A Thank You to My Ancestors(and Nothing Else?): An Ethnographic and Autoethnographic Analysis of Two Generations of Asian and Asian Americans and Their Desires, Values, and Perspectives on Freedom

by

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Dedication

给我的家人，我爱你
致我的爷爷，我想你

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Abstract

The intergenerational gap is a prominent theme within Asian American literature and Asian American culture. It synthesizes miscommunication and misconceptions between parents and their children and grandparents and their grandchildren on behavior, morality, and societal expectations. In this thesis, I explore and deconstruct the similarities and differences on the perspectives of freedom between the zero-generation, the grandparent generation, and the second-generation, the children of the first-generation immigrant parents using two threads: one personal and one literary.

In the first chapter, I recount the life of my grandfather. For my grandfather's generation, the zero-generation, I explore *The Water Margin: Outlaws of the Marsh* by Shi Nai'an and highlight similarities in the beliefs of titular characters within the novel and from the close-reading of my grandfather's autobiographical manuscript. I focus on the significance of the freedom to survive and the freedom to have a home and how it shapes the zero-generation's desires and influences their perspectives on freedom.

In the second chapter, I explore my generation—the second-generation Asian American. I analyze Cathy Park Hong's *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* and extrapolate from her writing to develop how second-generation desires and concepts of freedom are different or similar to the zero-generation and first-generation Asian Americans. I also draw material from erin Khuê Ninh's *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* to analyze the concepts and theory behind second-generation Asian American filial debt. Additionally, I focus on the racism experienced by second-generation Asian Americans, and how second-generation Asian Americans respond differently towards it compared to zero and first-generation Asian and Asian Americans.

In the final chapter, I attempt to provide answers for second-generation Asian Americans on how they can live in a way which is fulfilling and abides by their own values and perspectives on freedom. From writing by erin Khuê Ninh in *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* and anti-racist writing by Myisha Cherry in *The Case for Rage: Why Anger is Essential to Anti-Racist Struggle*, I give examples and conclude on how Asian Americans can heal from the pressure exerted by filial piety, debt, and also from Anti-Asian hate.

Keywords: Chinese American autoethnography, Chinese autobiography, Chinese literature, Korean American literature, Asian American Literature, Asian Literature, freedom, philosophy, Confucianism, Chinese philosophy, Critical Race Theory, Anti-racism, intergenerational gap

Contents

Introduction

"Pass me the soap."

My family's eating the wonderful Chinese food my mother had cooked for us at the dinner table, and my spoon paused midway on its passage to my mouth when I heard my father's request.

"What? What soap?" I asked.

"The soap! The soap!" My father demanded, raising his voice with comical urgency.

I'm still flabbergasted, so I asked my father to spell out the "soap" for me to decipher what he actually wanted.

My father cleared his throat before enunciating as clearly as he could, "S-O-U-P."

I choked on my food as I started laughing loudly; my brother and mother joined in with laughter as well.

"BaBa!" I exclaimed in between cackles, "It's soup! Not soap!" I said as I picked up the enormous bowl of bone and tofu soup my mother had made and passed it over to him.

"Ai ya, yes, I know! Soap, soap!"

Now, whenever my father tells me to pass the soap, I know what to do.

While this interaction between my parents and I is comical and provides great entertainment, other times, the gap between language comprehension and generational morals and values can lead to great stress and tension. A common theme in Asian American culture is the intergenerational gap (Cai et al., 2022). This gap manifests not only through a sense of distance between the experiences of parents and children, first, second, or third generations, but also in contrasting, and sometimes conflicting, understandings of the fundamental categories that

guide our lives and convictions. As a second-generation Chinese American, this gap has undoubtedly influenced my upbringing, personality, and beliefs. First, there's a language gap between my parents and my grandparents. My parents don't understand English the way I do, mispronounce words, and don't extract the meaning behind my words in the way I want them too. With my grandparents, it's even more difficult since they only speak Mandarin, whereas I speak enough broken Mandarin to tell them I love them and their food. Second, and perhaps one that impacts my life more than non-immigrant families, is the difference in culture and thus, morals and values. I'm boisterous, or at least my family thinks so. They think I'm boisterous in the way I talk, the way I argue, the way I dress, and even the way I sit—manspreading if you will. I take up space, something that's not as appreciated in a community which traditionally values cohesiveness and collectivism. Just as they don't understand my behavior, I don't understand why they practice theirs. This gap in understanding often remains unaddressed in many Asian American families (Cai et al., 2022). Families recognize it's there, but they don't acknowledge it, instead choosing to pass over this gap with silence. I have found often, in my own life and the lives of my Asian American friends, that this silence tends to fester hatred and drive families apart. In my effort to create a healthy discussion about the dynamics Asian Americans experience in their families and in American society, I hope to understand more about this gap between each generation and research the mechanisms behind each generation's behavior, and how this impacts the values they hold.

In my thesis, I will explore the dynamics of this intergenerational gap through two parallel archives: one literary and one personal. In one thread of my thesis, I will compare the desires, moral values, and perspectives of freedom like freedom from (negative freedom) and freedom to (positive freedom) in Asian and Asian American literature. How does a move from

one region and one literary tradition to another affect these definitions? The second focus of my thesis will be translating my late grandfather's writings on his life that he wrote in the early 2000s. Additionally, I will be analyzing my own life to isolate themes of what my generation desires or deems as freeing in tangent to my grandfather's generation. In parallel with the literary works I am analyzing, I will use this ethnographic and autoethnographic research, alongside literary criticism, to analyze the morals, values, and perspectives of freedom across two generations of my family.

With this thesis, my desire is to reflect on Asian and Asian American collective trauma and to create a perspective where second-generation Asian Americans can live in the healthy space between freedom and constraint. To distinguish the different generations for this thesis, I will be defining second-generation Asian Americans as children who were born in America from first-generation Asian American parents who immigrated to America. I will also define zero-generation Asian Americans as the parents of the first-generation Asian Americans.

Additionally, due to the lack of Asian American narratives specifically on freedom and how to deal with intergenerational trauma, I want to write this thesis with my fellow Asian Americans in mind. There is not enough representation of Asian Americans in literature and scholarly work, especially literature with nuance and without generalization, and I hope to contribute to the Asian and Asian American literary field with a more expansive, and specific discussion (Nguyen, 102). I hope to provide my readers a chance to self-reflect on their own lives, as many second-generation Asian Americans often neglect themselves because they have an ingrained sense of thinking about fulfilling their parent's expectations. The ultimate goal of this thesis is to not only understand my experiences as an Asian American to understand more about the intergenerational gap, my family, and the pressures I face, but also to allow other Asian

Americans who have similar experiences to understand the mechanisms behind filial debt, racism, and history. What are some aspects of freedom like for us and how can we obtain and practice those freedoms?

My methodology consists of analyzing my grandfather's manuscript and my family's history using ethnographic and autoethnographic research, alongside literary criticism, to analyze themes of what we value, and how these values shape our definitions of freedom between two generations of my family. I also draw selectively on historical contexts and conversations in Western and Chinese philosophy in order to illuminate the meanings that freedom has had across the generations in my family. Then, on a more personal reflection, I focus on my grandfather's manuscript and my life to analyze how our different reading choices apply to how definitions of freedom have changed or stayed the same across the two generations.

I believe this is the best methodology in terms of integrating my family's personal history into the academic writing and meshes both the scholarly work and autobiographical work in my topic. In my writing format, I usually introduce my family's personal stories first, and then integrate the literary work I have read and introduce literary analysis into what each generation values and how these values form their perspectives on freedom. Some may argue the inclusion of my personal experience takes away from the scholarly work; however, I would like to argue that there would be no scholarly work if there was not a collection of personal experiences and stories to begin with. I don't want to make this thesis too personal or too academic, so having a mixture of ethnographic and autoethnographic analysis allows a thesis that I believe can connect to many Asian and Asian Americans while also making it a piece of scholarly work. I use my family's history to contribute as evidence to trends observed in Asian and Asian American

literature and their perspectives on freedom, and thicken my argument with literary analysis of other literary works.

I also wish to note that I am Chinese American, and most of the works I am utilizing are Chinese literature and works originally in Mandarin. Therefore, I would like to remind and acknowledge how this thesis will not apply to all Asian American or other works of Asian and Asian American literature as the term Asian American is already too expansive.

