China Men Study Guide

China Men by Maxine Hong Kingston

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The text is presented as a biography of the author's male relatives and covers four generations, including a great grandfather, grandfather, and the author's father. It also describes the experiences of the author's siblings, particularly one brother, who served in the United States of America's Navy during the Viet Nam conflict. The text is divided into chapters, which are largely presented in chronological order. However, there are notable exceptions. Major chapters are separated by very short chapters, which present brief vignettes derived from Chinese folklore or other relevant but disparate sources. These concise chapters have themes, which, in general, complement the subsequent biographical chapters and serve as extended allegory.

The text contains a fair amount of autobiographical material, which is interspersed with biographical information. The text is additionally complicated by the lack of many elements traditionally considered fundamental to biographical treatments, and the inclusion of many elements traditionally considered appropriate only for works of fiction. Dates are vague. Events happen during a broadly specified period of time only, or dates are presented as a suite of possibilities. Textual chronology is not particularly discernable beyond major historic events. Family relationships are not specified and periodically appear to be contradictory. Finally, fictional or fictionalized events are interspersed with factual events without, in most cases, noting what is factual and what is probably not. The biographical nature of the text is, therefore, open to interpretation and speculation. This approach to biography is simultaneously difficult yet engaging and makes the book particularly interesting to read and consider.

The basic biographical elements of the text include the presentation of the voyages between China and the United States of America, including pre-Statehood Hawaii, of the author's male relatives. Most of the family information centers on the experiences of the men as laborers in America, and how their Chinese heritage influenced their decisions and treatment. The author's relatives participated in many of the most important historical events of American history and yet they are not widely remembered. Their anonymity as Chinese laborers is counterbalanced against their fundamental role in the successful development of the author's extended immigrant family of Chinese Americans.

On Discovery

On Discovery Summary

Once upon a time Tang Ao searched for the Gold Mountain and came upon a land of women. He was surprised but imagined he was pleased to discover the land of women, assuming as a man he would be in good standing. The women took him to meet their queen. They first chained him, then pierced his ears, broke and bound his feet, and painted his face. They caused him then to serve food at a banquet where the guests commented on his feminine charms. In the land of women, there are no taxes and no wars, and the land of women is in North America.

On Discovery Analysis

Tang Ao is a character in a traditional Chinese story. Here he is presented in a different manner. The adventuring man is taken by women and treated as a woman; his ears are pierced, his toes and feet are purposefully broken and bound so they will become culturally attractive. Tang Ao's face is plucked and painted and he is turned into a serving woman. The opening scene, though brief, serves as an allegory to the experiences presented in subsequent biographical chapters. Like Tang Ao, many Chinese men traveled to the United States of America in search of wealth only to discover that their destination country emasculated them and treated them as inferior and subservient beings. As the opening presentation in the text, the allegorical importance of the story of Tang Ao is clearly emphasized.

On Fathers

On Fathers Summary

As a child, the author and her brothers and sisters sat in front of the house and waited for their father to return from work. They see a man approaching and run to meet him, calling him their father, and searching through his pockets for treats. The man laughs and insists he is not their father. The children retreat to the house and consult with their mother who confirms that the man is not their father, though he appears largely the same. A few moments later, their father does arrive and, not surprisingly, looks just like the stranger who had previously passed by.

On Fathers Analysis

The very brief anecdote presented here is compelling yet difficult. One possible reading is that all Chinese men look alike and are interchangeable. While this may indeed be the perception of many of the Caucasians presented in the text it is strange to encounter this perception among the man's own family who are, of course, also Chinese. The scene can otherwise be interpreted as not suggesting equivalence, but simply ignorance. The children do not know their father because he is always gone away working and does not actively participate in childrearing. This interpretation also has problems. However, in later chapters, the author notes that all of the children worked aside their father almost every day. In any event, it is clear that their father is a stranger to them.

The Father from China

The Father from China Summary

The Chinese American narrator will tell the biographic story of the men in her family. She remembers that her father could be a pleasant and happy man, and she remembers a few specific occasions when they had fun together as a family. However, far more often her father had been a dour and angry man. He constantly used vulgar and abusive language and usually frowned and scowled as he worked. The narrator's father never talked much about his pre-immigrant life in China, so the information that will be presented is a mix of facts, innuendo, reasoning, and imagination. The narrator then goes back in time to tell the story of her father's life and emigration.

In China, Ah Goong and his wife Ah Po have three sons, Dai Bak, Ngee Bak, and Sahm Bak, when their fourth and youngest son, BiBi (later Ed), is born in the year of the rabbit, probably 1903. BiBi is born as a skinny baby with long fingers, and Ah Po declares him the family scholar. Unlike his sturdy older brothers who work the fields, BiBi is raised as a privileged child by an indulgent mother; he is preened and groomed to take the imperial examination and thereby increase the family's social status.

When BiBi is about one-month-old, Sahm Bak climbs onto the bed to look at his younger brother. Sahm Bak begins jumping on the bed and then innocently begins jumping on BiBi's stomach, which he finds softer than the bed. Ah Po rushes to the rescue, and BiBi recovers from his ill usage. Ah Goong had wanted his last child to be a girl. Ah Goong locates a peasant family who has a baby girl the approximate age of BiBi and then smuggles BiBi out of the house and into the village where he trades his boy child for the family's girl child. Ah Goong then returns home and deposits the baby girl in BiBi's bed. In the morning Ah Po is outraged at the ridiculous trade. Ah Po's feet are bound, but she nevertheless follows Ah Goong to the peasant's house, vituperating him the entire way, and reverses the trade, scolding the villagers for trying to trade a girl for a boy. When BiBi is about one year old he accompanies Ngee Bak to the family rice paddy. BiBi enters the water and plays with the crop, damaging and destroying many shoots. Ah Goong sends Dai Bak to find a suitable switch for punishment, and then whips Dai Bak for failing to properly discipline his younger brothers. BiBi grows up and becomes a successful and skilled gambler. Ah Po says he is a lucky child, an auspicious child.

When BiBi is fourteen-years-old, he travels two days to take the imperial examination. As is traditional, he assumes a new name, an adult name of his own devising, when he reports to the examiners. His new name translates into English as 'Think Virtue,' though in Cantonese it is not quite so lyrical or symbolic. BiBi is housed in a utilitarian room for the evening and determines to stay awake the entire night. Mimicking the reported behavior of legendary scholars before him he ties his pigtail to an iron ring on the ceiling to prevent his head from drooping in sleep; when even this is insufficient he pierces his thigh with an awl so the pain will keep him alert. Over the next several days he takes his

oral examination and performs adequately by reciting hours of memorization, and he takes his written examination writing in several styles. BiBi then waits for three days, along with the other candidates, while the examinations are considered and graded. BiBi realizes that many men fail the examination many times, and there is no irreversible shame in failure. In fact, there is a sort of tradition of failure among some families. BiBi is finally notified that he has passed the imperial examination, but not with particular honors, and he is assigned the job of schoolteacher in his home village.

Some years later, BiBi's wife's parents prove quite superstitious and spend a prolonged period engaged in various divination rituals to locate a suitable husband for their daughter. They finally settle on BiBi and a marriage contract is arranged between the two families. BiBi's betrothed spends the night before her wedding performing a prolonged crying-singing ritual viewed by other women of her village. She wails about her awful state and sings beautiful songs. All the women feel her performance is far above average. On their wedding day BiBi and his bride are married among opulent and beautiful surroundings; the ceremony is accompanied by many traditional symbols and rituals. That night BiBi's bride enters his bed and serves him tea. She deliberately sits so close to him that she cannot bow to him, and he sees her face for the first time.

BiBi proves to be an inadequate schoolteacher. He does not command the respect or admiration of his students and he finds the occupation unrewarding and denigrating. He spends two years working as a teacher and becomes haggard and disappointed. Although he eventually has two children, he finds no particular satisfaction in his family life. He begins to dream of the Gold Mountain, or America, where riches are available for the taking and adventure awaits the daring man. Many other men in his family have traveled to the Gold Mountain and returned with wealth and fame. Many evenings are spent with the men of the family boasting of their exploits on the Gold Mountain and telling tall tales. One day Kua Goong, Ah Po's brother, returns from a trip of banditry and adventure in the countryside. Because times are difficult, Kua Goong is determined to go to the Gold Mountain and obtain some riches. He whips up frenzy among the men, and many men in the family pledge that they will accompany Kua Goong. BiBi determines that he, too, will travel to the Gold Mountain and seek his fortune. The year is 1924.

Preparations are made for the voyage. Although BiBi has legitimate papers for entry into the United States of America, he also buys a set of fake papers, in case his legitimate papers don't work out right. Money is collected and divided and an entire crew of men is assembled. The men tell their wives that if they cheat in their absence they will be killed by various horrible means upon their return. The wives tell the men that, if they cheat while abroad, the wives will mutilate and torture the women with whom the men cheat.

The narrator does not know many facts concerning BiBi's actual voyage from China to the United States of America, so she offers two hypothetical accounts. One is romantic and exciting, but probably incorrect. The second account is routine and tedious, but is probably somewhat correct.

BiBi may have traveled by ship to Cuba where he worked briefly as a cigar-roller. He then may have stowed away upon a freighter and, with the assistance of a smuggler, hid in a packing crate while the freighter traveled to New York City harbor. BiBi may have then been smuggled ashore past the Statue of Liberty and found safekeeping with an underground network of illegal Chinese immigrants. All this may have happened in addition to several other exciting events, but probably did not happen, as BiBi was a law-abiding immigrant.

On the other hand, BiBi may have traveled by ship to San Francisco harbor where he was placed in a holding building on Angel Island with hundreds of other hopeful immigrants. The food in the holding cell may have been nearly inedible, and the conditions may not have been particularly nice. Although he might have remained in detention for several weeks, he may have been eventually granted permission to legally enter the United States of America.

Regardless of how BiBi arrived in America, he travels to New York City and establishes himself as a laundry operator with three friends. The four men operate a successful business and apparently live and work in the same facility. BiBi re-names himself Ed, after Thomas Edison the inventor. The four men work long hours but make good money. Ed buys expensive suits and has his hair professionally cut. The men spend their free time going to pay-per-dance dance halls and dancing with white women. Ed often writes home and sends photographs. Through his correspondence, he learns that his two children have died, and his wife wants him to return to China. Ed demurs and tells his wife that she may join him on the condition that she earns a science degree from a Western university. Ed's citizenship becomes firmly established, as his wife earns a medical degree. In late 1939 or early 1940, fifteen years after BiBi's departure, she emigrates from a war-torn China to the United States of America.

Ed's co-workers feel that he has been illogical in sending for his wife. Although she cooks for all of them, plays a subservient role, and works hard they find her presence distasteful. She observes traditional Chinese holidays and, as a new immigrant, still has many Chinese behaviors. Her arrival ends Ed's long independence. She is highly educated and they are not. After a little while, Ed's three business partners furtively organize the laundry into a legitimate business, which excludes Ed from ownership. They inform him that he is, simply, an employee of their business. Ed decides it is time to move to California. He and his wife leave New York City on a train bound for the West Coast.

The Father from China Analysis

The biographical narrative presented in this chapter, and indeed throughout the entire text, is simultaneously interesting and problematic. The narrator states that many, if not most, of the events portrayed as factual are fictive events describing what might have happened; this presents difficulty if the text is interpreted as conventionally biographical. The narrative is engaging and interesting because of the constant interweaving of fiction and biography, but there is generally no way to know where one ends and the other

begins. The text is perhaps best approached as a talk-story, a form of traditional narrative, which enjoys popularity in China. In another sense, the text can perhaps be viewed as a strangely inverted *Roman a Clef*. For example, the anecdotes of BiBi studying by the light of captured fireflies, tying his pigtail to a ring in the ceiling to remain awake, and plunging an awl into his thigh to remain alert during study are all events in traditional Chinese folktales about folk heroes. Here, they are presented as factual events in the life of an actual person.

The writing presented in the chapter, as throughout the entire text, is incredibly well crafted and precise. Numerous words' meanings are compared and contrasted between the Cantonese and the English translations. Imagery is very strong and characterization is excellent. These are elements found frequently in fiction but traditionally absent to such a degree in biography. The chapter does contain a notable amount of profanity and other vulgar language, principally attributed to individual speech but not infrequently present in the narrative itself. The attributed vulgar speech is often of a sexual nature and is generally derogatory and denigrating to women.

The opening paragraphs of the novel contain a large amount of descriptive information about living in 1940s Stockton, California, and are particularly interesting and well written. Throughout the chapter, dialogue is convincing and articulate and the Chinese culture is highlighted in a way that is accessible to a non-Chinese audience. For example, the discussion between husbands and wives prior to prolonged separation is interesting - wives guilty of infidelity will be murdered, whereas husbands guilty of infidelity will be punished by having their extra-marital lovers mutilated and tortured. Thus, only females involved in events of infidelity will suffer consequences. It is also interesting to note that the voyage to the Gold Mountain, that is America, is viewed as a brief excursion for economic gain, whereas the narrator notes the trips typically lasted for several years, if not indefinitely. In other words, this is not a temporary separation by modern standards. The emigration event transpires in 1924, and several of the mature women are noted as having bound feet, a practice which was officially declared illegal in 1911 and was gradually abandoned thereafter.

