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Author
Fan, Christopher T

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Science Fictionality and Post-65 Asian American Literature

Christopher T. Fan

I cannot define science fiction, but I can locate it, philosophically and historically.

Judith Merril, "What Do You Mean—Science? Fiction?" (26)

The gloves are off. In "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," the last chapter of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior: A Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), the narrator, Maxine, and her mother, Brave Orchid, finally go at it. Although their argument is instigated by what Maxine sees as her mother's plan to marry her off to an undesirable man, its focus quickly shifts to Maxine's future professional prospects. But it's kind of all the same thing:

> Do you know what the Teacher Ghosts say about me? They tell me I'm smart, and I can win scholarships. I can get into colleges. I've already applied. I'm smart. I can do all kinds of things. I know how to get A's, and they say I could be a scientist or a mathematician if I want. I can make a living and take care of myself. . . . I am not going to be a slave or a wife. [. . .] I'm never getting married, never! (201–2)

What's so striking here is that, for Maxine, imagining a professional future—and not just any future, but one in science or mathematics—is part and parcel of her struggle against prescribed forms of femininity, a struggle for which *Woman Warrior* is perhaps best known. "Chinese-feminine," as Maxine calls it at one point, is rejected here along with being a "slave or a wife," and "American-feminine" is

*Christopher T. Fan is an assistant professor at UC Irvine in the departments of English, Asian American Studies, and East Asian Studies. He is writing a book titled *Principles of Selection: Asian American Literature after 1965*.

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rejected by cathecting lucrative, masculine professions in science or mathematics (11).

Yet the forces bringing professional identity to bear on femininity, and vice versa, far exceed any beef between mother and daughter or any designs that the "teacher ghosts" might have on their star pupil. In the late 1950s, when this fight takes place, Maxine could only be dimly aware of an ongoing process of scientific and technical professionalization that in subsequent years would shape Asian America in ways for which literary critics have yet to fully account. The name that sociologists and demographers use for this process is *occupational concentration*, and it refers to the overrepresentation of Asian Americans in professional-managerial positions, especially in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. It's a process that will eventually generate stereotypes like the model minority and the Asian math and science nerd, and that will lead Kingston to enroll at UC Berkeley with no fewer than 11 scholarships to support her intended major of engineering (Huntley 7). And it's a process whose source can be found in a confluence of immigration policy, US-Asia political economy, and an emerging negotiation of Asian American identity.

The confluence of these factors matters hugely to the fight between Maxine and her mother. When Maxine says that she could be a "scientist or a mathematician," the subtext she's activating is the history of her mother's erstwhile pursuit of the same professional path and eventual failure to escape wifehood. Essentially, Maxine is saying that she will succeed where her mother failed, and that times have changed since her mother's days in medical school in the late 1930s. If their fight were to have taken place today, however, Maxine's embrace of STEM fields might betray that she's yet to kick "the nerd syndrome," which is the revealing formulation that Sau-ling Wong once borrowed to refer to the temptations of whiteness, social status, and political quietude associated with the model minority stereotype. If, in Wong's words, rejecting the model minority means "abandoning traditionally 'safe' fields like science, engineering, or medicine" (210), then it wasn't until Kingston's sophomore year at Berkeley, when she changed her major to English, that she finally kicked the nerd syndrome (Kingston, "*MELUS*" 69). In the decades since *Woman Warrior*'s publication, occupational concentration has facilitated the injection of the nerd syndrome into the very DNA of Asian American identity, especially that of the Asian American author.

In a fundamental way, *Woman Warrior* is concerned not only with gender and race, which are the two dominant frameworks through which the memoir has been read, but also with how those categories have been shaped and directed by economic subjectivity.

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We might thus establish a continuity extending from *Woman Warrior* to a recent group of 1.5 and second-generation Chinese American women writers who debuted within the last five years and whose debut works feature a very similar structure of concerns. One might include in this cohort Meng Jin, Ling Ma, Chanel Miller, Celeste Ng, Lucy Tan, Weike Wang, Xuan Juliana Wang, and Jenny Zhang. The parents of each of these writers (generally their fathers) were or are professionals (generally STEM professionals) who emigrated to the US after 1965 for employment or education.[1] Patriarchal dilemmas over professional identity, womanhood, and liberation feature prominently in these authors' works: sometimes as a "two cultures" conflict between the arts and sciences; sometimes as intergenerational conflict; and sometimes as the ressentiment that Susan Koshy calls "secondariness," a condition in which women immigrants are deprofessionalized or otherwise made dependent upon men for financial reasons and for citizenship (352).

Jin's *Little Gods* (2020) centers on a brilliant Chinese physicist whose career fails to offer an escape from the limitations of motherhood. In Ma's *Severance* (2018), a novel set against the backdrop of the Obama-era US–China relationship and a zombie pandemic, the protagonist's aspiration to transcend secondariness is directed toward the mirage of a useful career that evacuates her of all content but her economic subjectivity. Miller's memoir *Know My Name* (2019) is an account of Miller's sexual assault and struggle for justice, as well as a *Künstlerbiografie* charting her path through tangles of cultural and professional expectations into subjectivity as a visual and literary artist. The parents in Ng's debut novel *Everything I Never Told You* (2014) are, by profession, a history professor and a would-be doctor. Their daughter, Lydia, is pushed to the brink by her mother's STEM-directed tiger parenting. Tan's *What We Were Promised* (2018) is about a family of elite Chinese professionals who move back to Shanghai after years in the US only to find themselves struggling with cultural difference and the isolation of career and wealth. Weike Wang's *Chemistry* (2017) features an unnamed Chinese American PhD student in chemistry and undercover creative writer who drops out of her PhD program. The stories in Xuan Juliana Wang's *Home Remedies* (2019) range formally from realism to allegory to science fiction and take as their subjects young Chinese and Chinese Americans navigating upward mobility and economic precarity in the midst of China's global rise. Finally, Zhang's short story collection, *Sour Heart* (2017), focuses on the lives of impoverished Chinese artists who emigrated to the US after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, rejecting China's politics as well as its industrializing ethos, and struggle to live, make art, and raise children in New York City.

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In some of these works, the influence of *Woman Warrior* is all but explicit. We see homage paid to its first chapter, "No Name Woman," in the title of Miller's memoir, and in *Chemistry*, where the narrator's father (like Maxine's father) had a sister whose death has been a family secret and whose name is never mentioned. Strong resemblances can be found throughout the plots and characterizations in *Sour Heart*. What these works more tellingly share is a thematic continuity with *Woman Warrior*'s interest in professional and feminine identity, and liberation from patriarchy. To be sure, such a thread could describe any number of novels, Asian American and non-Asian American alike. Making these works paradigmatic of post-1965 Asian American literature as a whole is how these thematic continuities are sustained by the material processes underlying each of these authors' emergence *as* authors. These processes enter the text of *Woman Warrior*—and post-65 Asian American literature broadly—through a postwar fantasy of endless, science-led economic expansion in which scientific and technical professionals play heroic roles and for which post-65 Asian America has become emblematic.

