

# “vinegar soup improved his womb”: Food, Appetite, and the Redefining of Asian American Masculinity in Kingston’s *China Men*

By Danielle Crawford

The study of food in Asian American literature has recently gained critical attention.<sup>1</sup> In particular, food and consumption practices have been identified as integral to the development of Asian American subjectivity, as food signifies the historical politics of Asian and Asian American labor.<sup>2</sup> While food and consumption are a key determinant of Asian American identity, food and foodways in Asian American literature are tropes that establish ethnic and cultural difference. Food occupies a pivotal position in the American cultural imagination, and is often a medium through which to label Asian Americans as the ethnic “other.”<sup>3</sup> We can thus view food and consumption as a critical discourse in Asian American literature that is responsible for shaping both subjectivity and the Western conception of Asian American identity.

In addition to the importance of food in determining Asian American subjectivity, there has also been some interest in the connection between food, consumption, and gender roles. Eating and the domestic acts of cooking and washing dishes are inevitably gendered activities.<sup>4</sup> This feminization of food and domestic labor is largely due to the 19<sup>th</sup> century cult of domesticity, which separated and gendered the private and public spheres. While the connection between domesticity and gender is a social construction, it is similarly impossible to ignore the significance of foodways in shaping the construction of gender norms.<sup>5</sup> However, although food has been historically linked to the domestic work of women, the tropes of food and appetite in Asian American literature can also be interpreted as signifiers of masculinity. In her study of Frank Chin’s *Donald Duk*, Xu states that “the kitchen becomes a site for the assertion of masculinity, with the language of cooking repeatedly evoking images of martial arts and war” (38). Such intersections of domestic spaces and masculine identity demonstrate the complexity of foodways in both defining and reconstructing gender roles.

However, despite this growing fascination with the significance of food and gender in Asian American literature, there is a lack of criticism regarding the role of food in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men* (1980). Both Sau-ling Cynthia Wong and Paul Outka discuss the workings of food in *China Men*’s companion text, *The Woman Warrior* (1976).<sup>6</sup> However, such discussions of food and hunger in *The Woman Warrior* do not include or incorporate *China Men* in their analyses. Instead, critics are generally silent on the role of food in *China Men*—which is surprising given the extensive references to food and appetite throughout the text. This study will include *China Men*

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within the ongoing critical conversations regarding the importance of food and gender within Asian American literature. I argue that food, appetite, and the various foodways of *China Men* are a crucial component in Kingston's larger project of redefining Asian American masculinity. Kingston essentially uses food and consumption practices to reconstruct traditional norms of masculinity, and create a politicized racial solidarity for Asian American men.

Kingston's use of food as a discourse of re-masculinization can be compared to the utilization of food in Frank Chin's works, such as his novel *Donald Duk*. Chin also attempts to reconstruct Chinese American masculinity through the medium of foodways. However, Xu notes that this project of re-masculinization ultimately adheres to Western hegemonic definitions of masculinity: "Chin's new construction of Chinese American manhood is, unfortunately, not very remote from the hegemonic white masculinity that he has fought against throughout his literary career" (38). Xu asserts, "Alimentary references [...] help pave the most conventional path to the construction of masculinity—the path of violence" (38). While Chin intertwines war and violence with food in "his effort to remasculinize the Asian American male subject" (Xu 38), Kingston also relies on the topics of war and violence in her construction of Asian American masculinity—a thematic which is particularly apparent in the case of the brother who participates in the war in Viet Nam. However, unlike Chin, Kingston does not uphold hegemonic definitions of masculinity that revolve around violence and warfare. Instead, Kingston utilizes food and consumption practices to reveal an aversion towards warfare. This aversion towards war and violence works to redefine Asian American masculinity outside of a Western and masculinist context.