BiBi was born in the Year of the Rabbit, which is provided as either 1891, 1903, or 1915 C.E. The actual year is not distinguished from among the three alternatives. The date of 1915 is impossible due to other ages and dates specified. Since BiBi emigrated in 1924, several years after having passed the Imperial Examinations at age 14, the most likely date is 1903. This date, however, is problematic, because the Imperial Examinations were suspended in 1905. Thus, BiBi would had to have been born in 1891 to take the Imperial Examination at age 14 in 1905, the last year in which they were offered as stated in the text. This would indicate, however, that he then spent 19 years as a schoolteacher and emigrated when he was 33 years old. The text does not seem to suggest that he spent nearly two decades as a schoolteacher or that he was in his mid-thirties, when he emigrated. Additionally, he is later noted as being of draft-able age in 1942, which would preclude 1891. A potential explanation is that BiBi's involvement in the Imperial Examination process is, like many of the events described, fictive or intended to be read as allegorical or representative. This explanation is probably

correct, because BiBi is stated to have been born in 1903 in San Francisco, where he probably lived until at least 1906, in the first sentence of *The American Father*.

BiBi re-names himself Ed upon his arrival in the United States of America. He becomes successful in a laundry business and able to buy expensive clothes and pay for dances with white women. He lives with three other Chinese men, all eager to embrace the American way of life. They work hard and prosper in their business. The news of the death of Ed's two children seems to have little or no impact on his life or attitudes. When his wife wants him to return home he refuses. He tells her she may join him, but not as an ignorant Chinese woman. She must earn a university degree in science from a rigorous Western university. Incredibly, she agrees and completes the assigned task, earning a medical degree. She leaves China on one of the last boats allowed out by the conquering Japanese. Her arrival in New York City is, to Ed's business partners, the end of their American freedom and way of life. For example, instead of gobbling take-out, they eat her home-cooked meals with traditional Chinese etiquette. Within a short period of time, they exclude Ed from the business, and he moves to the West Coast to pursue an as-yet-unknown opportunity.

The Ghostmate

The Ghostmate Summary

Many young men have frequently walked along a mountain path. Some of the have been farmers or artisans, and some of them have recently failed the Imperial Examinations. Many young men have been caught in unexpected rainstorms. One such young man finds refuge in a lonely house, as he seeks shelter from the storm. He is taken in and cared for by a young widow. Instead of being treated as a temporary refugee from the weather, he is given food and gifts. He also senses a sexual allure within his young hostess. She entices him to stay, and he remains long after the storm has ended. In fact, he remains for many years. Eventually, he determines he must leave. His hostess attempts to persuade him to stay, finally encircling him in her naked body. Nonetheless, he is determined to leave and return home.

When he returns to the countryside, he tries to sell his wares but other Chinese are shocked at his alarming appearance and strange manners and they avoid him. Eventually, he meets, quite by accident, an old acquaintance from his home village. The villager takes him back to his home village. His home village takes him in and gradually restores him to normalcy. Some time later, he is walking along the same mountain path and discovers that the house in which he had lived in luxury is a decrepit ruin. His former hostess is dead and, in fact, has been buried for many, many years.

The Ghostmate Analysis

The ghost mate, or the young attractive widow who entices and seduces the young wandering man, is an extended allegory for the allure of the Gold Mountain. The young man is represented as one of any number of young men, often artists, farmers, craftsmen, or those seeking adventure or employment. The young man is voyaging through life in China, when the symbolic storm arrives. Rather than seeking shelter in his village, he enters the home of a young widow and is enticed by her money, luxury and perceived sexuality. Upon his return from the ghost mate's estate, he is encumbered by belongings - gifts she has given him - and his appearance is extraordinarily strange due to his long estrangement from Chinese culture and norms.

The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains

The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains Summary

The chapter begins with three short anecdotes and then proceeds to a longer biographical section. The author sends a small sum of United States of America money to her cousin in China to enable the relative to purchase a bicycle. The author's mother informs her that the cousin is not really a cousin, but only a distant relative. The cousin's father then corresponds with the author and demands his own money, and threatens to murder the cousin, his own child, if the money is not received quickly. The author ignores the threat.

The author receives a letter from an educated Chinese emigrant, who had lived in the same village as her ancestors. He characterizes the village as Communist and rural and notes there are rusting automobiles and other abandoned relics of past voyages to the Gold Mountain, useless in a village without gasoline or electricity. He comments that some villages are polite, but some are very rude. The author wants to visit the village, even visit China, but her family does not allow it. Her family does not want any attention or official scrutiny and feels there would be no purpose to a visit.

The author visits Hawaii and seeks a connection to her ancestors. She is able to find only an oblique connection through the landscape. One day, she and unnamed others swim out to Mokoli'i Island, known locally as Chinaman's Hat because of its vertical profile. She finds the name, initially, distasteful. After spending a day lounging in the tide pools and enjoying the natural beauty of the place, she changes her mind and feels it an honor to have the island named after a workingman's hat. After the three previously noted short anecdotes are related, the remainder of the long chapter is devoted to a detailed biography of the immigration of Bak Goong, one of the author's great grandfathers.

During China's violent civil war, known in the West as the Taiping Rebellion, Bak Goong immigrates to Hawaii, around c. 1855. He works as a laborer on a sugar cane plantation for $1.00 each week. He signs a three-year labor contract and then avoids conscription, as he makes his way to Canton. In Canton, he finds travel to Hawaii aboard a ship, where he gains employment as crew. Although he is part of the crew, he lives in the hold with the Chinese passengers, who remain locked below throughout most of the day. While at sea, Bak Goong decides, one day, to smoke opium, known colloquially as 'tobacco shit.' He enjoys feeling simultaneously disengaged from his physical cares and engaged with a higher clarity of vision, but he determines that opium is addicting and expensive and does not return to the drug. He successfully makes a three-month voyage and arrives at Hawaii.

Bak Goong joins an organized group of workers and is led through the Hawaiian countryside to a distant beach area that is encumbered by thick trees and underbrush. He lives in a labor camp and spends the next several months in the backbreaking labor of clearing new farmland. The Chinese contract workers are joined by Hawaiian native workers who continue employment, until the only work remaining is the clearing of large stumps and boulders. This most difficult phase of work is performed exclusively by the contracted Chinese men. After the land is fully cleared, a crop of sugar cane is planted, raised and harvested. The crop requires constant attention and care. Bak Goong meets another work camp employee, named Bak Sook Goong, another of the author's great grandfathers. While in Hawaii, Bak Sook Goong meets and marries a local Hawaiian woman. She is his third wife, who will return to China with him.

The work camp enforces a no-talking-while-working rule, which particularly angers the Chinese workers, as they would prefer to sing while working. Month after month, the men toil in the heat and periodically receive meager pay from which they pay fines for speaking while working and breaking or wearing out tools. Bak Goong discovers the pay is not as lucrative as initially promised. Some laborers kill themselves, rather than face another year of contractual labor. Bak Goong develops a persistent cough, which gradually worsens. However, he also learns that he can 'cough-talk' while working, by coughing out single-syllable Chinese words.

While working through his three-year contract, Bak Goong spends most of his free-time enjoying the ocean vistas and talking with friends. One day, he finds and unwittingly eats a hallucinogenic mushroom. It's an experience, which he finds enjoyable but does not repeat. He spends his few days off in town, exploring the countryside, or resting at the plantation. Christian missionaries preach to the Chinese workers, and some convert to Christianity. At any given time, about one-third of the workers are too sick to work. Bak Goong goes through some periods of illness but always recovers his health. After three years of demanding physical labor, Bak Goong and Bak Sook Goong decide to return to China, having completed their labor contract. They have made new traditions and have become founding fathers of the Chinese community in Hawaii.

The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains Analysis

The chapter's construction is somewhat unusual, in that it commences with three brief contemporaneous anecdotes and then presents a long biographical section detailing a three-year period in the life of one of the author's great grandfathers. The use of the English 'great grandfather' honorific perhaps does not indicate a literal relationship. Instead, it can be interpreted to mean 'forebear.' As the biographical section is developed, it becomes clear that the previous anecdotes are the author's return, full-circle, to the principle elements of her great grandfather's sojourn to Hawaii. The first anecdote describes life in contemporaneous China for another descendant of the author's great grandfather. The second describes some brief scenes from the village that was home to the great grandfather. The final anecdote describes the author's own experiences engaging the wild and raw beauty of Hawaii on an island colloquially

named after a Chinaman's (her great grandfather's, perhaps) working hat. The writing presented in the chapter is well-crafted and precise. Several words' meanings are compared and contrasted between the Cantonese and the English translations. Imagery is very strong, and characterization is excellent. The chapter does contain profanity and other vulgar language, principally attributed to individual speech.

While the Taiping Rebellion, a particularly bloody and savage civil war, raged throughout China, Bak Goong and other Chinese men emigrated to Hawaii and other places by avoiding compulsory conscription and signing long-term work contracts. Although the contract at least nominally bound Bak Goong to labor for a period of three years, it also allowed him passage to Hawaii and entrance to the Gold Mountain. Immigrants without signed contracts were often refused entrance for prolonged periods or, worse, returned to China.

The text detailing the public-relations speech used by the plantation recruiter in China is humorous and interesting. He promises everything and in the end delivers very little. Of course, once the reality is manifest documents have been signed and oceans have been crossed leaving very little alternative for the Chinese workingmen. Bak Goong and many others thus spend three years as virtual indentured servants performing back-breaking physical labor. They clear vast areas of jungle and then raise several crops of sugar-cane, which requires intensive physical care. When Bak Goong sings or talks, he is fined. When he breaks a tool or wears out equipment, he is fined. When he is too sick to work, he is not paid. He thus calculates that he receives perhaps two-thirds of his contracted pay, from which he must satisfy many of his own personal expenses. He will return to China with some wages, but not the vast sum he had envisioned. Bak Goong is unusually penurious. Many of the men spend large amounts of their wages on gambling, smoking, opium, and women.

In addition to the biographical information presented on Bak Goong and Bak Sook Goong, the chapter also details some general events in the life of Chinese living in Hawaii including one description of an elaborate ball held in 1856 to honor the king and queen of Hawaii. Another passage describes a visit to the Chinese living quarters by some Caucasian female Christian missionaries; the men play scandalous social tricks on the women who, because of their cultural differences, remain ignorant. These general observations make very interesting and enjoyable reading and add to the texture of the narrative.

On Mortality

On Mortality Summary

Tu Tzu-Chan lived from 558 to 618 C.E. and had a life memorialized in many apocryphal legends. He obtained and squandered several fortunes until he became indebted to a supernatural being. He attempted to pay for his debt by voluntarily entering a life of illusion without uttering any sound. Tu Tzu-Chan knew his life was an illusion. Therefore, it did not trouble him, even as he was physically tortured and surrounded by horrible images. Throughout it all, he remained entirely silent. Tu Tzu-Chan was even reborn as a deaf-mute woman, who delivered a child and never made a sound. The husband of Tu Tzu-Chan, however, one day flew into a rage and killed the child by dashing its head on the ground which, finally, elicited a scream from Tu Tzu-Chan. As Tu Tzu-Chan was unable to repay his debt by living in silence through an illusory life, the supernatural being was unwilling to allow humanity to live an immortal life. Thus, death is a feature of human life. Tu Tzu-Chan was consoled by learning that even though hate, fear and desire may be suppressed, love cannot be overcome.

On Mortality Analysis

The legend of Tu Tzu-Chan is informed by the philosophy of the illusion of life - if life is illusion then so too are pain and suffering and all could be, indeed should be, borne without complaint. Even the illusion of death should be ignored. However, Tu Tzu-Chan was unable to overcome his love for his illusory child and therefore could not repay his enormous debt. As love cannot be overcome, death becomes an inescapable feature of living. The notion of death as an imminent feature of life is explored in *The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains*, where Ah Goong lives with death as an ever-present companion.

On Mortality Again

On Mortality Again Summary

Maui, the trickster god of Hawaii, tries to obtain immortality for humanity. Maui tries to steal immortality from the vagina of Hina. Under Maui's careful tutelage the entire world becomes completely silent as Maui crawls into sleeping Hina's vagina and encircles the object of his desire. The strange sight of Maui's legs wriggling backward out of Hina's vagina, however, causes one bird to laugh, which awakens Hina. She closes herself up, and Maui the trickster god dies within her.

On Mortality Again Analysis

As an alternative to the Chinese legend of the rationale for death, the Hawaiian legend is presented. Although more graphical, the Hawaiian version is subtle and somewhat more difficult to analyze. In effect, Maui's ridiculous attempt to steal immortality doomed him to death by the process of un-birth, because his approach was, quite simply, too funny to be ignored.

The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains

The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains Summary

The author, born in 1940, grows up in Stockton, California, near a railroad line. She imagines the line is part of the one placed down by her grandfather. Eventually, the railroad stops using the line and takes up the steel tracks. The local Stockton residents gradually carry away the railroad ties to use in landscaping and other projects. The author's paternal grandfather, Ah Goong, is featured in several photographs that hang on the house walls. He usually appears slightly disoriented and is generally photographed alone, frowning. Ah Goong was known to be a little crazy, and the author insinuates his mental condition may well have been the result of receiving a Japanese bayonet thrust to the head, though specific details are not provided. Ah Goong, a sojourner, made three trips to the Gold Mountain.

