Park’s situation with that of the Rhees, in order to understand why Mr. Park succeeds as an ethnic entrepreneur and the Rhees do not.

While it is true that white Americans have difficulties elevating their professional status if they come from low-income backgrounds, they at least do not have to face the same discrimination that Korean Americans and other minorities have to face when they are in the workplace, which is one of the reasons that many first-generation Korean Americans become ethnic entrepreneurs.93

93 “The modern Asian American movement has invested much of its energy in critiquing the model-minority myth to the point that, with the exception of hate crimes, no other issue has been such a visible priority for Asian American mobilization” (D. Kim 1).
As Telles and Ortiz observe, immigrant minorities will vary in their pace and degree of assimilation, and even if they undergo rapid acculturation, ethnic persistence is likely for some. Especially for second generation immigrants from working class backgrounds, class and racial disadvantage will have adverse effects on this group’s chances for landing well-paying jobs in a restructured post-industrial service economy that privileges education and skills (Gans 1992; Perlmann and Waldinger 1997; Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Portes and Zhou 1993). (D. Kim 5)

The notion of the model minority overlooks the fact that not all Korean American entrepreneurs succeed. Lee’s novel portrays the successful Korean American entrepreneur (Mr. Park, Henry’s father) and Chang’s novel portrays the unsuccessful Korean American entrepreneur (Mr. Rhee). To Henry Park and Thomas Pak, their father figures’ identities as model minorities strongly influence their decisions to emulate their fathers or reject this identity altogether, which includes rejecting their fathers as well as the debts they owe them.

The notion of the model minority overlooks the fact that not all Korean Americans succeed. Lee and Chang redefine “success,” “failure,” and the “model minority,” in their depictions of these entrepreneurs. Mr. Park and Mr. Rhee aspire to be model minorities, but they cannot succeed beyond their own ethnic businesses. Their personal struggles with their work, as well as their dissatisfaction and alienation, produces a debt that their children feel pressured to repay; that is, the children are expected to become more successful model minorities than their fathers. However, it is impossible for the children to fully honor that debt, because they look down on their fathers for accepting their subordinate social and professional status. The sons want more agency over themselves; becoming model minorities only serves to reinforce their subordinate, not-American status. Lee and Chang show through these workers’ experiences how people are racialized through their work. Their work as ethnic entrepreneurs establishes their racial identities as Korean Americans, not solely as Americans. With no help from outside sources, they are forced to be self-reliant and isolated. Their work reinforces the barrier between

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94 Bascara claims that the model minority myth discriminates against Asian Americans and that to “critique the model minority myth is to assert that the effects of that history are ongoing...” (4).
them and other Americans. Being model minorities means that they will be recognized for being minority workers, not American workers.

Mr. Rhee and Mr. Park’s quest to be model minorities also shape their relationships with their families, especially in terms of the debts that their families owe them, the honor that is associated with their work and the payment of those debts. Thomas, Mr. Rhee’s surrogate son, admires Mr. Rhee’s work ethic and empathizes with the latter’s isolated, racialized status as a worker. Despite Mr. Rhee’s inability to become the successful model minority and his failure to protect his family and Thomas from the thieves and the rioters, Thomas believes that Mr. Rhee is honorable due to the latter’s strong work ethic and ambition to achieve the American dream. Once Mr. Rhee puts his trust in Thomas, the latter becomes driven to earn the honor that he associates with that trust, because he feels indebted to Mr. Rhee for giving him a job and making him feel like he is part of the Rhees’ family, though Thomas is still not regarded as an equal to the Rhees’ daughter, June. She is their blood relative and is her parents’ motivation for achieving the American dream. In addition to becoming successful entrepreneurs, they want their daughter to become a college-educated, white-collar worker who will never have to resort to ethnic entrepreneurship. Henry Park witnesses the discrimination and racism that ethnic entrepreneurs suffer, though he still thinks that Mr. Park should be able to overcome that and achieve something more in his work. Henry is contemptuous of his father for “settling” for an identity as an ethnic entrepreneur and a model minority. He believes that his father’s inability to move beyond ethnic entrepreneurship makes him less honorable than someone like John Kwang, who is also a model minority but an even more successful and powerful one because he aims to have a voice in the public sphere, whereas the typical model minority, like Mr. Park, is resigned to his status as the “silent” minority worker. Unlike Thomas, who is fully aware of how hard he has to
work in order to survive, Henry’s upper-middle-class lifestyle (which his father’s work provided for him) insulates him from his father’s struggles. That’s why he takes it for granted how difficult it is for minority workers to succeed. If Mr. Park had been more like Kwang, he might not have expanded his grocery business and accumulated material wealth and a suburban lifestyle, because spies like Henry might have been sent to “investigate” him and help drive him out of business and out of the country. Kwang does become rich and successful, but he ultimately loses everything when he refuses to be the “passive, silent” model minority that Mr. Park is resigned to being.

As ethnic entrepreneurs, it is necessary to rely on unpaid labor from family members. The intertwining of labor and family often puts a strain on the latter, because “as business prospers, family or kin ties play a less important role. People perceive family and kin relations as increasingly cold, rational, calculative, even inhumane, and alien to the traditional Korean notion of domestic life. The turning point comes in their realization that their children need something more than a pool of family and kin ties in order to succeed in America” (K. Park 110). In Native Speaker, Mr. Park and his son Henry become “increasingly cold, rational, inhumane” towards each other, largely since Mr. Park only relates to his son through work. Mr. Park’s work as an ethnic entrepreneur fails to bring him closer to his son and instead drives them further apart due to Henry’s need for more than the material wealth and suburban lifestyle that his father’s successful ethnic entrepreneurship provides for him. Henry resents his father, because he believes that “family or kin ties play a less important role” as Mr. Park becomes more focused on expanding his business. For Mr. Park, being a good father means being a good provider, which makes Henry indebted to him. Mr. Park also creates this debt due to his own disappointment with his life in America. Even though he became a successful business owner and a suburban
homeowner, Mr. Park also feels more alone than he did when he first came to America, because he has no one that he can relate to. The other ethnic entrepreneurs that he initially befriended are now successful model minorities as well and have little time or interest for friendships, and therefore, a life that revolves around work is a lonely one for all of them. Mr. Park does not pressure his son to sustain an emotional bond, but Henry does feel conflicted about not honoring his father in this way. It is easier for Henry to blame his father’s coldness (and for creating that debt in the first place) than to take responsibility for his own role in their “broken” relationship or to blame the capitalist system that forces immigrants like Mr. Park to become self-reliant, hard-working model minorities who have to sacrifice everything else in order to succeed. Henry rebels against his father by rejecting his debt altogether, due to his negative view of his father and the latter’s work. He does not rebel against that capitalist system and attempt to alleviate or change the situation for minority workers like his father. Henry’s work as a mole requires him to preserve that system and ensure that those workers are either “eliminated” (deported or killed) or “put in their place” so that they do not aspire for more than what America is willing to give them.

In The Fruit n’ Food, family relations are strained but are not necessarily “cold” or “inhumane.” Still, June finds it difficult to relate to her parents due to her own conflicted feelings over honoring her debt to them by becoming a successful model minority. She recognizes the importance of her parents’ dreams, but also wants to be a typical American teenager with the freedom to focus on her own interests rather than be burdened by her parents’ expectations of her. Thomas, the Rhees’ employee and surrogate son, seeks emotional refuge in the relationship that he develops with the Rhees, especially Mr. Rhee. If he had never developed an emotional connection with any of them, it would have been easier for him to detach himself and walk away when the boycott against the store first began. He could have focused on his self-interest and
saved himself. Because he was so focused on protecting them, Thomas became more concerned with his surrogate family’s needs than his own self-preservation.

**Opposing Responses to Debt in Native Speaker and The Fruit n’ Food**

Despite his impoverished status, Thomas tries to be a model minority. His commitment to his debt and identity leads to his downfall, though what precipitates it is when he breaks away from the identity of that silent minority worker (the kind Mr. Park encouraged Henry to be) to threaten suspected black shoplifters with a gun, though he did it not out of racism but to protect Mrs. Rhee, which is what Mr. Rhee asked him to do. Thus, Chang presents two options for the second-generation Korean American children of ethnic entrepreneurs: to become a model minority and sacrifice themselves for their family, which fails to preserve the family’s American dream and the family as a whole, or to refuse to become a model minority and focus on their personal interests instead, which also threatens the family’s American dream and prevents the children from escaping their family’s situation (i.e., if June had become a straight-A student, she might have been able to escape her parents’ professional struggles in order to focus on achieving her academic and professional goals, like the narrator in The Woman Warrior aspires to do). Chang shows how it is impossible for the children to honor their debts to their parents either way, and he also shows how it is impossible for the parents to achieve their American dream by becoming model minorities.

In contrast, Henry retreats to his identity as a model minority by obeying his employer, Dennis Hoagland, who gives the INS the information regarding the illegal immigrants that Kwang has been helping. As a model minority, Henry preserves the status quo of the American government that seeks to prevent the “forever foreigners” from invading the country, as is evident in the description of the scene where the Chinese immigrants try to enter the country
illegally through a boat and end up nearly drowning, only to be “rescued” with imprisonment and deportation. Though he ultimately tries to protect Kwang from the white mob that attacks him, Henry’s efforts are insufficient. Henry’s earlier actions as a model minority illustrate what he learned from his father: it is necessary to be passive and subordinate in order to protect yourself in America, even if it means other people will get hurt. Unlike Thomas Pak, who becomes more moral and selfless the more that he commits to the model minority stereotype (similar to Theresa, who becomes more moral and selfless than her brother in Typical American), Henry becomes morally corrupt when he betrays Kwang and all the other immigrants. Henry is not as “honorable” as Thomas is, because he rejected his debts to his father and Kwang in order to focus on his own self-preservation, which allowed him to retreat into the domestic sphere to reconcile with his white American wife, Lelia. However, honoring one’s debts to one’s family does not necessarily lead to a positive conclusion, which is evident in what happens to Thomas. If Henry had honored Kwang by remaining loyal to him, he might have been driven out of the country too, or Hoagland and his henchmen might have killed him or gone after Henry’s wife, Leila. His knowledge of the consequences of loyalty illustrates Henry’s fear and lack of agency in this situation. Thomas’ commitment to protect the Rhees despite the risks to his own life illustrates his courage, self-sacrificing nature, and his attempt to bring order to the chaos.

My main argument in Native Speaker is that Henry feels more indebted to John Kwang than his own father. Although Mr. Park provides Henry with a suburban, middle-class lifestyle and a college education, John Kwang personifies Henry’s masculine and professional ideal, which makes Henry feels like he learns more from Kwang than he does from Mr. Park. Henry’s father aspires to be the model minority, believing that it is the best that he can hope for as a first-generation Korean American. He encourages his son to follow his example, not necessarily so
that Henry can also become an ethnic entrepreneur, but so that Henry can benefit from the fruits of his father’s labor and gain the type of white-collar career that Mr. Park could not have in America due to his own difficulties with assimilation (specifically, the language barrier) and discrimination against immigrant workers. Mr. Park’s passivity in his behavior around his rich white customers and his marginalized position in the public sphere reinforces his identity as a model minority. According to Mr. Park, the best that Henry can hope for is a white-collar career without deviating from the confines of the model minority stereotype, similar to Theresa Chang in *Typical American*. Since they cannot relate to each other due to their differing views on the model minority, the ties that bind Henry and his father become frayed, and Henry attempts to unbind himself completely by rejecting his debt to his father altogether.

Henry does not feel obligated to honor his “debt” to his father by pursuing a white-collar career in a lucrative field like medicine, finance, or engineering. Instead, I interpret Henry’s work as a spy as retaliation against his father and a rejection of his debt to Mr. Park, because he spies on minority workers who are mainly on the same economic and professional level as his father. Similar to the daughters in *Bone* and *The Woman Warrior*, Henry interprets his parent through the latter’s limitations and weaknesses as a worker, though unlike Leila, these limitations and weaknesses do not make him feel bound to his father. Instead, he believes that Mr. Park’s self-sufficient status as the model minority means that Henry does not need to take care of him, whereas the parents in *Bone* work dead-end, low-wage jobs that prevent them from becoming self-sufficient, which increase their daughters’ sense of indebtedness to them. In contrast, Henry emphasizes the importance of his role in Kwang’s campaign the more that he becomes invested in it. He believes that Kwang needs him in a way that his father never did, and as a result, Kwang’s success is due partly to the work that Henry does for him. Kwang is also an
immigrant, but he comes to America at a younger age than Mr. Park and is basically a younger version of the father and man that Henry wishes his own father could have been. Kwang accomplishes everything that Mr. Park and Henry never did. Because of his professional success and assimilated identity, he is perceived by Henry as being more of a “man” than Henry and his father. That is why Henry feels guiltier about his disloyalty to Kwang than to his father, because Kwang represents the type of worker that Henry wishes he could be. Ironically, Kwang’s failure in America is directly tied to Henry’s ultimate betrayal, who chooses his own self-preservation over the preservation of his debt to Kwang, the latter’s work, or the lives of the immigrants that rely on Kwang. Henry chooses not to honor his debt to Kwang, which was to remain loyal to Kwang and keep his secrets, and he refuses to honor his debt to his father, which was to value his father’s hard work, recognizes him as a man, and become a more successful model minority.

My main argument in my analysis of *The Fruit n’ Food* is that Thomas Pak feels indebted to the Rhees, particularly Mr. Rhee, even though they only provide him with a low-paying, backbreaking job. Thomas’ sense of indebtedness to Mr. Rhee causes them to develop an emotional bond, and he maintains that sense of indebtedness in order to combat his sense of alienation and dissatisfaction with his own life. June, on the other hand, rebels against her parents’ expectations of her and defies the model minority stereotype by failing in school, lacking professional ambition, and “dishonoring” herself and her family by engaging in a sexual relationship with the low-wage worker, Thomas. June has spent more time observing her parents’ hardships, and though she pitied them, she is still more focused on her short-term self-interests than her family’s long-term goals. June’s refusal to honor her debt to her parents reflects her selfishness and laziness. Thomas’ commitment to his debt to them reflects his selflessness and strong work ethic. The more invested the Rhees become in their goal of becoming the
successful model minority entrepreneurs that Mr. Park, the more they rely on Thomas’ labor. Similar to Henry, Thomas feels that his work and repayment of his debt are essential to his parent-creditors’ survival and success ethnic entrepreneurs. He is indebted to them, and yet he feels that they need him too. He fails in his attempts to save their business and them, and Mr. and Mrs. Rhee withdraw from the emotional connection that bound them to him, leaving him alone in the hospital to suffer from the injuries that he sustained during the riots that occur as a result of the boycott of the Rhee’s store. Only June visits him in the hospital, because she is not as immersed in their work as the Rhees are. Unlike her parents, she values her personal connection with Thomas more than the professional one, and she does not blame him for the destruction of the store. Thomas ultimately learns that the Rhees’ “love” for him as a surrogate son is contingent on whether he can enable them to become successful model minorities and whether he can be a model minority, specifically on whether he can learn to be the passive, subordinate, and silent worker that model minorities are required to be. He threatens two African American customers with a gun after Mrs. Rhee falsely accuses them of shoplifting, and subsequently he and Mrs. Rhee fail to be the socially “acceptable” model minorities whose status in America is contingent on whether or not they conform to that identity.

Thomas risks his own life to protect the Rhees from antagonistic neighborhood residents, yet his attempts to honor his debt to them lead to the Rhees’ own downfall, specifically the loss and destruction of their store. Thomas lacks the financial support and family network that second-generation Asian Americans need in order to become model minorities, so he invests himself in the Rhees’ own model minority aspirations, even if he will not directly benefit from the achievement of their goal. In that sense he fails to be the completely self-sufficient model minority, because he still needs emotional intimacy and a sense of belonging. Unlike Kingston’s
narrator, Jade Snow, the daughters in *Bone*, and Henry Park, Thomas is similar to Theresa Chang in that honoring his debt to his “family” makes him feel connected to them. Like Theresa, Thomas believes that family gives him a sense of belonging, and without it, he feels lost and disconnected from everyone. Unlike the majority of the other second-generation Asian Americans that I have analyzed, Thomas has a more positive view of his debt to Mr. Rhee. When the Rhees’ business is destroyed by rioters, Thomas Pak identifies with their failure and is physically and emotionally destroyed as well, due to his failed efforts to help and protect them. Despite his failure, he is still portrayed as more moral and honorable than Henry Park and June Rhee, because unlike the latter, Thomas maintains his commitment to his own debt and his father-creditor throughout the novel, even if it means sacrificing his own life and personal relationships, like the sexual relationship that he has with the Rhees’ daughter.