Kingston's *China Men* thus uses foodways to create a more multifaceted definition of Asian American masculinity that does not adhere to "white American patriarchy" (Xu 39). Food and consumption practices in the text function as a politicized discourse that allows the male characters to claim American soil and history through their labor, activism, and resistance to the Vietnam War. Kingston uses foodways to reveal ambivalence towards war and violence, as well as the pervasive need for social justice and racial equality. The characters' activism and their labor in both the domestic and public spheres create a political solidarity for Asian American men. While the author does depend upon essentialist signifiers of gender difference, such as the gendered division of labor and the consumption of "women's food," Kingston nonetheless uses these signifiers to deconstruct dominant conceptions of masculinity. Food and foodways are a means of establishing the political reality of Asian American masculinity, as consumption practices and appetite intersect with labor exploitation, American consumerism, and the U.S. military complex.

In her analysis of *China Men*, Linda Ching Sledge discusses Kingston's reinvention of masculinity. Sledge states that "Kingston inverts the notion of masculinity and femininity in order to define 'heroism' according to the standard of sheer survival of humiliating social and economic setbacks" (8). This redefining of Chinese American masculinity and heroism involves a process of "emasculatation" (Sledge 8). Furthermore, LeiLani Nishime also examines the text's cultural construction of Chinese American masculinity, noting that Kingston's "assertion of the place of the Chinese in America is, by definition, also a move towards confirming Chinese-Americans' masculine 'Americanness'" (77). Drawing off of this scholarship, my

analysis will closely examine Kingston's depiction of Asian American masculinity within the framework of food and consumption, paying particular attention to the characters Tang Ao, the narrator's father and the uncles from the New York laundry, Ah Goong, and the narrator's brother from the Vietnam War. These characters' various appetites and relationships with food work to reconstruct masculinity within the text, while creating a racialized solidarity for Asian American male subjectivity that exists outside of Western hegemonic gender norms.

The opening legend of *China Men* depicts the character Tang Ao's journey to the "Land of the Women" (215), where he is held captive by women who pierce his ears and bind his feet. Sledge asserts that footbinding in this legend is "a symbol for the immigrant male's 'emasculatation,' his loss of power and position after his emigration to America" (8). Leslie Rabine argues that this legend is representative of "a textual practice in [...] *China Men* that displaces and transforms boundaries" (475). This opening story indeed demonstrates that Kingston's project will be closely associated with gender and the defining of Asian American masculinity. However, this legend also reveals that food and foodways will be pivotal to the author's reconstruction of gender roles. While Tang Ao is held captive, he is fed food that is typically reserved for women: "During the months of a season, they fed him on women's food: the tea was thick with white chrysanthemums and stirred the cool female winds inside his body; chicken wings made his hair shine; vinegar soup improved his womb" (216). The women force Tang Ao to participate in cultural practices of femininity, such as ear piercing and foot binding, which alter his exterior appearance; however, they also use food to dramatically change his biological sex. In the "Land of the Women," Tang Ao's consumption of white chrysanthemum tea and vinegar soup endows his body with "cool female winds" and a womb. Such foods not only construct but enhance his feminine reproductive organs. In this sense, food is used to create a gender reversal that goes beyond mere performances of femininity.

Throughout Tang Ao's captivity he is trained to serve food at the royal court: "He served a meal at the queen's court. His hips swayed and his shoulders swiveled because of his shaped feet. 'She's pretty, don't you agree?' the diners said, smacking their lips at his dainty feet as he bent to put dishes before them" (216). This service of food to the royal guests is defined as an act of domesticity. Tang Ao performs this role and is objectified by the guests because of his feminine appearance, such as his hips and small feet. Kingston thus utilizes both food and the gendered act of serving food to create a feminine identity for Tang Ao that is both a societal and biological construct. In her discussion of this myth, Sledge asserts that the "womanization of Tang Ao is not to be interpreted as a diminution of stature of character. [...] the Chinese hero's strength consists of an ability to find new methods by which to endure, in this case to acquiesce and hence to outlast his captivity" (9). Sledge notes that the "myth also speaks of the growing equality of the sexes as a result of the male's adventuring into unknown territories" (9). Tang Ao's adventure does indeed imply an increasing equality between the sexes within the context of immigration. But, more importantly, Kingston uses food in this opening legend to construct a complex definition of Asian American masculinity itself. Tang Ao's gender transformation dramatically subverts hegemonic norms of masculinity, and hints toward a multifaceted Asian American male identity that encompasses both the masculine and the feminine.