I plan on breaking my thesis down into two main sections exploring what each Asian and Asian American generation defines/practices freedom in chronological order. In my first chapter about my grandfather's generation, I will be using my grandfather's autobiographical manuscript, *The Water Margin: Outlaws of the Marsh* by Shi Nai'an, and some secondary sources on Confucianism and Chinese ethics. Here, I plan on using this comparative philosophy lens to extrapolate my grandfather's understanding of freedom, and apply what I learned about my grandfather to the *Water Margin's* exhibition of its ethics, albeit questionable for modern standards. I plan on writing about my grandfather's relationship with the concept of a home, as this seems to be one of his main desires within his writing. When his mother and father died, he asks in his manuscript, "Where can we go to live in peace?" (Huáng, 2020). When the Japanese, who he constantly refers to as "the devils," invaded Changsha and forced his family to flee, he may have been attracted to the *Water Margin's* plot, where outlaws, people with little power, work to overthrow the tyranny of a government filled with corruption and injustice. Due to how war-torn and impoverished China was during my grandfather's life, was desire and freedom only based on the bare necessities for survival? Or, are there other more defining themes within my grandfather's manuscript that parallels the *Water Margin*'s illustration of the importance of the formation of a home at Liangshan Marsh?

In my second chapter, I will focus on my own life and how freedom has become an extensive topic using a capitalistic and racial lens for my generation of Asian Americans. I will be using *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* by Cathy Park Hong and *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* by erin Khuê Ninh. What are the pressures my generation feels? How do we define freedom, and how is our freedom defined by the pressures we feel? When basic needs are less of a freedom and more of a human right, how does freedom expand towards discussions on racism and cross cultural differences between generations?

I will be taking theories about freedom from Isaiah Berlin and the definitions of negative freedom and positive freedom. Freedom and liberty are often used interchangeably in philosophical theory, so I will be using this language as well. Negative freedom is the idea of freedom from the external constraints presented socially or from the government, and includes the capability to realize and practice one's desires without external obstruction. In contrast, positive liberty is based on the ability for one to act on their own free will, and "is involved in the answer to the question 'What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?'" (Carter, 2021). Simply put, "freedom to" is speaking in strands of positive liberty; "freedom from" denotes the articulation of negative liberty. These terms are used and should be applied to the section titles I write for each chapter.

For my concluding chapter, I want to focus once again on the intergenerational gap and propose ways for my generation to understand it and also how to deal with the debt and guilt we face from filial piety and our families. Here, I will be drawing more from erin Khuê Ninh's writing in *Ingratitude* and how she explores the immigrant family as a "special form of capitalist enterprise" (Ninh, 2). I will also provide my own personal story with this guilt, and develop

theories on how to realize that this debt is not a debt meant to be paid with continued suffering. Perhaps, taking on a more individualistic viewpoint on one's own happiness can become part of the solution towards resolving the untouchable and aphantasia-like debt many Asian Americans feel from their parents. Then, I will take Myisha Cherry's *The Case for Rage: Why Anger is Essential to Anti-Racist Struggle* to find solutions on how to process the racism Asian Americans experience.

Freedom as an overarching concept encompasses all of these chapters; however, I will be focusing on what each generation centered on and how their values develop and where their values lie through their common experiences. While I am using my family and family history as representatives of the Asian and Asian American experience and community, I want to stress the importance of avoiding generalization and how we as individuals are by no means representative of every Asian or Asian American experience. Furthermore, many of the themes I will be addressing also apply to other cultures and groups of people. This thesis does not intend to invalidate the experiences of other groups with similar experiences, but rather, isolates and analyzes the specificity behind the Asian and Asian American upbringing that leads to the development of morals, values, and desires which influence perspectives on freedom.

Chapter 1: The Zero-Generation Asian

I would like to note again that I do not wish to generalize my grandfather's writing and experience to all of the zero-generation Asians or Asian Americans. As this is a personal project, my goal with analyzing my grandfather's autobiographical manuscript and the *Water Margin* by Shi Nai'an was to learn more about him, as well as taking the more scholarly approach of connecting two pieces of writing together and analyzing prevailing themes. Furthermore, I would also like to state that I have been very specific in what I chose to include in this chapter. As I am dealing with a very personal piece of history, I have omitted parts of his story which I have deemed to be too personal and do not wish for anyone else to know. All of the quotes describing the experiences my grandfather survived that I chose to use are well known facts of how history treated Chinese civilians during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Furthermore, I have created a pseudonym for my grandfather to conceal his identity and for citation purposes will address him as Huáng Yéyé (黄爷爷), or Grandpa Huang in English. Perhaps in the future, the manuscript he left behind will be published for further academic use as I find it to be a very valuable piece of individual history—but not while I'm alive. To the reader, I thank you for your understanding.

The Freedom to Survive

I received the first section of my grandfather's manuscript shortly after his passing from my father. An English translation of the section title is "Leaving Home and Fleeing South"; my grandfather uses this portion of the manuscript to document his experiences after the Japanese invaded Changsha during the Second Sino-Japanese War. This war happened between 1937 to 1945 and around twenty million people, most of whom were civilians, were killed, for the sake of Japanese imperial expansion (Gordon, 2006). During this time, my grandfather had to flee his

hometown when he was only thirteen (Huáng, 2020). This experience, as my father tells me, would lead my grandfather to have a lifelong hatred for Japan and Japanese people, and he addresses Japanese people as "the devils" in his writing. Although his parents were able to successfully relocate to Xiangtan, a nearby city in Hunan Province, there was little time to settle down as both his mother and father passed away from illnesses shortly after. In an environment where families were forced to fend for themselves, even a cousin who they met up with in Xiangtan was unwilling to take care of him and his siblings. With scarce belongings and no close relatives to seek support, my grandfather calls out in the manuscript to a Chinese god, Shangdi: "Oh my God, why are you so ruthless. How will we, lonely children like us, live in the future?" (Huáng, 2020). Experiencing such a heavy loss at such an early age, fighting for survival with minimal support from others, and witnessing the debauchery of the Japanese invasion may have played a role in my grandfather's engrossment with the *Water Margin* by Shi Nai'an, where Chinese civilians who are strangers express altruism and corrupt officials are overthrown. The reason why I chose to analyze the *Water Margin* was because my father told me that it was one of my grandfather's favorite books. Ideally, I would have liked to compare a piece of literature published closer to the time period when my grandfather was alive; however, due to many historical events like the Second Sino-Japanese war, the Chinese Communist Party's regime, Cultural Revolution, and general poverty my grandfather experienced throughout his life, my grandfather did not read much besides the most prominent and classical pieces of Chinese literature.

The male camaraderie, autonomy, and physical strength—qualities and rights my grandfather did not have—exhibited by the many protagonist characters in the *Water Margin* like Chao Gai, Song Jian, Wang Jin, and Shi Jin, convey the positive significance of independence

and righteousness against amoral characters like Gao Qiu, a corrupt Marshal of the Imperial Guard and main antagonist in the *Water Margin*. These protagonists fight for their right to survive under a corrupt government, while my grandfather had to fight for basic necessities during the Second Sino-Japanese War, and later had to survive the autonomy-stripping Cultural Revolution. These parallel narratives give insight into my grandfather's writing and his subliminal understanding of freedom in tangent to the *Water Margin's* evident disgust towards violations against Chinese ethics like corruption and injustice. One may argue how relevant fiction actually is towards developing one's perspective on morality and philosophy, however William Sin writes in "The Water Margin, Moral Criticism, and Cultural Confrontation" that "the activity of reading fiction may strengthen readers' moral understanding of life in many ways. Readers may practice the moral emotion of care and compassion toward the needy in fictional scenarios. In the course of reading, they also expose themselves to suggestions of different evaluative views of life" (Sin, 2017). Therefore, I hope to analyze themes within the *Water Margin* that may have drawn my grandfather to it as well as how my grandfather writes about his experiences of injustice through the knowledge that fiction does have an impact on how one perceives life.