Kibria claims that “the model minority stereotype not only applauds Asian achievement but also works to limit its scope, by defining it in particular ways. Among the limitations that it imposes is the suggestion that Asians have a passive, introverted personality style, one that makes them unsuited for positions of leadership” (139). This perspective is certainly one that Henry adopts, because he recognizes his father as an employer who exploits his Korean American employees, but not as a leader. John Kwang starts out as an ethnic entrepreneur by selling dry cleaning equipment, but he becomes a political leader. Kwang defies the stereotype of the model minority with the “passive, introverted personality” by becoming a political leader who sought to forge interracial connections and harmony by being aggressive and extroverted. Kwang is the exception. Mr. Park is the rule. Most ethnic entrepreneurs, including the Rhees, are like him, whether they are successful or not, because they cannot transfer their skills to leadership positions in white-collar careers in America. One reason they cannot make the
transition is that many first-generation Korean Americans, including Mr. Park, have limited fluency in English and do not completely assimilate to American culture, whereas Kwang seeks to assimilate to American culture as much as he can without completely forgoing his identity as a Korean American. Their work as entrepreneurs requires them to “passive” and “introverted,” because they do not feel like they can challenge customers whose business they rely on. The one time Mrs. Rhee challenges customers by accusing them of stealing, her deviation from the typical “passive and introverted personality” associated with Korean American entrepreneurs leads to her permanent “silencing” as not only an ethnic entrepreneur but also as an American. Asian Americans who refuse to “accommodate” others are more likely to experience backlash and exclusion. Kibria distinguishes between race and ethnicity:

Race is a system of power, one that draws on physical differences to construct and give meaning to racial boundaries and the hierarchy of which those boundaries are a part. Racial boundaries reflect the relations of power from which they emerge. That is, the dominant group plays a critical role in erecting racial boundaries, through the definitions and conditions that it imposes on others. In contrast, ethnic boundaries involve the emergence of ‘perceived common ancestry,’ the perception of a shared history of some sort, and shared symbols of peoplehood’ (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998, 32). Critical, then, to the conceptual distinction between race and ethnicity is the self-conscious sense of group membership that the latter implies. (68)

While these “ethnic boundaries” contribute to the closeness between Mr. Rhee and Thomas, they fail to reconcile the differences between Mr. Park and Henry, partly because Henry believes that Mr. Park’s adherence to the model minority stereotype made the latter a “lesser” man and father. Henry identifies more with Kwang and the latter’s minority supporters than his white American employer, Dennis Hoagland, largely because of their “shared symbols of peoplehood.” For example, when Henry describes the ggeh, or the money club that Kwang assigns him to administer, Henry identifies with the immigrants who contribute to the club and come to him for financial assistance. He understands their aspirations and concerns, especially because several of them mirror his father’s own aspirations and concerns when he first immigrated to America.
Hoagland points out to Henry that he is the son of immigrants too, but since Hoagland is the descendant of white Europeans instead of Koreans, Henry believes that Hoagland cannot understand Kwang in the way that Henry does. That is why Henry attempts to honor his debt to Kwang by withholding vital information from Hoagland.

I agree with Kyeyoung Park’s contention that “instead of asking whether immigrant life makes a positive or negative impact on family/kin and gender relations, it is more productive to identify those aspects of family life that are changed by small business activities.” The primary reason the Korean American families in Chang and Lee’s novels are so conflicted is because of their work in small businesses and these businesses, which are supposed to be the “solution,” actually create even more problems for them. One reason that Henry rejects any notion of indebtedness towards his father is he believes that his father’s work makes him completely self-sufficient. Therefore, Henry believes that he does not owe his father anything because the latter does not need anything. However, the more that Henry continues with his narration in Lee’s novel, the more it becomes clear that he is ambivalent over his rejection of that sense of indebtedness. He realizes that while his father may be self-supporting, he is still in need of emotional support and intimacy, just as Henry was.

Thomas is similar to the daughters in Bone because he recognizes that if he walks away from the Rhees, their business is more likely to fail and the Rhees will suffer even more. The longer he works for them, the more he feels responsible for them, even if it means sacrificing what he wants and needs. Chang portrays Thomas as being more loyal and honorable than June, yet June is not as negatively affected by the failure of the business and the riots as Thomas is, since she chose to focus on herself rather than her parents. The author portrays the debt that both of them carry as a burden that prevents them from having an honest and fulfilling relationship
with each other and that ostracizes them from the outside community. Thomas aligns himself with the Rhees when the protests and boycott start, but in doing so he is ostracized from the African American protestors who classify him as being as “foreign” as the ethnic entrepreneurs.

**Role Models and Masculinity in *Native Speaker* and *The Fruit n’ Food***

Henry’s debts to Kwang and his father are connected to gender and his understanding of the model minority. Henry’s ideal of manhood conflicts with the guidelines that model minorities are expected to adhere to. Asian American men have historically been feminized (since they are often portrayed in the media as sexually nonthreatening or asexual and earlier immigrants were consigned to “women’s work” in laundries and restaurants) and Henry also believes that accepting a subordinate status at work threatens masculinity. This belief is connected to Henry’s own insecurities regarding his work, where being a spy for Glimmer and Company requires him to not only be manipulative and deceitful (stereotypes that have been attributed to Asians) but also require him to take on a passive role in that he is not free to do what he wants. He has to do what his employer wants, even if it means hurting people, and it usually does.

Henry has already been forced to betray one father figure, the Filipino American therapist Emile Luzan, who is on Hoagland’s radar for being a President Marcos sympathizer. Due to the cold, forbidding nature of his own father, Luzan becomes a surrogate father to Henry and, since he believes that Henry is simply another patient in need of therapy, encourages him to tell him about his problems so that Luzan may counsel him. Luzan becomes Henry’s emotional confidant, to the point that Henry feels tempted to warn Luzan of the dangers that await them, yet Hoagland’s other employees prevent him from protecting Luzan, who later dies in a boat “accident.” Luzan is an even more “honorable” father than Henry’s own father was, because the former encouraged Henry to open up to him and be his real self, unlike Henry’s father, who
encouraged him to become a model minority, even if it meant sacrificing his true feelings and desires. Luzan’s honor and the emotional bond that he creates with Henry makes the latter feel indebted to him, because Henry was unable to foster an emotional connection with almost everyone else in his life, including his wife.

Henry’s guilt over his complacency in Luzan’s downfall makes him even more committed to develop a bond with John Kwang, partly because the latter is a younger version of the man that Henry wishes his own father had been and also because Kwang represents the kind of “American” that Henry wishes he could be. He internalizes American racism against minorities by viewing his late father, Mr. Park, solely as a Korean despite the latter’s decades-long life in the United States, since being a model minority racializes Mr. Park as “not-American.” Kwang acknowledges that even as a politician he does not have as much power to change and improve people’s lives as Henry thinks he does, because “this is the challenge for us Asians in America. How do you say no to what seems like a compliment? From the very start we don’t wish to be rude or inconsiderate. So we stay silent in our guises. We misapply what our parents taught us. I’m as guilty as anyone” (Lee 193). Although Henry is aware that there is more than one side to his idol, nevertheless he does not fully understand until the end that much of Kwang’s so-called courage and idealism are actually very strategic and in some cases not as real or as great as Henry imagines. In the end, Kwang is exposed as being “not-American” by the white mob that attacks him, and he fails to fight back and is ultimately silenced, similar to the model minorities who are silenced by their antagonists who view them as “not-American.” Since Henry wants a role model that he can look up to and live vicariously through, he maintains a much more positive view of Kwang than he ever does of his father, even after Kwang’s flaws and murderous side are fully exposed.
Although Mr. Park wants his son to become a more successful model minority than he is, he does not pressure Henry to pursue a career in a field like medicine, finance, or engineering, apparently assuming that his son will make a sensible, responsible choice in terms of his work.\textsuperscript{95} Abelmann and Lie note that “many Korean American shopkeepers balk at the prospect of their children’s succeeding them in their businesses or opening small retail stores of their own; the first generation’s desire for the second generation is for them to achieve prestigious and remunerative careers” (qtd. in D. Kim 51). For these ethnic entrepreneurs, their small businesses are means to an end. The parents’ sacrifice as ethnic entrepreneurs is worth it, as long as their children become successful, white-collar professionals who will be able to “repay” their parents by providing them with a comfortable retirement and the pride of being able to show other people, particularly other Korean Americans and white Americans) that the children’s success would not have been possible without their parents’ labor. The second-generation Korean Americans agree with their parents’ opposition to the possibility that the second-generation will follow in their parents’ footsteps, “because of the low status of the work, the uncertainties that come with business failures, and low profit margins and limited growth potential of ‘mom and pop’ enterprises…Young people are not just apprehensive about labor-intensive small businesses; there is a disdain for ‘mom and pop’ Korean immigrant businesses” (D. Kim 52). Second-generation Korean Americans who “are raised and schooled in the suburbs experience rapid acculturation, and with it a loss of the ethnic culture and language that diminish their interest in ethnic economy jobs” (D. Kim 61). Henry is technically “bicultural and bilingual” and

\textsuperscript{95} “The very businesses the enabled the immigrant generation to achieve financial stability in the United States are being shunned by the second generation. For example, according to the ACS 2010, self-employment plummets from a high of 28.6 percent in the first generation to 12.1 percent in the 1.5 generation and 8.9 percent among U.S.-born Koreans (25-65 years olds). Similarly, significant reductions in self-employment have occurred from first-generation Korean New Yorker parents (43 percent to their children in the 1998 New York (11 percent) and 2004 IIMMLA surveys (13.4 percent)” (D. Kim 48).
is hypersensitive about his identity as a Korean, even more so than as an American, because he feels that he has to work harder to be perceived as an American. He blames his parents for raising him to be a model minority rather than an American, which is another reason why he does not feel indebted to them or obligated to honor the value of the work that his father did to subsidize their middle-class lifestyle. Henry’s father thought that what his son needed most was material wealth, but what Henry wanted most was to be recognized as an unhyphenated American. However, it was unfair for Henry to blame his father for his own conflicted identity, because even if Henry’s father had not raised him to become a model minority, other people, including, Lelia, take one look at him or listen to how he speaks and automatically assume that he is not “one of them.”

Henry’s mother defines his debt to his father by emphasizing the latter’s sacrifices and struggles for Henry’s sake. She tells him, “Don’t shame him! Your father is very proud. You don’t know this, but he graduated from the best college in Korea, the very top, and he doesn’t need to talk about selling fruits and vegetables. It’s below him. He only does it for you, Byong-ho, he does everything for you. Now go and keep him company” (Lee 56). She tries to make Henry, who is only a child at the time of this conversation, feel guilty for questioning his father about his work, as if to do so would be to emphasize how far his father has “fallen in America,” which is similar to how in Kingston’s The Woman Warrior, the narrator’s mother believes that she has “fallen” because she can no longer practice medicine and has to resort to working as a laundress in order to support her family. Henry’s mother implies that one way for Henry to honor his debt to his father is not to shame him. Instead he should take pride in his father’s work by recognizing that even though Mr. Park is overqualified for his work as a greengrocer, his strong work ethic and material wealth make up for it, at least according to Henry’s parents, which is
something that Henry strongly disagrees with, and by providing companionship for his father. When Henry becomes an adult he maintains as much distance from his father as possible, and his father does not try to bridge that distance.

Henry breaks away from the norm of second-generation Korean Americans who pursue lucrative, white-collar careers for a job that most Korean Americans would never do. Even his white American wife, Lelia, disapproves of his job because it requires him to have no loyalties to anyone but his employer, even at the exclusion of his own family, which is one of the reasons that his marriage to Lelia becomes strained. If he had done what she wanted and been honest with everyone, he would not have been able to do his job, and their safety would have been threatened. Due to his ambivalence towards his Korean identity and his father’s work, then, Henry rejects both in favor of the American identity and a job that requires him to conspire against immigrant workers like his father, which illustrates his attitude towards his debt to his father. Henry’s work as a spy could be seen as retaliation against his father and as a challenge to his debt to Mr. Park, because he spies on minority workers who are on the same economic and professional level as his father. Unlike most of the characters I discuss in this dissertation, Henry does not believe that he is indebted to his parent at all. The narrator of The Woman Warrior resists the notion that she is indebted to her mother by asserting her own independence and her academic achievements, yet her narratives describing her mother’s resourcefulness, intelligence, and strong work ethic indicate how much her mother has influenced her. Henry acknowledges his father’s work ethic, but he still sees his father as being a “failure” in America for not assimilating to American culture and for not finding a job that matches his academic qualifications. He is similar to the other second-generation Asian American children that I have described who do not fully recognize the circumstances that are beyond their parents’ control,
such as the language barrier, racism, and discrimination. Also, Henry takes it for granted that he has more professional options than his father did when he first came to America. Mr. Park had to “settle” for ethnic entrepreneurship; if he had held out for something that fit his academic qualifications, his family would have suffered and they might not have gained that upper-middle-class, suburban lifestyle.

Henry also witnesses his father’s unhappiness in his work as an ethnic entrepreneur, which fulfills his financial needs but not his emotional ones. Henry thinks back to when his father was still starting out in America, when he had one store and still had time for his family and friends. Their family may have been less successful back then, with far less money and an apartment in the city rather than a home in the suburbs, but Henry realizes that that time period was the only time where his father felt happy with his life in America. When he was still a struggling ethnic entrepreneur, he could relate more easily to other entrepreneurs in his situation, and he was able to express affection towards his wife. When he becomes a successful model minority, Mr. Park’s workaholic habits change him into a cold, unloving father and husband who feels alienated from Korean Americans and other Americans. All he has left is his work. That is why Henry tries to reconcile with his wife, because he does not want to emulate his father by having a life that only revolves around work. His father’s lonely life makes Henry realize that there is more to life than being a model minority, especially because this identity will not enable him to have loving relationships.

Thomas Pak maintains his sense of indebtedness to the Rhees in order to combat his sense of alienation and dissatisfaction with his own life. Thomas believes that since the Rhees provide him with a small livelihood, he is obligated to help them maintain their store and protect them from antagonistic neighborhood residents. Without the Rhees and the employment that
their store provides for him, there is also the possibility that Thomas could end up like the other second-generation Korean Americans who are “the children of working class immigrants who are more likely to acculturate into a risky peer subculture and increasingly join the ranks of the racial underclass, namely downward assimilation in the form of school dropouts, juvenile delinquency, unemployment, incarceration, and poverty” (D. Kim 5-6). Thomas does not achieve upward mobility in Lee’s novel, but at least he does not become one of the Korean American gang members that he encounters at the end of the story. The longer he works alongside the Rhees, especially Mr. Rhee, the more he develops empathy for their situation and feels as if their problems have become his problems too, even though the Rhees’ store does not belong to him. He is less self-centered than Henry, who is bitter and resentful about his shifts at his father’s store, especially because he thinks that it is degrading and causes him to lose his sense of honor among his American friends. As a result, Henry views his father’s status as an ethnic entrepreneur as degrading and without honor. June Rhee is not unaware of her parents’ problems but is more apathetic about them. She does not think that she has the power to improve her parents’ situation, and she thinks it is unfair of them to impose their American dream on her by pressuring her to excel in school and becoming a model minority. In response, she engages in drug use and parties, which only depreciates her value as a student and a future model minority.

Thomas’ attempts to honor his debt to them lead to the Rhees’ own downfall, specifically the loss and destruction of their store. Unlike Kingston’s narrator and Jade Snow, who seek to free themselves from their debts to their parents or attempt to renegotiate their debts’ terms, Thomas’ attempt to protect the Rhees and repay his debt to them through his work and protection give him a new sense of purpose and makes him feel like he is part of a family. June tells him that her “‘parents are really glad you’re working there…because you do twice what I did, and
with my dad gone a lot, you’re needed badly there’” (Chang 75). June’s statement pleases Thomas, because he is anxious to make a good impression on the Rhees and get them to accept him, if not as a son, then at least as a valued employee. It also gives him the moral high ground over June, due to her refusal to become the model minority daughter that her parents wanted her to be. Unlike Kingston’s narrator, who believed that her family, specifically, her mother, kept her from getting what she wanted (specifically, recognition as an American), Thomas believes that a family gives him a sense of belonging, which is what he wants most. He is different from the Chinese American daughters that I discussed earlier; as a Korean American “son” Thomas has a more positive view of his debt to Mr. Rhee, though he recognizes that his work for the latter’s family makes his own life more difficult. The Rhees perform exhausting work at their fruit and vegetable store, but they do it for their daughter, June, hoping that she will succeed in the American workplace in the way that they never could. She focuses more on satisfying her personal needs and desires, as is evident in her partying habits and sexual relationship with Thomas Pak. She is similar to Nina in Bone, who focuses more on what she wants than on what her parents want for her. Since she does not feel beholden to her debt to her parents, she lacks an emotional bond with them, which increases their sense of alienation and unhappiness in America. Thomas Pak, on the other hand, develops a kinship with Mr. Rhee due to his sense of obligation and admiration towards him. When the Rhees’ business is destroyed by rioters, Thomas Pak identifies with their failure and is physically and emotionally destroyed as well, due to his failed efforts to help and protect them.
The Diversity of American Dreams in *The Native Speaker* and *The Fruit n’ Food*

In her book *The Happiness Project*, Gretchen Rubin claims that “you’re better off pursuing a profession that comes easily and that you love, because that’s where you’ll be more eager to practice and thereby earn a competitive advantage” (72). Mr. Park presumably would have been happier doing the work that he had been trained to do in Korea, which was engineering. Henry looks down on his father for doing work that he is overqualified for, but Henry fails to recognize that Mr. Park’s success as an ethnic entrepreneur is partly due to his “middle-class and urban origins, including pre-migration and occupational experience in South Korea” (D. Kim 47). Mr. Park is similar to Brave Orchid in *The Woman Warrior*. He does not have the luxury of “pursuing a profession” that he loves in his adopted country. As a model minority, he has to focus on providing for his family, even if it means doing a job that he dislikes. In order to achieve Mr. Park’s American dream, he has to work “from before sunrise to the dead of night…Your family was your life, though you rarely saw them. You kept close handsome sums of cash in small denominations. You were steadily cornering the market in self-pride. You drove a Chevy and then a Caddy and then a Benz. You never missed a mortgage payment or a day of church. You prayed furiously until you wept. You considered the only unseen forces to be those of capitalism and the love of Jesus Christ” (Lee 47). Intertwined with Mr. Park’s American dream are a strong work ethic and a sense of duty to his family. Though he does not like working long hours, especially because it takes a physical and emotional toll on him (similar to how years of sweatshop labor takes a toll on Mah in *Bone*), he accepts it as a

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96 “Difficulties transferring these educational credentials and occupational skills, coupled with language barriers, have had many Korean immigrants turn to entrepreneurship for economic survival and adaptation in the United States…Despite meager profit margins, long working hours, and concerns with crime, self-employment is still viewed as the most viable option of economic adaptation for first-generation Koreans” (Kim 1987; Kim 1999). For an immigrant group without a history of small business experience, a disproportionate concentration in small businesses suggests a strategic pursuit of self-employment to circumvent barriers in the mainstream economy” (D. Kim 47).
necessary factor in order to achieve his goal of financial security for his family. Mr. Park is similar to Ralph Chang in *Typical American*. For both men, it isn’t enough for them to earn enough to help their families survive. The fancy cars and the house in the suburbs are part of their American dream because they illustrate the change in their economic status, if not the change in their social status, since Ralph and Mr. Park remain outsiders living on the fringes of American society. “Thus, ongoing racialization complicates the racial structure that is under construction, which can produce a racial and ethnic order that is enduring and entrenched rather than optimistic projection of full assimilation for immigrant minorities straddling the Black-White divide” (D. Kim 7). In other words, Mr. Park achieves his American dream because he accepts his designated role as the model minority, yet it is precisely this role that preserves the racial hierarchy in America and continues to make other people, both white and African American, see racial conflicts in “black and white” terms, with less or no consideration for the Asian Americans who are also often affected by those conflicts. Mr. Park gains material wealth but loses his son, who does not respect him. Even if his father had failed to achieve the American dream, Henry would still have had more respect for him if Mr. Park had refused to settle for the model minority stereotype and had tried to change the status quo rather than preserve it.