While psychological accounts of autopoetic irony in Asian American literature certainly provide forceful and convincing explanations for formal tendencies found in the work of specific authors, what I hope to provide in this article is a broader account of how various material processes have come to constrain formal tendencies found across post-65 Asian American literature as a whole.[2] That said, Chinese American writing in this article functions not as a stand-in for Asian American literature. Nor is my goal here a partial account that might be completed through an additive analysis of other nationally defined traditions. My premise is that the content of the modifier *Asian American* is the dialectical tension between the general category and its component parts. The genre of post-65 Asian American literature might, therefore, be grasped within the genre of post-65 Chinese American literature and vice versa.

With the exception of *Severance*, these works are not readily described as science fiction (SF), yet they are all *science fictional* insofar as they are oriented to a social totality that makes it possible in the first place to generate and receive the conventions of SF as an aesthetic, and especially literary, genre. In this regard, these works offer an opportunity to reevaluate theories of how genres mediate the historical problematics of the contemporary, a set of issues that has lately fallen under the heading of the "genre turn." A core claim of my argument is that the gravitational pull of science fictionality can be detected in genres ranging far beyond its extreme focalization in SF. What I am after here isn't a method for distorting texts so that they might resemble SF if we squint at them in just the right way.

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Rather, my interest is in the literary historical questions that arise when we trace the literary production of a racialized class of economic subjects.

If we take up Theodore Martin's approach to genre as a "historical tendency" (13) rather than a category that might potentially be exemplified, then the question I am posing about post-65 Asian American literature is how it reveals autopoetic tendencies influenced by science fictionality. In many of these works, like *Severance*, such tendencies are found both in explicit deployments of SF and in the registers of theme, characterization, and trope. A common feature of the various accounts of the genre turn that we have is that they all default to an account of a general phenomenon in postwar anglophone, especially US, fiction. What such accounts risk eliding are specific, especially minority, literary and social histories. The science fictionality of post-65 Asian American literature compels us to pause and reconsider our literary historical claims when social forms and genre forms resemble each other in ways that exceed analogy and resonance.

Had *Woman Warrior*, part memoir, part fabulation, part novel, been published in 2016 rather than 1976, it might very well have been placed under the rubric of the genre turn. But, as I'll soon show, its approach to genre responds quite directly to occupational concentration. After revealing the science fictionality of *Woman Warrior*, I leap ahead some 40 years to examine the cohort of Chinese American writers mentioned above. Rather than provide an exhaustive account of this period, my goal is to model a methodology for such an account that will emerge by first focusing on a hypercanonical text that has had an enormous downstream influence and that is especially sensitive to science fictionality at the subjective level; and second, by turning my focus to a cohort case study where science fictionality has become a predominantly objective condition.

My hypothesis is that across the post-65 period, literary articulations of science fictionality modulate between subjective and objective foci, and that China's geopolitical rise becomes one of the predominant drivers of this process. In this regard, *Severance* is emblematic of the new cohort's debut works. Its genre turn qualities are best understood when placed in relation to what we might call the trope of China's rise: the distinctly science fictional, US–China dimension that the novel is at pains to describe. This dimension appears across the cohort's works. We lose sight of it if we read genre-turn features as simply instances of a deracinated reckoning with capitalist realism and the afterlife of postmodernism. Taken together, these works and their authors evidence an orientation to science fictionality installed at the core of post-65 Asian American

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identity. This orientation becomes clear when we examine the dynamic formal processes in and between these works: the narrative vehicle of occupational concentration, the characterization of feminist resistance to patriarchy, and the rich, dichotomous tension between the arts and sciences that reveals them as two sides of the same coin.

1. Occupational Concentration and Science Fictionality

On or about 3 October 1965, the character of Asian America changed. That was the day that President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act. Seated at a desk on Ellis Island, darkened by the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, he declared that the act "corrects a cruel and enduring wrong in the conduct of the American Nation" (1038). Johnson was referring to the longstanding system of exclusion based on country of origin and eugenic racial science that the 1965 act finally brought to an end. Along with the Voting Rights Act, signed a few months earlier, and the Civil Rights Act, signed the previous year, it was one of three signal pieces of civil rights-era legislation. But even as the 1965 act was framed by its supporters as an attempt to rectify America's Cold War persona of moral superiority, it was also designed to respond to a global restructuring of economic relations that saw US companies responding to falling profits by expanding their supply chains to cheap labor countries. As the sociologists Paul Ong, Edna Bonacich, and Lucie Cheng put it, "capital [began] seeking out new recruits for industrial production around the globe" (9). The 1965 act's provisions thus shifted the basis of US immigration policy away from principles of exclusion to principles of economic selection. Madeline Hsu explains that this shift "turned immigration selection into an aspect of fiscal policy. The growing influence of such neoliberal principles has masked emerging forms of inequality in global migrations that privilege the mobility of educated elites, particularly for those concentrated in what are now labeled STEM, or science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, fields, and most prominently from Asia" (21).

While Hart-Celler didn't go into effect until 1968, there was an overnight explosion of immigration from Asia when it did. Since 1965, Asian America has radically increased in kind (diversity of national origin) and quantity. The Asian American population has grown from a population of just under 1 million to what is now the fastest-growing ethnic group in the country, with a population of 22 million. A number of employment and job skills-related policies and legislation have subsequently extended the 1965 act's provisions,

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most notably the Immigration Act of 1990, and it would be an understatement to say that their impact on Asian America has been profound. For instance, in 1964, Asian immigrants constituted only 14 percent of technical and scientific students and professionals arriving in the US. In 1970, that percent nearly quadrupled, rising to a dizzying 62 percent (Ong and Liu 58). Since then, trends have shown that Asian American men enter STEM fields at nearly four times the rate of white Americans; Asian American women enter STEM fields at lower rates than men but still almost three times the rate of white women (Min and Jang 845, 848). This focalization into STEM fields is a feature of a more general occupational concentration into professional and managerial careers.

Subsequent legislation, rule-making, and regional advantages have skewed economic migration policies like the H-1B temporary worker visa heavily in favor of Asian applicants with technical backgrounds. In 2017, more than 85 percent of H-1B visas were granted for STEM professions, and over 86 percent of visas were granted to workers from India and East Asia ("Number of H-1B"). Economic geographers like AnnaLee Saxenian have shown how post-65 Asian immigrants have established the key ethnic networks and supply chains that have made possible both Silicon Valley's meteoric growth and the growth of the American research and development sector more broadly.[3] Significantly, similar trends are found in non-voluntary Asian immigrant populations like Southeast Asian refugee communities, which have historically experienced high rates of poverty and have struggled academically and professionally. Sociologists Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou describe a phenomenon they call "second-generation convergence" in which the 1.5 and second-generation children of these immigrants begin to exhibit the academic and professional outcomes of more privileged Asian immigrants from East Asia and South Asia.[4] While occupational concentration has impacted nearly every segment of Asian America, it has especially impacted Asian Americans who become authors, as we shall see.