On one trip to the United States of America, beginning in 1863, Ah Goong, like many Chinese, works as a laborer for the Union Pacific railroad. He begins employment in the spring of 1863 and is paid $1.00 each day, leaving employment with the railroad after six years. While with the railroad, he is employed in a variety of physical jobs, including felling giant redwoods to make railroad ties and shoveling earth. In the evening, he watches the constellations and is surprised to notice that the stars and constellations in the United States of America are the same as the stars and constellations in China.

Eventually, Ah Goong is assigned as a basket worker. He stands in a large basket, which is lowered over cliff faces by ropes controlled by teams of men. He is allowed to dangle above vast drops, while he bores holes into the cliff face and stuffs the holes with gunpowder and fuses. He then lights the fuse and signals the men above to draw him up before the charges ignite, blasting away sections of the cliff face to construct the railroad grade. Many Chinese are killed by accidental falls, equipment failure, or premature detonation. In fact, Chinese workers are killed nearly every day. Ah Goong develops the peculiar habit of publicly urinating and masturbating in his dangling basket while ejaculating into space. The habit seems to calm his nerves but does earn him a reputation for being somewhat deranged.

After the basket work is finished, Ah Goong is assigned to a tunneling crew. He uses a sledgehammer to pound away at granite, boring through a mountain at the rate of one foot every day for three years. Ah Goong does not like being in the tunnel but is glad that he is not entangled in the Civil War raging largely in the Eastern United States of America. After 1000 feet of tunnel are pounded by hand, the railroad, in 1866, begins to use dynamite, only newly invented, which enormously speeds the process. The dynamite, however, is particularly dangerous. As usual, many Chinese die in accidental explosions or other working mishaps. The railroad does not seem particularly concerned

about the death toll, as long as the work proceeds apace. Dead Chinese, when their bodies are easily recoverable, are buried next to the railroad tracks in generally unmarked graves. Work continues straight through the winter seasons, and Ah Goong, after working an eight hour shift tunneling through granite often must spend several minutes tunneling through fresh snow to get out of the railroad tunnel. The winters are brutal and make work particularly difficult. Stories of the ill-fated Donner Party circulate through the camps.

In the spring of 1867, the Union Pacific announces that it will raise wages by $4.00 to $35.00 each month, and also lengthen working days from eight to ten hours. The extra hours of labor are viewed by the Chinese and other workers as unacceptable. After a few days, a general labor strike is surreptitiously arranged and carried out. The strike lasts for nine days and concludes with the retention of the four dollar raise and a return to the eight-hour working day. It's a victory for organized labor.

During the strike, Ah Goong enjoys some free time and wanders alone through the countryside. One day, he meets a solitary white man dressed in nice clothing who introduces himself as a 'Citizenship Judge.' The confidence man sells Ah Goong fake citizenship papers for a large sum of money. Although Ah Goong never discovers his papers are worthless, they do give him a false sense of security. One day, a man brings a woman through the work camp and sells her sexual favors. The woman is apparently an unwilling prostitute, as she is bound around the waist by a leash and led about as an animal. Many of the men buy lottery tickets for their chance to have sex with the woman.

After the strike is resolved, Ah Goong returns to work. Eventually, the tunnel is completed, and soon after, the railroad is completed when the two separate tracks meet at Promontory, Utah. Ah Goong is present for the historic event as are many Chinese, but none of them appear in any of the press photographs. After the transcontinental railroad is completed the Chinese workers are seen as undesirable aliens and a national effort is made to marginalize and deport them. The author documents dozens of incidents where Chinese were harassed, persecuted, cheated, deported, and murdered, and refers to these events collectively as 'The Driving Out.' Ah Goong's history is unclear throughout this period. He wanders a great deal, and by 1902, he was in San Francisco, though whether he returned to China in the intervening years is unknown. While in San Francisco, he commissions a gold wedding band from an unscrupulous jeweler, who vastly overcharges him. Ah Goong was in San Francisco during the earthquake and subsequent fires of 1906. In fact, he may have died in the fires, although he is rumored to have valiantly saved one of his own children from a flaming building. Other family rumors suggest that a somewhat mentally disturbed Ah Goong was returned to China at great expense.

The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains Analysis

The chapter's construction is similar to that of *The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains* in that it begins with an anecdote about the author's early childhood life. The author grew up in Stockton, a railroad-oriented settlement, where she looked at the railroad and imagined it to be the very line put down by her grandfather, Ah Goong. This introductory anecdote is followed by a long biographical section detailing a long period in the life of one of the author's grandfather. The biographical information focuses on a six-year period where the author's grandfathers worked as a laborer constructing railroad grade for the Union Pacific Railroad. The writing presented in the chapter is well-crafted and precise. Several words' meanings are compared and contrasted between the Cantonese and the English translations. Imagery is very strong, and characterization is excellent. The chapter does contain profanity and other vulgar language.

The fake citizenship papers purchased by Ah Goong from the Citizenship Judge are among the papers referred to in *The Father from China*. In that chapter, the papers are said to be 75-years-old, placing their date of origin in 1849. This is an impossibility, as Ah Goong did not purchase them until after the Civil War. The papers also are said to have been destroyed by the San Francisco fire of 1906, yet Ed produces them during his immigration in 1924.

Ah Goong's pay of $1.00 each day is seven times the salary received by Bak Goong only a decade earlier. Yet, in addition to being physically demanding, the work is incredibly dangerous. The chapter contains several anecdotes relating the fate of several Chinese workingmen. Many were blown to pieces, while others fell screaming to their death. When their bodies were easily recovered, they were buried next to the railroad track. Significant effort was not expended to recover bodies lost in difficult terrain.

The essence of the chapter can be found in the brief but telling account of the festivities surrounding the ceremony of the so-called 'golden spike' at Promontory, Utah, where the transcontinental railroad was completed. The railroad was built by the sweat and blood of thousands of Chinese workingmen, and yet, no Chinese appears in any of the press photographs of the completion event. The text notes that speeches were made stating that only 'Americans' could have constructed a transcontinental railroad. Whereas the speaker clearly meant Caucasian Americans, the author notes that the speaker was unintentionally correct. The construction was made possible by Chinese Americans. Ah Goong's participation in the building of the railroad that changed American history establishes his firm claim to America. Not only was he a productive long-term resident, he was a builder and founder of the infrastructure that enabled the very fabric of the American civilization to be created.

The biographic detail presented about Ah Goong after his railroad participation is sketchy. The author notes that he was in San Francisco in 1902 and is rumored to have

died in the 1906 earthquake and fire. The child he putatively saved from the flames is probably the author's father, Ed. In *The Brother in Vietnam*, a later chapter, the author states that all of the family's official papers and personal letters and other errata were destroyed in the fire.

The author states that no one is certain whether Ah Goong returned to China between 1867 and 1902, although it seems as if he might have returned. He had four children, the youngest being born in 1903. Ah Goong, probably born c. 1855 or earlier, seems to have lived a particularly long and personally satisfactory life. The family relationship between Ah Goong and Bak Goong is uncertain. The author presents them as grandfather and great grandfather, respectively, and the unstated conclusion is that Bak Goong is Ah Goong's father. Another possible interpretation is that the presentation of Bak Goong as a 'great grandfather' simply means that he was a forebear of the author.

The Laws

The Laws Summary

A series of policies and laws enacted by the United States Government are presented. The first laws summarized date from 1868 and the final laws summarized date to 1978. All of the policies and laws presented deal with immigration in one form or another. The chapter lists approximately thirty-five major governmental events in the history of immigration practice, with an especial emphasis on the way these laws and policies were implemented to exclude Chinese immigrants. Additionally, some relevant court cases are briefly discussed.

The Laws Analysis

The chapter details the legalistic means by which Chinese were driven out of the United States of America and the immigration policies, which prevented Chinese from legally entering that country. The author refers to these laws, together with their practical effects, as 'The Driving Out' and provides rough census estimates of Chinese living in the United States of America at several historic periods to show that 'The Driving Out' did, indeed, displace many Chinese. It is interesting to note how the laws changed during the World War II era, when China became a political and military ally with the United States of America, and how they again later changed, when China became a Communist country.

Alaska China Men

Alaska China Men Summary

Some Chinese men traveled to Alaska to prospect for gold. Caucasian prospectors determined that the Chinese must be driven out because, ostensibly, they found with the indigenous Indian population. In July of 1885 all Chinese, about 100, were forced out at gunpoint. They were loaded onto a boat and transported to Puget Sound, where they were put ashore. Many immediately returned to Alaska, where they are rumored to have scabbed for the Treadwell Mining Company. In July of 1886, the Alaska 'Driving Out' was repeated at gunpoint. However, this time, the Chinese were packed into an old derelict ship and set adrift without food or water. They were reportedly rescued by another ship and requested a return trip to Alaska.

Only one Chinese worker was not driven out. China Joe was rumored to be a baker, who had given away free bread during a food shortage. China Joe, potentially representing more than a single Chinese merchant, was allowed to remain in Alaska through both of the forced deportations.

Alaska China Men Analysis

Gold was discovered in Alaska during 1861 and lured many prospectors. The United States of America purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867. Thus, when the Chinese were expelled in 1885 and 1886, they were expelled under existing United States of America territorial laws. This brief chapter demonstrates that the poor, often illegal and inhumane, treatment of Chinese was not confined to the contiguous United States and Hawaii, but extended throughout the entire territory of the nation.

The Making of More Americans

The Making of More Americans Summary

Say Goong and Sahm Goong, two younger brothers of Ah Goong, live in a house in Stockton. The author remembers visiting her grandfathers' house. In the yard is an enormous pile of horse manure that amazes the family and neighbors. The manure is a topic of admiration and discussion, and the grandfathers portion it out to visitors as an esteemed gift. The grandfathers' house has a stable, where two huge black horses are kept. The grandfathers sell vegetables from a cart drawn by the horses. After some time, Say Goong dies and his ghost begins to visit Sahm Goong. The ghost of Say Goong is silent but persistent. Sahm Goong wonders what Say Goong wants to do or say. After some time, Sahm Goong takes the advice of the author's mother and commands the ghost, on its next appearance, to return to China. The ghost of Say Goong takes the insistent advice and finally leaves for good. Some time later, Sahm Goong vanishes. The author, a young girl at the time, assumes he has also died.

One of the author's cousins, a grandchild of Sahm Goong, is named Sao Elder Brother. Sao gains United States citizenship by serving in the United States Armed Forces during World War II. After the war, he settles in Stockton, California, and sends to China for a bride. Although the bride arrives sight-unseen, she is beautiful and gracious. Sao's mother constantly sends nagging letters asking for money and food. The letters are both pitiful and humorous, and note that food is incredibly scarce in Communist China. Sao logically concludes that it is better to send no money than insufficient money, and sends no money. Eventually, his mother dies, and her starving ghost begins to haunt him. Sao becomes known as "Mad" Sao, as he constantly throws food and money into the air and talks into space, believing he is consoling his starved mother's ghost. He gets fairly crazy and decides the only way he can quit being haunted is to return his mother's ghost to China. Sao buys ship's passage to China and sails across the sea, enters the Communist country, returns to his ancestral village, and commits his mother's ghost to the grave in a traditional and ritualistic Chinese burial ceremony. He thereafter returns to the United States of America and resumes his life, seemingly normal.

Kua Goong, Ah Po's highwayman brother, is an incredibly large and imposing man. He immigrated to the United States at roughly the same time as Ed. Kua Goong's wife remained in China, and they have not seen each other for many decades, though she constantly writes him and asks him to come home. Kua Goong repeatedly declines because, he says, he does not want to return to a Communist country. Kua Goong's wife eventually illegally crosses the border to Hong Kong and repeats her request for Kua Goong's return, noting that he can join her in non-Communist Hong Kong. Kua Goong again refuses, noting that California is his new and permanent home. Kua Goong's wife again illegally crosses the border back to China, so she will not be alone in a strange place. Kua Goong is liked by boys but disliked and feared by girls, whom he meanly treats as his personal servants. He spends his time working in the family laundry without pay, until his eventual death. An elaborate funeral ceremony is then

enacted, which ends in the burying of Kua Goong. He will not be visited very often once buried, as he is treated as an "American," and customs regarding graveyard visitation are very different from Chinese customs.

Uncle Bun is a distant relative, who has possibly never been to China. He appears to be obsessive-compulsive and suffers a progressive mental breakdown that continues for a prolonged period of time. He does not appear to work and instead spends his time at the laundry operated by the author's father. Uncle Bun focuses on a single, seemingly random, idea at a time and speaks constantly about that idea. At first, it is the wholesomeness of wheat germ. Later, it is Chinese Politics. Then, Uncle Bun believes that Ed is somehow surreptitiously stealing money from Uncle Bun's bank account. It's a belief he vigorously espouses to Ed. Ed responds by taking Uncle Bun to the bank and having the bank review the account. Uncle Bun then becomes convinced that he is being poisoned and starts to fixate on garbage collection and disposal. Uncle Bun eventually decides that the Americans are amassing garbage for a future date, when they will imprison him and force feed him mountains of refuse. To escape being lied to, robbed, poisoned, and force fed garbage Uncle Bun determines that he will return to Communist China to live. Several interesting discussions follow regarding the nature of Communism contrasted to free enterprise Capitalism. Uncle Bun finally does, indeed, immigrate to China and is never heard from again.