Henry’s American dream contrasts with his father’s dream because the former already enjoys an upper-class lifestyle, thanks to his father’s perseverance and hard work. Kingston’s narrator and Henry both want to become “American,” though the narrator believes that she will gain this identity by becoming a model minority, whereas Henry believes that he will lose his “manhood” and any chance he has of being recognized as an American if he becomes a model minority. He does not want to be perceived as a Korean man or even as a Korean American man, since he associates both identities with his father. That is why he is so conscious about being
perceived as a “native speaker,” though he fails to fool his wife, the ESL instructor Leila who is trained to identify and educated nonnative speakers of English. His American dream is something that he never achieves, and the closest he can get to it is to see it fulfilled (at least initially, before it falls apart) in John Kwang’s life. Kwang is older than Henry but not old enough to be his father; the implication is that Henry views him as a younger version of what his own father could have been if he had chosen a different path in his adopted country. Henry is more open to the possibility of a close relationship with Kwang than he is to his father because the latter “eventually built up in my chest a resolve that told me I would never yield to him or surrender. I would come to share a different difficulty with John Kwang” (Lee 139). After Kwang’s downfall, Henry’s American dream is focused on the other dream that he had all along: a reconciliation with his wife, Leila, and a restoration of their matrimonial ties to each other, which were weakened by the death of their son Mitt and Leila’s frustrations with Henry’s refusal or failure (or both) to communicate with her as a full American rather than as a Korean. It isn’t just that Henry is not a native speaker. Lelia wants Henry to communicate openly with her, rather than to shut down emotionally in the way that he learned from his father, who did not encourage him to show his emotions and taught him to act as if he did not need anyone. Due to the fact that he holds on to this aspect of his Korean identity, as exemplified through how his father raised him, Lelia blames him for the disintegration of their marriage, though she is also to blame for trying to force him to change into her ideal husband and man rather than completely accept the person that he truly is. She is also guilty of shutting him out, such as when she leaves him the list of ways that she identifies him, rather than telling him face to face, takes vacations without him,

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97 Henry also states that he views Kwang as an older brother, because “when you met him in person you somehow felt that you understood the subtle pressure of his grip, that it said or meant that you were the faintest brother to him, perhaps distantly removed by circumstance or blood but a brother nonetheless” (138). He claims a kinship with Kwang, seeking the emotional intimacy in his relationship with Kwang that he lacks with his own father.
has an affair during their separation, and refuses to speak to him immediately after she returns from her most recent trip. In that sense, despite her white American identity, Lelia is similar to the first-generation Asian American parents that I have described in this dissertation, the ones who withhold their love and approval from their other family members when the latter fail or refuse to conform to the identity that the parents want for them. In other words, Lelia’s love and loyalty to Henry is contingent on his acceptance of his subordinate status in their relationship, which he ultimately does accept. In order to facilitate his acceptance, he must give up the job that she disapproves of and he is “silenced” to a certain extent, which means that in that respect, he becomes the model minority that his father raised him to be. He does not insist on an equal partnership in their marriage, similar to how he does not insist on being recognized as an American equal to other native-born (white) Americans in spite of his admiration for Kwang’s attempt to achieve equality.

Kwang is similar to Mr. Park since he started out with little money and few resources when he first emigrated to America, yet the political career he chooses demonstrates that it is still difficult for him to be accepted in American society even after he assimilates. Kwang does not completely reject his Korean identity. He utilizes it to his advantage in his political career by using his ethnicity to garner support among his minority voters, particularly his immigrant voters, claiming connections with them that presumably a native-born American politician could not claim in the same way. Kwang’s American dream is to be recognized as an American politician who succeeds not just because of his minority voters but also because he achieves equality with his native-born, white American peers, including the mayor de Roos, one of his opponents, who views Kwang as a rival and aims to bring him down. Kwang’s dream, which he has already achieved by the time Henry meets him, is to be more than a “respectable grocer or
dry cleaner or doctor, but a larger public figure who was willing to speak and act outside the tight sphere of his family. He displayed an ambition I didn’t recognize, or more, one I hadn’t yet envisioned as something a Korean man would find significant or worthy of energy and devotion; he didn’t seem afraid like my mother and father, who were always wary of those who would try to shame us or mistreat us” (Lee 139). Henry’s father does not aspire for more after he improves his economic status. Kwang wants more power than he can gain from being an ethnic entrepreneur or even an ethnic politician. In that sense, Kwang is not a model minority, since this stereotype is associated with the lack of power over one’s work, identity, and life. Model minorities do not strive for power or equality, and they do not voice their objections to racial or economic injustice. The people who adhere to this stereotype take what they can get, though they are aware of the disparities between their lives and those of people who are not model minorities. Henry’s father is more willing to remain an outsider. Kwang becomes a politician so he can become an American “insider.” He is thus distinct from other Korean men like Henry’s father because he is unwilling to avoid the risk of disrupting the status quo and remain invisible.

Kwang’s visibility, then, makes him a masculine ideal for Henry, who is actually more like his father than he is willing to admit. Although he is not an ethnic entrepreneur, nevertheless Henry still accepts the fact that he has to be the “invisible Korean” in his work. Kwang and Henry constantly try to prove themselves as Americans, because they feel that to fully hold onto their Korean beliefs and values, as Henry’s father does, will distinguish them as non-Americans and exclude them from American society. That’s why Henry identifies more with Kwang than he does with his father. Henry’s attitude towards his father is similar to the narrator’s attitude towards the mute girl in The Woman Warrior, because both Henry and the narrator look down on the people they view as being too “Asian” (specifically, too Korean or too Chinese,
respectively), largely due to the latter’s “silence” in the American public society. The narrator attacks the mute girl because she feels no loyalty towards the latter, and her attempts to force the mute girl to speak and conform to the narrator’s American ideal only serve to estrange them further from each other. By a similar token, rather than reconcile with his father on the latter’s deathbed, Henry maintains the distance between them by “attacking” his father with a list of his father’s misdeeds. As his father lays dying, Henry takes advantage of the former’s weakened state to confront him over their disconnected relationship, which he solely blames his father for. The father is effectively “mute” on his deathbed and is forced to listen to Henry rail against him, similar to how the mute girl is unable and unwilling to fight back against the narrator’s verbal abuse. In his final confrontation with his father, Henry makes it clear that he does not feel indebted to him because his father did not give him the emotional connection that he needed, though Henry did not try to foster an emotional connection with him either. This confrontation is similar to the final confrontation between the narrator and her mother in *The Woman Warrior*, where the narrator confronts her mother with her own list of perceived grievances and her announcement that she is “going away” rather than stay and honor her debt to her parents. These confrontations illustrate the consequences of debt. They show how the pressure to become model minorities foster resentment and loneliness on both sides of the debt, and they show how towards the end, the debtors (the children) do not even feel obligated to honor their parents and try to devalue them as much as possible in order to alleviate their own conscience over their “betrayal.”

From Henry’s perspective, Kwang does a better job of being an American than Mr. Park does:

Henry is much closer to Kwang by background, ‘appearance,’ and cross-cultural adeptness. It is this closeness that almost makes Kwang Henry’s classical psychological double and helps him step over the gap. It is this sameness, this linguistic and cultural code-sharing, that facilitates Henry’s approach, and it is this too that determines his
Spying as betrayal, which in turn, Lee hints, reenacts Kwang’s ‘originary’ act of community ‘disloyalty.’ Such a betrayal or self-betrayal, rather, is generally speaking part and parcel of immigration and acculturation to the extent that these entail active self-forgetting and self-remaking, the calculated loss of a ‘mother tongue,’ ‘ancestral graves,’ customs, mores and reflexes (Lee 1995, 279). (Moraru 70). The information that Henry gives to his employer, which is then used against Kwang and his supporters, is certainly a betrayal, and Henry’s ambivalence, attempt to withhold the information, and his attempt to save Kwang at the end of the novel do not make up for that betrayal. When Henry hands over that list with all those illegal immigrants’ personal information, he is sealing their doom as well as the fate of Kwang. The “right” thing to do would have been to honor Kwang by remaining loyal to him, quitting his job at Glimmer and Company after the incident with Luzan (which is what Henry’s friend Jack says he should have done) and becoming an honest supporter of Kwang, letting the latter see him for who he truly is. It would not necessarily have been enough to save Kwang or those illegal immigrants, but at least Henry would not have come out of the situation looking like he was more concerned about his own self-preservation than the lives of the countless people that he betrayed, though clearly that is not true; he does feel that what the INS does to them, which is to deport them and effectively destroy their American dreams, is unjust and immoral. This betrayal also means he has to surrender control to Hoagland and INS, who take control over the lives of Kwang and his voters. Lee seems to imply that unlike Kwang, Henry is not “man” enough to save any of them, which is proven when he ultimately betrays Kwang and fails to repay his debt to him. In his descriptions of his work for Glimmer and Company, Henry boasts of his ability to deceive and manipulate people, who are unaware of his true identity and motives. However, the façade that he maintains in his professional life and personal life prevents him from making honest, lasting connections with anyone. By pretending to be someone he is not, Henry can participate in minority communities without truly belonging to them, and he can maintain his self-sufficient status, which makes him into the model minority
that he did not want to become. This status, though, makes it easier for him to betray people without too much regret, until he meets Luzan and Kwang. With them he lets part of the wall that he has built around himself come down, since both men offer him the kinship that he has spent his whole life longing for. Although he does become a silent, self-sufficient model minority in his work, at the same time he cannot be truly silent when he opens up to Luzan, nor can he be truly self-sufficient due to his desire for closer relationships, especially with his wife and Kwang, who becomes his double and his father figure.

Henry’s debt to Kwang is different from his debt to his father, since Kwang does not provide a comfortable lifestyle for Henry like his father did. The debt is similar in that Henry should not have asked too many questions, like he initially tried to do with his father, and he should instead have continued to have pride in Kwang’s political work and support this work by helping Kwang achieve his goal of improving the lives of his immigrant supporters and changing the greater majority’s opinion (specifically the opinions of white Americans and African Americans). Henry chooses to betray his sense of duty and kinship to Kwang by obeying his employer, though he does quit working for Hoagland. But the damage is done. Kwang’s downfall is complete, and Henry’s refusal to honor the terms of his debt to Kwang makes him partly responsible for Kwang’s banishment from America. There is also the possibility that if Kwang had been fully aware of Henry’s betrayal, then the latter would have suffered the same fate as the “good son” Eduardo, the Hispanic immigrant who did everything that Kwang wanted in return for Kwang’s support of his lifestyle and education. When Kwang suspects Eduardo of betraying him by revealing the secrets of his campaign, particularly his money club, he has Eduardo killed, which also ends up getting an innocent bystander, Kwang’s Korean housekeeper, killed, in a bombing that is orchestrated by the Asian gang members that the unscrupulous
politician hires to do his dirty work for him. The premeditated murder of Eduardo shows that Kwang is similar to other first-generation Asian American parents, though his reaction is obviously much more extreme (the other parents would not have killed their children for disobeying and dishonoring them; instead, they disown them or threaten to disown them). His devotion to his supporters, like Eduardo and Henry, is contingent on the latter’s devotion to him. Even after Henry learns the truth about Kwang’s role in Eduardo’s murder, there is still a part of him that feels a sense of loyalty and kinship with him, which is something that he never felt for his father, who never killed or was violent with anyone. Henry is thus stuck between warring loyalties, since both his employer and Kwang threaten his personal safety. The only way to save himself is to cut ties with both of them, but that means sacrificing Kwang and all of his supporters and losing the connection that he had with them.

Kwang is more pragmatic and realistic than idealistic Henry, because he recognizes the limitation of his own American dream. He tells Henry, “‘We let them think that change will come to their lives. How many politicians have walked through the Carver housing projects in the last twenty-five years? How many rallies and speeches have been made there? How many words of hope have been spoken? And what does it still look like? Would you live there for any rice? Generations have been lost in those buildings. Thousands of people. A black mayor couldn’t change that. What can a Korean do for them?’” (Lee 194). Kwang is not so cynical that he does not believe any change can occur, but he is pessimistic enough to know that all of his “promises and speeches” are not enough to improve the lives of minorities who live in poverty. Henry, however, is more concerned with race, particularly when he tells Kwang, “Still, black groups should be supporting you…I can’t think of any other prominent officials who are minorities” (Lee 194). Kwang analyzes the issue through economics, including the problems
with the lack of affordable housing, gentrification, and how capitalism ensures that people like the ones in the projects will continue to live in those areas for years due to lack of better opportunities, while the people at the top of the economic hierarchy will continue to accumulate more wealth and professional achievements. In America, “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” Henry is still enthralled with this politician’s minority status. All his life Henry had viewed his racial identity as a debilitating factor in his life that prevented him from fitting in to American society and identified him as a foreigner. His role model uses his minority status as a source of power instead. After all, as someone who has the classic rags-to-riches story (from a penniless immigrant to a successful businessman and politician), Kwang “began to think of America as a part of him, maybe even his, and this for me was the crucial leap of his character, deep flaw or not, the leap of his identity no one in our work would find valuable but me” (Lee 211). That is one of the reasons that he withholds information from his employer. Even though Henry claims to be pragmatic and cynical about his work and the people he investigates, he is still reluctant to betray someone he admires so much and feels indebted to. He knows that betraying Kwang means breaking the connection that they have, and he is unwilling to let go of something that he has been searching for his whole life.

Not to mention Henry still resents Hoagland for forcing him to abandon his other father figure, Dr. Luzan, and for preventing Henry from protecting Luzan. Henry still bears guilt over his role in Luzan’s death, and he truly believes that the doctor “saved my life in ways he never imagined, or ever could. He knew a hundredfold of me compared to what I had filched from him” (Lee 207). Luzan is the one person that Henry comes closest to opening up to, even more so than to Lelia, perhaps because unlike most of the other people in Henry’s life, in his role as therapist Luzan does not make Henry feel like the latter is obligated to do anything for him or
change anything about himself. The therapist does not make him try to be a model minority, and he does not make him feel guilty for being one (or for not being one). All Henry has to do for Luzan is confide in him, so that the latter can help him, while everyone in Henry’s life makes him feel bound to them for their own self-serving reasons. Thus, Henry avoids an emotional connection with almost everyone, because Henry feels the ties that bind him to those people are too constraining and force him to suppress his true identity and feelings.

Henry’s class status also affects his attitude towards his debt to his father. His father’s work provides Henry with a comfortable, middle-class, suburban lifestyle, which contrasts with the working-class lifestyle in the ethnic enclave that the daughters in Bone endured. Because they suffered from poverty and witnessed firsthand the financial and professional struggles that their parents dealt with, the daughters in Bone feel more indebted than Henry does. Henry does not feel obligated to help his father, because he believes that his father’s success has made Mr. Park self-sufficient. “Indeed, no less important for his entrepreneurial success than the social capital was his creed of self-reliance, hard work, perseverance, rugged individualism, and iron discipline. Park pulled himself up from his own bootstraps and ran his business as if he had been a warrior with a belief in a ‘determined set of procedures, certain rules of engagement’” (K. Lee 750). The parents in Bone, on the other hand, work dead-end, low-wage jobs that prevent them from becoming self-sufficient, which increase their daughters’ sense of indebtedness to them.

When Henry is a child, his father reminds him and his mother about how they “were living lucky

98 “Based on empirical studies of the American Community Survey of the U.S. Census, the current Population Survey, and large-scale survey studies, the immigrant optimism or assimilation thesis finds that children of post-1960s immigrants are doing better educationally and occupationally relative to their parents and are poised to achieve assimilation and integration into the mainstream or are moving positively in that direction (Alba 2009; Alba and Nee 2003; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Perlman 2005)...In another major empirical study of the second generation that examined the group’s integration into the mainstream, Kasinitz et al. (2008) also find that children of immigrants in New York obtain, on average, better educational and occupational attainment relative to their immigrant parents and native-born minority groups of similar age, although the authors observe that some groups such as second-generation Dominicans face serious risks for downward mobility due to low family socioeconomic status and residential segregation” (D. Kim 4).
in this life, resounding his personal lore of how merciless and dangerous it was in this land and that he could only do so much to protect us...he was nothing if not a provider and a bulwark. He was the kind of man who subscribed to that old-fashioned idea of nation as personal test – and by extension, a test of family – and not only because he was an immigrant. What kept him toiling and working through his years was that he bore that small man’s folly of sometimes seeing himself in terms historical, a necessary evil, as if each apple or turnip or six-pack he was selling would be the very one to catapult him toward a renown he could only with great difficulty imagine for himself” (Lee 136). Mr. Park’s perception of himself is obviously more positive than his son, because he believes that he has done all that he can and needs to do, whereas Henry views his father as a “small man” who cannot measure up to the likes of Kwang. Mr. Park makes distinctions between himself, the provider, and his wife and son, the beneficiaries of his material wealth and professional success, which makes Henry feel less like his father and more “frail” like his mother (135), thus underscoring Henry’s lack of his own sense of masculinity.