Occupational concentration is the red thread allowing us to track what is distinctly Asian American in the broader processes of embourgeoisement and professionalization so strongly shaping the persona of postwar US authors and the literature they produce. Part of the challenge in telling this story is that the itinerary of the post-65 Asian American author tracks quite closely with the rise of what Mark McGurl calls the "Program Era" of US fiction. In that period, the postwar university campus became the site of "continuity between *creativity* and *R&D*" and the launching pad for an increasingly professionalized creative writing industry (McGurl 20). Although it's merely a coincidence that between 1965 and 2005, the

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number of creative writing programs in the US rose from about a dozen to over 300, that is, roughly by the same multiple, 25, that the Asian American population has increased over the same period, these are two histories of professionalization that, when viewed from the standpoint of literary history, might look startlingly the same (25). What ultimately is Asian American about post-65 Asian American literature, then, is not a racial identity or some essence residing in the body of a specific Asian American author. Instead, it is a set of historical forms that sometimes makes certain bodies legible as Asian or Asian American, and that sometimes allows for a correspondence between social type and aesthetic form.[5]

It's the coalescence of occupational concentration into an aggregate *type* of the post-65 Asian American author that Chang-rae Lee describes in a 2017 interview:

> A lot of Asian American writers, mostly of my generation and a little younger . . . and without exception, I mean really without exception, you know, at a writer's conference maybe 20 of us sitting around, every single one of them started out in a very professional, very respectable gig before they threw it all away to become a writer. ("Vox" 00:23:27–00:23:55)

To be sure, if I were in that room and had told the gathered company that their books were all science fictional, some might nod their heads (Lee himself, for instance, whose 2014 novel, *On Such a Full Sea*, is a work of dystopian SF), but I'd likely be laughed out or worse.

Still, that's precisely the claim I'm making. One might respond that work by Southeast Asian writers features proportionally *less* SF in comparison to East and South Asian writers. The core of my argument, however, is thatthe material conditions underlying the social meanings of professional authorship have, after 1965, had a strong influence on the formal features of the literature that Asian American authors produce. Science fictionality is the name for that totality of conditions, so my argument accounts, first, for why East and South Asian writers have tended to make their relation to science fictionality explicit through genre. Second, it accounts for why Southeast Asian authors, who have generally hailed from refugee communities rather than the professional-managerial class (PMC), have tended not to do the same. These differences notwithstanding, all Asian American communities—PMC or refugee, rich or poor—have fallen under the sway of occupational concentration and the cultural-economic processes of secondary convergence.

[T]he material conditions underlying the social meanings of professional authorship have, after 1965, had a strong influence on the formal features of the literature that Asian American authors produce. Science fictionality is the name for that totality of conditions.

Clearly, this is not an uncomplicated way of thinking about an archive that, since 1965, and especially since 1990, has exploded

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quantitatively as well as exhibited a great deal of formal variation: from the multimodal experimentation of Theresa Cha's *DICTEE* (1982), the spy narrative of Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995), and the quantum thought experiments of Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), to the melancholic tales of secondariness in Jhumpa Lahiri's and Bharati Mukherjee's short stories, the poetry of Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), and the jaunty schematics in Charles Yu's fiction. But what appears as difference at the level of style conceals a common concern with occupational concentration. As I briefly outlined earlier, biographical details can offer important clues as to how these concerns make their way onto the page. Cha's parents were both teachers. Lee's father emigrated to the US to take up a psychiatry residency, and Lee himself worked as an analyst on Wall Street before "throwing it all away" to become an author. Ozeki's mother Masako Yokoyama received her PhD in linguistics from Yale, where her father, Floyd Lounsbury, also a linguist, taught for decades. Mukherjee's father, Sudhir, was a wealthy head of a pharmaceutical company. Yu's father was an engineer at Lockheed Martin. While Vuong, a refugee, hails from a very different background than these writers, his work nonetheless contends with the trope of the college classroom as a symbol of race and class. Science fictionality may not always provide a direct explanation, but it necessarily provides a proximal one.

Science fictionality refers to the material conditions of emergence for a specific mode of cognition, deeply associated with industrial modernity and Anglo-European imperialism, and that provides the precondition for the production and reception of SF conventions. We get an oblique account of it in Darko Suvin's adaptation of Ernst Bloch's notion of the "novum," which Suvin defines as the "cognitive innovation" in an SF narrative that opens to "*a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality*," and that differs from "poetic metaphor" and similar forms in "modern prose fiction" in that it "entails a change of the whole universe of the tale, or at least of crucially important aspects thereof" (68). The novum, in other words, is the key site of recognition between SF author/producer and SF reader/decoder. It is also, Suvin stipulates, a contingent figure: a "mediating category whose explicative potency springs from its rare bridging of literary and extraliterary, fictional and empirical, formal and ideological domains, in brief from its unalienable historicity" (68). If I find it necessary to pause over Suvin's account in order to hold the historicity of the novum in focus—and name it science fictionality—then it's because Suvin's interest lies elsewhere: in an account of SF poetics as such. My more modest goal is to account for SF and science fictionality as much more historically and

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ideologically bound phenomena. Analogous accounts of science fictionality can be found in John Rieder's *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008) and Istvan Csicsery-Ronay's article "Science Fiction and Empire," both of which argue that European "technoscientific Empire" furnished the preconditions for SF genre forms (Csicsery-Ronay 236).

In the case of post-65 Asian American literature, there are at least two analytical structures we can use to track science fictionality outside of the institutional and genre loci of SF: professional identity formation and the two cultures conflict between the arts and sciences. In post-65 Asian American literature, narratives about professional identity frequently take the form of *Erziehungsroman* and of struggles to square professional identity with other modes of identification pertaining to culture, race, and gender. Professional identity formation isn't the whole story, but it is an aperture through which we can glimpse the interaction between occupational concentration as an economic process and its subject-level consequences. The two cultures conflict is a trope with a lineage extending at least as far back as the Arnold-Huxley debates of the late nineteenth century. I borrow the term, however, from the British scientist-cum-novelist C. P. Snow, who, in his famous 1959 lecture "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution," decried the antagonism between "traditional" culture (humanist disciplines) and scientific culture. Advocating for greater understanding between the two cultures, Snow expressed a postwar optimism that, in addition to envisioning a technocratic rapprochement between the US and USSR, was shared by theorists of so-called postindustrial society, who saw science and technology as the key to endless industrial expansion and often invoked Snow in their arguments.[6]

The two cultures conflict in its own way thus conceptualizes the postwar period as science fictional. When we see art taken up in post-65 Asian American literature as a theme, trope, or narrative, a two cultures conflict signals how art is formulated dialectically with an ideology of science and its role in industrial expansion. The arts and sciences are obviously very different categories, but in post-65 Asian American literature, they are for all intents and purposes libidinally identical: one is always pursued at the expense of the other. Whenever art is conjured, so is its shadow, science; and whenever science is conjured, art is right there beside it. In regard to the *production* of post-65 Asian American literature, the two cultures conflict worms its way into the friction between professional identity and authorship. The stereotype that results—of Asian parents prohibiting pursuit of the arts—is so familiar even to non-Asian Americans that it scarcely bears repeating. In the same way that genre fiction is frequently stereotyped as a deficient mode of literary

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fiction, literary authorship is, for post-65 Asian Americans, often coded as a genre of professional identity always contradistinguished against more prestigious, STEM-related professional identities. Sean McCann locates a similar friction between "the inventive artist versus the routine worker; the self-conscious writer versus the symptomatic buffoon; and, most fundamentally, skill versus bureaucracy" (303).