One day, the author is in San Francisco and wanders through Chinatown, until she becomes lost. By fortunate happenstance, she encounters her Auntie, who is her mother's youngest sister. She accompanies Auntie to her tiny apartment, and they hold a prolonged conversation. Auntie tells her that her older two siblings, who had died in China, were frightened to death by firecrackers. The author poignantly responds, "'[p]robably all babies, having recently been nothing, have a tenuous hold on life'" (p. 207). Auntie tells her that her own father had flouted Chinese convention and caused his daughters to be literate and educated. Auntie had then married a rich man and had two children. During the revolution, her family had been forced to live in a leper house, and then her husband had been executed.

Auntie and her children, two boys, fled to Hong Kong. There, she met a shoe salesman, named I Fu. Auntie and I Fu got married and had two children. Auntie was constantly worried that the revolution would sweep over Hong Kong, so she finally immigrated to the United States of America. For years, she tried to convince I Fu to join her. He finally visited her but, instead of staying, he took her back to Hong Kong. Their two oldest children remained behind and lived with the author's family, where they were treated as second-class family members. In Hong Kong, I Fu owned a successful shoe sales company. One day, however, I Fu had a peculiar episode. He went to the bank, withdrew all of his money and gave it to a stranger. He came to believe he had been drugged. He then repeated this behavior. I Fu then decided that he had to leave China, so he sold his business and took his family to the United States of America. Throughout her visit with Auntie, the author is very conscious of class, race and money. At the end of the long visit, I Fu returns home and the author greets her uncle with the metrically funny and linguistically interesting "How do you do, I Fu?" (p. 217). I Fu says hello and then delves into his newspaper. The author notes that he looks exactly like her father.

The chapter concludes with a brief anecdote relating a New Year's telephone call between the author's mother and her mother's brother living in China. They shout news at each other, and hang up after a few minutes. The mother then states that she learned nothing new.

The Making of More Americans Analysis

This long chapter's construction departs from the typical construction presented to this point in the text; instead of focusing on a single person the chapter presents a series of shorter biographies of a variety of individuals from the author's extended family. Additionally, many of the events described transpired within the author's lifetime. The events are therefore often presented missing details that an adult would probably have noticed, but which were not particularly noteworthy to the then-adolescent author. This approach is particularly interesting and makes the biographies very engaging.

The brief biographical events presented provide a wealth of background information and texture to the Chinese area of Stockton, California, during the post-World War II period. The description of the author's first encounter with a horse is intriguing and believable. Many of the anecdotes feature a mixture of real and supernatural events mingled into a single tale. For example, Say Goong is presented as both a living person and later as a silent ghost. The ghost appearances are limited to a single witness, however, which allows them to be interpreted either as an actual manifestation or as a figment of a disturbed mentality. Either way, their function within the narrative is essentially the same. Say Goong is not mentioned by name in the earlier *The Father from China* chapter, as he is the youngest of the brothers. Perhaps, he was born after those events transpired although this would make him at least two decades younger than Ed.

The biography of "Mad" Sao is one of the most enjoyable and interesting sections of the entire text. The contrast between the affluent Chinese Americans and their distant Communist relatives is stark. Sao pays a mortgage and watches television with his daughters, while his mother claims to subsist on beetles and balls of mud. Sao's mother's letters are, of course, pitiful and contain painful information. However, their presentation is also comical and enjoyable. The subsequent haunting of Sao by his intolerably hungry mother's ghost is profound, risible, and eminently memorable.

Kua Goong's story illustrates the profound differences between the United States of America and Communist China. Kua Goong has been separated from his wife for many years. They have become old apart from each other. Family members speculate that, perhaps, it is better for them to not spend their remaining few years together. Kua Goong, like most of the Chinese Americans presented in the book, is distrustful of Communism and refuses to return to China, because it has become a Communist country. This rationale, however, is simply a defense mechanism for Kua Goong, who does not want to return to China, because the United States of America has become his home. The funeral procession to honor Kua Goong is quite interesting and deserves a close reading. The observed customs, both Chinese and American, illustrate a gradual fusion of old and new, that is so common in many immigrant cultures.

Uncle Bun's story provides a more modern, contemporaneous analogy for some Chinese immigrants unable to mentally integrate with the United States. He is unable to make consistent sense of the new world and devolves into a type of paranoiac madness, convinced that Communism must be preferable to his current way of life. It's a decision made even stranger, when one considers that Uncle Bun is a veteran, having served in the United States of America's armed forces during World War II. He begins to yearn to return to China, though he is not particularly Chinese in culture or thought. Uncle Bun's focus on the benefits of wheat germ appears innocent enough at first. The author's mother makes a humorous statement that wheat germ must not be so great or else it would have been invented long ago. It's as if wheat germ was some new-fangled American contraption. However, when his obsessive behavior moves from wheat germ to politics to paranoia, the pattern of mental disability becomes clear. An analysis of Uncle Bun's speech patterns is noteworthy and particularly interesting.

Auntie's story is compelling and interesting and illustrates, somewhat, the hardships experienced by average Chinese during the social upheaval of the Communist revolution. Auntie has a good life in Hong Kong but wants to leave there, because she fears the revolution will soon encompass the whole world. Her experience in Communist China contrasts sharply with the workers' paradise that Uncle Bun extolled. I Fu's bizarre behavior is not explained or rationalized. He simply goes into a strange type of hyper-awareness trance and proceeds to give away all of the family's money. One is left with the feeling that, perhaps, I Fu's explanation of events covers a simpler but more distasteful truth. The author's comparison of I Fu to her father is reminiscent of the mistake she earlier related in *On Fathers*. Chinese men seem interchangeable.

The Wild Man of the Green Swamp

The Wild Man of the Green Swamp Summary

In 1975, some of the residents of Green Swamp, Florida, saw a wild man running through the swamp near the town. He was rumored to be a savage or a wild animal, though most people doubted a human could survive in the swamp. Eventually, a party of law-enforcement officers cornered the man and extracted him from the swamp. He had been living on wild animal flesh and was covered by insect bites, though he otherwise appeared clean and well-kept.

The wild man was from China, where he had a wife and children. He had obtained a job as a hand on a freighter but had quickly become homesick and desired to return to China. His crewmates had arranged for his transport home and took him to the airport in Tampa, Florida. The wild man, however, mistook their intentions and became very agitated, whereupon they turned him over to a mental facility. A few days later, he walked out of the mental facility and into the swamp. He lived there for several months before being arrested. The officers told him he would be returned to China, per his wishes. That night, however, he used his belt to hang himself in his cell.

The Wild Man of the Green Swamp Analysis

The so-called wild man is in actually a vagrant refugee, who is afraid of law enforcement and lives a marginal existence in the swamp for about eight months. He claims that his desire is to return to his family and China. Yet, when faced with this on the first occasion he becomes irrational and agitated. When faced with this on the second occasion, he kills himself. The wild man is probably mentally deranged, but his split desire and strange behavior provides an analogy for the Chinese American situation of being split between two cultures and, for many, living with a constant fear of deportation.

The Adventures of Lo Bun Sun

The Adventures of Lo Bun Sun Summary

Lo Bun Sun defies his father's wishes and forsakes the family business to become a seaman. He has several misadventures, before he is shipwrecked on a deserted island. He is the only survivor, though the wrecked ship washes ashore on the same island. Lo Bun Sun spends many difficult days salvaging everything he can from the shipwreck, until one day the surf carries the wrecked hulk away. Lo Bun Sun then sets about improving his condition on the small tropical island and uses a variety of ingenious techniques and methods to make his situation as comfortable as possible.

After many years, Lo Bun Sun is shocked to discover a human footprint on the beach on his island. He becomes afraid of meeting hostile humans and fortifies his island. Years later, he discovers a party of cannibals has landed on his island to have a horrible feast. One of the cannibals' intended victims manages to escape. Lo Bun Sun intervenes in the pursuit and saves the fleeing man, who he names Sing Kay Ng. Over the next few years, Lo Bun Sun educates and civilizes Sing Kay Ng and saves others, including Sing Kay Ng's father, from the cannibals. Eventually, Lo Bun Sun and Sing Kay Ng are rescued and return to civilization. They are not content, however, and again return to the seas. Eventually, they return to the island, where they have further adventures.

The Adventures of Lo Bun Sun Analysis

Lo Bun Sun is, of course, the eponymous character from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Lo Bun Sun being a minor pronunciation variant of Robinson. In Chinese, "Lo Bun Sun" has many possible subtleties of meaning, but the author's preferred rendering means Naked Toiling Mule, while Sing Kay Ng represents Friday. The classic story is heavily summarized but remains fundamentally true to the original tale. This provides a delightful interlude in the narrative and also links the text tightly with Western literature and experience.

It is interesting to note how aptly the life of Robinson Crusoe, as Lo Bun Sun, is allegorical to the experiences of most, if not all, of the Chinese men and women presented in the text. Lo Bun Sun is stranded on a deserted island far from home, which serves as a metaphor for emigrating from China to the United States of America. Lo Bun Sun salvages everything he can from the wrecked ship, but these supplies dwindle. Over the years, they are exhausted and must be replaced with local supplies. This is allegorical of the culture and customs brought from China, which are gradually supplanted by new traditions, languages, jobs and culture. Lo Bun Sun meets savages, whose customs are disgusting and horrible. Yet, he befriends one man and educates and pacifies him. This is symbolic of the shock that American culture presents to some Chinese, and the benefits to American culture and society gained from Chinese

immigrants. The charming and surprising rendering of an English-language classic into Chinese traditional folklore provides one of the artistic highlights of the text.

The American Father

The American Father Summary

The author's father was born in San Francisco in 1903. However, he might have been born in some other time or at some other place. The author remembers several locations, which are strongly reminiscent of her father. For example, she recollects a particular cellar with a well, which was considered dangerous, a particular house's attic, and most of all, a particular gambling hall.

The author's father, Ed, runs a gambling hall for another, richer, man. Ed performs all of the work of the gambling hall. The preferred method of gambling appears to be the selection of words to form poetry, followed by the random drawing of words from a large box. The gamblers with the most words drawn win the pot. Ed not only cleans and runs the gambling establishment, he also pretends to own it. The police raid the hall about once every month and arrest Ed, who proceeds to offer a false name and a $100 bill as a putative fine payment. Ed is then released to return home and re-open the gambling hall on the next evening. The hall primarily is frequented by Chinese men, but some Caucasians gamble there. They include one lucky blonde woman, named Maxine, whom the author is named for. The author's mother works as a maid for the rich man, who actually owns the gambling hall.

Sometime before the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor causes the United States of America to enter World War II, Ed begins looking at houses to buy. He scouts out a house, negotiates a price, and then asks his boss to close the deal on paper. His boss then unscrupulously buys the house for himself and offers to rent it to Ed. Ed finds another house and the betrayal of trust is repeated. Ed finds a third house which is very large but also run down and buys it for $6,000, without requesting assistance from his boss. The author, born in 1940, is the oldest surviving child of the family and remembers having two younger siblings prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The family will eventually grow to six siblings, including three girls and three boys.

After the United States of America enters World War II, the gambling hall is forcibly and permanently shut down by the police. Ed, without a job, becomes extremely depressed and is idle. The author's mother works at odd jobs and brings home food items apparently taken from her work. After a considerable period of unemployment, Ed becomes angry and sullen. His weight drops to perhaps 97 lbs., and he spends his days reading the newspaper, drinking whiskey, and doing little else.

One day, Ed becomes angry with one of his daughters and chases her through the house, until she locks herself in a room. Ed begins pounding on the door and eventually batters it open. In the process, he dislodges a mirror from the wall, and it shatters on the floor. Ed then beats his daughter viciously, and his wife comments on the impending seven years of bad luck incurred for breaking the mirror. That afternoon, Ed shaves, cleans himself up, goes into town, and purchases a laundry business. He rapidly

becomes productive, energetic and happy, and spends his time working at the laundry and gardening. The author remembers that the laundry sat atop a vast basement, which apparently featured a network of tunnels that ran off into the distance, connecting the building's basement to other basement locations in Stockton.

The American Father Analysis

This chapter contains more of an autobiographical tone than previous chapters. This phenomenon, repeated in *The Brother in Vietnam*, is of course understandable, as the author lived through many of the events described.

Ed's initial occupation in Stockton appears to be acting as a front man for a gambling hall. He performs all aspects of work, ranging from sweeping up the floors through running the gambling operation to being arrested by the police during their routine sweeps of the neighborhood. Ed is apparently very comfortable and competent at offering bribes and extricating himself quickly from legal situations. The chapter contains a particularly interesting section detailing how Ed would imagine the many names he would take. He uses a different name for each arrest to preclude a lengthy police report being developed.

When the gambling hall is permanently closed, Ed falls into a prolonged and profound depression. Similar to many men, Ed apparently derives an inordinate amount of his self-worth on his employment status. The exact duration of Ed's depression is not specified, but it appears to be at least several years. Like nearly all dates in the text, the gambling hall closure is not specified. Rather, it is vaguely noted as having happened sometime during the United States of America's involvement in World War II, probably c. 1942. Ed's depression is accompanied by a notable decline in health, his weight dropping to an alarming 97 pounds, as well as fits of rage, which apparently result in frequent beatings administered to his children. The author remembers her father as being rather severe, angry, and ill-tempered. These are perhaps memories firmly established during this early period of life. Ed's depression ends suddenly and for rather ironic reasons. One day, he breaks a mirror, which supposedly will cause him seven years' bad luck. The bad omen apparently spurs Ed to activity. Within a few days, he has purchased a laundry business, which will gainfully occupy his time for many years. Ed's mental outlook appears to radically and rapidly improve with his new employment.