There are different versions of the *Water Margin*, and I chose to read the seventy chapter version which is argued to be written by Shi Nai'an (Idema, 1997). It is close to an eight hundred page novel set in the Song Dynasty and tells of a group of one hundred and eight outlaws who rebel against the main antagonist, Gao Qiu, and the corruption and injustice of the government. In the seventy chapters, Shi Nai'an goes from protagonist to protagonist and how they came to join the bandits of Liangshan Marsh to become the one-hundred and eight stars of Heaven (Shi, 197). Each protagonist experiences some form of injustice, be that they were betrayed by their

wife or friend, or were accused wrongfully of a crime and were punished unjustly. Their collective experiences of being failed by the government and people around them cause them to form their own community, one where they are accepted and display indisputable loyalty for each other.

A character which represents the pinnacle of loyalty and justice in the *Water Margin* is Song Jiang, who becomes the leader of the brigands by the end of the novel. In almost every interaction with friend or foe, he is praised and famous for his benevolent character. When Li Kui, an ill-tempered and violent outlaw becomes comrades with Song Jiang, he states that "'Song Jiang is not a common man. We are not old friends, and yet he immediately advanced me this money. He is a hero who despises wealth and stands for justice—of that there is no shadow of doubt'" (Shi, 459). Not only are Song Jiang's friends devoted to him because of his personality, Song Jiang's character attracts those who are also initially his foes. After he has captured two leaders fighting against the bandits and for the government, Xiang Chong and Li Gun, he treats then with respect and mercy: "The two leaders kowtowed and replied, 'We have heard of your celebrated name for a long time, but we have not had the fortune of meeting you. We now know for certain that you are a very just person. Had we known before of your goodness we would not have been your opponents. Today we are your prisoners, and expected to die, and never expected to be treated in this way. If you do not kill us we shall certainly be under a great obligation to you'" (Shi, 682). Furthermore, there are multiple scenes where Song Jiang tries to prevent the slaying of innocent people, or family members connected to the antagonist they are trying to kill. When the bandits begin hunting Huang Wenbing, who exposes Song Jiang's seditious poem to become famous for exposing a rebellion, they initially want to kill all people involved with Huang Wenbing; however, Song asserts himself and states: "'I will deal with

Huang Wenbing himself,' said Song Jiang, 'and I do not want you to injure any of the people at the village as they are not at fault'" (Shi, 501). This moral belief transcends the moral beliefs at the time, where family members of those who were accused or violated the law were taken into custody and sometimes even killed for being associated with the accused criminal even though they were innocent (Sin, 2017). Sin defines the idea of innocence as a concept that separates the individuals who were directly responsible for an action from individuals who were not related to the action (Sin, 2017). This concept of innocence was formed during the enlightenment period, and was not implemented during the time the *Water Margin* was written (Sin, 2017). While the outlaws, which include Song Jiang, sometimes do kill civilians and innocent people in brutal manners, the implementation of Song Jiang's values into the outlaw community along with the bandits fight against corruption and injustice has cemented the *Water Margin* as one of the Four Classical Literatures of China (Idema, 1997). The novel remains popular even when governments have restricted its access in fear of anarchy and "commentators have generally regarded the characters as 'heroes and heroines' as they are depicted in the novel. This is so despite the fact that these heroes perform wanton killing, excessive retribution, and various forms of cannibalism" (Sin, 2017).

Even in a novel written in the 14th century, hundreds of years older than the occurrence of the Second Sino-Japanese war, the characters concede and show mercy towards people who may be related to the antagonist they are trying to defeat, but are ultimately innocent and even altruistic. This kind of mercy was not shown towards the zero-generation impacted by the Second Sino-Japanese war. My grandfather was an innocent thirteen year old boy, and to experience such undeserved trauma because of Japan's imperialism caused him to develop hatred towards the Japanese not unlike the hatred developed by protagonists within the *Water Margin*

who have been wronged. Despite his innocence, my grandfather's rights for survival were deeply infringed by the war, from losing access to food, water and shelter, to experiencing the unmerciful nature of the Second Sino-Japanese War. The *Water Margin* quickly introduces and exposes the corruption of the Chinese government with the appointment of Gao Qiu to Marshal of the Imperial Guard. By chance, Prince Duan witnessed Gao Qiu's talent and skill with football(soccer as the Americans call it) and was so impressed he used his power to appoint Gao Qiu to a powerful social and political position (Shi, 4). With his new social standing, Gao Qiu abuses his power and calls for Wang Jin, an innocent martial arts instructor of the Imperial Guard, to be arrested because Wang's father had beaten him while he was still a street thug (Shi, 5). Fleeing at night, Wang Jin and his mother head toward the Yanan Prefecture where they meet a farmer and ask for shelter. With little hesitation, the farmer allows them to stay and also ensures that they are well fed (Shi, 7). Such a warm welcome was unavailable for my grandfather and his family, where their right for a safe shelter was unmet, a right which is met for Wang Jin, expressing the importance of altruistic behavior among Chinese people. This scene supports the Mohist concept of *jian ai*, or inclusive and impartial love/concern, which opposes the Confucian thinking of putting filial piety and family above authority and strangers (Wong, 2018). Wang Jin and his mother are given access to positive freedom, as once the basic necessities of life are met, Wang Jin is able to give back to the farmer by teaching his son, Shi Jin, martial arts—a skill which serves and protects him incredibly well throughout the novel (Shi, 10). This altruistic transaction formed from the concept of *jian ai* is integrated deeply into Chinese culture; however, my grandfather was unable to experience this positive liberty, and experiences the Confucian values of filiality—or the lack of care from people who are not included in the family. Furthermore, Song Jiang, even after the throes of battle, thinks of the innocent villagers caught

up within the bandits' battle with the government: “When it was daylight, Song Jiang ordered that all civilians whose houses had been burnt should be compensated. The loot was placed on about five hundred carts, and sent to Liangshan Marsh” (Shi, 669). Scenes similar to the interaction between the farmer and Wang Jin, and Song Jiang with the civilian public, happen throughout the *Water Margin*, such as Chao Gai and Song Jiang’s generosity of handing out money and food to outlaws they want to recruit, villagers, and the poor (Shi, 735, 742). Losing his parents to the war, people who are undoubtedly crucial to his survival and existence, may have had an impact on why he was drawn towards the *Water Margin,* which exudes male camaraderie and forges a sense of belonging within an unconventional community where resources like money, shelther, and food are distributed with little constraint. After all, the kind of people one is around or born into has an immense predictor on the survival and life of an individual (Yi, 2007).

The Freedom to have a Home

When my grandfather’s family was forced to flee Changsha, my grandfather writes: “The devils are coming again, we are going to run away again, run away! Where to go? Where can we live in peace?” (Huáng, 2020). His desperate tone exemplifies the harrowingly unpredictable experience of losing one’s parents and support in a time of war, the traditional providers for a home. His questions reflect his longing for a home, and a place to settle down once again. The absence of a home, a shelter, and the deprivation of a safe environment is indicative of the positive liberty my grandfather was stripped away from. Not only did he experience the forced confiscation of his home by the Japanese, but he also experienced the indifference of relatives and his country people; the presence of Japanese interference in his way of life and the

Confucian values of prioritizing one's own family instead of all people shaped his understanding that basic necessities like shelter—a place of refuge—was not to be taken for granted.

A major appeal of the *Water Margin* is the cohesion many of the characters have together, and the harmony and altruistic tendencies between strangers. Families like Wang Jin's and Shi Jin's exchange material and expertise, following along with Mozi's *jian ai*. Although Shi Jin's father, the farmer, extended a helping hand, he only allows Wang Jin and his mother to stay on his land because of Wang Jin's ability to teach Shi Jin martial arts as payment for food and shelter. They enter into an informal contract, using their prospective bargaining chips to obtain different desires—-for Wang Jin, freedom to have shelter; for Shi Jin, the ability to defend oneself and others. However, during any war like the Second Sino-Japanese war, people can not give as much as they normally would because they are already surviving on very little. My grandfather writes of how he understood why the people around him were unable to help or give as he states: "The good-hearted people who passed by could only shed sympathetic eyes and could not lend a helping hand" (Huáng, 2020). After all, the concept of *jian ai*, while generous and morally virtuous, is less likely to be practiced when everyone is collectively suffering and fighting for survival. In contrast to my grandfather's experiences with the reality of war and the interaction between Wang Jin and Shi Jin, Song Jiang's leadership embodies many qualities of *jian ai* during his battles with his enemies and the government, as he assembles the one hundred and eight bandits together to form a cohesive familial unit through his generosity with resources—like food and money—along with his undying loyalty for his fellow outlaws. His actions consistently transcend the boundaries between strangers as he treats his biological family, friends, and sometimes even enemies, with little significant difference and transcends the societal expectations of the traditional restrictive roles between child and parent, friend to friend, and

enemy to enemy. The egalitarian persona Song Jiang embodies draws not only his enemies to join the bandits, but also the readers of the *Water Margin* towards an attractive character which creates a micro-society of comfort, support, and happiness.