Henry and Mr. Park’s claims regarding the latter’s self-sufficient status is not entirely accurate. While he may be a self-sufficient entrepreneur, he is also a human being who wants love and intimacy, just like Henry and everyone else. Mr. Park’s desire for human connection is evident in his affair with his Korean housekeeper and in his love for his young grandson, Mitt, whom he adores because Mitt loves Mr. Park unconditionally, unlike Henry. Mr. Park does not pressure Mitt to be a model minority, and he responds to Mitt’s open displays of affection. He and Henry shared silent dinners and did not express any affection towards each other. Due to this unconditional love, there is no tension regarding any debt that Mitt owes his grandfather, though technically Mitt is financially indebted to Mr. Park for leaving him and his parents enough money to finance Mitt’s education. One could argue that Mitt’s young age and the fact that he
dies while he is still a child is one of the reasons that his relationship with his grandfather is not
tense like it is between Henry and father, yet Henry describes even his early childhood memories
of his father as being dark and lonely for both of them. It is possible Mr. Park is aware of the
emotional distance between himself and his son, and seeks to avoid making the same mistake
with his grandson. He is also already established as a successful ethnic entrepreneur by the time
Mitt is born, and therefore he has more time to spend with him. In that sense, Mitt is more
“honorable” than his father, because he is more willing than Henry to fill the emotional void in
Mr. Park’s life. Henry, on the other hand, blames his father for creating that void in the first
place.

The American Failure Story

Thomas Pak is similar to Henry in that he is less concerned with elevating his economic
status. Although he is much poorer than Henry, both men want intimate relationships and a
happy, loving family, which neither of them has due to their upbringing, personal problems and
flawed personalities. Henry becomes alienated from his father partly due to his observation of
the violence that his father suffers from thieves and the submissive stance he takes in relation to
the white customers who patronize his store. For Henry, being a “man” means taking control
over one’s life, refusing to back down to antagonists, and making oneself heard in society, which
are all things that Henry fails to do in his own life. His attitude towards his father’s “cowardice”
is ironic, considering how he does not stand up to the antagonists in his own life: Leila,
Hoagland, or the INS. Instead, he lets all of them have their way and submits to their control
over his life, not realizing that his desire for self-preservation is not that much different from his
father’s desire. Thomas does not think Mr. Rhee is less of a “man” for being a model minority.
He identifies with Mr. Rhee due to the latter’s lower economic and professional status, which is not much better than Thomas’ own status. Unlike Henry, who enjoyed a middle-class, suburban lifestyle that was fueled by his father’s work as an entrepreneur, Thomas Pak has no financial support because he has no family, and he latches on to Mr. Rhee as a father figure and is better able to truly understand the struggles that ethnic entrepreneurs face every day. In contrast, June, Mr. Rhee’s daughter, takes her family for granted by not taking their American dream seriously and forgoing the model minority stereotype in order to focus on her own leisure rather than work that will fulfill her parents’ expectations of her. June knows that no matter what she does, her family will be there for her; they do not threaten to disown her for her failures. Thomas’ status is more precarious, especially since he knows that Mrs. Rhee is opposed to his presence in the store and he is anxious to make a good impression on her and the rest of the family in order to keep his job and maintain the connection he has with them, especially Mr. Rhee. Mr. Park and Mr. Rhee trained to be engineers in Korea, and Mrs. Rhee even studied to become a nurse. All three immigrants eventually gave up their career aspirations and became ethnic entrepreneurs in America instead. Although the Rhees never become as successful as Mr. Park does, all three people accept the limitations that are placed on their work and their lives in America, which is what model minorities are expected to do. In The Woman Warrior, Brave Orchid openly expresses to her daughter her sense of disillusionment and unhappiness with her work in America in comparison to the work that she did in China. The Rhees and Mr. Park are much more reticent about their sense of dissatisfaction with their work, though it is still evident to their children. One possible reason for June’s apathy is that she sees how her parents’ work ethic has produced undesirable results and failed to make their American dream come true; she may think that there is little point in becoming a model minority if all she has to look forward to is a life of
hard work, stress, unhappiness, and a glass ceiling. Thomas differs from June and continues to hope that his life and those of the Rhees will get better, if they just keep working hard enough, which shows that he and the Rhees believe in the values upheld by the American dream.

The Rhees’ American dream is to achieve what Henry’s father ultimately gains, which is the expansion of their business into multiple stores, an elevated economic status, a more comfortable lifestyle, and an American education for their daughter. While Henry’s father is arguably an “American success story,” (a phrase that is more conflicted than it sounds, due to the reasons I previously described), the Rhees become an American failure story. In *Native Speaker*, Henry describes boycotts of Korean grocery stores, African Americans who protest against these ethnic entrepreneurs, and the looting and rioting that destroys many of these stores. Mr. Park is robbed and assaulted by African Americans, saved from death by employees who arrive before his attackers can kill him, yet none of his stores are ever boycotted, protested, or destroyed. The Rhees experience all of these things, which is why they ultimately fail to become successful model minorities. Their plight illustrates the fact that the model minority’s status in America is precarious and vulnerable; a strong work ethic, “silence,” and self-sacrifice do not protect them from racism, poverty, or violence, especially since other Americans believe that these model minorities’ self-sufficient status means that they do not need any help from outside sources. At least, that is the belief that Americans use to justify their inaction or refusals to help Asian Americans in times of crisis, like the government and law enforcement officers’ refusals to protect ethnic entrepreneurs during the L.A. riots.

The Rhees and Mr. Park distrust non-Koreans, including white Americans and African Americans, and they discriminate against the latter by not hiring them. Admittedly, Mr. Park does try to appease African Americans who complain about this discrimination by hiring some of
them, but he soon changes his mind due to their absenteeism and “gifts” of his products to their friends. The Rhees never hire any black employees, and the incident where Mrs. Rhee is robbed and assaulted by a black man does not make her any more inclined to reconcile her differences with other African Americans, even though obviously not all of them are like her attacker. She is not a passive victim when she is attacked, because “she became furious at this gumdngee who was taking her money which the store needed, and she lunged for the cash in his hand saying in Korean that this was theirs, not his. The man stopped her with one fist to her chest which shocked the breath out of her, and he called her a chink bitch. With a sweeping, easy movement he brought the gun down on her cheek with a crack and everything blurred, this time forcing her to the ground, pain everywhere, and the store falling away around her” (Lee 82). She quickly learns that the money earned from her labor can be taken away by someone who did not work for it, who believes he is more entitled to it than she is because he views her as a “chink bitch” and not as a fellow American. She also learns the consequences of standing up for herself and fighting back, which makes her feel like her attempt to succeed in America is a battle that she cannot win, though she does not fully realize this until her store is completely destroyed. One of the things that set the boycott, the protests, and the destruction of the store in motion is when Mrs. Rhee accuses two female African American customers of stealing from her store, though Chang implies that the customers are not actually guilty of doing anything wrong. Since she is still nursing the wounds from her robbery and assault, Mrs. Rhee is guilty of the same prejudice that is directed towards her: she starts to view all African Americans in the same way.

All three of these ethnic entrepreneurs fit the model minority stereotype because they are more focused on their own survival and success than on the concerns or the well-being of almost everyone else, with the exception of their families, which is one of the primary reasons that the
Rhees ultimately end up losing everything that they worked for. Mr. Park was not just a savvier entrepreneur than the Rhees; he was luckier because he mostly managed to stay out of the crossfire. Unlike garment industry workers in Chinatown like Mah in *Bone*, who work dead-end jobs, Korean American entrepreneurs have hopes of expanding their businesses as entrepreneurs. They have more control over their own work and earnings, even if they are still working in less than favorable conditions. As entrepreneurs, they can “be their own bosses,” which means that they do not have to worry about being exploited, though they often have to exploit their own employees and family members in order to keep their businesses afloat. This exploitation makes Henry feel less indebted to his father, and even when he no longer has to work in his father’s store, he still views his father’s exploitation of other workers as wrong and unjust, which makes him view him as less than honorable and thus not worthy of the debt that Henry is supposed to honor. Thomas, on the other hand, knows that he is exploited but is able to look past it due to his understanding that the Rhees are exploited workers too, who are just struggling to survive, and that it would be wrong and unjust of him to demand more from them. He learns to be a “silent” and “grateful” model minority by working for them. Their own daughter, June, remains dissatisfied with what her parents provide for her and continues to want more, which is why she engages in a sexual relationship with Thomas. 99 Similar to how he responds positively to her (though he is still ambivalent about his actions), she seeks him out possibly to fill the emotional void that was created by her parents. Since they are so immersed in their work, they have little time for her except to pressure her to conform to their ideal of the model minority. So she seeks emotional intimacy by engaging in a physical relationship with Thomas, but he follows her

99 “Employees in such firms tended – like the owners – to work long hours for little remuneration, with few fringe benefits and under substandard work conditions. They were also very unlikely to be members of labor unions or to engage in militant action. The acceptance of such conditions was partially a product of the small business form itself” (Light and Bonacich 357).
parents’ example by withholding himself emotionally from her since he knows that their affair conflicts with his identity as the “grateful” model minority. Since the Rhees continue working despite their exploited status, Thomas views them as worthy of the honor that Henry denies to his own father; at the same time, he secretly “dishonors” their daughter by sleeping with her. Thomas lacks his own parental figures who sacrifice themselves in their work for him, so he believes that the Rhees’ exploited status signifies their love and devotion for their daughter, which makes them more honorable and moral, even if their work as model minorities and ethnic entrepreneurs disempowers them.

Due to limited professional options, ethnic entrepreneurs often view their work as a source of agency, since it allows them more control over their work and their lives than they would have if they were employed by other people. Ethnic entrepreneurship does not come with any guarantees, and it can often create even more financial and emotional hardships for the people who engage in it. Native Speaker and The Fruit n’ Food show that contrary to the American dream, work is not enough to change economic status. Many Asian American workers believe that material wealth, which can be obtained through work, is a signifier of class. Social acceptance and equality with other members of that class are more important than material wealth in order to elevate class status. The boycotts and destruction of Korean stores emphasize that the Korean American store owners were not accepted as “real” Americans, not only because their stores were destroyed by native-born African Americans but also because white politicians

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100 “Owning a small business is the American Dream. It represents an opportunity to escape from the position in society one was born into. It is an avenue out of the working class, an opportunity to make money and even possibly become a millionaire. With a small investment, an entrepreneur with a good idea and some luck may hit it big and transform his life. The belief in this possibility has always been a feature of American society. This belief curtails discontent in its lower echelons and gives the impression that the United States is a land of opportunity where gigantic leaps on the social scale are still possible” (Light and Bonacich 366).

101 The people who fail to become successful model minorities think that they, not the American capitalist system, did something wrong. Since “they often feel ashamed of their failure and blame themselves for it, their story rarely receives public attention. Lives dedicated to sacrifice and hardship end where they began, never having achieved the dream for which the sacrifices were made” (Light and Bonacich 432).
and law enforcement officers did little or nothing to help or protect the Korean American
entrepreneurs during the L.A. riots. This is shown at the end of The Fruit n’ Food, when the
Rhees’ store is destroyed, the Rhees are literally in fear for their lives, Thomas is nearly killed,
and the police are nowhere in sight. Thomas does not necessarily aspire to be recognized as an
“American” in the same way that Henry does, though both men do feel anger and frustration that
white Americans and African Americans have classified them and their father figures as “not
American,” which reinforces their sense of alienation in American society. Thomas identifies
with the Rhees not just because of his desire to be part of a family and his admiration for their
status as hard-working model minorities but also because he understands what it is like to be
treated as an outsider. He views the protestors, all of whom are native-born Americans, as
antagonists, which is why he does not care about being accepted by them. He is not as self-
conscious about being perceived as a nonnative speaker, and he accepts the Rhees’ belief that the
best he can hope for is to become a successful model minority. Henry seeks to dissociate with his
father as much as he can in his desire to be seen as a “native speaker” of English, a “real”
American, and he blames his father when he is not identified in this way, similar to how
Kingston’s narrator blames her mother for her self-consciousness over speaking English in
public. He recognizes that “real” Americans like Lelia and her father will always view him as
“foreign.” He feels conflicted about joining a society that discriminates against Korean
Americans. But he thinks that not identifying as an American means identifying himself as a
Korean, which he associates with the “lowly” and “unmanly” ethnic entrepreneurs.

Work reinforces class status and economic barriers. Lee and Chang show how people are
racialized through their work. Mr. Park and the Rhees’ work as ethnic entrepreneurs establish
their racial identity as Korean Americans, not solely as Americans. Their work keeps them in the
lower classes and prevents them from achieving economic mobility. Even the exceptions who do achieve economic mobility, like Henry’s father, remain marginalized. Most of the Asian American workers in these novels do not participate in public society, nor do they have a voice. Only John Kwang fights to be heard, and even he is eventually silenced when he is forced to give up his political career and life in America. As Henry tells his Greek friend and colleague, Jack, who claims that Henry can “go anyplace you want and speak your mind,” Henry knows that he cannot actually do that and that “I’ve forgotten how, if I ever knew. Then, when someone like Kwang attempts something larger, there’s instant suspicion. Someone must step up and pay to send in us hyenas. We’ll sniff him out. We eat our own, you know” (Lee 288). Henry feels constrained within the limits of the model minority identity, yet he obeys his employer’s command to investigate people who fail or refuse to conform to this identity. His ambivalence over his obedience indicates that he feels dishonorable for betraying these people. He seeks to dissociate himself from his father, whom he viewed as dishonorable for being weak and passive, yet Henry becomes dishonorable due to his weakness and passivity in his work as a spy for Glimmer and Company.

Issue of work and class are more important to the people in these two novels than issues of race and ethnicity, but all of these issues (work, class, race, and ethnicity) are still intertwined and connected to the debts that the main characters owe to other people, especially their families. When the Rhees’ business is destroyed and they face the prospect of becoming subordinate, low-wage employees rather than self-employed entrepreneurs, Mrs. Rhee mourns the loss of her family’s income, because “she could not stand being truly poor.” Once they lose their store, they lose the fragile hope they had been clinging to that their lives would eventually get better. Furthermore, Mrs. Rhee believes that she has failed her daughter as well. She does not feel
indebted to June, but she wants her daughter to “concentrate on school, not on family problems” (22), and the fact that that is no longer an option for June makes Mrs. Rhee feel that the debt that upheld her status as an entrepreneur and as a valued, honorable mother is irretrievably lost. It is not just the second-generation Asian Americans who feel guilty about fractured connections and unpaid debts; it is the first generation too, as exemplified by Mrs. Rhee, who fears that June is becoming “like her mother who is always feeling so tired. Never has she been so run-down from doing nothing” (Chang 223). The possibility that June will become like her rather than someone who is more successful upsets Mrs. Rhee. As I stated before, the primary goal of Korean American ethnic entrepreneurs is to ensure that their children will not end up like their parents.

Mrs. Rhee’s shame over her daughter’s observation of her parents’ loss and their subsequent vulnerability is similar to Mr. Park’s shame over his dependence on his son and daughter-in-law when he is dying. Mr. Park’s work was one reason that he did not develop a closer relationship with his son. Similar to the daughters in Bone and The Woman Warrior, most of Henry’s memories of his father revolve around the latter’s work rather than personal time that they spent together. Even when Mr. Park is dying, he does not allow his son to take care of him, and “he hated when I helped him, especially in the bathroom…Now, when he needed cleaning, he would let Lelia bathe him…He said (my jaundiced translation of his Korean) that he didn’t want me becoming an anxious boy, as if he knew all of my panic buttons, that craphound, inveterate sucker-puncher, that damned machine” (Lee 48). Despite the fact that Henry is a grown man, Mr. Park belittles him into an “anxious boy” in an attempt to assert his own manhood and make up for his weakened state. Although Henry attempts to care for his father while the latter is dying, Mr. Park refuses to let him, because he does not like looking vulnerable or helpless in front of his son. Henry’s efforts to care for his father do not mean that he is
suddenly repentant over his anger towards his father nor rejection of any debt he owed him. When his father is immobile and unable to speak, Henry finally gets his revenge by telling him all the reasons why he hates him, thus disowning his father for the last time, by making it seem as if all the work that Mr. Park did and the sacrifices that he made did not make up for the emotional distance between them.\textsuperscript{102} Henry’s confrontation with his father illustrates the injustice of the debt that parents expect their children to honor. His angry statements and accusations towards his father show that being a model minority did not make Mr. Park a good father; instead, it made him a bad one, and it motivated Henry to be a “bad” son who dishonored and rejected his father (and the debt). His attitude towards his father is proof that work and success are not enough to instill loyalty and love in the children towards their parents. Unlike Leon in \textit{Bone}, who is not ashamed to lean on his children for emotional and financial support but rather demands it from all of his daughters, Mr. Park prefers to be more self-sufficient, which makes Henry feel less indebted to him. In that respect Mr. Park’s shame on his deathbed is similar to Mrs. Rhee’s shame upon the “death” of her career as an ethnic entrepreneur. Min claims that “Korean immigrants in the ethnic economy have more cultural and social ethnic attachments than those in the general economy” (44). However, these attachments do not necessarily apply to their families, since the work done in the ethnic economy often weakens family ties.