The Li Sao: An Elegy

The Li Sao: An Elegy Summary

Ch" Y'an is an incorruptible prince who advises his kingdom against war. He is banished for his pacifist ideas and roams the world and mourns his fate for twenty years. He has many adventures and sees the entire world except for his own homeland. He is unable to find a single uncorrupted person in the entire world and eventually despairs and casts himself into a river where he drowns. After he is dead, his incorruptible soul is greatly missed. The people mourn and try, unsuccessfully, to entice him back to the living world. There is now a yearly festival to honor him.

The Li Sao: An Elegy Analysis

This brief chapter presents an extended analogy to the paradigm experienced by many of the author's male relatives who traveled throughout the Gold Mountain in search of their fortunes. The chapter is interesting in its concise fusion of biographical elements with a traditional Chinese folk tale.

The Brother in Vietnam

The Brother in Vietnam Summary

One of the author's first memories is watching an unnamed war movie with her mother. The author remembers, as a child, screaming at the horrible images of war. The author remembers a new baby sibling being born on Christmas Day, probably in 1942. About two years later, another baby brother is born. These two brothers are named Han Bridge and Pure Bridge, respectively, reflecting their birthright of bridging the gap between China and the United States of America.

Throughout World War II, the author recalls seeing various racist and otherwise sensational and horrible war comic books, putatively for children. She remembers war parades and war fund drives. Most Chinese Americans are alarmed, when they discover that conscription will take place. They had left China, in part, to escape the draft. Numerous discussions about draft evasion take place, and various wild, ridiculous, and dangerous schemes are proposed and considered. The author remembers seeing several empty houses, recently vacated by the governmentally-forced evacuation of Japanese Americans from the West Coast.

Ed, the author's father, is drafted along with several other local Chinese men. Ed travels to the army induction station but fails his draft physical. He is too skinny. Uncle Bun's son and Sao Elder Brother are drafted and serve in the United States of America's armed forces in the European theater. Other relatives serve in both theaters of the war. After the war, all of the relatives gradually return, and many of the evacuated Japanese Americans also return from their internment camps.

The subsequent years, only briefly outlined, are very turbulent and full of conflict. The Communist takeover of China results in the deaths of millions. The Korean War takes place and the author remembers performing various war drills in school. The Viet Nam War takes place and two of the author's brothers are drafted. One brother tries to join the Coast Guard to avoid more intense military service, but he cannot successfully enlist and so waits to be drafted. He teaches remedial English.

The principle character in the remainder of the chapter is referred to only as The Brother, presumably the author's younger brother. The Brother professionally teaches remedial children who, beyond being illiterate and largely uneducated, appear often to have severe social problems. Most of the children are apparently Caucasians. The Brother is against the United States of America's military involvement in the Viet Nam Conflict and openly challenges the war. His students are blindly patriotic and pro-war. The Brother becomes convinced that he will be drafted and, pursuing some dizzying logic, decides that his contribution to the war as an American consumer is no different than his contribution to the war would be as a passive objector within the Navy. He, therefore, enlists for a four-year term in the Navy, determined to take a minimally active role in the conflict and thereby avoid conscription.

The Brother goes to boot camp and trains for several weeks. He loses his appetite and, for several days, eats nothing. He realizes that without eating he will die and, regardless of his lack of appetite, forces himself to consume food. He notices that he feels no pain during training practices. Even though, he apparently feels nothing he complains about everything. His fellow seamen consider him to be a champion complainer. After boot camp, The Brother is assigned to an aircraft carrier. The Brother ships out and, like thousands of other sailors before him looks upward as San Francisco's Golden Gate bridge passes overhead. On board the aircraft carrier, he is assigned to teach remedial English to illiterate seamen. The Brother reflects that he has excellent English skills but only a scant knowledge of Chinese. At night, he suffers terrible nightmares.

The Brother travels aboard ship to the Philippines, then to Korea and Taiwan. He is excited to finally set foot on Chinese soil but finds Taiwan to be some sort of distant and disappointing facsimile of the real China. He is then assigned to the *U.S.S. Midway* and shipped out to the Gulf of Tonkin, where the aircraft carrier participates in heavy daily bombing runs against Vietnamese targets. The Brother is repeatedly invited to fly aboard a bomber. After declining many invitations, he finally boards a plane and rides as a passenger throughout an uneventful bombing mission. He is unable to tell when the bombs are even released.

The Brother receives a two-week R&R break and travels first to Tokyo, which he finds very appealing, and then to Hong Kong. Like Taiwan, he finds Hong Kong to be somewhat disappointing. While in Hong Kong, he tries persistently to locate some relatives. When he finally locates the street, he discovers that the number does not exist. He inquires about his supposed relatives but is unable to find additional information. They appear to not exist.

After four years in the navy, The Brother returns to Stockton, California. Three years later, The Brother returns to Stockton, and the United States of America ceases military involvement in the Viet Nam Conflict. The Brother's appetite gradually returns, as he assimilates back into his life as a civilian.

The Brother in Vietnam Analysis

The author's early memories of a war movie and, later, of war parades and fund drives are somewhat problematic. The memories are about events during World War II yet the author was only five-years old when that conflict ended. An alternative explanation would be that, perhaps, some of the memories are derived from experiences, which took place during the Korean War. This is unsatisfactory, however, because many of the memories are specific to World War II. Most notable is the evacuation of Japanese Americans and Ed's draft procedures.

The birth of the author's younger brother is highly reminiscent of the birth of the author's father. The scenes are described in very similar ways, and a comparison to the parallel scene in *The Father from China* makes interesting intra-textual reading. An additional

parallel is found in the two men's choice of early profession, as schoolteachers. The pupils are described in similar terms, as lazy, unmotivated, uninterested and rude.

The comparison between the author's brother and her father is strengthened by the text's statements regarding the military draft. Ed and other men originally left China to, in part, escape conscription. Early textual passages refer to the evils of mandatory military service and, in fact, Bak Goong and many others emigrated from China while sneaking around military press gangs. The freedom from the draft enjoyed in America is, unfortunately, short-lived for the family. Ed faces conscription during World War II, and the sons face conscription during the Viet Nam War. Finally, when faced with a stressful situation, both men lose their appetite.

The construction of the chapter is somewhat distinct. It begins with a nearly autobiographical recounting of experiences in Stockton, California, during a twenty-seven year period from 1940 through about 1967. The exact chronology of events is uncertain, though the implication is that events are related in chronological order. This ordering of events generally agrees with broad historical events, although there are several exceptions, which indicate the chronology is more complex and obscure than is readily apparent.

The Brother, presumably the author's brother, remains unnamed and largely generic. He could be nearly any Chinese American. In fact, he is probably deliberately constructed to be representative of an entire class of Chinese men, who participated in the Viet Nam war. The Brother's military service begins in 1967 and ends in 1971. His return is noted as being three years before the United States of America's troop withdrawals. The Brother served in the Navy during the height of the United State's involvement in the conflict, and is noted as serving at the Gulf of Tonkin aboard the *U.S.S. Midway*, historically on Yankee Station from May 18 through June 5, 1971.

The Brother's rationale for joining the navy is complex and interesting. He reasons that, as an American consumer, he is already directly participating in fueling America's war-footing economy. Therefore, as an active participant already, he might as well avoid conscription into the infantry by voluntarily joining. The Brother rationalizes that, in the Navy, he is extremely unlikely to come face-to-face with the oriental enemy. Therefore, he will not have to face the possibility of killing anyone. However, in the Navy, he assists with the preparation of bomb-equipped airplanes, which heavily bomb Viet Nam, inflicting major casualties upon both soldiers and civilians. In fact, The Brother even allows himself to be enticed to participate directly in one bombing run, when he rides along as an unofficial observer. As a result, The Brother's complex and incomplete rationalization proves to be more a sop to his conscience than an actual process of logic. At any rate, he does not serve in the infantry and never comes face-to-face with the enemy.

The anecdote about The Brother's inability to locate his Hong Kong relatives is notable. It is biographically curious that The Brother would have a non-existent address for his relatives. However, it is also symbolic of The Brother's split from China, in that The Brother has no ties to his homeland. He doesn't speak Chinese particularly well. In fact,

he speaks English so well, he is assigned to teach native-speakers about their own language. The Brother serves in the United States of America military and fights against an oriental enemy.

This chapter, along with *The American Father*, nearly concludes the biographical nature of the text in an interesting and complicated fusion of biography, autobiography, social commentary, and fiction. In particular, the tone of the final two major chapters is warm and the development is easily accessible. This is most likely because of the author's direct involvement in the events and their nearness and applicability to current American sociopolitical trends.

The Hundred-Year-Old Man

The Hundred-Year-Old Man Summary

A very old man celebrated his one-hundred-and-sixth birthday in Hawaii in 1969. He remembered how he had come to Hawaii in 1885 aboard the *S.S. Coptic* and had subsequently worked for four dollars a month in the sugarcane fields. In 1980, the old man is still alive and fondly remembers working in the fields among the crops.

The Hundred-Year-Old Man Analysis

This page-length chapter recounts some historical information about an unnamed Chinese immigrant to Hawaii. The hundred-year-old man's life has much in common with Bak Goong, the author's great grandfather, although significant details about the man's life do not match Bak Goong's biographical information. For example, Bak Goong arrived in Hawaii sometime during the Taiping Rebellion, which occurred, from 1851 through 1864, while the hundred-year-old man arrived in Hawaii in 1885. The hundred-year-old man was born during 1863; about eight years after Bak Goong arrived in Hawaii.

On Listening

On Listening Summary

The author attends a party and meets a Filipino scholar who recounts a brief and confused history of Chinese involvement in the Philippines. He is joined by other party-goers who contribute their own partial understanding to Chinese involvement around the world. Most of the statements involve Chinese searching for gold. The Filipino scholar says that the Chinese climbed a huge mountain and searched a lot of ore for a small amount of gold. The author has difficulty understanding the scholar's accent.

On Listening Analysis

The text's concluding chapter is scarcely more than a page in length. It recounts the author's experience at a party, where she discussed, briefly, Chinese involvement in other areas of the world, including the Philippines. The comments she hears generally indicate that Chinese men searched the globe looking for the Gold Mountain. However, in the end, they searched through huge volumes of rubble to find only a tiny amount of gold. Other Chinese workers in the brief apocryphal story seem to realize that everything around them is gold. Thus, even though vast monetary wealth was not found, a better quality of living resulted from the search.

Characters

Maxine Hong Kingston

Maxine Hong Kingston is the author of the biographical text. When the text includes fictive elements or fictional anecdotes, Kingston acts as the narrator or as the re-teller of anecdotes narrated to her. Kingston was born October 1940 in Stockton, California, to Thomas Edison ("Ed") Hong and Chew Ying Lan, who is not named in the text. She was the third of eight siblings, and the oldest surviving child of the family. Kingston was named after Maxine, a Caucasian gambler, who was perceived as very lucky. Kingston graduated from Berkeley in 1962, got married, and taught school from 1965 to 1967. In 1967 Kingston, with her husband, left the Continental United States for Hawaii to remove herself from violent West Coast anti-war demonstrations and rampant drug use. She wrote the text *China Man*, which was published in 1980.

Kingston is a major person in the text only inasmuch as she is the author and brings together numerous stories about her family members. She does make personal appearances in the text, principally as a young girl, and does participate in one short but key passage on a swim to an island in Hawaii, but the biography is not about her, *per se*. The text does contain some autobiographical elements, which allow a somewhat incomplete history of the author to be assembled. However the primary goal of the text is to assemble biographical information about male members of Kingston's family and the author is, therefore, strangely not seminal to the work.

Thomas Edison ("Ed") Hong

Ed is probably born during the Year of the Rabbit, in 1903 in San Francisco, California, and is therefore a citizen of the United States of America. The text suggests that Ed' birth could possibly have taken place in 1891 or 1915 although for various reasons these other dates are improbable. Ed's parents are Ah Goong and Ah Po and Ed is the fourth of perhaps five children - apparently all boys. Ed remained in San Francisco with his family through at least 1906 when he was rescued from a burning building by his father. At some point after 1906 Ed's family returned to China where they lived in New Society Village until about 1917. During this period Ed studied to take the Imperial Examination and took and passed the assessment in 1917 - this date is problematic, however, as the Imperial Examinations were officially discontinued in 1905. After completing the assessment Ed is assigned to be a school teacher in his home town; he finds the job unrewarding, frustrating, and difficult. Ed marries and has two children and then decides, in 1924, to emigrate to the United States of America.

Although he is a citizen of the United States, Ed purchases false papers in case his own legitimate papers do not work as anticipated. He travels to the United States by an unknown route - the author offers two possible but fictive methods - and establishes himself in New York City as a laundry operator with three other Chinese men. He

remains in the United States through 1939 when he is joined by his wife. During the 15 years of their separation their two children have died, reportedly by being scared to death by firecrackers as infants. Ed and his wife leave New York City and move to Stockton, California, where Ed works as the operator of a gambling hall. In 1940, Ed's daughter, the text's author, is born. Ed loses his job around 1942 and enters a prolonged period of depression and inactivity. During this period, Ed's health suffers considerably. He is rejected for military service due to being too thin, and he becomes somewhat abusive to his children. His family eventually grows to six living children, including three boys and three girls. He buys a laundry business in Stockton, and thereafter rapidly recoups his spirit and energy. Ed is apparently still living in 1980, when the text is written.