While the men in the narrator's family do not undergo a radical gender transformation like Tang Ao, we can nonetheless view the tale as a metaphor for the new and changing domestic roles of the sojourners to Gold Mountain. Due to the absence of women, the male characters are responsible for domestic duties and are increasingly present in domestic spaces associated with food. When the narrator's father joins the uncles in New York to start a laundry, the men form a bachelor community that is closely tied to their consumption practices and domestic chores. Ed, the character who represents the narrator's father, Woodrow, Roosevelt, and Worldster have a contest over who can finish their dinner first:

[they] held their bowls to their mouths and shoveled as fast as they could, chewing crackly pork and pressed duck in one bite, gulping while jabbing from the center dishes without choosiness. They raced as if food were scarce and one of them would be left the runt pig. Woodrow picked up the soup tureen and drank directly from it. "Uh. Uh," the others protested, but didn't stop gulping to say "You're cheating." (275)

The characters' race to finish their food is a nightly tradition that creates close ties between the four men. Their eating ritual further establishes their alternative family unit, as they compete and celebrate with one another at the dinner table. When Worldster wins the race and Ed admits to losing, "His friends cheered him as he leaned back and sipped his whiskey. 'That was a four-and-a-half-minute dinner,' [Ed] said, looking as his new gold watch. 'It's a record.' They gave their record a cheer" (275). The men's bachelor community is essentially established through their consumption practices and food rituals. Moreover, this bachelor community is indicative of the multiple bachelor communities formed by Chinese immigrants as a result of restrictive immigration policies. Lisa Lowe asserts that the "residents of the urban 'bachelor society' Chinatowns of New York and San Francisco from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1950s [...] were mostly male laborers—laundrymen, seamen, restaurant workers—from southern China" (65). Kingston thus uses consumption practices to establish the political reality of Chinese immigration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Ed and the other uncles form a bachelor community in the urban space of New York.

As the "last one to finish eating [does] the dishes" (275), the characters' food race is also connected to the responsibility of a domestic chore. One of the men must wash the dishes from the meal, and so they create this contest to determine who will be liable for the duty. Kingston describes Ed's process of cleaning the dinner table and washing the dishes in great detail:

Ed scraped the dishes onto the tablecloth, which was layers of newspapers. Then he rolled up the top layer; the table was instantly clean and already covered for the next meal. He sudsed the dishes with laundry soap and put them in a drainer. From the whistling tea kettle, he poured boiling water on them; the water was so hot, the dishes dried before his eyes. It was a method he remembered the slaves in China using. Dishwashing just took common sense; women had made such a to-do about it. The Gold Mountain was indeed free: no manners, no traditions, no wives. (275-6)

In this passage, Ed completes domestic tasks associated with food within the domestic space of the kitchen. Because the men's wives are not present, they assume responsibility for gendered chores. Ed and the uncles' increasing work in the domestic sphere reflect the domestic labor of male Chinese immigrants after the construction of the transcontinental railroad. Ho notes that while "a few Chinese workers found other railroad jobs after the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, the most socially acceptable and available occupations for these laborers were either as menial labor or in domestic areas of cooking and cleaning" (27). Moreover, the act of performing gendered work essentially gendered these male laborers: "Because Chinese men were forced to perform work associated with women, their gender identity became feminized—neutralized by the socioeconomic restrictions placed on them due to their ethnic status" (Ho 27). Ed's duties, which are directly connected to food, eating, and its aftermath, indeed construct a gender identity that is starkly different from his gendered roles and responsibilities in China. However, Ed's work in the domestic space of the kitchen does not neutralize his gender identity, but rather deconstructs the gendered binary of the private and public spheres. Kingston essentially uses Ed's labor in the domestic sphere to construct a multi-layered Asian American male subjectivity that counters gendered divisions of labor, and reflects the politics of male Chinese immigration.