Throughout \textit{Native Speaker}, Kwang’s work is emphasized. After his downfall, his racial identity is emphasized instead. The mob outside his house at the end of the novel reinforces his status as a foreigner rather than an American. “As people define their identity in ethnic and religious terms, they are likely to see an “us” versus “them” relation existing between themselves

\textsuperscript{102} That scene on his father’s deathbed is similar to the scene in Zora Neale Huston’s \textit{Their Eyes Were Watching God}, where Janie’s husband Jody Sparks, is dying, and she finally has the courage to say what she truly thinks of him. She devalues the middle-class lifestyle that he provided her, claiming that it did not make up for the iron grip he kept over her identity and her life and the distance that was created between them as a result.
and people of different ethnicity or religion” (Huntington). Since he is not “like” the white mob
who attacks him, they believe that Kwang does not have the right to live in “their” country, let
alone work there. When Henry returns to Kwang’s now empty house that is up for sale, no
mention is made of Kwang’s past work as a politician. The realtor refers to the Korean family,
again emphasizing their ethnicity. Lee’s novel emphasizes that most of the people that Glimmer
and Company spies on are immigrants, foreigners, and minorities, apparently because they are
more “suspicious” due to their “differences” from other Americans and the “suspicious”
activities they engage in, such as the fact that Luzan is a Marcos sympathizer. Their activities are
categorized as “un-American”; therefore, they are “un-American.”

The Rhees’ plight contradicts the American dream that promotes hard work, because
their status as model minority workers (specifically, as entrepreneurs) fuel the protestors’ ire
against them. The protestors resent and envy the Rhees’ ownership of a store in a neighborhood
that the protestors believe belongs to them. Even though the Rhees have operated a business in
that area for years, the protestors emphasize the Rhees’ outsider status because the latter are
Korean. For example, when the protestors are boycotting the Fruit n’ Food, they hold up signs
and distribute leaflets that make statements like, “Buy Black. Don’t support the Koreans who are
taking money out of the community. Koreans are racist and treat African Americans with no
respect. BOYCOTT!!” (Lee 184). The protestors emphasize their status as African Americans,
yet they identify the Rhees as Koreans, not as Korean Americans, and definitely not as
Americans. When the Rhees’ daughter walks by them, one of them calls her a “Chink bitch”
(like the insult that was lobbed to her mother when the latter was attacked by a robber) even
though June is not Chinese, which demonstrates that to these protestors, Asians are more or less
indistinguishable. Their treatment of June reinforces her belief that it is not worth it to honor her debt to her parents by becoming a model minority, because it exposes her to racist ridicule.

Mr. Park and Henry accept the fact that they have to abide by certain “procedures and rules of engagement,” except Henry ultimately breaks away from that code of conduct when he stops being a spy. Henry is still not completely free because he trades his employer’s rules and restrictions for the terms of his identity and work for his wife’s rules and restrictions of the terms of his identity, work, and their relationship. Henry ultimately accepts that Lelia has more control over their lives than he does, which demonstrates his passivity as well as her unwillingness to compromise more or recognize him as an equal partner in their marriage. John Kwang works his way around the rules while pretending to follow them. While admittedly many politicians do the same thing, native-born Americans or not, Kwang is the one whose attempt to break the rules leads to his downfall.\(^1\) His downfall occurs because of his money club, his identity as a first-generation Korean American, his minority immigrant supporters, and most of all because he inflicted the most extreme punishment on one of his most loyal allies: Eduardo, the Hispanic volunteer and college student who becomes Kwang’s sacrificial lamb. Kwang has Eduardo killed for the former’s own self-preservation. He is enraged when he thinks that Eduardo has betrayed him by breaking the terms of his own debt to Kwang, considering everything that Kwang has done for him as well as all the other immigrants and minorities like him. While Mr. Park is focused on his business, Kwang is more willing to do whatever it takes in order to change people’s perceptions of Korean Americans (with him as their representative) and change his minority voters’ lives as a result. While parent-creditors like Mr. Park and the Rhees threaten to

\(^1\) Native-born American politicians are not immune to the risks of getting caught and punished, especially when you consider the Rod Blagojevich, the ex-governor of Illinois, and another ex-governor of Illinois, George Ryan, who were both caught up in sandals and corruption and were eventually punished and imprisoned for their crimes.
disown their children or create emotional distances to punish them for not honoring their debts to their parents, Kwang eliminates his “child” altogether as punishment for the latter’s betrayal.

The Rhees and Mr. Park work long hours to provide comfort and education to their children, who are less than appreciative. The Rhees are unaware of their daughter’s sexual relationship with their employee, Thomas, and the other things that she does when she’s supposed to be studying. Mr. and Mrs. Rhee put all their hopes in their daughter, thinking that she will go to college and pursue a white-collar career. Her lackluster attitude towards school and the fact that she spends more time partying and drinking undermine the power that her debt holds over her and it also undermines the model minority image. These parents put too much pressure on her by creating this debt in the first place, even if they thought they were justified due to their own sacrifices and hard work. The work that Henry and his father do in the latter’s stores drives them further apart. Henry loses respect for his father after seeing him as a subordinate worker to his customers, and he thinks that his father is emasculated as a result. Similar to work, class sets rules that people must follow.104 In Asian American novels, there is a different code of conduct for each group of workers. Through work the people recognize their place in society, which is what Mr. Park tries to teach the reluctant Henry when they encounter the rich white customer at Mr. Park’s store who eats food without paying for it. “I started over to her not knowing what I might say when my father intercepted me and said smiling in Korean, as if he were complimenting me, ‘She’s a steady customer.’ He nudged me back to my station. I had to wait until she left to replace the ruined apple with a fresh one” (Lee 54). Mr. Park is willing to accept his subordinate status by passively accepting the bad behavior of his white customers, whose

104 In Edith Wharton’s novel *House of Mirth*, it wasn’t enough for Simon Rosedale to be a successful, wealth businessman. He had to be accepted by the upper class, who looked down on him because he was “new money.” When Lily Bart broke the code of conduct, she became a social outcast, which is why Simon Rosedale, an admirer of hers, refused to marry her. He knew that marrying her would break the social “rules” of the upper class that he aspired to join.
patronage he relies on to keep his store running. Henry is more Americanized since he wants to stand up for himself and his father, and he resents his father for making sure that they both stay silent. This silence transfers to his work for Glimmer and Company. He knows that getting paid to betray people is unethical. He openly expresses his dislike of Hoagland but does not try to strip the latter of his power, feeling powerless to do so. In *The Fruit n’ Food*, Thomas Pak also learns what his place as a low-wage employee is. The cash payments that the Rhees give him are barely enough to live on, which forces him to suffer in poverty. He does not resent the Rhees for the low pay. He is grateful to them for the work, similar to how the low-wage Korean employees who worked for Henry’s father were grateful to Mr. Park for the opportunity to work in America, despite the meager wages and rotting fruit that he paid them.

Henry develops a connection with Kwang because he respects the latter’s work in a way that he never respected his father’s. Henry identifies more with Kwang the politician than with his father the ethnic entrepreneur. He notes how Mr. Park may be a successful model minority, but he is unhappy, exhausted, isolated, and weakened by his work. Henry questions whether Mr. Park “would have wished to go back to the time before he had all that money, when he had just one store and we rented a tiny apartment in Queens. He worked hard and had worried but he had a joy then that he never seemed to regain once the money started coming in. He might turn on the radio and dance cheek to cheek with my mother…They had lots of Korean friends…when they talked in public there was a shared sense of how lucky they were, to be in America but still have countrymen near” (Lee 52). The price of Mr. Park’s success is his personal relationships with his family and friends. In order to maintain his stores and accumulate more wealth, he has to work more hours, which makes him more stressed out and leaves him with less energy or time for people outside of his work. Mr. Park’s old friends also withdraw from their relationships in order
to focus on expanding their businesses. This withdrawal makes their children less willing to honor their debts to their parents and more focused on pursuing the children’s American dream, which is typically different from the American dream that the parents want for them.

Thomas is the exception; after Mrs. Rhee is assaulted and robbed, Thomas does not resent Mr. Rhee when the latter tells him that he needs to run the store while Mrs. Rhee recovers and her husband takes care of her and other business. Thomas is naturally overwhelmed by the responsibility, but consoles himself through his work: “He went outside and began stacking apples in the wooden stand, finding the repetition soothing, rhythmic, with the one-two placement, rows upon rows, shiny reds, dull greens, bruises turned away – the apples had that sweet smell he liked, and he began to feel better” (Lee 85). Since he does not come from an upper-class background like Henry does, he is not embarrassed or resentful about being seen working at the store, unlike Henry, who tries to keep his work for his father a secret from his white American friends. When Thomas reflects on Mrs. Rhee’s condition, he wonders, “Had Mrs. Rhee been scared? Tom didn’t know what he would have done if it had been him” (Chang 85). Henry recognizes his father’s trauma from being robbed and attacked, yet Lee implies that Henry resents him for not fighting back and overpowering his attackers. Thomas recognizes that he might have been too scared to fight back if he had been the victim of the assault and robbery. He also feels guilty that he was bedding June at the same time that Mrs. Rhee was being attacked, and “he found something frightening about the image of him and June with the image of Mrs. Rhee being held up” (Chang 89). Thomas is not in love with June, despite their relationship. He responds to her advances because of his loneliness and longing for intimacy and love, which the Rhees do not give him despite all the work that he does for them. He feels ambivalent about June. He knows the Rhees would certainly not approve, because he is their
employee, not an appropriate suitor for their daughter, and his relationship with her could derail their educational and professional plans for June. In that respect, he feels like he cannot truly be a “good son” who honors his debt to the Rhees as long as he has a dishonorable relationship with their daughter, which also compromises her own honor as a virginal schoolgirl. The fact that June makes the first move in her relationship with Thomas signifies her attempt to take control over her life, rather than submit to her parents’ control and adhere to the terms of her debt to them. She is less willing than Thomas to accept their authority, which she feels infringes upon her freedom and desires.

*Native Speaker* and *The Fruit n’ Food* emphasize the characters’ dissatisfaction with their work, as well as the stress, poverty, and alienation that are caused by their work. They work because they have no choice, but their work is unfulfilling and makes it difficult for them to maintain relationships with other people, let alone honor their debts to each other. The one optimistic worker is John Kwang, but even he ultimately fails in his work, not to mention he does not have a loving relationship with his family, whom he abuses, controls, and is unfaithful to. Similar to Ralph in *Typical American*, Kwang feels that since he is the male patriarch of his family, his wife and children are indebted to him for providing them with an upper-class lifestyle in America. Therefore, he feels entitled to treat them with cruelty. In their attempts to honor their debts to him, his family deteriorates as a result. His wife becomes weaker and passive to Kwang’s abuse, even when she witnesses his harsh treatment of their sons. His children become violent towards their classmates in an attempt to prove their strength and not dishonor their father, who has high expectations for them.

Lee and Chang also demonstrate the destructive nature of work and debt. Thomas Pak is physically destroyed due to his attempt to honor his debt by defending the owners of the store
and their loyal customers. The Rhees are destroyed economically and financially after they lose their livelihood and hope for a better future. Kwang is destroyed when he loses his career, reputation, and hope for a better future. Henry emphasizes his father’s loneliness, unhappiness, and dissatisfaction with his work, especially since he trained to be an engineer in Korea. These negative feelings foster Henry’s sense of indebtedness to his father, but they also motivate Henry to reject his debt; he believes that his father is responsible for those feelings since the latter accepted his status as a model minority rather than attempt to get something better. Although Mr. Park provides a comfortable suburban lifestyle for his family, it is not enough to fulfill him or his son emotionally. The brief moment of happiness he experiences is when his grandson is alive, because unlike his son, Mitt loves Mr. Park unconditionally. After his grandson’s death at the hands of another white mob (of children) in a “dog pile,” Mr. Park again retreats into isolation. Mitt’s death does not bring Henry and his father any closer together. The implication is that love from his family (specifically Mitt) would have been enough to make Mr. Park feel happy and fulfilled, whereas his work was not. This fact, however, is either something that Mr. Park does not fully realize or that he disregards because he believes that it is still more important to keep working and maintain his role as his family’s provider.

Henry may have been more willing to honor his debt to his father if he did not view him primarily as a worker. He thinks that his father cares more about his work than about his son, especially since his father spends more time at work than with his family. Henry views his father’s workaholic habits as a betrayal. He mistakenly thinks that his father’s work are more about the latter’s own self-serving needs and desires than about providing for his family, which

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105 “Because many parents at this stage are so preoccupied with business, they have limited time, energy, or emotional reserve to give to their children…In the United States, it becomes difficult for parents even to communicate with their children because of hard work and long hours, not to mention the language barrier” (K. Park 83-84). Mr. Park thought that providing a comfortable, suburban lifestyle for Henry was enough, but the work he did to provide that lifestyle actually cost him a close relationship with his son.
is why he feels less obligated to honor or even recognize his debt to his father. But Henry is selfish too, since he is not grateful to his father for the latter’s sacrifices and looks down on him instead. He imposes unrealistic expectations on Mr. Park, who is unable and unwilling to adhere to them, similar to how Henry is unwilling to adhere to Mr. Park’s expectations of him.

Nobody forces these people to betray each other. They make that choice on their own, though they feel pressured to make that choice. Some, like Mr. Park, convince themselves that they have no other alternative. Henry’s conflict revolves more around his work and its questionable ethics than his racial identity as a Korean American. Race is connected to his work since his minority status is valued by his employer. He works with other minorities by spying on them and betraying them. Since they lack a voice in American society, some members of minority groups, like Henry, use the little power and control they do have to exploit each other and betray each other. Henry feels even less connected to the people he spies on than he does to his father, which is why he is also willing to betray and dishonor them. He does not feel indebted to them, though he recognizes their hard work and sacrifices that are made to honor their own families. Henry’s betrayal of these people demonstrates that “if the problem of the twentieth century, as Du Bois saw it, was the problem of the color line, then the problem of this new century is that some of us find ourselves on the greener side of the divide. The ethics of one’s success and another’s impoverishment, individual rise and collective fall manifest an intimate relationship between resource and representation, the price of privilege and the cost of poverty” (K. Lee 232). The characters’ professional choices also reflect their personal decision on whether or not to repudiate their personal ties to their families, communities, or heritage. Some characters’ sacrifices for each other are contrasted with other characters’ selfish betrayals of each other. Regardless of Henry’s view of his father as cold and unloving, the latter is still more
selfless than Henry since he was more willing to honor his family by giving up what he wanted to provide what they needed. *Native Speaker* suggests that second-generation Asian Americans have to “break” from their parents in order to survive in America, and *The Fruit n’ Food* shows what happens when the second generation, as exemplified by Thomas Pak, does not break away.  

Henry tries to integrate parts of himself into a narrative whole in his quest to be an America and to separate himself from his father’s work and model minority identity. Tina Chen argues that “*Native Speaker*” is a meditation about fractured identity, the loss of internal coherence, and the longing for a wholeness that is ever deferred, ever impossible to attain. Ultimately, Henry recognizes that his impostures and false acts as a spy have come to mark him personally: he is a man whose very identity is in question” (649). Henry initially tries to establish his place in society through his work as a spy for Glimmer and Company, but the irony is that as a spy he has “no place”; he is required to be invisible, participate in many different communities, and adopt multiple identities, none of which belong to him. People like Henry are recruited because of their color in order to police other people of color. They enforce a certain American nationalism and identity. Through his work with the agency, Henry enforces the idea that only certain people can be American and accepted in American society. This is related to the idea of the model minority, which illustrates the fact that model minorities are not perceived as Americans nor fully accepted. He is conflicted about his identity so working as a spy allows him to avoid resolving the conflict. Being a spy is only a temporary solution for his identity crisis. It allows him to be everyone and no one at the same time, because he can adopt several different identities without having to make a personal commitment to any of them. Henry describes

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106 In William Faulkner’s book *Go Down, Moses* (1942), Ike McCaslin thought he could repudiate the aspects of his identity that he didn’t want, like Thomas Sutpen in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* Repudiation is not possible because these aspects help to determine the events in their lives and are part of who they are.
himself and his coworkers as having “allegiance to no government. We weren’t ourselves political creatures. We weren’t patriots. Even less, heroes. We systematically overassessed risk, made it a bad word…Our office motto: Cowardice is what you make of it” (Lee 17). As a spy, Henry does not have to demonstrate loyalty to anyone, because it is his job to betray people’s confidence in him. Unlike his childhood, where he felt pressured to honor the ties that bound him to his father, his work prevents him from developing ties with any of the people that he spies on. Henry is a dishonorable “coward.” He does not reveal his true identity to them, and he does not “save” them in the way that a hero does. His work leads to their downfall. Henry and his coworkers do not investigate all immigrants, usually just people who are “a well-to-do immigrant supporting some potential insurgency in his old land, or else funding a fledgling trade union or radical student organization. Sometimes he was simply an agitator. Maybe a writer of conscience. An expatriate artist” (Lee 18). Henry emphasizes the work that these people do, specifically the cultural ties to their native countries, which they maintain through their work. They are singled out because they deviate from the model minority image, which threatens the status quo that keeps the “real” Americans in power. Their cultural ties rebel against the American ideal of assimilation, which is meant to sever or weaken those ties. In order to gather this information, Henry and his colleagues “worked by contriving intricate and open-ended emotional conspiracies. We became acquaintances, casual friends. Sometimes lovers. We were social drinkers. Embracers of children. Doubles partners. We threw rice at weddings, we laid wreaths at funerals. We ate sweet pastries in the basements of churches” (Lee 18). Thus Henry and his coworkers foster the illusion of creating ties between themselves and the people they study while also finding a way to “unbind” any obligation America has to these people, by providing proof of their “unworthiness” to be Americans; this “unworthiness” rationalizes their
betrayal of these people. This issue is similar to how Henry felt his father was unworthy of being an American, due to the latter’s identity as a model minority and ethnic entrepreneur. He spends a significant portion of his narrative describing the way his father fails to become an American, to rationalize Henry’s rejection of his debt to his father. Despite their “unworthiness,” deep down Henry understands that they are still more “honorable” than him, because they put their trust in him, which he does not deserve. His relationship with Luzan makes him realize that he is betraying good people who he could have developed stronger emotional bonds with, if only he had not dishonored them.