Where McCann and McGurl both see in postmodern US literature a fundamental resistance to the research university by an expanding PMC as emblematic of resistance to what McCann calls "bureaucratic confinement" (302), post-65 Chinese American writers like Kingston are more likely to view the technoscientific research university as a space of freedom in which dilemmas pertaining to identity might be productively resolved.[7] Relatedly, a character like *Severance*'s protagonist Candace Chen sees office work and consumerism as adequately compensating for the lost plenitude of collegiate life. For Maxine and Candace, professional identity is one way to embrace a capitalist subjectivity that is a rosier alternative to secondariness and the incarceration of normative femininity. If the Asian American campus novel is a relatively new and small genre, then it's perhaps because the postwar technoscientific research university is such a fundamental precondition for post-65 Asian American literary expression that it goes without saying.[8] Therefore, to suggest that post-65 Asian American literature is always already campus fiction is another way of saying that it's all science fictional. Even a character as far-flung from the PMC as Little Dog, the protagonist of Vuong's novel, ends up on campus (166).

2. Deprofessionalization in *Woman Warrior*

Perhaps the most written-about text in Asian American literary studies, *Woman Warrior* has also enjoyed a wide readership outside of Asian American studies, especially in the fields of feminist criticism and autobiography studies. According to several anecdotal accounts, *Woman Warrior* was, at least at one moment in the late 1990s, the most widely read and taught literary text in US colleges and universities by a living American author (J. H. Lee 17). Of its five unnumbered chapters, chapters one, two, and five—"No Name Woman," "White Tigers," and "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe"—have received the most attention and have been foundational to the development of Asian American critique. "No Name Woman," with its nod to Betty Friedan's "The Problem That Has No Name," is one of the most powerful accounts that we have of how the violence of patriarchy is sustained in mother–daughter

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relations, as erin Khuê Ninh has shown in her figure of the debt-bound daughter.[9] Sau-ling Wong has shown how the reimagining of the Fa Mulan folktale in "White Tigers" activates a tension between "necessity" and "extravagance" that allegorizes the internal conflicts of Asian Americanist critique. And the bullying scene at the center of "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe" has become the paradigmatic illustration of what Anne Cheng calls "racial melancholia" and that King-Kok Cheung calls "articulate silence."[10]

If its third and fourth chapters, "Shaman" and "At the Western Palace," have been proportionally underexamined, it's perhaps because their focus on class instability doesn't obviously accord with the feminist, antiracist, and anti-Orientalist politics of Asian American critique. While the argument I'll be making is that these two chapters reveal how Kingston's feminism and formal choices are tied to a post-65 context, my intention is not to bring these chapters into line with the normative practices of Asian American critique. Instead, it's to demonstrate in this highly influential text how post-65 economic realities have generated strong social and aesthetic guidelines for Asian American subject formation and literary expression.

"At the Western Palace" opens with an extended scene of misrecognition at the San Francisco International Airport (SFO). The international terminal is filled with travelers milling about, and it's into this hubbub that Maxine's mother, Brave Orchid, has brought her children and her niece to pick up her younger sister, Moon Orchid, whose flight from Hong Kong has arrived early. When Brave Orchid lays eyes on her sister—for the first time in 30 years—she's taken aback not so much by her age as how swiftly she moves through immigration: "*That* old lady? Yes, that old lady facing the ghost who stamped her papers *without questioning* her was her sister" (117; my italics). It's a stark contrast from her own immigration experience:

> These new immigrants had it easy [Brave Orchid thinks to herself]. On [Angel] Island the people were thin after forty days at sea and had no fancy luggage. . . . [Angel] Island had been made out of wood and iron. Here everything was new plastic, a ghost trick to lure immigrants into feeling safe and spilling their secrets. (115)

For Brave Orchid, the scene at SFO dredges up memories of her own entry into the US decades earlier. By the time Moon Orchid has arrived at the airport, the "wood and iron" world of Angel Island has transformed radically into a "new plastic" world of deceptions and secrets—not least in terms of the labor skills that each material

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indexes.[11] What Brave Orchid registers here is the profound unlikeness of the pre- and post-65 immigration regimes. The question of likeness, as it turns out, is a central preoccupation of "At the Western Palace."

In *Woman Warrior*, the logics driving resemblance and simile arise from anxieties pertaining to whether pre-65 Chinese America is *like* post-65 Chinese America. One way this distinction is made is through the apparent generic differences between the novel's chronologically pre- and post-65 chapters. "At the Western Palace" is the novel's pivotal chapter because it transitions readers from the magical realism and fabulation of the China chapters ("No Name Woman," "White Tigers," and "Shaman," which bring us up to the early 1940s) into the realism of the US chapters ("At the Western Palace" and "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," which take place in the early 1970s). "At the Western Palace" facilitates this transition by mixing the fictionality of the China content with the realism of the US content.

"At the Western Palace" reads like a straightforward realist narrative, but we later learn that it is an almost entirely imagined reconstruction of events based on thirdhand information: "In fact, it wasn't me my brother told [this story to]," Maxine explains; "one of my sisters told me what he'd told her" (163). To account for this genre reversal, critics have read *Woman Warrior* in terms of postmodern epistemology and formal experimentation. Indeed, McGurl holds it up as "perhaps *the* classic" of postmodern autopoetics (262). In addition to these accounts, I propose that a salient feature of "At the Western Palace" is that it's a highly wrought product of what Yoon Sun Lee has described as Maxine's "laborious narrative work of mediation" (431). The question that then arises is *why* she chooses to undertake this not inconsiderable task. Why, moreover, would these events be so important to her that she displaces her pride of place in her own memoir even more than she had in the previous three chapters? The answer has to do with the stakes of professional identity as a solution to limitations of traditional femininity and how her mother's professional narrative models this strategy.

"At the Western Palace" and its predecessor, "Shaman," together form a narrative arc about Brave Orchid's deprofessionalization, and in so doing reveal *Woman Warrior*'s orientation to science fictionality. "Shaman" is an account of Brave Orchid's medical training in the mid-1930s and her subsequent years practicing as a field medic in the rural areas of Guangdong province during the Japanese invasion of 1938. In its opening scene, we find Maxine marveling over her mother's diploma, which cites her as possessing "Proficiency in Midwifery, Pediatrics, Gynecology, 'Medecine,' 'Surgary,' Therapeutics, Opthalmology, Bacteriology, Dermatology,

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Nursing and Bandage [*sic*]" (57). As outlandish as this spread of specializations might appear, it's very much in line with the modernizing ethos of the Republican era in China and its emphasis on importing Western science. Indeed, at the beginning of her training, Brave Orchid and her fellow students are told, while gathered in an auditorium under a portrait of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, "You will bring science to the villages" (63). Yet a different, if related, form of liberation was on Brave Orchid's mind when she decided to enroll in medical school. As she recounts to Maxine, she left her husband's family's household, where she was living at the time, in order to be "[f]ree from families" and to "live for two years without servitude" (62). Brave Orchid's very name is actually emblematic of a kind of second-wave feminist commitment to the liberatory potential of the career: "Professional women have the right to use their maiden names if they like. Even when she emigrated, my mother kept Brave Orchid, adding no American name nor holding one in reserve for American emergencies" (77).