Bak Goong

Bak Goong is one of the author's great grandfathers - probably the father of Ah Goong and the grandfather of Thomas Edison Hong. Bak Goong is born in China and lives there until c. 1855 when, largely to escape being conscripted into military service, he decides to emigrate and seek his fortune elsewhere. Bak Goong and several other men from his area are recruited by a traveling company man, and they sign a contract to work for three years on a sugarcane plantation in Hawaii. Bak Goong makes his way to Canton and then signs aboard a ship as crew. He helps sail the ship for three months through a successful passage to Hawaii. While aboard the ship he tries opium and, although he finds it quite agreeable, decides it is an expensive and bad habit and does not return to the drug.

In Hawaii Bak Goong is sent to raw jungle land where he spends several months, with many others, clearing the jungle and preparing the area for a crop of sugarcane. He then spends the remainder of his three-year contract raising sugarcane crop. The labor is incredibly physical - so difficult that several men commit suicide rather than continuing. The company enforces numerous ridiculous and quirky rules, such as not allowing talking or singing while working. The pay is a meager US$1.00 per week. Bak Goong goes through several period of illness but always recovers his health. He works hard and is particularly fastidious about saving money. At the end of his labor contract he takes his earnings - far less than promised or expected - and returns to China.

Bak Sook Goong

Bak Sook Goong is one of the author's great grandfathers - probably the grandfather of the author's mother. Bak Sook Goong, a minor character in the text, is born in China and emigrates to Hawaii c. 1855 where he works alongside Bak Goong. Bak Sook Goong takes a Hawaiian wife, his third wife, who returns with him to China at the end of his labor contract.

Ah Goong

Ah Goong is one of the author's grandfathers - probably the son of Bak Goong and the father of Thomas Edison Goong. Ah Goong is born in China and makes at least three trips to the United States of America although he apparently returns to China to die.

In 1863 Ah Goong travels to the United States where he is employed by the Union Pacific railroad in the construction of the first transcontinental railroad line. The work is physically demanding and incredibly dangerous - many, many Chinese are killed by various work mishaps. The pay begins at US$31.00 per month but is later increased to US$35.00 per month. Ah Goong is employed felling giant redwoods to provide lumber for railroad ties and is then assigned to the particularly dangerous role of a basked worker.

As a basket worker, Ah Goong stands in a large basket that is lowered over a cliff face by a gang of men using a winch. Ah Goong dangles in his basket above the precipice and drills holes into the rock cliff face. He then packs black powder and fuse into the holes, lights the fuse, and signals the work crew to draw him up. The resulting explosion spalls the cliff face and allows the railroad grade to be constructed through the mountainous terrain. Ah Goong, his mind powerfully stimulated by the constant danger, develops some peculiar habits - he enjoys urinating into space as he dangles in the basket and also constantly publicly masturbates, ejaculating into the air and calling out. Needless to say, his antics earn him the reputation of being somewhat unstable.

Ah Goong participates in an organized labor strike that results in a pay increase, and he also works for several years tunneling through a hard rock mountain. One day he meets a confidence man who convinces Ah Goong to purchase fake citizenship papers - the papers are later destroyed in the San Francisco fire of 1906. Ah Goong is present at Promontory, Utah, when the so-called 'golden spike' completes the transcontinental railroad. He subsequently wanders through the West and ends up in San Francisco in 1903 where he lives with his wife and their child, Thomas Edison Hong, is born. The family then returns to China. Ah Goong makes other trips to the United States, though the specifics are not given, and he is said to have received a bayonet thrust to the head by a Japanese - although again the specifics are not provided. Ah Goong appears to have lived to and through 1924. He is one of the most developed people in the biography and is certainly one of the most interesting.

Say Goong and Sahm Goong

Say Goong and Sahm Goong are two of the younger brothers of Ah Goong. They are relatively minor characters in the biography. They both live together in Stockton during the 1940s where they own two horses and a cart, and make their living selling vegetables. Sahm Goong is the grandfather of Sao Elder Brother. Say Goong dies while the author is relatively young. His ghost then begins to haunt Sahm Goong. Sahm Goong tries, unsuccessfully, to determine what Say Goong's ghost might want. Finally, tiring of the haunting, Sahm Goong follows the advice of the author's mother and firmly

demands the ghost to leave him alone - the demand is successful. Some time later Sahm Goong disappears and the author assumes he has also died.

Sao Elder Brother

Sao Elder Brother is variously known as Sao, 'Mad' Sao, or Big Brother Sao. He is the grandchild of Sahm Goong, and the author refers to him as a cousin. Sao is approximately the same age as Thomas Edison Hong, and he gains United States citizenship when he is drafted and serves as a soldier during World War II. Sao's mother lives in China during the Communist revolution. She sends a constant stream of vituperative letters demanding, and then begging for, money. Sao reasons that it is better to send no funds than send insufficient funds, and sends no money. Sao's mother's letters continue to claim she is starving to death, having to subsist on balls of mud and beetles. Eventually she does die and Sao then becomes convinced that his starving mother's ghost is haunting him. He acts irrationally for a prolonged period of time, earning the sobriquet 'Mad' Sao, and finally returns to China on a quick trip where he provides funeral services for his mother. Upon his return he is no longer haunted by her ghost and returns to a normal life.

Kua Goong

Kua Goong is Ah Po's brother, an incredibly large and imposing man. He apparently made his early living in China by acting as a brigand or highwayman of some sort. In c. 1924 he emigrates from China to the United States of America where he settled in Stockton, California. He worked in Thomas Edison Hong's laundry business without pay for several years. Kua Goong's wife remained in China for several decades and eventually begins to entreat him, by letters, to return to her. Although many of his relatives urge him to return he eventually decides he will not return - America is his new and permanent home.

Uncle Bun

Uncle Bun is a distant relative who was probably born in the United States of America - in fact, it is doubtful if Uncle Bun has ever been to China. He serves in the United States armed forces during World War II. He is apparently somewhat mentally deranged and exhibits symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder. He will seize upon one idea, which will dominate his thoughts for a prolonged period of time. For example, he focuses on the wholesomeness of wheat germ, then moves on to Chinese politics, and then becomes convinced that Thomas Edison Hong is somehow stealing money from his bank account. Uncle Bun finally becomes convinced that the United States is deliberately producing and stockpiling refuse and garbage. Uncle Bun believes that one day in the future he will be captured and forcibly fed the national stockpile of garbage. Uncle Bun, to escape the perceived ills and persecutions of the Gold Mountain,

determines to return to Communist China and one day vanishes and is never heard from again.

Auntie and I Fu

Auntie is the appellation used by the author to refer to her mother's youngest sister. Auntie lives in a tiny apartment in San Francisco's Chinatown with her husband I Fu. Auntie's complex history is briefly summarized in the text. She was living in China with her rich husband during the Communist revolution. After severe persecution her husband was killed by the Communists and she fled to Hong Kong with her two children. In Hong Kong she met and married I Fu and later emigrated to the United States of America. After a prolonged separation I Fu visited America and Auntie returned to Hong Kong. While in Hong Kong I Fu suffered a series of serious altered mental states and became convinced he must leave Hong Kong. The couple emigrated to America and settled in San Francisco. Auntie, a minor character in the text, is significant, mainly because she provides additional information about the author's parents and about the Communist revolution in China.

The Brother, Han Bridge, and Pure Bridge

Han Bridge and Pure Bridge are two of the author's three younger brothers - all born in Stockton, California. The names Han Bridge and Pure Bridge are the men's Chinese names, and they probably routinely go by Americanized names although these are not given in the text. One of the three brothers joins the navy and serves during Vietnam, although which brother serves is not established in the text. Instead, the author's brother is referred to simply as The Brother. The Brother speaks excellent English and works as an English teacher for remedial children before the war. During the war, fearing the infantry draft, The Brother enlists in the navy and serves aboard aircraft carriers during the Vietnam War. While in the service The Brother loses his appetite and apparently feels little or no pain or other sensations, and instead performs his duties nearly as an automaton. After the war The Brother returns to Stockton and resumes his previous life, gradually returning to a normal state.

Objects/Places

Foot Binding

Foot binding was the Chinese custom of wrapping young girls' feet in tight bandages so the feet would not grow normally. The process included the deliberate breaking and forcible relocation of the four small toes and the disruption of the foot's normal arch. The resultant adult foot was dysfunctional, often as small as three inches, but was considered to be a greatly desirable trait for women. Foot binding resulted in the basic inability of the individual to walk and was accomplished only at the cost of incredible pain and frequent health complications. The popularity of the custom varied through time but it was widespread for hundreds of years until it was officially declared illegal in 1911.

Imperial Examination

j?rén, or provincial-level examination, administered once every three years - his average score did not qualify his for an important role in government; he was assigned to be a school teacher in his home town. The Imperial Examination process was officially abandoned in 1905.

Gold Mountain

Gold Mountain is the Chinese colloquial name for America - the land of free money and an easy life. In a broad sense Gold Mountain included Canada, Cuba, and other areas where wealth could be found. In the text Gold Mountain usually means only the United States of America.

Sojourner

Sojourner is the colloquial appellation for Chinese, nearly all men, who travel from China to the United States of America to work and earn money. Unlike traditional emigrants, sojourners plan to eventually return to China to live. Each trip lasts several years and can result - at least potentially - in abundant wealth. Often, however, the trips end in death, ill health, or financial disarray. A generic name for a hypothetical sojourner, perhaps akin to the American 'John Doe,' is Wah Q.

Paper Sons and Daughters

From c. 1882 through 1943, the United States of America had strict immigration quotas, which were enforced for Chinese desiring to enter the country. Only 105 Chinese were allowed to immigrate each calendar year. However, any person born to a man who was a United States citizen was automatically a citizen. Therefore, many Chinese men with citizenship would falsify a new child being born every year and these false births, accompanied by false papers, were then sold to Chinese desiring to enter the United States without waiting for many years. Chinese entering the country on these quasi-legal documents were colloquially referred to as Paper Sons or Paper Daughters.

Citizenship Judge

A Citizenship Judge was a particular form of confidence man, or swindler, who traveled throughout the United States of America through the nineteenth century. The so-called Citizenship Judge would offer to sell citizenship papers, for a sizable fee, which purportedly conferred citizenship in the United States of America. Of course the papers were bogus but many Chinese workingmen doled out considerable portions of their wealth believing that they were establishing their legal citizenship.

Promontory, Utah

The remote location in the Utah desert where the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroad lines finally linked together, establishing the first American transcontinental railroad. Aside from its historical significance the location is largely unremarkable.

New Society Village

New Society Village is the possibly apocryphal name of the ancestral village in China where the author's parents grew up. The name is probably a post-revolutionary name, and the village is noted as having undergone profound changes during the Communist revolution. Before emigrating to the United States of America the author's father, Ed, was a schoolteacher in New Society Village. The author's two older un-named siblings were born and later died as children in New Society Village.

F.O.B. ("Fresh Off the Boat")

A darkly humorous but derogatory epithet the author uses to indicate an individual is newly arrived in the United States of America and is without any understanding of American culture or social politeness - they have immigrated too recently to have become even partially Americanized.

Relationship Honorifics

The author refers to many distant relatives as grandfather, uncle, aunt, or cousin. These honorifics often do not indicate the literal relationship that the English-language word would ordinarily imply. Chinese relationship honorifics are, to a Western sensibility, overly complex and very specific, while the Chinese use of the American honorifics seems vague and imprecise. For example, although the author does refer to her literal grandfather as grandfather, she also refers to his brothers as her grandfathers. The term uncle or aunt is applied to nearly any older individual to whom social respect is due, and cousin can refer to nearly anyone of similar age who shares even the most tenuous familial relationship.

Stockton, California

Stockton is an agricultural city in central California that was founded c. 1849. The author's family settled in Stockton in 1939 and the author was born there in 1940. Many of the events described in the latter third of the text happen in Stockton. The town is well-described throughout the book and is noted as being, prior to the 1940s, the terminus of a particularly well-connected railroad system.

Social Sensitivity

In a broad sense, the social concerns of The Woman Warrior (1976) are continued in China Men, although the emphasis is more on the Chinese-American community, as represented by Kings ton's family history, than on the personal trials of the author herself. She considers the two "one big book," which she wrote "more or less simultaneously." The second book, however, is a more ambitious undertaking than its predecessor: "What I am doing in this new book," she declared in 1980, "is claiming America." Such a goal requires that her book span several generations of men who left China for "the Gold Mountain." She weaves tales of the bitter poverty and meager successes of the early emigrants with stories of those who followed and built the railroad in the west. Little by little, they took root here and adapted their traditions to the America of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Eventually, the Gold Mountain became a place "which belonged to them, which they had invented and discovered."

Techniques

China Men is less an autobiography than an imaginative retelling of the recent history of one group of ChineseAmericans. Kingston tells stories of Chinamen in China, Hawaii, Alaska, San Francisco, Nevada, New York, and Vietnam. In the case of her father, she offers alternative versions. In an early chapter, she has him smuggled into New York in a crate; late in the book she writes, "In 1903 my father was born in San Francisco."