J. Paul Narkunas claims that Henry “does not feel at home in any national or ethnic cultural identity. He always seems disconnected from people, advancing through several coexisting cultural subjectivities while simultaneously remaining external to them” (332). His work makes him realize that his identity is still not under his control, because he must conform to the standards and beliefs of others (Jack, Dennis, and the unnamed clients): “As the commodifiable Asian American writer, Henry Park expresses his ambivalent relationship to the repressive work of Glimmer & Co., through an uneasy acquiescence to a profession that seems to suit him perfectly and yet is used against him and others with whom he comes to identify, most notably the psychiatrist Emile Luzan and John Kwang himself” (Corley 73). By giving up his work as a spy, Henry attempts to take back control over his life and his identity. Sometimes the nature of the characters’ work indicates their acceptance of the status quo or the authority of others’ control over them. For example, as long as Henry works for Glimmer and Company, he has to accept that white people use him to spy on other minorities and exploit his racial identity to serve their own needs. The immigrant workers who work in sweatshops in Chinatown and the Korean American ethnic entrepreneurs who work in low-income, mostly African American
neighborhoods are often resigned to the fact that the odds are stacked against them succeeding. There is only so far they can go in America.

Kwang is set up as a foil to Henry. Despite his work in American politics, he is not tolerated as a public figure because he utilizes non-American principles and methods to help people of color, such as the kye. Kwang is similar to ethnic entrepreneurs in one respect: he utilizes a Korean money club, otherwise known as a “kye” or a “ggeh” (the latter term is used to refer to this club in the novel). Aspiring ethnic entrepreneurs join these kyes to gain capital to build their businesses. Kwang uses the money to help various people, many of whom are not Korean, with their various needs, most of which do not include building their own businesses. “If you want a down payment on a store, bring the owner of the store you work in now. Bring your daughter who wants to attend Columbia, bring her transcripts and civics essay and have her bring her violin. Bring X rays of your mother who needs a new hip. I want to see the fleshted shape of the need, I want to know the blood you’ve lost, or that someone has stolen, or tricked from you, the blood you desperately want back from the world” (Lee 280-281). Operating the money club helps Henry to identify with the club’s members and it also gives him a sense of power and control over them that he never had when he worked for his father at the latter’s stores. He viewed ethnic entrepreneurship as disempowering: “Whether I wish it or not, I possess them, their spouses and children, their jobs and money and life…The story is mine…When I get here, I work. I work for the day I will finally work for myself. I work so hard that one day I end up forgetting the person I am. I forget my wife, my son. Now, too, I have lost my old mother tongue. And I forget the ancestral graves I have left on a hillside of a faraway land, the loneliest stones that each year go unblessed” (Lee 279). These immigrants’ “forgetfulness” illustrates the conflicts connected to family, debt, and labor. While Henry blames Mr. Park for “forgetting” his
family in favor of his work, what he does not fully realize is that “forgetfulness” is not something entirely within the immigrants’ control. That is, they do not necessarily “want” to forget the people that they care about, but they spend their lives in America working so hard that they “miss the forest for the trees.” They focus more on their short-term goals and do not fully understand until it is too late what they end up losing as a result. Their situation is similar to the one that Leon faces in Bone. He felt responsible for burying the bones of his “paper father,” yet years of hard work in America and his own “forgetfulness” cause him to forgo his debt in favor of his own survival and personal problems. The consequence is the lifelong guilt he feels for not honoring the debt that he owes to his paper father who enabled him to come to America, which instills a sense of loss and emptiness in him that can never be fulfilled due to these long-lost bones.

Operating the money club is the closest that Henry can get to being like Kwang. Henry will never be a politician, but he can assume a leadership role as the manager of the money club and as the confidant of the members who come to him for financial assistance. There have been cases where the members of this type of club were defrauded by at least one member who took all the money and never repaid anyone.107 Most clubs do work out to the members’ advantage, due to their cooperation with each other and their trust that each person will contribute his or her fair share and not steal from anyone. As Henry states:

Small ggeh, like the one my father had, work because the family members all know each other, trust one another not to run off or drop out after their turn comes up…The larger ggeh depend solely on this notion, that the lessons of the culture will be stronger than a momentary lack, can subdue any individual weakness or want. This is the power lovely and terrible, what we try to engender in Kwang’s giant money club, our huge ggeh for all. What John says it is about. My father would have thought him crazy to run a ggeh with people other than just our own. Spanish people? Indians? Vietnamese? How could you

107 “When a Hawaiian kye organizer defaulted in 1979, he owed $16 million to 1100 creditors, many of whom were Korean. Some victims of this fraud had been paying as much as $200,000 monthly into this fund” (Light and Bonacich 252).
trust them? Then even if you could, why would you? If my father had possessed the words, he would have said the whole enterprise was bad hubris. (Lee 281-280) Kwang’s money club is made up of people who do not all know nor trust each other. Their trust is placed on Kwang rather than each other, and they feel indebted to him because they think that by giving him money for the ggeh, he will enable them to make their own American dreams come true. They also trust Henry, to some extent, since he collects information about them. Their trust in Henry proves to be their and Kwang’s undoing, since he turns that information over to his employers, who then turn it over to INS, which uses the information to deport them. By betraying Kwang, Henry also betrays all the other people who were indebted to Kwang. Kwang’s mistake is that he acts like an ethnic entrepreneur in his political work. He does not realize that what works for ethnic entrepreneurs would not work for a politician, especially since he does not follow the rules that are set by more traditional money clubs.

Although the novel focuses on Kwang’s rise and fall as a politician and Mr. Park’s rise as an entrepreneur, there are references to the tension between entrepreneurs and minority customers that are described in more detail in The Fruit n’ Food. Henry describes how Kwang pressures another Korean store owner to acquiesce to the demands of an African American customer who accuses the former of racism. The store owner is reluctant and angry, but he submits to Kwang’s demands due to his debt to the money club. Kwang believes that it is necessary in order to maintain racial harmony, even if it means disregarding the store owner’s concerns. As Kwang tells Henry, “‘He knows what’s good for us is good for him…He doesn’t have to like it. Right now, he doesn’t have any choice’” (Lee 187-188). Despite his own desire to move past the model minority stereotype, he believes that his supporters have no choice but to become model minorities in order for his campaign to succeed, so that he can help them more in the future, which makes Henry’s admiration of him ironic, since he resented his father for
pressuring him to be a model minority. Henry assumes that the store owner, Baeh, obeys Kwang because “the fact of [Kwang’s position and stature in the community was what had persuaded the shopkeeper to deal fairly with Henry, I assumed Baeh was honoring the traditional Confucian structure of community, where in each village a prominent elder man heard the townspeople’s grievances and arbitrated and ruled. Though in that world, Baeh would have shown displeasure only in private. He would have acted as the dutiful younger son until the wise man was far down the road” (Lee 188). However, Henry follows that assumption with a description of Baeh’s work ethic, as well as the work ethic of the other model minority ethnic entrepreneurs: “Stay open. Keep the eyes open. You are your cheapest labor. Here is the great secret, the great mystery to an immigrant’s success, the dwindle of irredeemable hours beneath the cheap tube lights. Pass them like a machine. Believe only in chronology. This will be your coin-small salvation” (Lee 188). Baeh is aware that his store is dependent on the patronage of customers like the African American customer that he argued with, and Kwang’s pragmatism makes it clear to him that he “has no choice” but to cater to them.

As a politician, it is part of the nature of his work to be more optimistic and goal-oriented than ethnic entrepreneurs like Mr. Park and Mr. Rhee. He focuses on promoting change. Mr. Rhee and Mr. Park’s work do not require things to deviate too much from their normal routine, beyond the expansion of their businesses. Kwang’s work requires him to assimilate to American culture. He never would have been able to become a politician if he had not become fluent in English, whereas Mr. Rhee and Mr. Park never fully master the language. Their interactions with other Americans are mostly limited to the people that they serve in the stores. They do not have to assimilate because “foreigners are not involved in local social relations and so are able to maintain a strictly business posture, making them more efficient business operators. Foreigners
also tend to stay out of local political issues” (Light and Bonacich 394). Ethnic entrepreneurs remain under the radar. Kwang refuses to stay out of local politics. He goes out into the community and interacts with business owners and people from different ethnic groups to garner support for his campaign. Mr. Rhee and Mr. Park’s primary goals of expanding their businesses are more self-contained. Kwang is self-serving but also seeks to serve his constituents. His motto appears to be “help me help you.” If he succeeds as a politician, he will be able to improve his supporters’ lives. His work requires him to seek out the spotlight, which is why his work, unlike the work of ethnic entrepreneurs, is monitored by Glimmer and Company.

Despite his admiration for Kwang, Henry’s loyalty towards him only extends to a certain point. He does not stop spying on Kwang, and he does not reveal to him the truth about his work as a mole:

He loses in his bid to become the Korean American Willie Stark and so lays himself open to a peculiarly American form of ignominy: whatever their democratic and egalitarian principles, whatever their sympathy for the underdog, Americans respect only winning. Kwang’s defeat, however, seems not to lie in the crossing of certain moral boundaries. Even if his acts prove as reprehensible as those of Teddy Kennedy, Richard Nixon, or a host of lesser American politicians, Kwang remains unsuited, at the deepest level of his character, to survival on the tangled bank of American politics…One makes the related point about Park somewhat differently: though morally flawed, he may yet prove more capable of more ethical behavior, but for now, emerging untouched from the collapse of Kwang’s fortunes, he bitterly recognizes in himself qualities that make him, he fears, at once a true American and a less than good man. (Cowart 121)

Succeeding at work often comes at the cost of personal ties, as is evident in books like Native Speaker and Typical American. It causes them to withdraw from them and keep secrets from them, which destabilizes their bond and weakens their trust. In Native Speaker, one thing that Henry, Kwang, and Mr. Park have in common is that they cannot completely reveal their true selves, beliefs, or values in their workplaces lest they compromise their work. Kwang has the most agency out of the three, yet even he does not have complete freedom in his work, especially since he ultimately loses everything he achieved when his true nature is exposed. The only
person who succeeds in his work and commits to it for life is Mr. Park. Henry eventually gives up his job as a spy and becomes an assistant to his wife, who works as an ESL teacher. After Kwang’s downfall, Henry refuses to continue spying for Glimmer and Company because he does not want to completely surrender to their control. On the other hand, he does surrender to the image of the model minority even after he stops being a spy. He does not try to replace Kwang by pursuing a political career and finding a remedy for the injustice that was committed against the immigrants who were deported. He retreats to the domestic sphere and focuses on renewing his relationship with his wife. He does not completely escape his subordinate status. He learns what it means to be a “subject” and a “citizen” and what one has to do in order to survive in this country, which in his case means becoming the “silent” and “passive” model minority that his father raised him to be. Kwang gives up his work after he is embroiled in a scandal with a teen prostitute and after he has one of his employees killed. Like Ralph in Typical American, Kwang becomes morally corrupt due to his work and his obsession with success at all costs, even if it means sacrificing his relationships with other people or sacrificing the people themselves. After the Rhees’ store is destroyed, any hope they had of expanding their business is destroyed as well. As a result, they have no choice but to take subordinate roles by working for relatives in the latter’s dry cleaning business, which is a bitter pill for them to swallow because they have to take a more passive role and their job status is almost similar to Thomas’ status when they first hired him. The loss of their livelihood does not inspire them to break away from the model minority stereotype. It reinforces their belief that they can never be anything more than model minorities, and even worse, a life spent as a model minority will lead to little, if any, reward.

Mr. Park continues in his work, which does not hurt people in the same ways that Henry and Kwang’s work did. Mr. Park is like Theresa in Typical American. Both characters follow the
rules regarding the American dream and do not allow their work to corrupt them; they focus on their obligations to their families rather than on what they want for themselves. Despite their hard work and sacrifices, their relationships with their families become strained due to their differing attitudes towards work. Work does not guarantee inclusion. It just means that they will be allowed to work in the “real” Americans’ country. “From his parent’s example, Henry gathers that getting along as an immigrant seems to require staying inconspicuous, limiting interaction with native-born Americans to avoid appearing a threat to the ethnic and cultural composition of the community…Within such a hostile environment, according to the elder Parks, the ‘perfect’ immigrant remains hidden as a survival strategy” (Jirousek 11). Kwang is more concerned with elevating his social and political status than Mr. Park and the Rhees, who are focused on elevating his economic status. Mr. Park and the Rhees prefer to remain model minorities in the background and continue expanding their grocery businesses. Kwang lives in the spotlight as he expands his career as a politician. It is not enough for him to become educated and achieve financial success. He wants the social acceptance of other Americans, particularly American voters, to validate his work. Mr. Park relies on financial means to validate his work, though it is not enough to validate him in his son’s eyes. Henry admires Kwang more than his father because the former is more willing to fight for more than what the government and other Americans bestow on him. Mr. Park accepts the limitations that have restricted his professional life, though that does not necessarily mean he is happy about it. Kwang seeks to undo those limitations, not just for himself but also for his supporters.

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108 By a similar token, it was not enough for Simon Rosedale in *House of Mirth* to accumulate wealth. His wealth and his work had to be validated by the “old money” society that he aspired to join.
Interracial Conflicts and the Struggle for Agency and Territory in *The Fruit n’ Food*

The American dream is not focused on race as much as it is focused on class and money, specifically, on the goal of elevating one’s economic and class status. Many Asian immigrants who come to the United States want to earn more money and work better jobs than they could have gotten in their native countries. It is not necessarily race that helps people to achieve the American dream. It is education and a solid professional background. People who lack these things are typically unable to achieve the American dream and change their class status or work conditions. For many Korean American immigrants, they are unable to succeed in the United States not just because of their race but because of their jobs. The people who become ethnic entrepreneurs, for example, are unlikely to switch to white-collar jobs. Thomas understands this, since he lacks education, a solid professional background, and the connections that he would need to advance to a white-collar career. That is why he is more empathetic to the Rhees’ situation and is more willing to honor his debt to them, even at the risk of his own life. Henry does not understand this, despite his observations of his father’s work, and blames his father more for the latter’s limited professional status in America than the American capitalist system that imposes those limits on him in the first place. Henry is less empathetic to his father, because to show empathy would make him feel guiltier about dishonoring his father by breaking away from him and condemning him.

Work in these novels is also associated with freedom or the lack thereof. The workers are defined by how much authority and control they have over their work and their own lives, as well as the constraints that their work puts on their lives. For example, Henry’s work limits his freedom because he is not free to be honest with the people he works with. He could have saved them by withholding their personal information from his employers, but doing so would have
cost him his job and possibly his life. Henry is more focused on his self-preservation than Thomas, who sacrifices his own life to save the Rhees. In that sense, Thomas is a “better” model minority than Henry is, because Thomas is more focused on what he can do for his “family” than himself. Since Henry is not the only mole who is spying on and working for Kwang, the Korean immigrants’ lives in America would probably have been sacrificed anyway, even if Henry had withheld that information.

People like Brave Orchid in *The Woman Warrior* and Henry’s father are not free to pursue the careers they wanted. Due to discrimination and language barriers, they are held back to pursue jobs that their families need. Similar to Mr. Park, the Rhees in *The Fruit n’ Food* also desire financial stability and the expansion of their business, but they want power and independence even more. Their struggles to keep their store afloat and their vulnerability to the customers who rob and attack them show that their work controls them rather than the other way around. The Rhees believe that if they can succeed in their work, they will have more agency over their lives; they will be free to do what they want and live a more comfortable lifestyle, even if it means working more hours.\(^{109}\) Chang’s novel illustrates the limitations of the model minority ideal and the so-called American dream by showing how difficult it is to achieve it and by showing how personal relationships are negatively affected by the pursuit of the American dream. The Rhees’ plight demonstrates the sacrifices that are made to achieve this dream, and they end up sacrificing themselves because of their work. They also sacrifice their relationship with their daughter, because their relationship is more about work than about love. That is, they are more concerned with what they can gain from their daughter’s success as a model minority than on what June wants, which is why June is less willing to honor them by doing what they

\(^{109}\) Their willingness to work even harder and longer than they already are characterizes them as model minorities, because their goal is to become self-sufficient and successful, rather than just entrepreneurs who cannot survive, no matter how hard they work.
want. When they lose their businesses, they lose themselves. Being financially insecure makes them more vulnerable. If the Rhees had been prosperous owners of a major grocery store chain, they might have been better equipped to defend themselves against the rioters and the looters. Since they are owners of a mom-and-pop store, they have few resources to help them. Race does play a role in their situation. For example, during the L.A. riots, it was mainly the Korean Americans’ stores that were destroyed, not the ones that were owned by white Americans. Law enforcement officers ignored the ethnic entrepreneurs’ pleas for help and allowed their stores to be destroyed, but the officers prevented the same rioters and looters from entering the richer (white) neighborhoods, like Beverly Hills. Thomas tries in vain to protect them. He does far more than June and the implication is that he dies at the end of the novel as a result of his attempts to honor his debt, whereas June escapes from the destruction of the store relatively unscathed. Henry, also, is emotionally scarred as a result of his failure to help Kwang and his supporters, but he also escapes with his life in America more or less intact; he is not willing to give up everything in the way that Thomas does.