While the absence of women in these immigrant communities results in the male characters' increasing domestic responsibilities, the men in the text also use food and a widening definition of Asian American masculinity to assert their presence within the American landscape. Nishime asserts that "Kingston firmly places the Chinese in the American landscape and enumerates the ways in which he has participated in forming and creating that landscape in order to further her goal of 'claiming America' and creating a Chinese-American history and identity" (75). Such emphasis on the importance of these men within American history is especially evident in the story of the grandfather Ah Goong, who physically alters the U.S. landscape by constructing the transcontinental railroad with other underpaid, Chinese laborers. In her analysis of Frank Chin's *Donald Duk*, Ho identifies the connection between the historical symbol of the transcontinental railroad and Asian American gender identity: "the Chinese railroad laborer is simultaneously a symbol of neglected American history, an affirmation of Chinese masculinity—a tremendous source of 'yellow' pride" (34). In the case of *China Men*, the railroad becomes a space from which to articulate Kingston's burgeoning definition of Asian American masculinity.

During the arduous and dangerous process of building the railroad, the men decide to go on strike "and demand forty-five dollars a month and the eight-hour shift" (360). Ah Goong and the other Chinese laborers use food to pass along the message of the strike:

The men wrapped barley and beans in ti leaves, which came from Hawai'i via San Francisco, for celebrating the fifth day of the fifth month [...]. Usually the way the red string is wound and knotted tells what flavors are inside—the salty barley with pickled egg, or beans and pork, or the gelatin pudding. Ah Goong folded ti leaves into a cup and packed it with food. One of the literate men slipped in a piece of paper with the strike plan, and Ah Goong tied the bundle

with a special pattern of red string. The time and place for the revolution against Kublai Khan had been hidden inside autumn moon-cakes. (360)

Ah Goong's use of food to spread information about the strike reveals the subversive nature of food itself. By using dishes associated with the summer solstice, the men utilize their cultural traditions in order to disguise and circulate the message of the strike, as well as gain participants for the movement. Ah Goong and his fellow laborers use the seemingly innocuous vehicle of *ti* leaves, beans, and barley to demand fair working conditions from their employers. As such, subversive *ti* leaves intersect with a larger discourse of social justice, as Kingston reveals the exploitation of Chinese male laborers within the project of constructing the transcontinental railroad.

As the strike progresses, it becomes a battle over food itself. Kingston writes that "the cowardly demons blockaded the food wagons. No food" (363). In order to continue the strike, despite the food shortage, "The foresighted China Men had cured jerky, fermented wine, dried and strung orange and grapefruit peels, pickled and preserved leftovers. Ah Goong, one of the best hoarders, had set aside extra helpings from each meal" (363). While this strike is prompted by food, the laborers use their consumption practices to ensure that it continues. Their activism through the medium of foodways creates a racialized solidarity, as the Chinese men utilize their resources to resist labor exploitation.

This act of resistance, which is directly associated with food, helps Ah Goong and the other workers regain a sense of their masculinity and assert their significance within the changing American landscape. As the strike gains publicity, the participants are drawn for various newspapers: "The men posed bare-chested, their fists clenched, showing off their arms and backs. The artists sketched them as perfect young gods reclining against rocks, wise expressions on their handsome noble-nosed faces" (362). Later, Ah Goong comes to the realization that the "pale, thin Chinese scholars and the rich men fat like Buddhas were less beautiful, less manly than these brown muscular railroad men, of whom he was one. One of ten thousand heroes" (362). The strike essentially elevates the men to the status of heroic figures, and Ah Goong gains a newfound perspective on his masculine identity through their collective act of resistance. Sledge asserts that "heroism in *China Men* is not defined by the conventional Chinese standards of masculine authority nor by western standards of physical prowess" (8). Instead, Kingston constructs an Asian American masculinity that does not adhere to Western patriarchy or traditional Chinese gender roles. The male characters in the text create a multifaceted definition of masculinity through their labor in both the domestic and public spheres. While their activism creates a racialized solidarity, their work in the public space of the railroad enables them to definitely claim the American landscape. However, as the text juxtaposes acts of physicality alongside acts of domesticity, Kingston constructs a multilayered Asian American masculinity that resists hegemonic gender norms.