By the time we arrive at "At the Western Palace," decades have passed since Brave Orchid received her degree, and much has changed. "You have no idea how much I have fallen coming to America," Brave Orchid tells Maxine (77). Differences in training and her lack of English meant that she could no longer practice medicine in the US (149). Instead, she spends long hours working in her husband's laundry. Although Moon Orchid is the protagonist of "At the Western Palace" on a superficial level, the plot truly centers on Brave Orchid and the caper she hatches to reunite Moon Orchid with her long-estranged husband, from whom she's been separated for some 30 years. In those decades of separation, Moon Orchid's husband started two things: a successful medical practice as a brain surgeon, and a second family with a young Chinese American wife. For Brave Orchid, this situation is totally unacceptable, but for Moon Orchid, who was living a comfortable life in Hong Kong funded by her husband's generous remittances, the situation has been, after all, pretty darn great (125). Nonetheless, Brave Orchid convinces Moon Orchid to go along with her plan to drive the 300 miles from Stockton to her husband's office in "a skyscraper in downtown Los Angeles" and force him to take her back (146).

When they arrive, Brave Orchid tells Moon Orchid to wait in the car as she goes up to the office to scope out the scene. Now, after weeks of living with her sister cheek by jowl, Brave Orchid finally has a few moments to herself. Entering the building, she finds the "lobby was chrome and glass; with ashtray stands and plastic couches arranged in semicircles" (147). Once she exits the elevator into the medical office's waiting room, we get a hint at the true reason why Brave Orchid hatched this plot in the first place.

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> A roomful of men and women looked up from their magazines. She could tell by their eagerness for change that this was a waiting room. Behind a sliding glass partition sat a young woman in a modern nurse's uniform. . . . It was an expensive waiting room. Brave Orchid approved. The patients looked well dressed, not sickly and poor. (147–48)

What a weird reaction! "Brave Orchid approved." This description of the lobby echoes that of the waiting area at SFO, with its glass partitions and "new plastic," even as it parallels Brave Orchid's envy or resentment for how easy the "new immigrants" have it (115). But why is her reaction to the waiting room one of *approval*? One answer may be found in the play of similes that opens the chapter—the trope of likeness that mediates the difference between pre- and post-65 immigration regimes. In her efforts to recruit Moon Orchid into her scheme, Brave Orchid tells her at one point, "He's a doctor *like* me" (149; my italics). Condensed into Brave Orchid's approval is an identification with Moon Orchid's husband's profession as a doctor and perhaps also a vertiginous realization that if she had immigrated *after* 1965, that that medical office, or one like it, could well have been her own. She never utters the words *endless industrial expansion*, but the fantasy of that expansion and its dreams of STEM-led upward mobility fill the room.

Even as Maxine inherits her mother's investment in the connection between science and liberation from patriarchy, the science fictionality of *Woman Warrior* isn't limited to that inheritance. Where that inheritance opens onto the broader context of post-65 science fictionality is when the memoir turns to the problem of Maxine's academic and professional future, which, as we saw earlier, is consistently oriented to scientific and technical fields. It's Maxine's antipatriarchal investment in post-65 science fictionality that helps us to unlock the mystery of the last two sentences of "At the Western Palace": "Brave Orchid's daughters decided fiercely that they would never let men be unfaithful to them. All her children made up their minds to major in science or mathematics" (160). Laura Kang has called these sentences "cryptic" (282); Sau-ling Wong has called them a "non sequitur" (200). I read them as conclusions overdetermined by the pressures of occupational concentration, which at this point, in the early 1970s, are still emergent and only perceptible as structures of feeling. "Science or mathematics" refers not only to academic and professional fields but also to an emerging post-65 Asian American social formation in which professional values promise to supersede the cultural values of pre-65 Chinese immigrants. Brave Orchid might have arrived too early to

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catch the wave of occupational concentration, but her daughters are right on time.

3. Shenzhen Drift

Imagine, for a moment, Brave Orchid sitting down to share a meal with Ruifang Yang, the mother of the protagonist of Ma's 2018 novel *Severance*. They might chat about the differences between their immigration experiences: Brave Orchid's arrival by ship at Angel Island in the 1930s and Ruifang's arrival by airplane in Salt Lake City in 1988 to join her husband, a would-be literature professor whose examination scores unhappily funnel him into a PhD in economics at the University of Utah (170). They might commiserate over their shared sense of isolation in the US and their negative feelings about assimilation. But where they would truly bond would be over the topic of deprofessionalization. Brave Orchid would recount to Ruifang the story of how far she's fallen since emigrating to the US; and Ruifang would tell Brave Orchid the story of "how far she had come" in her hometown of Fuzhou, where "she had been a certified accountant, and she counted among her clients various city and regional government officials" (172). She would explain that she had to give all of that up in order to join her husband, and that the only work she could find in the US was piecework for a wig manufacturer (173). The two women would recognize in each other a ressentiment fistulating around their shared secondariness. At this point in their conversation, they might opt to change the subject to their hopes for and worries over their daughters. Ruifang might convey to Brave Orchid, as she did to her daughter Candace, what she and her husband wanted most dearly for Candace when they chose to emigrate to the US: "I just want for you what your father wanted: to make use of yourself. . . . No matter what, we just want you to be of use" (190).

In these very different characters and very different books, we detect a similar orientation through resemblances between characterization and theme. Yet where *Woman Warrior*'s orientation to science fictionality is interior and psychologically mediated, *Severance*'s is right there on the surface. If we think of the two texts as generically linked, as I do, then we sense that something has changed. Set in New York City in the year 2011, *Severance*'s novum is a mysterious pandemic that has stricken much of the world, dooming its victims to a zombie-like state in which they are locked to a location, performing gestures in an endless time loop until their bodies waste away.[12] The disease, called "Shen Fever," is believed to be a fungal infection and is named after Shenzhen, the iconic industrial

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hub in southeast China. The novel's settings in deserted postapocalyptic cities and malls are familiar conventions of the zombie genre as shaped by George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and Boris Sagal's *The Omega Man* (1971).

However, much like Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), which many reviewers have cited as similar in style and approach to genre, *Severance* evades genre classification. For instance, its zombies aren't really zombies; they're "the fevered." They're harmless and don't horde together or offer up on-the-nose allegories for race or class in the way that, say, Romero's living dead do for black–white racial conflict and Whitehead's locating of the titular Zone One's base of operations in a Chinatown bank (Fort Wonton) draws the novel's zombies into an allegory of Chinese capital (90). Moreover, the ambient threat so common to the zombie genre is, in *Severance*, converted into relentless banality, outdoing even *Zone One*. The "drift" of zombie conventions brings our attention to what's contemporary about the novel. As Martin puts it: "By holding certain features steady . . . genres first draw our attention to what changes; then they compel us to ask why" (13). Like *Zone One*, *Severance* seems like an obvious instance of the "genre turn" in anglophone fiction, which has generally been understood as a recent phenomenon—after 1989-ish—in which the conventions of putatively low genre forms like SF, horror, and fantasy are accepted into the auspices of something called "literary fiction."[13] Critics have associated it, mainly through an analysis of form and genre, with writers like Michael Chabon, Emily St. John Mandel, Cormac McCarthy, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ozeki, and Whitehead himself. But if we think of genre as an expression of what Martin calls "historical tendencies," rather than sets of formal features and hierarchies that distinguish (however provisionally, psychoanalytically, or market-oriented) between high and low, then, as it turns out, *Severance* has more in common with *Woman Warrior* than *Zone One*. *Severance* and *Zone One* might share the niche genre of the zombie office novel, but we shouldn't allow their resemblance to obscure the differences in how they got there.