The economic disparity between Korean American entrepreneurs and African American local residents also illustrate the discrimination that both groups continue to face in the workplace, because “while greengrocers may enjoy a quick cash return on their work, they must contend with the frustration of substantial downward mobility. Some lament, ‘All that we do is deal with rotten tomatoes.’ Also, unlike professionals working in mainstream society, they are reminded daily of their marginal status” (K. Park 52). The Rhees’ work and their status as model minorities marginalize them. Their failure to improve their economic status, the destruction of their store, and their lack of resources to protect them illustrates their disenfranchisement in their adopted country. When Thomas attempts to honor his debt by working for them, he becomes
even more marginalized than he was before. The African American protestors associate him with the Rhees, which makes him vulnerable to their verbal and physical attacks. As long as he honors his debt to the Rhees, he will never be “acceptable” to the “real” Americans, which shows that being a model minority and a “dutiful, honorable son” are not enough to gain social inclusion.

Work is associated with visibility. When Henry works for his father, the latter encourages him to demonstrate his fluency in English for the customers, but “only in part to spite him, I grunted my best Korean to the other men. I saw that if I just kept speaking the language of our work the customers didn’t seem to see me…I was a comely shadow who didn’t threaten them. I could even catch a rich old woman whose tight strand of pearls pinched in the sags of her neck whispering to her friend right behind me, ‘Oriental Jews.’ I never retaliated…I kept on stacking the hothouse tomatoes and Bose pears” (Lee 53-54). Henry’s resistance of his father’s instructions illustrate his resistance to the terms of his debt to his father, because he thinks that his father is trying to make him into someone he’s not and into someone that he despises: his father. Mr. Park views himself as honorable because he is a model minority and because he raises his son to be the same way, yet Henry is ungrateful for this upbringing and believes that if he were to submit to his father’s expectations it would mean that he would be surrendering to his father’s control for the rest of his life. In his desire to be accepted by white Americans, however, Henry ends up submitting to their control and honoring their values instead, such as when he goes to work for Dennis Hoagland and when he reconciles with his wife Lelia.

Although Henry is “invisible” in some sense as a spy, at the same time he does not necessarily gain more visibility when he quits his job and retreats to the domestic sphere. Even in his work assisting Leila in her ESL classes, he is “invisible” because he wears a costume that conceals who he is. Leila, not Henry, communicates with the students in English. Henry
communicates with them through gestures and sounds. Even after Mr. Park becomes a successful entrepreneur and moves to the suburbs, he preserves his invisibility by avoiding his neighbors: “I know he never felt fully comfortable in his fine house in Ardsley. Though he was sometimes forward and forceful with some of his neighbors, he mostly operated as if the town were just barely tolerating our presence. The only time he’d come out in public was because of me” (Lee 52). Henry surrenders his autonomy in order to placate his wife Lelia. He accepts her authority over him and their marriage. Technically, as a college-educated mole, Henry’s work is classified as “white-collar work,” yet he is not in control of his work in the way that ethnic entrepreneurs are. Entrepreneurs may be subordinate to customers, but they do not have to lie about who they are and they are aware of what they are getting into. Henry is left in the dark about why his employer wants him to investigate Kwang. His father and Mr. Rhee have more control over their work because they own their businesses, yet even that control is severely limited and unstable.

Unlike Henry, who has alternatives to ethnic entrepreneurship and espionage, Thomas has no other option but to work for small business owners, which makes him more willing to honor his debt to them. Thomas is the only employee at the Fruit n’ Food who is not related to the owners. Working in such close conditions every day helps him to develop a deeper perspective of the Rhees’ situation. Although the Rhees struggle to survive and keep their business running, Thomas admires their attempts to achieve the American dream for themselves, especially after he has lost almost all hope of making the dream come true for himself. As an isolated figure with no other family or friends, Thomas develops an attachment to Mr. Rhee in particular and bonds with him through their work. Their relationship is not unique, because “when only a handful of employees worked in a business, they tended to develop personal relationships with the employer. They saw how hard the owner and his family worked, and they
worked alongside them as fellows. Personal knowledge encouraged loyalty and bonds of mutual obligation, making it very difficult for employees to place themselves in conflict with employers” (Light and Bonacich 357). Thomas looks up to Mr. Rhee as a father figure, similar to how Henry looks to Kwang as a father figure, rather than his own father. Kwang represents the man that Henry wishes he had the courage to be. Mr. Rhee represents the man that Thomas aspires to be, especially because of the latter’s commitment to the model minority image and the American dream of becoming a successful entrepreneur, which are two things that Henry strongly disdains. Both men associate their father figures and their debts to them with their work. Mr. Rhee and Kwang’s work causes Thomas and Henry to develop respect and empathy for their situations. Mr. Rhee and Mr. Park’s workaholic habits cause them to have strained marriages, since their focus is on their work rather than their wives. Mrs. Rhee is also a workaholic, so much so that she is more willing to disregard Thomas Pak’s needs and fire him. Mr. Rhee is more sympathetic to Thomas’ situation, while Mrs. Rhee blames Thomas for the problems that their business has faced as a result of his actions. She is actually indebted to Thomas for the assistance that he provided in their store, yet like the other first-generation Asian American parents I have described in this dissertation, she does not feel indebted to her children and believes that her value as a worker is worth more than theirs.

The Rhees’ work as ethnic entrepreneurs means that they must accept their place in the private sphere. Henry does not fully understand his father’s fear of visibility in the American public sphere, but these fears are harshly exposed in the Rhees’ situation. They become visible because of their conflict with African Americans who resent the former’s presence in “their”

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110 “Ethnic entrepreneurship pushes the woman out of the home, but typically it has not alleviated her responsibility for domestic chores and child care. The result is that women must bear a double workload, while their husbands resist taking on traditionally feminine household tasks yet see a decline in their domestic quality of life” (Light and Bonacich 431).
neighborhood; the protesters’ attempts to drive them out of business make them invisible. The African American protestors resent them because “through his or her own exercise of racist agency, that Korean merchant declared allegiance to the White power structure and denigrated Blacks inviting community censure” (C. Kim 127). Yoonmee Chang emphasizes the invisibility of model minorities and claims that Mr. Park “is invisible in that when he is remarked upon he is a launching point from which to illuminate Henry’s quandaries, with little or no perfunctory attention to the peculiarities and specifics of his work as a small business owner” (138). Nadia Y. Kim argues that model minorities are both visible and invisible:

Moreover, Asian Americans are not just visible examples of how non-white foreigners evince the meritocracy that is ‘America.’ What I add to these groundbreaking insights is Asian groups’ status as unknown, ignored, hence, ‘un-citizen’ – another dimension of foreignness, one that is especially damning given that identities do not exist outside of recognition of them (see Guttman 1994). An unrecognized identity, then, is tantamount to not existing. Moreover, an identity recognized (usually by the nation-state) accrues onto itself resources and privileges (e.g. see Espiritu 1992). (150)

Once the Rhees lose their livelihood, they lose everything else. They perpetuate the American myth by working hard, starting and running their own business, and making sure that their daughter receives an American education. The Rhees’ labor and identities as model minorities are not enough to save them from the African American protestors and rioters (nor are they enough to earn protection from the police and the government against these protestors and rioters), who ostracize them for their race and their work. In their eyes, the Rhees’ race, class, and work melds together into one identity that pits them against the African Americans.

Part of the Korean American ethnic entrepreneurs’ struggle is that their work estranges them from African Americans who are unable to become entrepreneurs.\(^\text{111}\) Interracial conflict, such as those between Korean Americans and African Americans, are not just about race; they

\(^{111}\) “In the United States writ large, almost 37 percent of Koreans operate small businesses with employees while 11.3 percent of Blacks and 17.7 percent of Latinos do (comparatively, Koreans’ average sales/receipts are also higher; E. Yu 2001)” (N. Kim 141).
are about the differences between their classes. For example, many African Americans resent the Korean American entrepreneurs who set up their stores in African American neighborhoods because “as a recent immigrant group that is racially triangulated, Koreans often cannot participate equally with whites in the open labor market, but they can take advantage of and benefit from Black residential segregation and economic marginalization. Racial ordering constrains Korean occupational choices, but not as much as it constrains black choices” (N. Kim 48). Work allows people to make connections with each other, so that they do not feel completely isolated, which is evident in the relationships between Kwang and Henry and Thomas and Mr. Rhee. On the other hand, work can create economic divisions between the “haves” (which in Chang’s novel are the ethnic entrepreneurs) and the have-nots (which are the African American residents).  

In *The Fruit n’ Food*, these divisions are maintained and preserved through work. Chang depicts the conflicts that occur when people try to overcome those divisions. Yoon disagrees with the “middleman minority theory” because:

> It pits blacks and Koreans against each other by defining Korean merchants in black neighborhoods as economic exploiters on behalf of white capitalists. But…Koreans are simply filling a vacuum neglected by large businesses. Thus it is false to single out Koreans as a cause of the economic plight of inner-city blacks. Their problems are caused more by larger socioeconomic forces, such as massive job losses and sharp cuts in welfare programs, than by Korean merchants. Radical black leaders criticize Koreans for being interested only in money and for not contributing to the communities where they make this money, but as Abelmann and Lie (1995, 155) succinctly point out, it would be a feat of ethnic romanticism to believe that black merchants would return their profit to the black community today. (Yoon 34).

African Americans often accuse Korean store owners of racism for not hiring more or any black employees and only hiring Korean employees. What they may not be aware of is that often these

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112 “By the time the riots began in 1992, Los Angeles was in the worst recession since the Great Depression, in part led by a mass reduction of manufacturing jobs within the aerospace industry. The groups most harshly affected by these job losses were the Latino and black residents of South Los Angeles who were living near the traditional industrial zones of the city” (Song 56).
employees are actually unpaid family members. Korean employers can increase their profits by employing family members who will work for free, and many employers cannot afford to hire paid workers. June works for the Rhees as an unpaid laborer, and Thomas is only paid meager wages. June and Thomas accept the situation, since they recognize their indebtedness to the Rhees, though Thomas is more willing to adhere to the terms of the debt than June is, who is focused more on enjoying the benefits of a typical American teenage life than on conforming to the image of the model minority daughter that her parents want her to be.

Other Korean American ethnic entrepreneurs return the favor that was given to them when they first arrived in the United States by hiring fellow Korean immigrants, a common practice in the Korean American community, which is what Mr. Park does when he hires other Koreans to work for him. Often these immigrants are willing to work for lower wages than American citizens (such as African Americans) are willing to work for. For example, Henry observes the way his father treats his employees, who “like all successful immigrants before him gently and not so gently exploited his own:

This is way I learn business, this is way they learn business.’ And although I knew he gave them a $100 bonus every now and then I never let on that I felt he was anything but cruel to his workers. I still imagine Mr. Kim and Mr. Yoon’s children, lonely for their fathers, gratefully eating whatever was brought home to them, our overripe and almost rotten mangoes, our papayas, kiwis, pineapples, these exotic tastes of their wondrous new country, this joyful fruit now too soft and too sweet for those who knew better, us near natives, us earlier Americans” (Lee 54-55).

Henry views his father’s treatment of his employees as dishonorable and another excuse to rationalize his disregard of his own debt to his father. He does not believe that his father’s labor and success, which comes at the cost of exploiting others, is worthy of honor. Incidentally, Henry’s contempt for his father’s work and his treatment of his employees does not cause him to reject the money or the lifestyle that his father provides for him, which shows that Henry is not more selfless than his father and is certainly more selfish than Thomas, who is willing to honor
his debt to the Rhees despite the poverty that he is forced to accept in order to work for them (admittedly, he is already poor even before they hire him, but the meager wages they give him means that he will not be able to elevate his economic status as long as he is their employee).

June Rhee is also selfish; she sees the hard labor and suffering that her parents subject themselves to in their store, but it does not motivate her to try harder in school or to honor her debt to them by becoming a successful model minority. Unlike Henry, Mr. Kim and Mr. Yoon feel indebted to Mr. Park for their livelihood, so they are much more willing to tolerate and even appreciate his behavior towards them. As Mr. Park points out, his treatment of his employees is in some sense their “American education” in ethnic entrepreneurship. They will utilize the skills and experiences that they gain from working in Mr. Park’s store in order to start their own businesses. Mr. Kim and Mr. Yoon are older, first-generation Korean American versions of Thomas Pak, though the latter has no current aspirations to run his own store as they do. Henry and June also do not want to become ethnic entrepreneurs, which partly explain why they are less willing than their fathers’ employees to submit to their fathers’ authority.

Chang demonstrates how work silences people, because a voice is associated with agency, and the Rhees’ work fails to provide them with agency, particularly over the black protestors. When their business is destroyed, the Rhees lose their voice entirely. The Rhees’ store was their source of independence and their livelihood. Without it they have no choice but to become dependent on other people. Henry’s work also requires him to be silent. He is silent about the true nature of his work when he spies on other people. The one time he steps out of his silent role and confesses his life experiences to Dr. Luzan, Henry’s coworkers literally silence him by covering his mouth and taking him away from the doctor, who later ends up getting killed and is therefore permanently silenced. Henry developed a bond with Luzan, his “subject,” while
Hoagland is dismissive of Luzan’s death and any role that his company may have played in Luzan’s murder. He tells Henry, “People drown, politically involved fat analysts included. A bad thing can happen in the world. I flush a big one down the dumper and next week some kid in Costa Rica gets a rash. What the fuck am I supposed to do? And then everyone asks, ‘who’s to blame?’” (Lee 45). Henry disagrees with Hoagland’s attitude, but Hoagland points out that like Henry, he is also the son of an entrepreneur: “My pop owned three swell pubs but he still died broke and drunk. The Jews squeezed him first, then the wops, then people like you. Am I sore? No way. It doesn’t matter how much you have. You can own every fucking Laundromat or falafel cart in New York, but someone is always bigger than you. If they want, they’ll shut you up. They’ll bring you down” (Lee 46). Hoagland is more pragmatic than Henry, because he recognizes that no level of professional success or wealth is enough to protect anyone from being silenced. For Hoagland, it’s about “survival of the fittest,” not about honoring debts that people have to each other.

Although Henry witnessed firsthand his father’s alienation and disillusionment in his work as an ethnic entrepreneur, he still wants to believe in the American dream and the possibility that a strong work ethic will be enough to help anyone, including Korean American immigrants, get what they want and never be silenced. Similar to how work teaches Korean immigrants what their “place” in society is, the L.A. riots reinforced their foreign status and made them feel like outsiders, even more so than before.113 The refusal of the LAPD and the government to intervene in the riots and help the store owners made these ethnic entrepreneurs...

113 “During these riots, approximately 2,300 Korean businesses were looted or burned, one Korean was killed, and forty-six Koreans were injured (Korea Times Los Angeles 1992b). The property damages Korean merchants suffered were estimated to be more than 350 million dollars, accounting for about 45 percent of the total property damages from the riots...An inquiry by the Federal Bureau of Investigation indicated that in planning the riots, black gangs had selected specific Korean-owned stores to be destroyed and looted (Korea Times Los Angeles 1992c). Although the violence did begin there, businesses in the neighboring community of Koreatown, over three miles away, were looted and burned as the rioting progressed” (Min and Kolodny 147).
feel alienated because of their race. The Korean Americans like the Rhees had thought that they were entitled to the same rights that other Americans were, but the riots made it clear that others did not share this view. The Rhees are portrayed as being mostly alone and defenseless against the protestors, which mirrors the isolation and helplessness of the Korean American entrepreneurs during the boycotts and riots. These entrepreneurs received little help from other Korean Americans and Asian Americans who did not want to get involved or take sides, for fear of retaliation. Their inability to fight back against the protestors increases Thomas Pak’s sense of indebtedness to the Rhees, because he believes that it would be dishonorable to walk away from them when they need his help. Unlike Henry, who is focused on his own self-preservation, Thomas Pak believes that abandoning his debt to the Rhees would weaken him and make him morally corrupt, which is what happens to Ralph in Typical American when he refuses to honor his debt to his sister Theresa. Thus it is clear that “honor” is associated with selflessness, because it means putting someone else’s needs before your own, especially when that someone is a family member that you are indebted to.

The boycotts may have been instigated by the mistreatment of African American customers in Korean-owned stores, but the boycotts were typically led not only by local African American residents but by black nationalists. “Although some local residents joined the picketing, marches, and demonstrations, those who organized and led the boycott were neither local residents and customers, nor local community leaders. A prominent local resident who occupied a political position believed that the boycott was ‘basically kept alive by people who don’t reside there’” (H. Lee 97-98). Most of the African American and Latino rioters were never brought to justice for their violence against Korean Americans, which deepened the division between these minority groups. The black rioters expressed their rage over the verdict that
acquitted the white police officers of beating Rodney King; they saw the verdict as proof of injustice against African Americans. The rioters’ violence against Korean Americans and the refusal of the government and police force (as well as the media) to show sympathy towards Korean store owners illustrated the fact that there was no justice for Korean Americans either. It is definitely true that many Korean store owners treated black customers like potential shoplifters and were rude to them even during paid transactions, such as Mrs. Rhee and Henry’s treatment of the black customers who were falsely accused of stealing from them. It is also possible that there were many other white store owners who treated black customers in the same way.