In the *Water Margin*, Liangshan Marsh becomes a place of refuge for the bandits. When multiple protagonists in the *Water Margin* are abandoned by the government, or even people they deemed to be family like their wives, they experience a very warm welcome with food and wine from the leaders of the outlaws at Liangshan Marsh (Shi, 430). If not for Chai Gai and Song Jiang extending their services and welcome to protagonists who have nowhere to go, they would be in a similar position my grandfather was in with no place to go for security, or would be thrown into jail and unfairly punished with whipping, placed into a cangue, or a brutal death. The bandits form close bonds with one another, something that my grandfather lacked during the Second Sino-Japanese War. My grandfather expresses a sense of great distress at not having any connections: “We are all underage, we don’t understand anything, our hometown has fallen, everything is gone” (Huáng, 2020). Actually, my grandfather only mentions the feeling of starvation once in his writing, but he writes countless times about how much he grieved over the loss of his parents and social connection (Huáng, 2020). One portion of his writing struck me with incredible interest. He writes of witnessing a mother telling her little daughter to buy food, but the little girl becomes upset and says, “‘Mama, I’m not hungry. I don’t want to eat. I want to be with my mother” (Huáng, 2020). It is curious that he wrote about witnessing this girl when he spends most of his time grieving over his parents and his personal suffering. From this detail, it gives me the impression that while basic needs like food were needed, to have the comfort of a family member or someone to rely on was much more dominant desire. In essence, it can be argued that having social connections with family or others is much more imperative for survival

than having access to food, as it is the social connections that give the ability to have exposure to other basic necessities for biological existence. In the *Water Margin*, the bandits rely on each other heavily for resources and survival as they defend themselves from generals and officials who wish to kill them. The significance of loyalty and honor the bandits hold for each other, without having a huge suspicion for betrayal, is one of the core messages the *Water Margin* expresses; it is through trust and the power of loyalty that individuals can survive as well as fight against unjust systems and corruption. These traits and qualities among the outlaws is what truly makes the refuge of Liangshan Marsh a home, as the bandits create their own chosen family and community.

Chapter 2: The Second-Generation Asian American

Freedom from Filial Piety and Debt

"Why are you depressed? What can you even *be* depressed about? You don't need to worry about anything. I have provided and sacrificed everything for you. How can you be this way?"

This is a statement that I have heard hundreds of times from my father. It is so crystal clear that it feels as if it has been etched into my skull. I can write it word for word from memory, and even as I write these sentences, his voice resonates so strongly in my head, I can feel the cold rush of shame descending down my spine and, if I may, my very soul. This experience is not an isolated one, it is a running joke among my generation of Asian Americans that our parents' expectations are high, that they don't understand the importance of or even recognize the concept of mental health, and that they abuse us—verbally, emotionally, and even physically—if we do not obey or satisfy their expectations. While the implicit connection between filial piety and debt has never been made explicit within my family, it is an unspoken rule within the family structure that I must abide by my parents' wishes and by doing so, I can pay back this debt—the debt of living a privileged life in the United States. While almost every generation will feel some form of debt and filial obligation towards their family, the debt for second-generation Asian Americans can actually be perceived as greater than the debt the first-generation owes to the zero-generation, and so on. Immigrating to America—the land of the free and the land of opportunity—leads to the first-generation exerting a larger amount of power over the second generation because the first generation has most likely provided a much better life of opportunity than if they were born in their parents' native country. The cost of the livelihood the second-generation Asian American owes to their immigrant parents is perceived as

a greater burden than if the parent stayed in their home country and raised their children there. While the feeling and concept of owing one's parents a debt, to a certain extent, is experienced within almost every single cultural group, the second-generation Asian American experience with this debt bondage is unique in terms of historical and cultural influences from their parents' native country as their cultural system forms a distinctive familial unit. It would be false to state that second-generation Asian Americans experience the same debt bondage that other cultural groups do, therefore, I wish to analyze this unique phenomenon to understand how it is formed and the impact it has on second-generation Asian Americans.

In her book *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature*, erin Khuê Ninh analyzes the experience of the second-generation Asian American daughter and the intergenerational conflict with her family by exploring how the immigrant family is a "special form of capitalist enterprise" (Ninh, 2). At birth, second-generation Asian Americans enter into a familial unit where they are expected to abide by their parents' expectations with unquestioning obedience (Ninh, 33). The emphasis on filial piety becomes greater than ever because of the first-generation Asian American parents succeeding in the ultimate goal—escaping from poverty and authoritarian regimes to immigrate successfully to America. Hong writes about her own perspectives on the debt Asian Americans experience, stating that "[i]f the indebted Asian immigrant thinks they owe their life to America, the child thinks they owe their livelihood to their parents for their suffering" (Hong, 185). Their parents act as symbolic debt collectors, whereas their children repay this debt symbolically through their socioeconomic accomplishments (Ninh, 32). This symbolic debt comes without contracts or instructions for repayment beyond the vague expectation that the child devote their lives to appeasing and gratifying their parents, committing their allegiance to them for the rest of their lives (Ninh, 35).

As the second-generation child seeks to pay off this debt, they are pressured into pursuing prestigious, high-paying careers in law, medicine, and STEM fields instead of those associated with the liberal arts, even if this is where their passions lie ("Asian Americans," 2017). Furthermore, for some second-generation children pressured by the debt that they feel internally and externally from their family, the dream to become a high-status individual can become their own (Ninh, 161). Otherwise, in certain circumstances where the second-generation child refuses or can not fulfill their parents' expectations, the relationship between child and parent can become extremely strained to the point of either disownment or of the child running away like in *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid* by Evelyn Lau that Ninh explores (Ninh, 82). In this section, I provide an analysis of filial piety and filial debt—something that has eluded me as well as many other of my fellow second-generation Asian Americans—and how it affects the autonomy and quality of life for second-generation Asian Americans.

Filial piety comes from many cultural aspects of historical Chinese philosophy and religion like Daoism, Chinese Buddhism, and Confucianism (Wong, 2018). The character for filial piety in Mandarin is 孝 and in pinyin it is xiào. The top part of the character(lao) represents an elderly man, while the bottom part of the character(zi) represents the elderly man's son. Even in the character, the son character is supporting the lao character from the bottom, symbolizing how it is the responsibility of the young to listen and support the old (Yee, 2006). When teaching one of his disciples, Confucious stated that "filial piety meant 'not contesting', and that it entailed: '... while one's parents were alive, serving them in a ritually proper way, and after one's parents died, burying them and sacrificing to them in a ritually proper way'" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2020). This definition of filial piety, while not specific, is a relatively simple and seemingly reasonable request for how children should treat their parents. Confucius does not state how

children should and must obey their parents' every word and request, so why did the definition become so skewed for the parent to demand close to absolute obedience of their second-generation Asian American child? Instead of the concept of filial piety which is generally only a flexible expectation, second-generation Asian Americans are expected to serve their parents to the point where the expectation of filial piety becomes the expectation of filial self-sacrifice because they owe them for their whole existence.