As in The Woman Warrior, Kingston borrows freely from family stories, folk tales, mythology and history books.

Generally these are woven together seamlessly. The various sections of the book, six full chapters interspersed between twelve stories or anecdotes from one to ten pages long, vary widely in tone and subject to give the book its rich texture. The single section which seems out of place is one entitled "The Laws," an eight page overview of United States' immigration laws and policies, beginning in 1868, which affected Chinese-Americans.

Kingston has commented that the section "affects the shape of the book, and it may look quite clumsy . . . [But] now maybe another Chinese-American writer won't have to write that history."

Themes

Themes

The nature of reality, the flux of time, and the power of language remain Kingston's themes in her second book. Memories and legends of China sustain many of the emigrants and refugees who leave their homeland believing the stories about the Gold Mountain. Others quickly grasp the new realities of America and discard many of the old ways and allegiances, like an uncle in The Woman Warrior who, when his family follows him to America, tells them to go away, that he is a different person and they "became people in a book [he] had read a long time ago."

Many were enticed to come to America by the tales of Gold Mountain sojourners who "were talking about plausible events less than a century old." Once here, locked in a brutal struggle for survival, they realize that time, inexorable and slow, will not hurry to keep pace with their desires.

The present moment, the present life, is but a small part of the pantomime. The author recalls her father telephoning the recording which gives the exact time; unlike most people, the "Time Lady... distinctly names the present moment, never slipping into the past or sliding into the future."

The Talk Story

The text presents a narrative structure common in China, Hawaii, and elsewhere known as the Talk Story. The Talk Story structure consists of people verbally sharing stories with each other in an informal setting, where the narratives consist of stories, history, ideas, and opinions. Most stories come from family traditions, cultural values, or are simply about life in general. Understandably, Talk Story narratives commonly feature significant, interesting, and sensational events while dates and locations are not particularly established. Much of the text is derived from biographical information gleaned through careful attention to family Talk Story narratives. Thus, significant events are sometimes presented in two possible versions, significant dates are not particularly reliable or even available, and familial relationships are vague. The Talk Story nature of the biographical text is simultaneously engaging yet difficult - a traditional biographical reading presupposes accurate dates, chronological presentation of events, and a fairly stringent adherence to facts. Yet in the Talk Story biography most of these elements are missing, and all of these elements are subjected to an interesting plot development, which tends to aggrandize achievement, focus on perverse or strange behavior and events, and erase the commonplace.

Chinese Contributions to America

Although the text is presented as a biography of the author's male ancestors, the principle events in the text also are interesting in a broad historic context. Thus, the text presents many Chinese immigrants working in vital capacities in the development of the United States of America over a period spanning over one hundred years. Since exact biographical data is missing for many of the people presented, the individuals described can also function as representative of entire classes of Chinese men. For example, Bak Goong, Bak Sook Goong, and thousands of other Chinese laborers cleared farmland and established crops in Hawaii. For the ensuing decades the Hawaiian economy would largely be based upon the sugarcane harvests made possible through the backbreaking labor performed by Bak Goong and others. Later Ah Goong performed difficult and incredibly dangerous labor for a period of many years building the transcontinental railroad - a truly monumental achievement with profound implications, and also an achievement made possible only through the ceaseless hard work of thousands of Chinese men like Ah Goong. Years later, Thomas Edison Goong was one of countless small-business owners and operators who helped to establish and develop the American economy while Uncle Bun, Elder Brother Sao, and The Brother all served in the United States of America armed forces during several of the nation's critical periods of conflict. Thus, the biography demonstrates individual Chinese contributions to America while simultaneously presenting Chinese contributions in a larger way.

Family History

The text is, at heart, a family history of four generations of men in the author's family presented in a biographical format. Most segments of the text either present direct experiences of family members or seek to put those experiences into a broader, generational context. For example, events that happen to Ah Goong in the 1860s later become significant in the life of Thomas Edison Hong and his sons and daughters, including The Brother who served in Vietnam. The text clearly illustrates how identity is linked to family identity, culture, and history and in a wider sense how family history can be used to construct individual identity and bridge cultural and social differences. The text spans over one hundred years of history and presents the achievements, personalities, and shortcomings of generations of men. For example, it becomes interesting to examine The Brother's experiences teaching English to remedial students to the experiences of his father teaching reticent children in New Society Village children - how the two men find themselves in similar situations even though a continent, a language, and a generation apart - and how they respond similarly to their respective challenges.

Style

Point of View

The text is related from the first-person, omniscient point of view. The point of view utilized is simultaneously interesting and problematic - biography is typically presented in from detached third-person point of view and restricted to a limited recounting of historical facts. In the text, however, the narrator is presented as the meta-author and claims especial insight into the thoughts, motivations, and private moments of those ancestors selected for biographical inclusion. This exclusive insight does not extend into all realms, however, and is generally limited to those aspects of character development, which lead the text into an interesting fusion of biography and fictive elements. The point of view selected is appropriate and insightful, and allows the biography to be presented as a culturally-appropriate type of Talk Story implementation.

Setting

The text covers two continents and spans over one hundred years of events. As such, the text's setting is truly vast and the establishment of tone and sense of place is exceptional and extensive. In general, however, the bulk of the events described in the book happen in one of four locations - New Society Village, Canton, China; Stockton, California; Promontory, Utah; and Hawaii.

New Society Village is a small Chinese village in Canton, China. The name is possibly apocryphal and the village was probably renamed during the Communist revolution. The village is presented as a very typical Chinese village in nearly all respects - indeed it is deliberately constructed as typical. Most of the individuals described in the biography were born or lived a substantial amount of their life within New Society Village. Notably, the author has never been to the town.

Stockton, California, is at the time of events described in the text a mid-size California city typical in many respects. The Chinese population of Stockton was, *per capita*, not as large as the Chinese population in other California cities - notably San Francisco - but a sizeable number of Chinese live in Stockton during the period described by the text. Stockton was notable as being the terminus of an unusually well-developed railroad network prior to about 1940. It is otherwise well-described in the text and authoritatively constructed by the author who was born and grew up in the city.

Promontory, Utah, and the surrounding environs to the West is the setting for *The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains*. The setting is well-described and covers several hundred miles along the historic course of the Union Pacific Railroad segment of the transcontinental railroad. Ah Goong lived, worked, and traveled this section of the country while working as a laborer during the construction of the railroad. He was

present at the historic 'golden spike' ceremony at Promontory, Utah, where the transcontinental railroad was completed.

Hawaii is the island setting for *The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains*, and also for one other shorter segment in the text. The area is described in generic terms. Bak Goong and Bak Sook Goong lived and worked on a sugarcane plantation on Hawaii for a period of several years. Later, the author visits Hawaii and seeks a connection with her ancestors. It is noteworthy to mention that after leaving California the author moved to Hawaii and has lived there for many years.

Language and Meaning

Language is one of the most subtle and complicated elements present in the construction of the text. The English used to construct the text is not only beautifully crafted and precise it is also frequently selected because of its translated equivalent in Cantonese. Probably the most easily understandable example of this occurs in *The Adventures of Lo Bun Sun*, and comes from the interplay between the given name Robinson and its homonymic rendition in Cantonese as Lo Bun Sun. To an English-speaker, the name Robinson, probably has some connotation as 'the son of Robin,' or perhaps to the Polish *rabin* (or rabbi) from whence it is probably derived. However, the Cantonese Lo Bun Sun has numerous subtle meanings including the amusing and surprisingly accurate 'naked toiling mule.' The compelling subtlety of meaning that is achieved by the text's simple translation from English to Cantonese to English of a particularly well-known name is a widely-read English-language classic is startling and invites the reader to more-closely inspect the frequent use of other Cantonese words and phrases and how they might relate to English.

Structure

The 308-page text is divided into 19 chapters. Six of the chapters are long and well-developed and contain primarily biographical information about one or more of the author's relatives. The remaining 13 chapters are, generally, quite brief and contain typically non-biographical information derived from Chinese folklore and other sources which are particularly relevant to the biographical chapters, which they either introduce or conclude.

Each of the six major chapters has a somewhat unique structure, although they typically follow the general pattern of opening with one or more brief anecdotes followed by a lengthy biographical sketch focused on a single individual. The author's father, Thomas Edison Hong, is the primary subject of two chapters, the author's great grandfather, grandfather, and brother are the respective subjects of one chapter each, and a final chapter, somewhat autobiographical in nature, synthesizes biographical information about a variety of the author's relatives. In general, the information presented in the major chapters is chronological although there are notable exceptions. Biographical information is intermixed with fictive elements with no particular distinguishing

characteristics - thus, the biographical nature of the text is simultaneously challenging and compelling.

Each of the 19 minor chapters focuses on a single event, theme, or character and most of the chapters are tightly focused. Several of the chapters are scarcely a page in length and the longest does not approach, in length, the shortest of the major chapters. The information presented in the minor chapters typically complements the major chapter which they introduce or conclude. However, the relationship is often subtle and not particularly evident until the text has been read and synthesized.

Quotes

"Waiting at the gate for our father to come home from work, my brothers and sisters and I saw a man come hastening around the corner. Father! 'BaBa!' 'BaBa!' We flew off the gate; we jumped off the fence. 'BaBa!' We surrounded him, took his hands, pressed our noses against his coat to sniff his tobacco smell, reached into his pockets for the Rainbo notepads and the gold coins that were really chocolates. The littlest ones hugged his legs for a ride on his shoes. And he laughed a startled laugh. 'But I'm not your father. You've made a mistake.' He took our hands out of his pockets. 'But I'm not your father.' Looking closely, we saw that he probably was not. We went back inside the yard, and this man continued his walk down our street, from the back certainly looking like our father, one hand in his pocket. Tall and thin, he was wearing our father's two-hundred-dollar suit that fit him just right. He was walking fast in his good leather shoes with the wingtips." (*On Fathers*, p. 6)

"BaBa sat on the cot, sat at the table. He would have enjoyed the luxury of having a window, though he did not need daylight or moonlight to study by. With hands folded behind his back, he paced, brushing the floor with the balls of his feet, and sang his memorizations. A jailor brought food, returned for the utensils, gave him back his bedroll, and locked him up 'until time for the first test,' he said. He left a teapot, around which BaBa held his hands and caught the rich heat that arose. He decided to stay awake all night. The tea lasted a short while. Fireflies in a jar would have given an appearance of warmth. Back in the village he had read by their light. Steam must have been issuing from his mouth and nose, but he could not see it. Huddling in a blanked, his knees against his chest, he perched on the straight-backed chair, but the blanked turned into a nest for sleeping, and he had to discard it. Muttering the texts, he gave voice and breath to word after word. His attention was aflame; when he saw it turn into a firefly, shrinking, going out, he almost fell off the chair with alarm; for a moment or longer he had fallen asleep. He tried propping himself up by the elbows. His eyes closed, and shapes and colors began turning into dreams. He tried holding his eyelids open with his fingers, but in the dark they might as well have been closed. He understood the blue-eyed Buddha-who-cut-off-his-eyelids. He stood on the chair and stretched - and felt a hook or a ring in a beam directly overhead. So there it was; of course, the poets said it would be there. He looped the end of his pigtail into the ring and tied it tight. Then he sat in his chair to study some more. When he dozed, his own hair jerked his head back up. Hours later, when the pull on his scalp no longer kept him alert, he opened the table drawer, where he found an awl. Like the poets whose blood had been wiped off it, he jabbed the owl into his thigh, held it there, and studied on. At the worst dark of the night, he needed neither ring nor awl. 'Aiya!' Out of the disembodying dark came screams of men already driven mad, footsteps, scufflings, someone yelling, 'Ah Ma. Ah Ma.' The poets say that men have used the ring to hang themselves." (*The Father from China*, p. 26)