Together with the debut works of fiction by Chinese American women mentioned earlier, *Severance* demonstrates how the story we've been telling about the genre turn needs to be disambiguated. Not so much to salvage the concept or periodization of the genre turn but to understand how genre forms and social forms interoperate, especially in minority literatures. For in many ways, Asian American literature anticipated the genre turn. What more genre turn-y text than *Woman Warrior*? In 1976, it was a clear outlier in what was then still a very small, stylistically uniform archive of Chinese and Asian American writing.[14] Betsy Huang observes that,

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until the late 1980s and early 1990s, writing by Asian Americans was predominantly populated by "life writing genres (autobiography and memoir)," and that its "representational vocabulary" was "still very much limited . . . [to] works that feature immigrant and assimilation themes" (3).

Elaine Kim, Robert G. Lee, and other critics have referred to this era as the "goodwill" or "ambassadorial" period in which US writers of Asian descent like Pardee Lowe, Jade Snow Wong, and Younghill Kang sought through their writing and self-fashioning to "demonstrate how acceptable" they were to "American society" (Kim 50).[15] It's after 1990 that the genre diversity of Asian American writing really explodes because, as Min Hyoung Song observes, it's around 1990 that the "children of 1965" come of age and begin publishing. While theories of postmodernism, the fate of realism after modernism, and the professionalization of creative writing help us to understand the genre turn in broad outline, a lot falls out of focus. The problem is, when we zoom out to look at anglophone fiction as a whole, where the 1990s are also a key periodization, the post-65 Asian American etiology fades into the larger phenomenon, evidencing a literary historical dimension of second-generation convergence. It matters how Asian American authors got with the program (era). The explosion of Asian American SF during this period follows occupational concentration and its articulation with industrializing Asian economies that are producing more STEM professionals than their economies can absorb. Even when post-65 Asian American literature unambiguously takes the form of SF, we need to understand that genre status as an extreme focalization of science fictionality. And just as SF is an extreme focalization of science fictionality, the focalization of Asian Americans into STEM fields is an extreme form of the more general process of occupational concentration.

What "historical tendency" is revealed in the science fictionality of post-65 Asian American literature? It would help to sharpen this question with another: What is the literary function of China, Chineseness, and the trope of China's rise? Science fictionality—understood as a fantasy of futurity that associates a certain mode of production (industrialization) with certain kinds of people (STEM professionals)—conjures new forms when its imagined locus of industrialization shifts from the US to China and its imagined ideal subjects begin to resonate with the prestige of global capital over against the racial form of nationally specific identities.

The recent debuts by these several Chinese American writers offer us a useful sample for exploring these questions. In each of them, we detect inheritances from Kingston's negotiation of feminine and professional identity in *Woman Warrior*, and especially

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how China intervenes in processes of identity formation that are already strongly influenced by occupational concentration. This scenario aptly summarizes the central conflict in Tan's *What We Were Promised*, where one of the main characters grapples with deprofessionalization upward (the reverse, one might say, of Moon Orchid's itinerary): away from a life of career ambition in the US and into a life in glitzy, twenty-first-century Shanghai as a "taitai," slang for "ladies of luxury who could not be called housewives because . . . they did no housework at all" (30). The mother of *Chemistry*'s unnamed protagonist might identify strongly with Ruifang's homesickness (but for Shanghai, not Fuzhou) and with her investments in beauty and STEM careers as stabilizers of the untenable agon of Chinese American-ness.

Puzzles of aesthetic, economic, and transnational identities also motivate the stories in X. J. Wang's *Home Remedies* and are most pronounced in the story "*Fuerdai* to the Max." Like a *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2003) for the Orange County parachute-children set, the characters in this story, the *fuerdai*, are the bling-blingy scions of Chinese nouveau riche, sent alone to the US as teenagers for an American education. Ignored by and indistinguishable to Asian Americans and non-Asian Americans alike, hovering indeterminately between Chinese and American, they are left with nothing but the shibboleths of global capital to anchor their identities. Their uncertain social status is further complicated by the hazy origins of their money: Does it come from political connections, the black market, or legitimate business? These are the factors that set the stage for the story's central conflict, in which Lily's reputation is besmirched by another girl, Wey, who is jealous of Lily's enormous wealth and accuses her of being an escort. Here, collapsed into the trope of twenty-first-century Chineseness, is the crystalized telos of narratives of occupational concentration: the absolute reduction of identity to economic subjectivity and the ejection of professional identity as a meaningless waypoint in that itinerary.

The transformation of China's rise into a trope for the objective dimension of Chinese American economic identity also appears in Zhang's *Sour Heart*. There, the logics driving resemblance and similarity arise from a historical comparison between China's pre-1989 ideological threat and post-1989 economic threat. The story "Our Mothers Before Them" exposes this structure by toggling the sections of the narrative between the Cultural Revolution in 1966 and Washington Heights in 1996. In addition to anxiety over historical analogy, another generic resemblance with *Woman Warrior* is the theme of deprofessionalization. One of Zhang's titular mothers, Li Huiling, is tormented by her diminished status in the US. In contrast to Brave Orchid, Huiling experiences this diminishment as a de-

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aestheticization. A talented singer and aspiring film starlet in her Shanghai youth, she abandons her ambitions after Tiananmen to follow her artist husband to the US. In a modification of the two sentences at the end of "At the Western Palace," in which Maxine and her sisters resolve to major in "science and mathematics," Zhang depicts Huiling's children trying to assuage their mother's regrets. "I'll never attempt art when I get older," one of them assures her, "Only a sadist—a self-centered sadist—would put his family through that" (133). Occupational concentration—depicted here as rejecting the arts—resonates not only with a post-65 process originating in US immigration policy. It also gives figure to a US–China political unconscious in which science fictionality is mediated by the China trope's relentless economism: its flattening of Chineseness and Chinese American-ness into modes of subjectivity whose rejection of the arts and implicit privileging of the sciences is a no-brainer for a fundamentally economic ethos.

A key indication that genre has drifted between *Woman Warrior* and these recent works, and yet retained its orientation, is that the latter register China as an objective, material reality rather than a subjective abstraction (for example, the private site of verification that Maxine has in mind when she declares, "I want to go to China and find out who's lying" [205–6]). This dimension is often mediated by displacements of the two cultures antinomy. Such displacements are registered, perhaps unexpectedly, in Miller's memoir, *Know My Name*. Miller's mother, Zhang Ci (张慈; also known as MayMay Miller), is a well-known Chinese feminist writer who, Miller tells us, was famously featured in Wu Wenguang's celebrated 1990 documentary film *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers*, which tracks five bohemian artists before and after the events in Tiananmen—the same kind of post-Tiananmen exiles in the US who are the subjects of *Sour Heart* (Miller 320). Zhang is best known for authoring a highly influential 1988 essay, "Life Alone," where she claims an artistic identity as a writer by way of rejecting what Maxine would call "Chinese-feminine," as well as the (STEM-oriented) professional trajectories entailed by China's reform-era alignment of human capital development with rapid industrialization. Thus, when Miller writes to her mother in the acknowledgments to *Know My Name*, "I grow in the direction of you" (329), she captures with moving efficiency a two cultures dynamic that elevates artistic identity as an ideal of self-expression but that also significantly mediates what Rey Chow calls a post-Tiananmen "transaction of ethnicity" in which Chinese artistic identity is inseparable from Chinese dissident political identity (19–20). Crucially, this convergence of identities—mother's and daughter's, Chinese American and Chinese—is motivated by Miller's resistance to occupational

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concentration, which she pathologizes when she recounts a streak of student suicides at her high school in 2009, many by Asian Americans (38–40).