Ninh brings up the Necessity thesis which has two fundamental points: one, that the financial circumstances of a family affect the family and will cause them to function with certain parenting practices; two, children can be perceived as human resources and are assessed for their efficiency and ability during times of recognizable hardship (Ninh, 28). The first is witnessed within many Asian American families, where many second-generation Asian American children grow up with very strict upbringings and high expectations for success to live in American society (Ninh, 28). The second is demonstrated within Asian American families by how the parents regulate their children's lives—their time, activities, or social life—using the language of financial strategies; the child's life is shaped by their parents for the child to succeed in a manner the parents approve of—usually becoming a wealthy, educated person of high socioeconomic status (Ninh, 28). However, although second-generation Asian Americans often do not have to experience the same adversities their parents or grandparents did, like not having food, shelter, social, or monetary security, they are still treated as an indispensable component of the family's financial dynamic as Ninh continues to add that "[w]hereas in theory, Necessity works itself out of existence—immigrants work hard so that with success they and theirs will no longer have to work hard—in practice, Necessity reproduces itself, perpetuating its mind-set and demands onto the next generation, even after the conditions of material adversity have come to an end:

‘Parental self-sacrifice [often] generates expectations of filial self-sacrifice, and the entire family is trapped in cycles of pain’” (Ninh, 33-34). While the Necessity thesis in theory should not have to apply with the second-generation because the family has already satisfied material requirements for survival, the hedonic treadmill continues and the second-generation children are expected to accomplish past these material requirements. Furthermore, even if the second-generation child abides by their parents’ every request and believes that doing whatever their parents wish for will pay off their debt, in theory, they are sorely mistaken.

Ninh takes Nietzche’s thesis on filial debt and explores the “debtor-creditor paradigm” as an “operative complex” (Ninh, 33). Taking Nietzche’s writing, Ninh establishes how it is from ancestral sacrifices and accomplishments that the family and offspring exist, therefore leading to the existence of a debt that only becomes greater and greater as the family continues to survive: “The debt dictates, in other words, that whatsoever the descendant may produce accrues to the benefits for which she is beholden, and thereby bids her further rather than earning her independence” (Ninh, 33). Therefore, even if the child becomes the most prominent, most wealthy, most socially established human on Earth, they would still be in debt towards their parents because they owe their success to them and “...paradoxically whatever she makes or achieves compounds her debt—adding interest onto interest, rather than paying against principle” (Ninh, 34). Since second-generation Asian Americans have access to many opportunities and freedoms their ancestors did not have or could not even dream of because of the perceived inflation that America is heaven on Earth, the limit of success and expectation does not have concrete boundaries, leading to the first-generation Asian American parents directing their children towards a goal which is extremely unattainable. Even then, if the child were to become the richest, most accomplished individual in the world, they would still owe all of their

success to their parents and ancestors who came before them, further increasing the amount of debt they owe to their parents. Therefore, it can be argued that this debt will never be fully repaid, leading to the destruction and restriction of the second-generation individual from autonomy and independence. It is no coincidence that many second-generation Asian Americans experience despair from this cycle, knowing that they are forever tied to their family members as debtors, whether from unconscious or conscious realization of their debt.

Even though my family has never specifically told me that I owe them my obedience or autonomy, it has been clear how much my accomplishments contribute to my value and worthiness within my family. However much they value me, my accomplishments have determined my freedom to spend time with friends, to partake in my hobbies, and even the amount of trust they have in my abilities to direct my own life and future. Questions about how my parents would treat me if I wasn't a functioning individual nagged me constantly. If I was unable to go to the University of Michigan, one of the best public universities in the world, would my parents still love me? Would they love me and treat me better if I went to Harvard? If I wanted to become a creative writer instead of a physician, would my parents still care for me? I have come to understand how directly, at least in my family's eyes, my value is tied to my successes. Ninh explains this phenomenon well among second-generation Asian Americans: "Under such circumstances, children may well come to understand their status in terms of market values, and relative power in terms of the balance sheet, for by dint of this alternate accounting, the child's assets—economic, social, and otherwise—may be garnished before they are so much acquired" (Ninh, 31). Such circumstances entail a familial structure which acts like a "classic wage-labor structure," where the parents emulate an employer that can bill against their employees, in this case the child, ledger whenever they believe they should, or withhold

payment, or in the familial structure, freedom and autonomy if the child is not acting in accordance to what the parent deems as productive enough to earn wages which grant such independence (Ninh, 30-31). Therefore, instead of a trusting relationship between child and parent, the relationship can become very tense, similar to how a dissatisfied employer would treat an employee. It is no wonder then that many second-generation Asian American children feel the sense of dread of not being enough, and experience tense relationships with their supposed caretakers.

As Ninh expands on the implications of such a familial economic structure, she states that :"[w]ithin the immigrant mind-set dictated by conditions of material Necessity, the economic values of all resources and people take on a very literal-minded immediacy" (Ninh, 29). Fostering such a relationship with their child, a subject which witnesses the American society which treasures children and does not treat them as workers and gives them their own rights as individuals, can cause the second-generation Asian American subject confusion on why they are being treated differently by their Asian parents (Ninh, 25). I have experienced this confusion, and it has always impacted the decisions I make in my life whether I recognize it or not. Hong also writes of how her feeling of indebtedness has impacted her behavior: "[b]eing indebted is to be cautious, inhibited, and to never speak out of turn. It is to lead a life constrained by choices that are never your own" (Hong, 185). One then has to question: how many second-generation Asian Americans truly feel as they have control over their own lives? This theme of such a loss of autonomy within a generation has severe effects on not only the relationship between family members, but also with their mental well-being. Asian American women have the second highest suicide rate among other cultural groups between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, and within their narratives as to why they had poor mental health, many of them state their parents

and their parents' expectations as the culprit (Ausberger et al., 2015). Not only do second-generation Asian Americans develop mental illnesses from their environment, but also, even if they do express their suffering, their parents will often invalidate their feelings just as I showed how my father did during the start of this section (Ausberger et al., 2015). The sense of control over one's life is essential towards self-growth and internal contentment, and when second-generation Asian Americans feel as if they have to argue for their own existence—to exist as individuals who make mistakes, who have emotions, and have dreams—from their own parents, many second-generation Asian Americans endure great suffering to pay back their debt towards their family, wondering when they can be free of the bondage their parents' have over them.

Freedom from Racism

Compared to my grandfather's and father's generation, an added and realized component in the lives of second-generation Asian Americans is the concept and experiences of racism in the United States (Hong, 18). On one hand, my grandfather lived in China for most of his life and was surrounded by Chinese people; being a member of a majority group, he would not have experienced the subtle and violating racist concepts and acts I have. On the other hand, my father has experienced more direct and indirect racism than my grandfather as he was moved from the familiar Chinese environment to the unfamiliar, challenging, sometimes unfriendly, and racist America. In comparison to my father, I may not have had the most direct experience with racism which could impact my life seriously, but I am much more aware of my race, the views others have on my race, and experience more nuanced, backhanded, racial microaggressions and aggressions. Furthermore, I have been educated and exposed to the deep-rootedness of American

racism, giving the concept and theory of racism a prevalent place in my thoughts, my actions, and my life.

I have noticed that many first-generation Asian Americans like my father recognize racism in America, however, unlike the more demanding and rage-filled second-generation that protest and fight for equal rights, the first-generation often follows along with the Confucian virtue of laying low and working hard to obtain equality (Kim et al., 2013). Asian culture and work ethic aligns with the belief that working hard will eventually pay off, a quality displayed by many Asian and Asian American individuals. We are culturally, and stereotypically, expected to make ourselves invisible while completing the tasks laid out for us, and to not complain about the conditions and environment we are in. And even then, when we have become the model minority, a myth which is false, the minority that all other minorities should look to as an example because it supports the capitalistic values of American society and often benefits the majority group, the white man, the moment this model minority acts unexpectedly, we are seen as second-class citizens (Hong, 32).

In *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*, Cathy Park Hong draws from her own experiences as a Korean American woman along with historical and factual information about the Asian American experience through a racial theory lens to create a narrative of the intersectionality Asian and Asian Americans experience in America. Along with her own autobiographical account of being an indebted Asian American, Hong delves more on structural racism and the racial prejudice many Asian Americans experience. She describes the purgatory position Asian Americans are put in because they are "distrusted by African Americans, ignored by whites, unless we're being used by whites to keep the Black man down" (Hong, 16). Culturally speaking, Asian Americans fit more easily into the mold that American society wants

them to be: hard working, uncomplaining, and willing to settle for less than their white counterparts. However, when we see Asian Americans who don't align with this stereotypical narrative, we are surprised and even alarmed by loud, unsubmissive behavior, behavior usually socially acceptable for white people. To illustrate what happens when an Asian American behaves unconventionally from cultural and societal standards, she uses the example of David Dao (Hong, 32). David Dao was a middle aged Vietnamese man who was forced from his seat on a United Airlines plane because it was overcrowded and needed to take employees instead (Hong, 32). When no one volunteered to leave the plane, Dao was violently removed from his seat, so much so the officers had broken his nose and teeth, causing a concussion and causing him to hallucinate when he regained consciousness (Hong, 32). Hong writes about Dao's physical appearance extensively, summarizing his appearance as "*I am not one to take up space nor make a scene*" (Hong, 32). Dao fits the description of a model minority. He's a physician and a highly educated, functioning, and assimilated member of American society, while also remaining discreet enough to be ignored. His years of hard work to get to his socioeconomic status are forgotten; he is graded as subhuman, and his status and value are reflected by the security guards decision to brutally abuse him.