What many African American customers do not realize is that the difficult work conditions typically put Korean American store owners on guard, particularly against the people that they view as threat. For example, “the constant fear of crime, close surveillance of customers, and long working hours all combine to cause Korean store owners mental and physical exhaustion and to reinforce their earlier prejudice against blacks…The alleged mistreatment of black customers by Korean store owners is, then, not merely a reflection of their prejudice against blacks but also a coping mechanism necessary for survival in the ghetto economy” (Yoon 205). Lee and Chang provide examples in their novels of how the ethnic entrepreneurs are victimized by African American robbers. In Native Speaker, Henry’s father comes home badly injured one night, and tells his wife that “some black men had robbed the store and taken him to the basement and bound him and beaten him up. They took turns whipping him with the magazine of a pistol. They would probably have shot him in the head right there but his partners came for the night shift and the robbers fled” (Lee 56-57). Mr. Park is traumatized by the attack and leaves work that night, but he goes back to work soon enough and continues running the store. He is an example of strength and perseverance, yet Henry’s
recollection of that event is connected to his knowledge of how his father had studied to be an engineer in Korea and had a graduate degree. His father “once mentioned something about the ‘big network’ in Korean business, how someone from the rural regions of the country could only get so far in Seoul. Then, too, did I wonder whether he’d assumed he could be an American engineer who spoke little English, but of course he didn’t” (Lee 57). Rather than honor his father for surviving the attack and becoming a professional success in spite of it, Henry emphasizes that his father’s professional status is lowered from a promising engineer in Korea to an ethnic entrepreneur in Korea. Mr. Park’s economic success and survival of his attack are not enough to impress Henry, especially not compared to the political success that Kwang has gained.

The rioters and protestors attacked Korean American entrepreneurs like the Rhees for economic reasons, but rationalized their actions with racial reasons. Native Speaker and the Fruit n’ Food demonstrate people’s attempts to define “American, “foreigner,” and “un-American.” People like Kwang and the Rhees are singled out, condemned, and ostracized for being foreigners, despite their years working and living in the United States and their own self-identification as Americans. African Americans “have been in the United States longer than immigrants groups, [which is why] blacks tend to think that they deserve social and economic enhancement ahead of new arrivals. For this reason, they are likely to perceive Korean businesses in their neighborhoods as a hindrance to their own economic mobility and to oppose strongly any signs of disrespect and mistreatment they receive as customers” (Yoon 204). This “disrespect and mistreatment” goes both ways in The Fruit n’ Food. If the Rhees had remained silent, passive, model minority workers, the boycott, the protests, and the destruction of their store would never have happened, yet the author does not mean to indicate that that would have been the right decision either. Both options keep them silenced and subordinate, as well as
identify them as “not-American,” which illustrates the racial and economic disparity between Asian Americans and other Americans.

Despite the animosity between many ethnic entrepreneurs and local residents, the boycotts and riots were not supported by the entire black community.\textsuperscript{114} For example, there is the elderly, kindly, African American customer of the Rhees, Mr. Harris, who continues to be loyal to them throughout the book and who is attacked by an Asian gang at the end of the novel. Henry tries to defend him and ends up nearly getting killed as a result, which demonstrates that not all Korean Americans and not all African Americans, including the ones in this book, can be judged through racial stereotypes, because doing so mistakenly presumes that they are all the same.

Although the protestors in Chang’s novel succeed in driving the Rhees out of business, there is no mention of whether they succeeded in their goal of creating a community that revolves around African American entrepreneurs. By a similar token, after the Big Apple boycott and the L.A. riots, the number of African American entrepreneurs did not significantly increase. Korean Americans continue to own and operate businesses in African American neighborhoods, though they did agree to hire more African American employees to appease the protestors. The fact that Korean Americans and African Americans are both minorities is not enough to create solidarity between the two groups, mainly because of economic disparity between them, yet their racial differences are emphasized in their conflict. Once the Rhees lose their store, they not only lose their livelihood and their voices, they also lose any sense of belonging they had in that neighborhood. They are no longer in control over their work or their lives, and thus the Rhees

\textsuperscript{114} “The Korean-black conflict is therefore an essentially political phenomenon, not merely an economic competition or a cultural clash. Contrary to the general public’s perception, only a small percentage of blacks display strong anti-Korean sentiments and support black boycotts among Korean business. Min’s survey in New York in 1992 shows that only 26 percent of the black respondents supported the 1990-91 boycott in Brooklyn, and an even smaller 14 percent agreed to the statement that blacks should not buy from Korean stores (Min 1996, Ch. 6)” (Yoon 206).
suffer a “death” in that their American dream dies. When the Rhees’ American dream is destroyed, Thomas’ life is destroyed as well. In his attempt to become a model minority and honorable son who repaid his debt to his “parents,” he was forced to sacrifice himself, and his sacrifice is not honored by his parent-creditors, the Rhees. Instead, Mrs. Rhee blames him for causing their downfall, though her false, racist accusations against the two African American customers also make her partly responsible. The one person who did not fully honor her debt to her parents is June, and there is still the possibility that she will become the successful model minority that her parents want her to be. Her parents’ downfall makes her even more bound to them than she was before. As proprietors of their own store, they were barely able to be self-sufficient. As employees of someone else’s business, they will have to rely more on her emotional support and their hope that she will find a way to escape (and bring her parents with her) from the situation. In Native Speaker, after Henry betrays Kwang, the ties that bound them to each other are permanently severed, and he does not know what happens to his father figure once the latter moves back to Korea. There is nothing more that Henry can or will do for Kwang after his final betrayal, especially since his decision to dishonor his father figure is so unforgivable.

Conclusion:

Native Speaker and The Fruit n’ Food destabilize the model minority stereotype and show how this identity complicates the sense of indebtedness and honor that second-generation Korean Americans feel towards their parents. The Rhees, John Kwang, and Mr. Park are all model minorities, yet their lives fall short of the American dream. The Rhees and the Parks fit the model minority stereotype by being introverted, whereas Kwang is extroverted. Kwang is less isolated than the Rhees and Parks due to his involvement in politics, but he does not have a
lot of political allies. His focus is on his voters and the ethnic communities, and he remains an outsider in the larger political sphere. His achievements provoke suspicion from opponents like the INS, who believe that Kwang’s association with minority immigrants automatically means that he is more willing to break the laws or code of conduct than American workers. Kwang loses his chance to improve his supporters’ status in the country, and they all end up getting deported instead.

Mr. Park is alienated from his son and leads a lonely life. Henry does not fully appreciate the sacrifices that his father made for him and thinks, “What belief did I ever hold in my father, whose daily life I so often ridiculed and looked upon with such abject shame?” (Lee 53). Rather than honor his debt to his father by using the work as an opportunity to understand him and relate to him, the teenage Henry resents his father for making him give up his time with his white American friends, whose company he prefers, and also because he is ashamed to be “serving the blue-haired matrons, and the fancy dogs, and the sensible young mothers pushing antique velvet-draped prams, and their most quiet of infants, and the banker fathers brooding about annoyed and aloof and humorless” (Lee 53). Henry believes that honoring his debt to his father will mean that he will be subordinate, silent, and passive for the rest of his life, which is why he latches on to Kwang instead. The politician does not treat Henry like a partner, though, but like an unpaid employee and a confidant. Henry is more willing to be exploited by Kwang than by his father, since Kwang embodies the American masculinity that Henry and his father lack.

The Rhees are driven out of business and lose everything that they worked for, leaving them without the optimism that had fueled their work before. Thomas loses his job at their store and nearly loses his life in his attempt to protect them as well as one of their black customers. With the exception of Kwang, these people followed the code of conduct for model minorities,
especially in regards to the American dream, but it was not enough. Their downfall shows that race ultimately matters more to their opponents than their economic or political achievements. Corruption in politics is not racially exclusive. When white politicians’ corruption or misdeeds are exposed, their racial identities are not emphasized in the same way that minority politicians’ racial identities are. The latter’s race is thus intertwined with their mistakes or crimes, and it is used by their white opponents as “justification” for their resentment or hatred towards minorities. The protestors believe that the Rhees’ Korean identities make them more likely to be prejudiced against African Americans. The white mob outside Kwang’s house emphasizes that he does not “belong” in “their” country and succeed in driving him out of it. They don’t attack him for his work as a politician so much as for his racial identity as a Korean, which they believe makes him “un-American” or not fit to be an American. In his desire to be perceived as an “American,” Henry breaks ties with Kwang, accepts the fact that he cannot save him, and attempts to restore his marriage to his white American wife. In other words, he betrays and dishonors Kwang in order to protect his own American status, yet he continues to be viewed as “not-American” due to his acceptance of the terms of the model minority identity.

The poverty that Thomas Pak endures even after being hired by the Rhees shows that a job is not enough to elevate someone’s economic status, no matter how hard he works, which disproves the model minority stereotype and the American dream that a strong work ethic is all anyone needs in order to become self-sufficient. His work makes him more dependent on the Rhees, who are not as poor as Thomas, but they still struggle to survive. The fact that the Rhees own their business is not enough to elevate their economic or social status, because their status is dependent on a financially unstable business. Both novels, therefore, describe American failure stories; they show how the American dream falls short for the characters and how the pursuit of
this dream causes people to sacrifice their relationships with other people and alienate them from other classes and races. Chang and Lee emphasize the Korean store owners’ problems, but neither author portrays them in a completely blameless light, due to the latter’s own bigotry and mistrust of other minorities.

Henry blames his father for their distant relationship, yet Lee implies that the fault partly lies with Henry. If Henry had honored his debt to his father rather than refuse to recognize that he was indebted to him at all, he might have been in a better position to empathize with what his father was going through. In other words, if Henry had been more like Thomas, he would have been able to feel a strong sense of kinship with his father. Henry does express his ambivalence over the ways he betrays other people, such as the immigrants that he identifies with his father, yet he continues to betray them until he finally quits his job. If he had listened to his conscience and recognized his sense of obligation, he would have had more compassion for other people and done more than just insult Dennis Hoagland and Jack and complain to them for how they pressured him to utilize his ties to these people to their company’s advantage. Furthermore, if he had recognized that he was in fact indebted to his father, he would have been less inclined to work for Glimmer and Company in the first place. He might have stronger connections with other people without having to withhold parts of himself from them. He would thus feel less alienated and happier.

In contrast, Thomas Pak’s commitment to honor his debt to the Rhees, while it does give him a sense of purpose, does not provide him with a happy ending, since the implication by the end of the novel is that he dies as a result of his injuries sustained during the riots. Nevertheless, he is unlike Henry that he attempts to form honest connections with other people, such as June and the Rhees, though even with them he withholds important facts of information, such as the
fact that he is using June to feel less lonely and to make himself feel even more connected to the Rhees. Despite his indiscretions, Thomas is the “honorable son” by living his life according to the terms of his family, even if it means sacrificing himself.

June is the “dishonorable” daughter since she is not willing to sacrifice herself for her parents in the way that Thomas does, and she has a clearer sense of the limitations of the model minority ideal that her parents and Thomas try to adhere to. She would not have been able to save her family or their store, but at least her efforts to help them would have made them feel less alone and more united in their fight against their antagonists. She struggles to make a connection with Thomas, due to his guilt over their relationship and due to the fact that he honors his debt to her parents by being a model minority and she does not. However, despite her unwillingness to do everything her parents want, it is the “dutiful son’s” actions, not the “dishonorable daughter’s,” that bring about the family’s downfall.
Chapter Eight: Closing Statements

What is emphasized again and again in these novels is that first-generation Asian Americans sacrifice their own professional aspirations in order to work as entrepreneurs, service workers, or sweatshop seamstresses and provide a good life for their children. They raise their children to follow their example and become model minorities, believing that even if they can’t achieve their goals in America, their children will. The first generation transfers their own American dreams to their children. The authors, however, demonstrate that what the children really want and need from their parents is not a comfortable lifestyle but emotional support and understanding. The first generation believes that they demonstrate their love for their children through their work. The second generation interprets the parents’ labor as the source of the distance between them. That is one reason they do not want to become model minorities, because they do not want to sacrifice personal relationships and suppress their true selves and individual desires like their parents did.\textsuperscript{115} Furthermore, being “American” is more important to the second generation than it is to the first generation, which is why the former is more conflicted about the model minority stereotype, which defines them as “not American.”

As second-generation children who spend the first part of their lives dependent on their parents for survival and for ensuring that the children can have lives in America in the first place, their lifelong sense of indebtedness extends that dependence. They are dependent on their parents for the latter’s love, approval, and validation of the children’s lives and work in America. When the children fail or refuse to honor their debts, their parents withhold their love, approval, and validation, which makes the children question the validity of their status in America and also resent their parents for making them feel like “incomplete” Americans. Henry Park and

\textsuperscript{115} “Small business contributes to family breakdown in the following ways...Even if parents are ostensibly pursuing small business for the goal of providing opportunities for their children, the children themselves may still suffer from immediate neglect” (Light and Bonacich 431).
Kingston’s narrator blame their parents for instilling their Asian beliefs and cultural practices into their upbringing, so that the children never feel like they can become “Americans.” They believe that the only way to claim this identity is to free themselves of the debts that bind them to their families, not realizing until too late that their racial identities and other Americans’ prejudice prevent them from becoming unhyphenated Americans, whether or not these children honor their debts.

Almost all the parents, like Jade Snow’s parents, Mr. Park, and the Rhees, raise their children to become model minorities, believing that this identity is the best that Asian Americans can hope for (especially if the parents assume that identity for themselves) and that it will be the best way for the children to achieve the American dream. This added pressure makes the children feel even more bound to their parents. They feel like they are failed “Americans” and failed model minorities when they cannot make that dream come true. Some of these young people feel more bound to their parents than the others, largely due to the economic status of their parents. That is, the wealthier and more successful their parents are, the easier it is for them to live independently. The poorer and less successful they are (particularly if they are low-wage workers), the more likely they are to be dependent on their families, which makes the younger generation guiltier for leaving them behind in order to pursue their own dreams.

Despite their attempts to break away from this stereotype, the children often end up becoming the model minorities that their parents raised them to become: Jade Snow writes a book describing the discrimination that Asian Americans face, but other than her writing, she is never able to become more than a potter in Chinatown. The narrator aspires to be like the woman warrior, who successfully led armies and fought wars, and unlike her mother, a dissatisfied laundress who gave up her medical career in China. Kingston’s protagonist is more like her
mother than she would like to admit, since she also becomes resourceful, well-educated, and hard-working. Leila’s parents strove to become successful model minorities, yet they were only able to become hard-working, low-wage workers who remained dependent on their children, disproving the self-sufficiency of the model minority stereotype, which motivates Leila to free herself from the binds that tie her to them. However, she continues the work that she did for her parents in her work as a community liaison, helping other first-generation Chinese Americans who are a lot like her parents, and she tries to teach them to become model minorities, reinforcing her parents’ belief that the identity of the model minority was the best way to achieve the American dream. Rather than empathize with these people, she emphasizes the importance of being self-sufficient, which Asian Americans are pressured to be, so that they will not need help from liaisons like her or the government. Henry believes that he is “better” than his father after he escapes the life of ethnic entrepreneurship, yet his work for Glimmer and Company requires him to be a passive, silent, and subordinate model minority, an identity that he is ambivalent about but ultimately submits to in his final betrayal of John Kwang.

All the characters recognize each other’s professional and personal limitations and weaknesses, which they use to rationalize their decisions to challenge or reject their debts or obligations to each other, or which they use to rationalize their decision to stay and honor their debts to their families. The children are quicker to judge their parents than the capitalist system that exploits them, especially since the children do not feel like they have the power to change the capitalist system to their parents’ professional advantage. They do not all fully recognize the structural factors that limit the older generation’s employment and identity in America, including discrimination, racism, and cultural assimilation. When Nina, June, Kingston’s narrator, and Henry refuse to fully honor their debts to their parents, they are portrayed as selfish and morally
questionable. These people try to justify their actions by emphasizing that the ties that bind them to their families imprison them within their own homes or make them feel as if they are suppressing their individual identities, and it is true that debt “confines” people. It makes them obey the people they are indebted to and feel guilty or unethical if they disobey them. By challenging the debt or refusing to honor it, these characters lose their own sense of honor, making them feel like they are inferior children, especially compared to the sons and daughters who do honor the ties that bind them to their families, like Thomas and Leila. The latter may still feel ambivalent and even resentful of these binds, yet they do not try to completely free themselves so that they can stay connected to their families and also maintain the moral high ground. Honoring the debt is not necessarily better for the children, because it can still make them feel unhappy, unfulfilled, and alienated from their families and the Americans whose recognition they initially desired.

These situations illustrate that there are multiple responses to this type of debt, yet the fact that none of the children get an unequivocally happy ending shows that there is no clear solution to these types of debts. When it comes to the debts that second-generation Asian Americans owe their parents, these debts can never actually be fully repaid; they must devote their entire lives to repaying them. That is why they think it is unfair for the parents to impose these debts on their children in the first place, because it creates a constant feeling of tension between them. Both sides end up feeling alienated and resentful; the parents resent their children for not honoring their debts to them, and the children resent their parents for pressuring them to adhere to the debts in the first place. The children also become alienated from their siblings when they cannot agree on the right way to honor their family. No matter what choice they make, they feel dissatisfied and unhappy. The authors suggest that if the parents had loved their children
unconditionally, their children would have been more willing to return their love. They would have been more understanding of their parents’ situations. The children would not necessarily have grown up to be failures, but at least they would have been less disillusioned with the false promises of the model minority ideal and the American dream. Their parents should have educated them about the falseness of these ideals, especially after experiencing the effects of them for themselves. Even if the first and second generations continued to be alienated from the rest of American society due to their racial identities, at least they would have been able to take refuge in the bonds of their family. Instead, the children face the threat of a double rejection: the rejection of their families if they do not honor their debts, and the rejection of the American society that refuses to recognize them as Americans.

The parents would have been more “honorable” if they had allowed their children more freedom to pursue their own desires, and the children would have been more “honorable” if they had found a way to reconcile their own needs with the needs of their families. That is, they could have become successful by pursuing their own dreams (without becoming model minorities) despite the discrimination and racism against Asian Americans, and honored their parents in that way. However, all the authors demonstrate that this idea is easier said than done. They do not necessarily present a solution, except to emphasize that the loss of family is even more devastating than the loss of the American dream. That is why it is so important to maintain these family bonds, without creating a sense of indebtedness. One possible way to do that would be for parents and children to accept each other, despite their limitations, rather than to use these limitations as an excuse to challenge or control each other.
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