The comorbidity of occupational concentration expressed as toxic, STEM-oriented academic standards helps to clarify the rather complicated historical orientations of Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*. The formal device organizing the novel's plot is a two cultures trope subjected to a series of gendered and racial inversions: STEM is aligned with the white American Marilyn Lee, rather than her Chinese American husband, James Lee, a history professor. The narrative that follows explores the consequences of these inversions, which can only really be cathected with reference to the racial form of occupational concentration. Marilyn's aspirations to become a doctor are scuttled by her mother, who enforces the traditional gender roles that Maxine would label "American-feminine" and who Marilyn resolves, very much like Maxine, never to become. Marilyn transfers her aspirations to her daughter, Lydia, who struggles to meet her mother's high—and field-specific—academic expectations. Meanwhile, James's affair with a Chinese American graduate student is an explicit attempt at resolving feelings of being out of place academically, culturally, and racially that the novel meticulously traces back to his childhood as a poor, second-generation Chinese American isolated in 1940s Iowa. These conflicts hinge entirely upon the novel's setting in 1977. Situated just prior to Deng Xiaoping's inauguration of China's "Reform and Opening" era in 1978, and to the full normalization of US–China relations in 1979, the 1977 US–China relationship was one still largely defined by symbolic diplomatic gestures rather than the deep economic relations that have since joined both countries at the hip. Although this earlier phase of US–China relations is barely depicted in the novel, it is nonetheless the sine qua non that enables Ng to bypass the unignorable, too-big-to-fail US–China relationship of 2014, when the novel is published, and confine China and Chineseness entirely to the registers of the libidinal and affective. The concrete reality of China's economic rise is, therefore, registered precisely in its diegetic absence: a key part of the "everything" we are never told.

The post-65 features of these narratives certainly resonate with Amy Ling's foundational account of pre-1990 Chinese American women writers as negotiating a "between-worlds condition . . . that is characteristic of all people in a minority position" and a patriarchy for which being a woman writer "is not only an act of self-assertion but an act of defiance" (177, 1). They also offer us opportunities to situate these works and their authors in a specific historical context and to unpack political complexities that do not solely follow the path of "defiance." China and Chineseness offer these writers means

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for evading occupational concentration and its Scylla and Charybdis of "Chinese-feminine" and "American-feminine."

If *Woman Warrior*'s heroic professional fantasies were sustained by the science fictionality of the early years of the post-65 period, then four decades of those fantasies' displacements and deflations shape the science fictionality in *Severance*. The future itself—empty but for the frisson of Chinese capital—joins the casualties in *Severance*'s postapocalyptic setting, revealing itself as akin to the nationalism parodied in *Zone One*'s ironically named "American Phoenix," whose numbers-driven, corporate-sponsored management of American civilization's rebound smacks of more of the same rather than its moniker's suggested rebirth. In *Severance*, if there ever was a future to speak of, it was in Shenzhen, not New York City. The novel's fleshing out of this context draws from a symbolic economy centering on Shenzhen, a city that has been both mythologized and demonized in the US for its astonishing growth from a population of only 30,000 in the late 1970s to one of the most high-tech, rapidly expanding cities in the world with a current population of over 10 million. Gothic, futuristic, and seemingly unstoppable in its growth, Shenzhen has become emblematic of China's economic and geopolitical rise, as well as evocative of the anxieties pertaining to the end of the American Century and the inevitability of China's hegemony.

Severance is a novel less about the heroic potential of science than it is about terminal economic stagnation that can only be imagined in national terms: the final severance of science fictionality's fantasies of expansion from the conditions that sustained them. Whereas in *Woman Warrior*, science fictionality is detected in the attachment of science to women characters, in *Severance*, science fictionality is detected in both the detachment of science from character and the relegation of science to the aesthetic—specifically, to the register of genre SF. While a genre-turn analysis of *Severance* might stop there, we may forge ahead to see that what distinguishes it from *Zone One*'s similar depiction of stagnation (most strikingly in the resemblance between its "stragglers" and *Severance*'s "fevered") is a dialectical working through of dilemmas in Chinese American identity. The exaggeration of the collapse of social and temporal relations as a result of prolonged economic stagnation in this allegory of the apocalypse merely intensifies what is a very real consequence of China's rise for the coherence of Chinese American identity, especially for paradigmatic post-65 professionals like Candace.

From our historical vantage point, if Maxine's commitment to science and mathematics is less than liberatory and instead charts a path out of the frying pan of normative femininity into the fryer of

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the PMC, then *Severance* makes this fraught pathway literal. For Candace Chen, a white-collar office job at the book manufacturing firm Spectra is initially an escape from the unfreedom of postcollege unemployment and precarity, yet it's ultimately a prison sentence that she oddly embraces. Rather than revolt against the imprisonment of career and wage labor, as her white boyfriend Jonathan does, Candace finds comfort in it. In response to his question, "Why do you want to work a job you don't really even believe in?" Candace wants to respond but doesn't say out loud, "The way you choose to live is a luxury. . . . You think it's possible to opt out of the system. . . . In this world, money is freedom. Opting out is not a real choice" (201, 205, 206). Again, she *thinks* these responses but doesn't voice them.

Here, the contradiction between racial identity and economic subjectivity running throughout the novel determines Candace's "articulate silence" (to recur to King-Kok Cheung's term for this prevalent trope in Asian American women's writing). That silence reflects Ma's habit of stopping just short of explicit racial markers, even when they're threatening to erupt through the surface. What Candace is clearly critiquing is Jonathan's cishet white privilege. In other words, her silence is more than just a dilemma of deracinated economic subjectivity—the fate, as it were, of the "neoliberal subject" or the "post-Fordist" worker. What we might call Candace's and Ma's postracial affect is symptomatic of the perennially unresolved status of Chinese American racial form as it articulates to a specific moment in US–China economic relations. As an anthropomorphic racial form that, as Colleen Lye and Iyko Day have shown, has been governed by the inhuman trope of economic subjectivity since the nineteenth century, it poses challenges for calibrating a vocabulary of race and racism.[16] The racial form that hovers about Candace has everything to do with her convergence with the capitalist system, which she describes here as a kind of opting in and which amounts to a dissipation of racial form rather than a deracination. Such dissipation, as I have argued elsewhere, moves Asian racial form away from mimetic markers like Frantz Fanon's "epidermal racial schema" (92) into other registers that are nonvisible, narrative, and relational.[17]

The complex process of economic subjectivity's absorption of racial and professional subjectivity reaches its climax when Candace is touring a factory in Shenzhen. Candace's job at Spectra is to work with US-based "publishers who paid [Spectra] to coordinate book production that we outsourced to printers in Southeast Asia, mostly China" (10–11). As a middle-level manager, Candace produces nothing but instead facilitates the smooth operation of a global supply chain. While touring one of her vendor's factories in Shenzhen, she

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realizes that both her Chinese identity and her Chinese American identity are incoherent to the factory workers showing her around. After experiencing some awkward attempts at making conversation with her rudimentary Chinese, and one worker's fat-shaming swipes at *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*'s (1969) American propaganda (greed, individualism, etc.) that seem unaware of the fact that she's an American, Candace realizes that the workers see her as neither Chinese nor Chinese American, and not even as American. Instead, they see her, if they see *her* at all, as an economic entity.