While the "Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains" constructs a masculine identity based on an act of resistance that is prompted by food, the narrator's father, or BaBa, is also depicted in terms of his relationship with food. When BaBa loses his job at the gambling house, he becomes depressed and loses his appetite. The narrator's mother attempts to restore his energy and vitality by feeding him particular foods. The

mother “dropped [a] pill in a bantam broth that had steamed all day in a little porcelain crock on metal legs. He drank this soup, also a thick beef broth with gold coins in the bottom, beef teas, squab soup, and still he sat. He sat on. It seemed to me that he was getting skinnier” (477-8). The mother’s attempt to reinvigorate his appetite, and thereby his desire to work, is largely unsuccessful. As he retreats within the seclusion of their home, the mother “is forced by the father’s increasing passivity to take on ‘masculine’ traits of aggressiveness and authority” (Sledge 10). She urges him to confront the neighbor who presumably stole their loquat tree, and blames him for not “track[ing] down the tree and bring[ing] it back” (476). The mother also becomes the primary earner of the family, “joining the hordes of migrant fruit and vegetable pickers in the fields of Stockton” (Sledge 10). We can view the father’s decreasing appetite as a symbol for his decreasing participation in the public sphere. Sledge notes that the character’s depression results in an “erosion of sex differentiation in the household. The strain on husband, wife, and children as a result of the father’s ‘emasculat[i]on’ or failure as a provider is clear. His silence and impotent rage deepen as the wife takes on more active power in the family” (10). The father’s loss of appetite is thus a reflection of changing gender roles and gendered identities within the narrator’s family.

While the mother’s attempts to feed her husband do not motivate him to join the workforce, he does eventually buy his own laundry. At the end of “The American Father” section, Kingston writes of the various fruits and vegetables that BaBa grows in his garden: “He planted many kinds of gourds, peas, beans, melons, and cabbages—and perennials—tangerines, oranges, grapefruit, almonds, pomegranates, apples, black figs, and white figs—and from seed pits, another loquat, peaches, apricots, plums of many varieties—trees that take years to fruit” (484). This growth of food represents a claiming of American soil. As the trees “take years to fruit,” the father establishes both his permanence in the American landscape and a renewed sense of his masculine identity, as he provides for his family with the food from his garden. The father’s relationship with food reveals his changing gender roles and his adherence to a broader definition of Asian American masculinity. While Ah Goong claims the American landscape through his construction of the transcontinental railroad, the narrator’s father claims the American landscape from the private space of his garden.

Although the father does regain his self-worth by growing food and opening a new laundry, his appetite nonetheless remains a source of contention within the narrator’s family. BaBa is able to dodge the WWII draft because he is too skinny (499). When he returns from the doctor’s office, his wife immediately begins feeding him:

MaMa started fattening him up, but it never worked. She had been using her old doctoring skills poisoning him, and his weight had dropped permanently. “I poisoned him to keep him out of World War II,” she says. “Now all these years, I’ve been trying to plump him up with food and medicine, but he stays skinny. His metabolism is ruined. He eats a lot but doesn’t gain weight.” (499-500)

The father’s skinny body exempts him from the draft, but he is unable to regain the weight, despite his wife’s efforts. With the help of the mother, BaBa uses both his consumption practices and his physical body to resist the masculine duty of fighting in the war. This utilization of the male body and food, or lack thereof, to escape the

violence of war directly contrasts with the depiction of the male body in other works of Chinese American fiction. Viet Thanh Nguyen notes that authors such as Frank Chin and Gus Lee demonstrate “that the individual male body can be discursively transformed into a representative of the larger ethnic and national community[;] they mark the male body as a site for a series of activities and movements that will serve to regenerate masculinity through violence” (“The Remasculinization of Chinese America” 131). While these authors essentially use violence to remasculinize the Chinese American male subject, Kingston instead utilizes the father’s body and food to avoid violence, such as warfare, and construct an Asian American masculine identity that exists outside the gendered norms of physical violence.