Hong expands on Dao's story with a more personal tone as well, noting that many of her fellow Asian friends and Asian American journalists felt that Dao reminded them of their own fathers (Hong, 32). What does this say about the Asian, Asian American, and American perceptions of Asians and Asian Americans? While the security guards dehumanized Dao, Asian and Asian Americans connected with Dao, and yet, they still understand the narrative American society has written for them. It's a narrative which presents Asian and Asian Americans not as equal individuals, but as less than, an organism which can not and should not take as much space

to exist nor have the rights of the majority group. Simultaneously, due to the perception that Asians and Asian Americans are willing and able to take inhumane hardship and won't complain, second-generation Asian Americans have recognized these stereotypes and work to get away from these negative perceptions that their mothers, fathers, and grandparents embodied. Though the model minority narrative makes it seem as though Asian Americans are superseding white people in terms of socioeconomic status, Hong believes in a different narrative as she states: "When I hear the phrase 'Asians are next in line to be white,' I replace the word 'white' with 'disappear'" (Hong, 35).

I went to a Anti-Asian Hate Protest in Detroit in the summer of 2020. We were quite a sizable group, taking up at least a block. There was an even mix of middle aged protesters, near my father's age, along with a mix of high school and college students. Many people were holding signs. Most of the cardboard signs had "Anti-Asian Hate" written or "I Am Not A Virus" in bold, black sharpie or something similar. Other ones were more vulgar, as I noticed an Asian American girl my age holding a sign with "Got Rice, Bitch!?." Before the protest, I had been writing my own signs with profanities on them. I distinctly remember writing "I'm not your fucking Asian fetish" along with some other, more tame, Anti-Asian Hate protest slogans. However, when my father saw what I had written, he told me to change it.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because, Lele(my Chinese nickname), no one listens when you're angry. They'll get angry and then they'll only hate you and misunderstand us more."

Initially, I argued with him. "So?" My voice slowly rose in volume. "This is America, I have a reason to be loud when I want to! If we're quiet, we're just going to be ignored and let your sacrifices be in vain!"

I know that my father understood my point, and he understood my rage. Even then, he still sheepishly said, “I just don’t think it’s a good idea in the long run.”

While I do agree with my father that anger alone will not solve the systemic racism Asian Americans face, his statement is an example of how non-confrontational Asian Americans can be. As the protest started, the organizers, college students, of the protest encouraged the protesters to chant. As our feet began pounding the streets, it was hard not to notice how quiet our protest was. There were moments where I could only hear my voice; other times, I could tell I was chanting with some other younger voices, shouting into the Detroit air. My father would also join in periodically, but would stay quiet when the majority of the crowd became quiet. As I walked alongside other Asian Americans my father’s age, I could tell they weren’t chanting at all. Many of them weren’t even holding their signs up in the air, simply holding it tightly to their chest like they were hiding it. As the protest continued, I couldn’t help thinking about Hong’s words. Are we really going to disappear?

Perhaps this is one of the largest differences between second-generation Asian Americans and the first and zero-generations. The second-generation knows of the freedom of speech, and they are unafraid of practicing and using it. This generation understands more about the inequalities they face, the stereotypes forced upon them, and are often more privileged than their parents and grandparents because they have been granted the literal freedom of speech and ability to fight. The zero-generation, like my grandfather, often had neither the time, money, nor power to protest for better living conditions against the Chinese Communist Party or other authoritarian governments. My own father had protested in Changsha during the Tiananmen Square protests, just as many other Chinese Americans my father’s age did. So, why do

first-generation Asian Americans who have experienced inequality before refrain from protesting unjust conditions when they've reached their adoptive country? The first-generation is unwilling to openly complain about the conditions in America, because they were able to flee from their home countries where conditions were much, much worse. In layman's terms, they are happy where they are and don't want to fight, or put in a lot of energy, for an even better—they are satisfied with what they have.

In general, the second-generation of Asian Americans have not experienced life under an authoritarian regime or government, nor have they been impacted by a war that stripped them from the basic necessities of life. They expect more from life, they expect to be able to endeavor in the American Dream, though a false promise, and the pursuit of happiness and freedom. Second-generation Asian Americans have been provided opportunities and a plethora of choices in America that their parents and grandparents did not have, leading to a generation that isn't afraid to ask for more, to be more, to take up space, and be seen and heard in American society. Asian Americans of all generations experience the subliminal messaging of American society that they have to uphold an impeccable image where they have to prove to American society that they are functional, whereas white Americans are born without such restrictions on their race. This leads to Hong asking rhetorically about Dao and the perception people have of Asian men. Hong describes Dao's scream as piglike, comparing him to a mongoose and uses other descriptions often used for animals (Hong, 33). Hong rhetorically asks: "How many years did it take to prove that he was a well spoken man?" (Hong, 33). If first-generation Asian Americans believe and practice the act of being silent and compliant to authority in order to maintain their freedom to exist, second-generation Asian Americans choose to confront the racist system and

fight for the freedom to do more than just exist, they are fighting for the freedom of individualist expression and freedom from racism.

This embrace of silence among Asian and Asian Americans is incredibly prevalent in the American workforce. Although Asian Americans have some of the highest rates of achieving higher education, degrees, and makeup of the white collar workforce, they continue to remain one of the least likely minority groups to be promoted or hold a leadership position (Hong, 22). Asian Americans of both binary genders are perceived as submissive gears working the machine of American capitalism; Hong paints a bleak picture of the American perception of Asian Americans in the workforce, comparing Asian Americans to animals and beings of no individuality: “We are the carpenter ants of the service industry, the apparatchiks of the corporate world. We are math-crunching middle managers who keep the corporate wheels greased but who never get promoted since we don’t have the right ‘face’ for leadership” (Hong, 9). Although the racist, stereotypical perception of Asian Americans have prevented Asian Americans from obtaining leadership positions in the workforce, another attributed cause of this is the culture of silence among Asian Americans. This silence prevents many Asian Americans from asking for a promotion or asking for more in their workplace and lives. This same silence is one which prevents Asian Americans from asserting their presence against injustice, like the lack of presence during the Anti-Asian Hate protest I experienced.

Hong addresses the culture of silence among Asian Americans, stating that “[T]he problem with silence is that it can’t speak up and say why it’s silent. And so silence collects, becomes amplified, takes on a life outside our intentions, in that silence can get misread as indifference, or avoidance, or even shame, and eventually this silence passes over into forgetting” (Hong, 165). Unfortunately, because of this silence, Asian Americans are the butt of

the stereotypical joke that they all look the same because we don't assert our individuality. Second-generation Asian Americans are not exempt from the perception that we have no personality and are completely replaceable with one another. As a high school student working in a senior care facility as a server, I was often mistaken for the other two female East Asian servers. I should have been distinguishable: I was shorter than both of them, and I also wore glasses while the other two wore contacts. Hong has similar feelings about her presence and inadequacy in a professional sense when she writes: "[f]or as long as I could remember, I have struggled to prove myself into existence. I, the modern-day scrivener, worked five times as hard as others and still I saw my hand dissolve, then my arm" (Hong, 9). The lack of self expression on one's needs in the Asian American community has influenced the "disappearance," as Hong puts it, in the Asian American identity (Hong, 35). Though this remains true for zero and first-generation Asian Americans, and even for some second-generation Asian Americans, second-generation Americans grew up in American culture, and understand the necessity of being loud, the power of social groups, and the power of the professional connection. This phenomenon is expressed by the second-generation Asian Americans who have organized Anti-Asian Hate protesters, albeit the protesters may not be loud during the protest. Second-generation Asian Americans seem to reject the human harmony achieved by fitting into a society to benefit society as a whole without consideration of the individual through silence. Instead, second-generation Asian Americans believe in harmony starting from an individual's desires; only by meeting one's desires does society become harmonious as all the individual bodies of society have achieved fruition or self-actualization. In applying this to the racism experienced by Asian Americans, only when individual Asian Americans gain equality, an existence free from the threat of inexistence and stereotypes, does society become congruous.