"At last came the legal father's turn to be interrogated. He combed his hair again. He said his goodbyes. Inside the interrogation room were several white demons in formal wear; the legal father gauged by the width of lapels and ties that his own suit was not

quite stylish. Standing beside the table was a Chinese-looking soldier in American uniform and a demon soldier in the same uniform. This Chinese American was the interpreter. The legal father sat opposite the interrogators, who asked his name, his village, where he was born, his birth date - easy questions. "'Can you read and write?' the white demon asked in English and the Chinese American asked in Cantonese. "'Yes,' said the legal father. "But the secretary demon was already writing 'No' since he obviously couldn't, needing a translator. "'When did you cut off your pigtail?' asked the translator. "'In 1911,' said the legal father. It was a safe answer, the year he would have picked anyway, not too early before the Republic nor too late, not too revolutionary nor too reactionary. Most people had cut their hair in 1911. He might have cut it for fashion as much as for revolution. "'Do you have relatives who are American citizens?' "The janitor, a China Man, who just then entered the room with dustpan and broom, nodded. "'Yes.' "'Who?' "'My grandfather is an American. My father is an American. So I'm an American, also my three older brothers and three uncles - all Americans.' "Then came the trap questions about how many pigs did they own in 1919, whether the pig house was made out of bricks or straw, how many steps on the back stoop, how far to the outhouse, how to get to the market from the farm, what were the addresses of the places his grandfather and father and brothers and uncles had lived in America. The interrogators like asking questions with numbers for answers. Numbers seemed true to them. 'Quick. How many windows do you have in your house?' 'How many times did your grandfather return to the United States?' 'Twice.' 'Twice?' 'Yes, twice. He was here once and returned twice. He was here three times altogether. He spent half his life in America and half in China.' They looked into his eyes for lies. Even the Chinese American looked into his eyes, and they repeated his answers, as if doubting them. He squelched an urge to change the answers, elaborate on them. 'Do you have any money?' 'Yes.' 'How much?' He wondered if they would charge him higher fees the more money he reported. He decided to tell the truth; lying added traps. Whether or not he spoke the truth didn't matter anyway; demons were capricious. It was up to luck now. "They matched his answers to the ones his relatives and fellow villagers gave. He watched the hands with yellow hair on their backs turn the copies of his grandfather's and father's papers. "They told him to go back to the gaol, where he waited for more weeks. The next time he was called to be examined - searched, the Chinese word - they asked again, 'What American relatives do you have?' "'My grandfather and father,' he said again, 'and also my three bothers and three uncles.' "'Your grandfather's papers are illegal,' the Chinese American translated. 'And your father is also an illegal alien.' One by one the demons outlawed; his relatives and ancestors, including a Gold Rush grandfather, who had paid a bag of gold dust to an American Citizenship Judge for papers. 'There are no such things as Citizenship Judges,' said the Immigration Demon and put an X across the paper that had been in the family for 75 years. He moved on to ask more trap questions, the directions the neighbours' houses faced and the number of water buffaloes in 1920, and sent him back to the barracks. "He waited again. He was examined again, and since he had an accurate memory, he told them the same number of pigs as the last two times, the same number of water buffaloes (one), the same year of cutting his queue, and at last they said, 'You may enter the United States of America.' He had passed the American examination; he had won America. He was not sure on what basis they let him in - his diploma, his American lineage (which may have turned

out to be good after all), his ability to withstand gaoling, his honesty, or the skill of his deceits. "This legal father then worked his way across the continent to New York, the centre of America." (*The Father From China*, pp. 58-60)

"In 1856 every great grandfather on every island gave some of his money to throw a Grand Ball for the Sandalwood Mountain king and queen's wedding. Neither Bak Goong nor Bak Sook Goong went to it, but they were represented by wealthy China Men. 'He practices quadrilles alone in front of a mirror in his room at night,' the plain men gossiped. The ball was held at the courthouse. Four white demons, named with Chinese names and dressed in mandarin gowns, acted as hosts. The queen danced the opening quadrille with a real China Man, the king with a demoness. Six whole sheep and one hundred fifty chickens were eaten. The China Men's Ball was the most elegant ever held in Hawai'i. The newspapers praised the China Men for their dancing and generosity; a ball was not above their comprehension. Great grandmothers were to understand that their husbands did not spend $3,700 on a Grand Ball to dance with the blonde Jesus demonesses or the princesses of the wild people but to prove their civility. "When Bak Goong needed to get off this rock of an island, he sat at an edge of the ocean where he often watched the sun pop out on his left, and later drop back in on his right. One moonless night the winds blowing from Kona met the winds blowing trade, and the air was still; the fronds hung silent. Two people were standing in the black water halfway between him and the horizon, halfway between the sky and earth. A yellow light shown from them; their random movements repeated in series, a dance. They revolved in the only brightness, and stopped, hands and feet held like Balinese temple dancers. Time moved at their rate of motion. It was either two people or one Hindoo with four arms. He heard music draw out into one long note. The waves going in and out forever was the same as no motion at all. The ocean remains the same basic water. Flesh does not evolve into the necessary iron. He yearned for the sun to blast out of the ocean. He sat for hours in the exact center of eternity." (*Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains*, pp. 108-109)

"The mountainface reshaped, they drove supports for a bridge. Since hammering was less dangerous than the blowing up, the men played a little; they rode the baskets swooping in wide arcs; they twisted the ropes and let them unwind like tops. 'Look at me,' said Ah Goong, pulled open his pants, and pissed overboard, the wind scattering the drops. 'I'm a waterfall,' he said. He had sent a part of himself hurtling. On rare windless days he watched his piss fall in a continuous stream from himself almost to the bottom of the valley. "One beautiful day, dangling in the sun above a new valley, not the desire to urinate but sexual desire clutched him so hard he bent over in the basket. He curled up, overcome by beauty and fear, which shot to his penis. He tried to rub himself calm. Suddenly he stood up tall and squirted out into space. 'I am fucking the world,' he said. The world's vagina was big, big as the sky, big as a valley. He grew a habit: whenever he was lowered in the basket, his blood rushed to his penis, and he fucked the world." (*The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains*, pp. 132-133)

"'Now we're eating potato leaves,' she wrote. 'We pound rice hulls into paste and eat it. At least send money to bury me.' (Sao felt the terror in *bury*, the dirt packing the nose, plugging the eyes and mouth.) 'I've wasted my life waiting, and what do I get for my

sacrifices? Food and a fat old age? No. I'm starving to death alone. I hold you responsible. How can you swallow when you know of me?' Some letters were long and some short. 'The beggar children who came to the door on your sister's wedding day were the worst-looking beggars in many years,' she wrote. 'Give them food? Huh. I should have kidnapped them and sold them. Except that people don't buy children any more, not even boys. There's a baby on the rich family's doorstep every morning. Oh, it's so pathetic. The mother hides behind bushes to watch the rich lady bring the baby inside. There are people eating clay balls and chewing bark. The arbor we sat under is gone, eaten. No more fish in the rivers. Frogs, beetles, all eaten. I am so tired. I can't drive the refugees off our property. They eat the seeds out of the dirt. There'll not be harvest again.'" (*The Making of More Americans*, p. 173)

"Before a letter in a white envelope reached us saying that Sao Brother's mother had died, she appeared to him in America. She flew across the ocean and found her way to him. Just when he was about to fall asleep one night, he saw her and sat up with a start, definitely not dreaming. 'You have turned me into a hungry ghost,' she said. 'You did this to me. You enjoyed yourself. You fed your wife and useless daughters, who are not even family, and you left me to starve. What you see before you is the inordinate hunger I had to suffer in my life.' She opened her mouth wide, and he turned his face away not to see the depths within. "'Mother,' he said, 'Mother, how did you find your way across the ocean and here?' "'I am so cold. I followed the heat of your body like a light and fire. I was drawn to the well-fed.' "'Here, take this, Mother,' he cried, handing her his wallet from the nightstand. "'Too late,' she said, 'Too late.' "With her chasing him he ran to the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator. He shoved food at her. "'Too late.' "Curiously enough, other people did not see her. All they saw was Mad Sao talking to the air, making motions to the air, talking to no voice, listening to someone who moved about, someone very tall or floating near the ceiling. He yelled and argued, talked, sobbed. He lost weight from not eating; insomnia ringed his eyes. That's when people began to call him Mad Sao." (*The Making of More Americans*, pp. 175-176)

"For eight months in 1975, residents on the edge of Green Swamp, Florida, had been reporting to the police that they had seen a Wild Man. When they stepped toward him, he made strange noises as in a foreign language and ran back into the saw grass. At first, authorities said the Wild Man was a mass hallucination. Man-eating animals lived in the swamp, and a human being could hardly find a place to rest without sinking. Perhaps it was some kind of a bear the children had seen." (*The Wild Man of the Green Swamp*, p. 221)

"I invented a plan to test my theory that males feel no pain; males don't feel. At school, I stood under the trees where the girls played house and watched a strip of cement near the gate. There were two places where boys and girls mixed; one was the kindergarten playground, where we didn't go anymore, and the other was this bit of sidewalk. I had a list of boys to kick: the boy who burned spiders, the boy who had grabbed me by my coat lapels like in a gangster movie, the boy who told dirty pregnancy jokes. I would get them one at a tie with my heavy shoes, on which I had nailed toe taps and horseshoe taps. I saw my boy, a friendly one for a start. I ran fast, crunching gravel. He was kneeling; I grabbed him by the arm and kicked him sprawling into the circle of marbles. I

ran through the girls' playground and playroom to our lavatory, where I looked out the window. Sure enough, he was not crying. 'See?' I told the girls. 'Boys have no feelings. It's some kind of immunity.' It was the same with Chinese boys, black boys, white boys, and Mexican and Filipino boys. Girls and women of all races cried and had feelings. We had to toughen up. We had to be as tough as boys, tougher because we only pretended not to feel pain." (*The American Father*, pp. 251-252)

"Freedom from the draft was the reason for leaving China in the first place. The Gold Mountain does not make war, is not invaded, and has no draft. The government does not capture men and boys and send them to war. "My father was exactly the right age for the draft. So was Uncle Bun's son and Big Brother Sao. Everybody suggested ways to get out of war. Certain butchers were supposed to be efficient cutting off the trigger finger with one blow of the cleaver. 'He's faster than a surgeon.'" (*The Brother in Vietnam*, p. 269)

"Grandmother and the aunts wrote letters on the deaths of every last uncle. If the uncles could have figured out what the Communists wanted of them, they would have complied, but Communism made no sense. It was something to do with new songs, new dances, and the breaking up of families. Maybe it had to do with no sex; the men were separated from the women. Children were put into motherless, fatherless camps for training; they were taught to report on their parents instead of guarding family secrets. The Communists were not simply after property; they wanted to people to say certain things. They had to sing ugly Communist songs. 'Stoop and scoop, stoop and scoop,' they sang, and genuflected, swooping their red scarves from air to ground. The aunts waved their kerchiefs vigorously; they memorized fast and sang loud, but still they had to kneel on ground glass, and their thumbs were broken. They did whatever they thought the communists wanted, but the Communists were not satisfied. Communists were people who had gone crazy and perverted. They made order by rationing food, a cup of oil per family per week. They held court trials, which they thought were the same as entertainment and theater. The torturers asked riddles with no correct answers. The uncles had listened to the answers of the people ahead of them, but the Communists wanted particular responses; the same answer did not fit everyone. Communist schools taught from strange books. The uncles had been kept awake at night to study. 'If Uncle doesn't get some sleep soon, he's going to die. He's working from four a.m. to eleven p.m., then has to study how to be a Communist in his spare time. If he doesn't memorize a page a day perfectly, he can't have his dinner.' The Communists were monkeys trying to be human beings; they were pretending to explain and reason, putting on serious faces. They were saying nonsense, pretending they knew the classics when they were not reaching from real books. Communist schools, Communist books, Red art work, Red courts, theaters, customs were almost like real ones but off. The shrewd villagers were not fooled. The Japanese had tortured people for the fun of it; the Communists wanted something else: their monkey civilization. Neighbors informed against one another to prove they were true Communists. The number of people the Communists killed was 60 million. "After the uncles were killed, the aunts fled to Hong Kong, Canada, and the United States. That the Communists were holding their distant cousins as hostages did not deter them." (*The Brother in Vietnam*, pp. 275-276)

"'They came in a ship in March of 1603,' he said. 'Three great mandarins landed at the Bay of Manila. The Filipinos were amazed to see them riding in ivory and gold chairs. They were higher class than the thirty thousand Chinese who were already living in Luzon. They had with them a Chinese in chains, who was to show them where to look for a gold needle in a mountain.' "It was past midnight, or it was his accent, but I could not hear if he was saying that looking for the Gold Mountain was like looking for a needle in a haystack. 'No. No,' he said. 'A gold needle.' To sew the sails, was it? A compass needle, was it? 'The mandarins asked for more ships, which they would fill with gold, some to give to the Filipino king, some to take back to the Queen of Spain, and some for the Emperor of China." (*On Listening*, p. 307)

Topics for Discussion

What does the title *China Men* imply about the text? Who are the 'China Men'?

The most difficult aspect of the text is, perhaps, its classification as biography. Is the text truly a biography? What constitutes biographical information?

Why is the text structured with major chapters interspersed with short chapters? What function do the short intercalary chapters serve within the construction of the biography?

Maxine Hong Kingston is the author and narrator of, and sometimes participant in, the events described in the text. Discuss how the autobiographical elements of the text strengthen its authentic tone and texture.

The transcontinental railroad was largely built by Chinese laborers. After the completion of the railroad, these men were systematically marginalized by local and national government. Discuss the effects this racist legislation had on the author's family.

What do you imagine happened to Uncle Bun, once he supposedly returned to Communist China?

At least two ghosts are presented in the text. Their appearance is presented as factual events in a biographical text. How do you interpret the putatively factual existence of ghosts within the context of the text?

On several occasions, the author mistakes another man for her father. What do you think this implies about the nature of their familial relationship?

Very few women are presented in the text beyond a simple mention. Why?

M N Is it possible for non-Chinese to understand the fundamental aspects of living in the United States of America with a Chinese ancestry and heritage?

Imagine that you have to assign this book to a particular section in the library. Would you consider it to be a novel, biography, historical document, or autobiography? Explain your choice.

Literary Precedents

The one book which Kingston admits is a major influence on her work is William Carlos Williams' In the American Grain: "I wish I had written it," she remarked. She admires the way "Williams has told the American history poetically and, it seems to me, truly. In a way, I feel that I have continued that book."

Nathaniel Hawthorne is another writer who imaginatively reinterpreted American experience. If not a direct influence, he certainly was Kingston's predecessor in retelling American history allegorically and poetically. Like Kingston, Hawthorne possessed a deep appreciation of the power the past holds over daily life.

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