However, unlike her father, the narrator’s brother is unable to evade participation in warfare. In order to avoid getting drafted in the Vietnam War, the brother enlists in the Navy. Interestingly enough, the character rationalizes his decision to join the war by reflecting on the impact of national consumption practices:

In a country that operates on a war economy, there isn’t much difference between being in the Navy and being a civilian. When we ate a candy bar, drank grape juice, bought bread (ITT makes Wonder bread), wrapped food in plastic, made a phone call, put money in the bank, cleaned the oven, washed with soap, turned on the electricity, refrigerated food, cooked it [...] we were supporting the corporations that made tanks and bombers, napalms, defoliants, and bombs. (513-4)

This passage draws a direct link between food and war, as the brother connects the consumption of particular foods and brands to the production of weapons. Although the brother is reluctant to join the war, he uses food and the act of consumption to justify his involvement in a cause that he does not support. He notes that it is almost impossible to not participate in the war effort: “The way to contribute less to the war was to go on welfare and eat out of garbage bins in back of grocery stores” (514). According to the brother, he is complicit in the war by simply eating certain foods.

This connection between branded foods, American consumerism, and the U.S military complex reveals the political reality of Asian American identity during the period of the Vietnam War. When the brother realizes that he will most likely be drafted, he also realizes that the “Army would not assign him to some easy NATO duty like guarding a German border. They’d send a gook to fight the gook war” (513). The narrator’s brother is “othered” by the U.S. war in Viet Nam, as he is simultaneously labeled the racialized “enemy” and enlisted as a participant in the American war effort. Through food and American consumerism, the brother is already implicated in the war, despite his status as the “other.” This contradiction is evident when “the new Secretary of Defense called the Chinese ‘the enemy of the world’ and predicted all-out nuclear war before 1970, [and] the brother stopped reading newspapers” (515). However, despite the fraught politics of the brother’s identity in the American cultural imagination, the Vietnam War and resistance to said war also created a racialized solidarity and unity for Asian Americans. In his discussion of the political representation of the Vietnam War, Viet Thanh Nguyen states, “As for Asian Americans, the war matters because the Vietnamese revolution helped to inspire the



Asian American movement" ("What is the Political?" 21). Indeed resistance to the war in Viet Nam helped construct a unified Asian American identity. By intersecting the brother's appetite with her critique of the Vietnam War, Kingston constructs an Asian American masculinity that is also unified by the politics of the war in Viet Nam.

When the brother does join the Navy and begins boot camp, he immediately loses his appetite. Like the father, his dramatic loss of appetite coincides with his depression:

The brother lost his appetite. From the first day of boot camp when the recruits were marched to breakfast, he did not want the food. No food tasted any better or worse than any other. Peanut butter, french fries, chocolate did not taste good. He had lost the sensation of hunger. His stomach did not growl no matter how long he did without food. Not eating gave him some extra time, privacy; [...] he would not have to plan his life around food. He had not eaten for days when it occurred to him he that his appetite was unreliable; he could not depend on it to keep alive. He would never get hungry. "I have to keep myself alive," he said aloud at table; [...] He would have to use his reason instead of his instinct to eat and stay healthy. (517)