While zero and first-generation Asian Americans are limited by their macro-sociological standpoint in terms of self expression, the micro-sociological standpoint allows second-generation Asian Americans to focus on their individuality as well as their expressions and practices of freedom much more than the generations preceding them. Whereas previous generations align themselves with the practice of forgoing one's personal desires for the greater good of the collective unit, second generation Asian Americans align themselves with more American values, specifically deciding to rebel and do without the cohesiveness of society to obtain their individual desires.

What it means to Heal: Carelessness, Rage, and Care

Carelessness

At the time I am writing this chapter, I am writing from a place of pure exhaustion. This exhaustion has prevented me from finishing this thesis and therefore, precludes me from fleshing out a complete answer on what it means to heal. How can one heal when one lives in a world which prevents them from actively, or even passively, healing? How can one focus on one's physical, mental, and emotional health when Asian American culture, or even capitalistic American society, seemingly prioritizes fulfilling the expectations put on by our parents instead of following our own desires and dreams? How can one truly live a fulfilling life in a racist world that doesn't allow Asian Americans to belong? Unfortunately, even in the United States, where problems are treated as if they can be fixed in a day with a pill, true healing takes years, perhaps even a whole lifetime. Even after death, the act of healing continues in the living.

In the afterword of Ninh's *Ingratitude: The Debt Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature*, she states: "There is a happy ending. Yet typing these words has me curled weeping over my keyboard, because to get dishes washed and classes taught one simply cannot remember how breathlessly expensive it has been to unlearn reflexes… to retrain posture, hunger, contentment, and guilt. So I will not pretend that shift 'happens' in some natural course of things—not the coming of age, nor of grandchildren, much less in a sudden rebirth; nor can I point to any literary examples of it being convincingly done" (Ninh, 159). I am currently not in the stage of healing Ninh is perhaps in, but I share similar sentiments: unlearning behaviors and reflexes ingrained into our very nervous system can not happen in the form of an acquiescent miracle. Even though this chapter's purpose is to give any readers suggestions on what comes next and how to heal, it would be wrong to promise this chapter answers all and should apply to

everyone. All I can write is pieces of my thoughts and theories from the literary works I have read on how to live a life one deems as satisfactory or even fulfilling—dare I say even a life free enough to live how one desires.

Surprisingly, my depression has benefited me in some ways, as incomprehensible as that sounds. In the many days and nights I stayed in bed, or refused to leave my apartment, I realized that partially, the reason why I was depressed was because I didn't care. I didn't care enough to finish my homework a week early like I usually did in a whirlwind of anxiety. I didn't care what my parents would think if my grades dropped; I didn't care if they told me I was fat because I wasn't exercising like I used to. Furthermore, I didn't care that the racist white man who told me that "Chinese people eat dogs" existed. I didn't care about how some people saw me or made assumptions about me, intentionally or not, solely because of my race and gender. Nearing the end of Ninh's *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature*, as they wrap up their argument on why Asian American girls or Asian American girls in literature turn to sexual acts in defiance from the repression of the home and family, they state that "[s]uch carelessness with life can be a way to persist in one's being, to comfort oneself for continuing to live" (Ninh, 157). While this quote with context does not directly apply to my argument for healing, the quote implies its meaning outside of sexual acts, and I wish to expand on it. Not caring goes against much of Chinese philosophy, where much of its foundations are based solely on caring about other people and their thoughts, family or not. To not care about serving your family or the effect you have on others is in direct violation of filial piety and societal expectations; therefore, to not care can be considered a radical way of living, and in essence, can be considered freeing.

Now, I want to stress that not caring at all in any sense is extreme, and probably leads to one's own self-destruction. Furthermore, I wouldn't want anyone to come to this conclusion through a mental illness like depression. After all, even when I say I didn't care, I would be lying if I said I didn't care completely. I had to and am still finding a balance of opposites, of caring and not caring, to decide how I want to live my life in the environment and society I am situated in. Hong writes on the debt she feels towards her own parents and other Asian Americans who came before her: "I can't entirely renounce the condition of indebtedness. I am indebted to the activists who struggled before me. [...]I'm also indebted to my parents. But I cannot repay them by keeping my life private, or by following that privatized dream of taking what's mine" (Hong, 201). It is imperative that this thesis' conclusion is not to take a consequentialist perspective. To take everything for granted is dangerous and is a disservice to our parents and the people who fought for our freedom and quality of life; however, what many first-generation Asian American parents, or even grandparents fail to realize, is how this indebtedness can lead to their own child's undoing (Ninh, 82). Therefore, the second-generation children have the power—if they perceive that they do—to decide what it means to pay back this immaterial, special debt. Take Hong's mother, who would guilt trip Hong by telling her that her parents moved to the United States so she "wouldn't have to suffer" (Hong, 201). This is a statement many first-generation Asian American parents imprint onto their children in hopes that their children listen and do what they want. However, looking at this statement itself, firstly, it is false of the parent to believe and invalidate their child that they are incapable of suffering or can not encounter situations that would cause suffering, otherwise I would not be writing this thesis. Secondly, because the child still suffers and does not live the perfect life the parent has seemingly provided, this means that some of the debt pressed onto the child by the parent is non-existent, because the

parent did not provide the child with a life free of suffering. Therefore, the child still has enough freedom from filial debt to go after their own desires and wishes, and the ability and right to defy their parents—or in this case, their debt collectors. In essence, the second-generation Asian American child can morally defy the commands of their parents and live their life to a certain extent uncaring of the expectations placed upon them. The child remains in the limbo of uncaring and caring, and most importantly, has the capability to choose what to specifically care about. Furthermore, because this debt is unquantifiable and has no set parameters, there will be confusion between creditor and debtor on how much is owed (Ninh, 35). As there is not a concrete understanding of what is actually owed between parent and child, the child has the right to define what debt they actually owe and act upon repayment in the manner they choose on their own terms. Unfortunately, I can not tell, nor direct readers or fellow Asian Americans on what to care or not care about to live the life of their desires, but I hope to provide some comfort and direction in the rights they have. This means that many of the pressures second-generation Asian Americans face from the internal family structure can be relieved, so it is possible to live the life you desire, be that the kind of job you want, the romantic relationship you want, or the political, social, religious, or personal beliefs you hold. Furthermore, I can provide some humble suggestions, or points for others to jump off of depending on their individual situation on how to heal and find out how they want to live.

Rage

Over the past couple of weeks, I have had fits of uncontrollable rage. Perhaps I was finally expressing my family's genetic constitution for a short temper, or perhaps I was finally expressing all the emotions I had packed away and avoided for twenty-one years. My rage,

which had been unconsciously pressure-cooked for years, was probably from a combination of internal and external intellectual and primal realizations and emotions, which is very socially unbefitting for a five-foot-two-inch tall Chinese American girl who has been taught directly and subliminally that I do not have the capacity, or even the right, to express my anger. At first glance, one may point out that this rage I felt was meaningless and unproductive. What are you actually doing if you smash four porcelain plates onto the floor anyway? The problem still hasn't gone away—it is still here and seems unsolvable. In my defense, I would like to introduce the concept of Lordean rage, inspired by Audre Lorde and later defined and expanded by Myisha Cherry in *The Case for Rage: Why Anger is Essential to Anti-Racist Struggle,* to further the discussion on what to care about. In an excerpt from Cherry's writing:

> The action tendency of Lordean rage is to absorb and use it for energy. As the title of Lorde's influential essay "Uses of Anger" suggests, anger has its benefits. And Lordean rage is useful if it is focused with precision and translated into needed action. In this way, Lordean rage is metabolized anger—"the virtuous channeling of the power and energy of anger without the desire to harm or pass pain." It is a call to "fight injustice and respect the reality of one's anger without being destroyed by it." (Cherry, 2020).