It's precisely at this moment that she recalls "a college Economics class":

> First, the US manufacturing jobs went to Mexico. . . . Later, a portion of those jobs went to suppliers in China. . . . And after this . . . the jobs will go elsewhere, to India or some other country willing to offer even cheaper rates. . . .
>
> I was a part of this.
>
> The workers looked up at me with benign expressions as we walked past. My first impulse was to smile, but it seemed condescending. I didn't know them. I didn't know what their jobs were or what their lives were like. I was just passing through. I was just doing my job. (85)

Bereft of Chineseness, or even Chinese American-ness, the only way Candace can connect with these workers is a smile, which they would find condescending because she is a buyer first and foremost. In her embrace of "passing through," and "just doing my job," we see Candace opting into the global supply chain. By thus converging with economic subjectivity, Candace brings into relief the Chinese American racial form that her mother once adumbrated: a usefulness with no use. Abject as it might seem, this is a compromise formation forged through the material processes underlying deprofessionalization, the shifting meanings of femininity, and occupational concentration. We misunderstand the historical variability of Asiatic racial form if we merely see in Candace a person who has yet to "kick the nerd syndrome": a model minority who cynically ignores opportunities for solidarity and critique and whose horizon of ethical development is limited to the ever-narrowing racial liberalism of a fading US empire.

Severance's indeterminate drift through the genres of the zombie novel, SF, literary fiction, the office novel, and any number of other genres tracks a drift of material relations from the US to China. If, as Csicsery-Ronay argues, SF has historically served to manage "the abstract techno-political leap forward out of 'domestic' culture, from a nation among nations to a global culture," then the tendency to drift between genres—exhibited by *Severance*, *Woman Warrior*,

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and the debuts of the Chinese American writers above—is connected to the ongoing, increasingly urgent recalibration of Asian American, and especially *Chinese* American, identity and racial forms in relation to China's rise (235).[18] Converging with economic subjectivity—embracing the nerd syndrome rather than "kicking" it—isn't just a story about model minoritization but of a turn from the untenable genres of normative femininity to the perhaps less untenable genres of professional identity. Tracking the science fictionality of post-65 Asian American literature reveals how this turn is neither an entirely private process nor one available to universalization. It is a process conditioned by the drifting meanings of "Chinese" and "American" and "Chinese American"—meanings that drift between Stockton and New York City, Mexico and India, Chicago and Shenzhen. In post-65 Asian American literature, Chinese American identity and "just doing my job" converge with one another.

Endnotes

1. Jin's parents are both scientists, and she herself intended to study physics in college. Ma's father is an economics professor, and her mother is an accountant. Ng's father was a physicist at NASA, and her mother was a chemistry professor. Tan's parents both came to the US from China for graduate study. W. Wang's father is an engineer, and she herself has a BS in Chemistry and a PhD in Public Health. X. J. Wang's father is an information technology (IT) professional and computer repair technician. Zhang's father started but didn't complete a PhD in linguistics at New York University before becoming an IT professional. All of these authors hold MFAs. This profile of familial and personal professional orientation is strikingly consistent across post-65 Asian American authors.

2. For instance, Tina Chen's "imposture" (*Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture* [2005]); King-Kok Cheung's "articulate silence"; Anne Anlin Cheng's "racial melancholia"; and David Eng's "racial castration" (*Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* [2001]).

3. See *The New Argonauts: Regional Advantage in a Global Economy* (2006).

4. See Lee and Zhou, pp. 21–50.

5. See Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893–1945* (2009) and Mark Jerng, *Racial Worldmaking: The Power of Popular Fiction* (2017).

6. See Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (1973) and Michael Marien, "The Two Visions of Post-Industrial Society," *Futures*, vol. 9, no. 5, 1977, pp. 415–31.

7. McGurl's account of technomodernism locates in postmodern style the relation between the creative writer and the research university, which themselves are reflections of postwar exuberance over the coming of postindustrial society and the

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possibilities of a unity of scientific and traditional knowledge (a sublation, as Snow might have it, of the two cultures conflict). What post-65 Asian American literature demonstrates—especially its fiction—is how technomodernism might attach itself not only to a style but to a racialized class ideology. If hypertext literature is technomodernism's literalization, as McGurl argues, then the post-65 Asian American author is its personification.

8. For example, Susan Choi's body of work, beginning with her 1998 novel *The Foreign Student*, Don Lee's 2012 *The Collective*, and Anelise Chen's 2017 *So Many Olympic Exertions*. By "campus novel," I refer to novels in which the campus or faculty are the central, rather than a peripheral, focus—what Elaine Showalter calls the "academic novel"; see her *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (2005).

9. See Ninh, *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* (2011).

10. What ultimately provokes Maxine to bully the girl is her anxiety over the abjection of feminine dependency and the promise of profession-led liberation. At the episode's culminating moment, Maxine implores, "Why won't you talk?. . . . What are you going to do for a living? Yeah, you're going to have to work because you can't be a housewife. . . . You think somebody is going to take care of you all your stupid life?. . . . Nobody's going to notice you. And you have to talk for interviews, speak right up in front of the boss. Don't you know that?" (180–81).

11. The text mistakenly refers to Ellis Island rather than Angel Island. Kingston notes the error in a later interview. See J. H. Lee, p. 3.

12. While the science fictionality of the "Shen Fever" premise, in the time of COVID-19, is undiminished, its status as a novum is. To the extent that a novum must be, in Suvin's famous phrase, an object of "cognitive estrangement," the notion of a pandemic resulting in the halting of society and the kind of isolation and social emptiness so powerfully depicted in Ma's novel loses much of its estranging force.

13. Prompted by Min Hyoung Song's reading of the variations of realist aesthetics across Chang-rae Lee's oeuvre, Andrew Hoberek picks Lee's 1995 debut novel *Native Speaker* as one of two precursors of the genre turn, which he traces to 1999; the other being Michael Chabon's 1988 debut, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*. Both Song and Hoberek take up Lee's novel as evidence for a general phenomenon in the development of the novel and do not ask a version of the question I attempt to answer in this article: What's Asian American about the genre turn? See Hoberek, "Literary Genre Fiction," in *American Literature in Transition: 2000–2010* (2017), pp. 61–75, esp. p. 62, and Song, "Between Genres: On Chang-rae Lee's Realism," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 10 Jan. 2014, web.

14. See King-Kok Cheung and Stan Yogi, *Asian American Literature: An Annotated Bibliography* (1988).

15. See also Robert G. Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (1999).

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16. See Lye, "Racial Form," *Representations*, vol. 104, no. 1, 2008, pp. 92–101; Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (2016).

17. See Christopher T. Fan, "Melancholy Transcendence: Ted Chiang and Asian American Postracial Form," *Post45: Peer Reviewed*, 5 Nov. 2014, web.

18. Kingston makes a similar argument about an ethnic to global turn in the American novel in her oft-cited 1989 essay "The Novel's Next Step: If Someone Could Create the Global Novel, We'd All Have a Sequel," *Mother Jones*, vol. 14, no. 10, 1989, pp. 37–41.

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