From this perspective on rage, rage can actually be productive and lead to action and change. Rage can be motivating and has the propensity to spur people into action to ask for better and to force the unacceptable—be that mistreatment, discrimination, or injustice— out of their lives. At the very least, my rage towards racists has spurred me on to succeed in the goals I have set for myself, to defend myself from any attacks and fight for my existence, and to finish writing this thesis in hopes of furthering my own self-development.

Asian Americans have had to experience the rise in Anti-Asian sentiment during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Huang, 2023). We have had to endure a racist man-child of a President that labels a virus after a group of innocent people by calling it the Chinese virus or the Kung Flu (Rogers et al., 2020). Even in one of the most liberal cities in the United States—Ann Arbor—I have been subjected to verbal harassment solely based on my race twice in the past four months (Allen, 2014). Even more disappointing is what happened after I spoke up. Both times, I yelled in the middle of the street, protesting my perpetrator's racism and asking for an apology. There were many people witnessing my interactions with these two separate individuals, and yet, no one came to my defense or asked if I was okay. Maybe they thought I was crazy and decided that they should steer clear of me, or the bystander culture overwhelms even the most liberal or woke people. It is no coincidence that I feel rage, rage at how helpless I feel in changing the minds of people who refuse to listen because they can't even see me as a human or an equal. It is no coincidence that I feel rage towards others who say they believe and stand for anti-racism, when they do not actively practice it or defend others from it. Embracing this rage can actually point towards what one cares about, after all, why should one feel such an intense emotion if one doesn't take the issue to heart personally?

Care

The expression of anger is a way for us to communicate that the object that has wronged us will need to face their actions and deal with consequences from it: "[w]hen we express our anger, we communicate that there will be consequences for wrongdoing. Those consequences might begin and end at just having to endure our expression of rage—which can be big or small, made of words alone or words and vengeful actions" (Cherry, 2020). Only voicing one's rage is

not enough for actual long term change, therefore, it is imperative for one to understand their anger and create thoughts that lead to action to produce a reality free from the object causing such anger. A good question to understand and transition to to recognize what one cares about is to start with: what are you angry about? Identifying the source of rage is only the first step. After that, in terms of Lordean rage, the most valuable takeaway from one's rage is the energy and the desire to create a better reality free from the experience that brought upon the rage initially. With the energy accumulated from rage, one can use this energy to analyze why this feeling of rage was brought upon them in the first place. With this analysis, one can envision the reality they desire which does not have the cause of such anger, and begin taking steps and exerting energy towards creating such a reality.

Now, the last paragraph gives pretty simple and general instructions which are hard to visualize. Therefore, I will provide an example which may help fuel or visualize your own rage into the transformative Lordean rage. Take my interaction with the racist white man who told me that "Chinese people eat dogs." Therefore, the source of anger is the racist white man spewing anti-Asian sentiment. His words are an insult and my anger allows me to express my indignation and respond appropriately by raising my voice and defending myself in a constructive manner by telling him that it was wrong of him to say that, and that he should apologize. The reasoning behind this response is because I envision a world free of interactions like this, and to actually create that, I needed to do my best to break the stereotypes or harm this man tries to inflict upon me. Furthermore, when an outraged person violates the stereotypical rules of their race, "that anger becomes an outlaw emotion, and by accepting the anger (and violating the rules) the outraged person transgresses against the emotions the dominant society wants and expects them to have. The point is that people not only can violate these rules—it's that they should, and

indeed must, if racism is to be resisted" (Cherry, 2021). Ultimately, I was unable to change this racist's mind because of the suddenness of the situation as well as the fact that it can be incredibly, stupidly hard to change a racist's mind. However, if you analyze my interaction closely, you will notice that I broke some stereotypes that are embedded in this racist's mind and within the perception of Asian American women. My noticeable expression of anger goes against the stereotype that Asian women are submissive and compliant (Abrams, 2019). I have directly communicated to this racist that their discriminatory assumptions about me are not true, and consciously or not, he has had an experience with an Asian American girl that defies his deeply seeded beliefs. Similarly, since I made a scene with at least twenty other people around me, I have communicated to those people, who may also have hidden roots of racist or even sexist thought, that Asian American girls are individuals that can fight back and defend themselves. I have made it clear that anti-Asian sentiment exists in even the liberal Ann Arbor community, and highlighted to people around me that what I experienced still exists; my angry response communicated that I would not just take the verbal abuse hurled towards me. These are the possible effects my actions have had in this relatively micro-sociological interaction to try to create a reality free from the injustice I faced, and even then, I am not finished.

After this interaction, I can use the residual anger I have against the racist white man who refused to apologize to me to fuel the next steps I want to take to create a reality free from racism. My rage is motivating, releasing adrenaline and cortisol to stimulate my body into motion and encouraging me to take action against what I believe is wrong. Furthermore, I want to note that this rage needn't only apply to racist experiences; it can be used in all aspects of life like my example of defying my parents expectations and wishes. These experiences allow moments of clarity, such as solidifying my dreams to publish fiction with a Chinese American

girl protagonist and Asian American characters to create more representation within the American literary field that I did not see growing up, or deciding to take gap years before I apply to medical school despite my parents' exasperation. My rage motivates me to care and continue learning Mandarin and embrace my heritage so I can better serve the Chinese American community when I become a practicing physician. I care about my rights to be treated as an equal human being, about my autonomy and independence from my ancestors, and at the very core, my existence. Since I don't have it now, I will fight for it.

To conclude this chapter, I issue a challenge to second-generation Asian Americans and to the reader.

Will you fight for what you care about?

Afterword

As I have been writing this thesis, I have come to the realization that it is an incredibly extensive process to define what freedom is, much less what freedom is for the community of Asian Americans or even individual Asian Americans. This was an important journey for myself to understand what it means to be me and what I value, and even now, while I have answered some questions as to what I desire, more questions continue to pop up each day. Even the term Asian Americans is much too broad in terms of finding even a general way of defining freedom. While there are common themes in our collective experiences, such as the pressures and abuse we have faced from our parents or the racism we have experienced, this does not mean that we will have all formed the same perception on what freedom means to us, nor does it mean that we will all act in the same way. Filial piety and racism are only two concepts within the intersectionality of themes in Asian American literature and second-generation Asian Americans, and it would be an overstatement that my thesis completely encapsulates what freedom means for us. There is much more research and thought needed to understand how trauma has impacted Asian Americans as well as how Asian Americans can heal and find security within their homes, families, and American society, but I remain hopeful for change and put faith into my fellow second-generation Asian Americans to implement this change, internally and externally, for their own world with the freedoms they desire.

In the meantime, I'll appreciate the ride that is my life. I won't let the limited time I have slip through like slippery noodles through chopsticks. I will rest and relax, and I will fight. I'll enjoy listening to my mother and father's mispronunciations of English words like pronouncing pistachios as pish-tae-kios and our conversations using Chinglish(mixture of English and Mandarin) when one of us doesn't know a word of the others native language. I'll continue

tolerating my parents' high expectations and racist people, probably for the rest of my life, but I'll be appreciating the new perspectives I've formed from writing this thesis and take my parents' words as flexible suggestions rather than ultimatums, and fight against the racism to protect my community and our existence. I am lucky to have been granted the ability to be loud and to write this thesis, and for that I am grateful. As always, I will continue thinking about my grandfather and grieve his life and passing—there were countless tears shed while I was reading and writing about his manuscript. I look forward to exploring my family's history in greater detail in the future, as I am still interested in what the first-generation of Asian Americans, like my father and mother, value and how their values shape their perspectives on freedom.

As I'm finishing the last couple of sentences of this thesis, the memory of my grandfather passes through my thoughts. When I was a young child, he would always walk with me to the bus stop, and wait with me until the bus came to pick me up and drop me off at elementary school. He would do this no matter what was happening with my family or what the weather was. Even if it was so hot it felt like the heat would melt your flesh, he would be there. Even if it was snowing and you could barely walk through the accumulated snow on the ground, he would be there. And when I got dropped off back home from the bus, he would be there waiting for me, his elderly face wrinkling kindly as he smiled at me and welcomed me home. I leave you with this image of him, in hopes that it leaves you with the motivation and desire to foster relationships and societies filled with care, care that is often unexpressed or uncommunicated. At least for me, the best feeling in the world is to be loved, and I don't need anyone to tell me that that's something I can't have.

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