The brother realizes he must force himself to eat in order to survive. He no longer enjoys eating food, nor does his body show signs of hunger. This extreme loss of appetite is closely connected to the character's recent involvement in the Navy. Although he is able to rationalize his decision to join the Navy through food and consumption practices, his sudden lack of appetite demonstrates that he has not fully accepted his new role in the war. Instead, his body essentially shuts down, and he must continually remind himself to eat. When boot camp ends, the brother does not regain his appetite: "He did not think he was any more full of hate and a desire to kill than before. Nor did his appetite return. At restaurants and at home on leave, he had no appetite for his favorite foods" (518-9). While the father's loss of appetite reflects his "emasculatation" and inactive role in the public sphere, the brother's loss of appetite indicates his reluctance to assume the gendered duty of fighting in the Vietnam War. The brother's aversion towards violence and warfare thus directly contrasts with the use of violence in Frank Chin's works, as Chin "rel[ies] heavily on the masculine pleasures of consumption, sex, and violence in his effort to remasculinize the Asian American male subject" (Xu 38). Instead, we can read the brother's rejection of food as a metaphor for a rejection of the war itself. Although he is outwardly participating in the war effort, his physical body directly resists the war in Viet Nam through his sudden loss of appetite. This resistance of the body constructs a male subjectivity that exists outside of the traditional norms of war and violence. Despite the brother's service in the Navy, it is his bodily resistance to warfare that both redefines masculinity, and outlines a racialized solidarity for Asian Americans within the context of the Vietnam War.

As Kingston's brother continues his service in the Navy, he rides an aircraft carrier headed towards the Philippines. During his time aboard this ship, he has gruesome and disturbing dreams about war and violence. One of these dreams takes place in the kitchen, where eating utensils are used as instruments of torture:

When he slept again, he dreamed that he was a barkless dog tied to a table leg in a kitchen equipped with a sink, oven, and operating table. Families—mother, father, and one child—are in kitchens like this all over the world. A voice comes over the loudspeakers: “Children, take up your knives; women, forks; men, spoons.” The fathers take the children’s knives and stab them quickly. Then with their arms around one another, the wife picks up the fork, and the husband the spoon. The loudspeaker says for them to kill themselves by forking and scooping. [...] He chooses the spoon, but is not willing to gouge himself to death. Because he is a dog and not watched as closely as human beings, he runs out of the kitchen surgery, but outside, the shooting war has begun. (523)

In this dream, the domestic space of the kitchen is transformed into a space of violence and death. Forks, spoons, and knives are no longer used for eating; instead they are used for torture and suicide in a “kitchen surgery” (523). The brother’s relationship to food dramatically shifts in this dream, as both the kitchen and the act of consumption are presented as a ghastly and surreal affair. Imagery of warfare and violence is directly conflated with imagery of food and eating. As the brother gets physically closer to Asia, his fear of the war is expressed in terms of foodways. Like the voiceless dog in his dream, the character does not wish to participate in the brutal violence of the war in Viet Nam. While the dog is separated from the rest of the family, the brother is also “othered” by the U.S. military. During basic training, the chief repeatedly asks the brother where he is from: “The chief didn’t ask anyone else about his hometown. It was a racial slur [...] as though he were saying, ‘Remember you’re not from Vietnam. Remember which side you’re on. You’re no gook from Vietnam’” (516). This dream of food and death thus reflects the brother’s “othered” status in the Navy, and the racialized solidarity created by this “othering” of Asian Americans in the face of the Vietnam War.

The pervasive connection between food and death is further apparent when the brother is “assigned to the U.S.S. *Midway* for an attack mission to the Gulf of Tonkin” (528). During this mission, he learns of the death of one of the pilots during dinner: “A man he’d eaten lunch with did not show up for dinner, and that meant the man’s plane had gone down. He had to imagine his death because he saw no blood, no body” (529). Kingston writes that the “sailors did not mourn the pilots, an arrogant, strutting class who volunteered for the bombings. Nobody was drafted to drop bombs. ‘Extra dessert tonight,’ the sailors said” (529). As the brother is not physically present to witness these deaths, food stands in as a signifier of death, and he is left to imagine the violence of the ongoing war during his meal times. Food and consumption represent the trauma of the war, and the brother’s conflict with hegemonic norms of masculinity. He is uncomfortable with the stereotypically masculine affinity for violence and warfare, and this unease is demonstrated through his loss of appetite and conflation of food with death.

When the narrator’s brother finally returns home, he is greeted by a family party and a feast. Sledge asserts that this “repast is a thanksgiving meal to celebrate Ch’ing Ming, the festival of the dead, during which the ancestors are commemorated. The brother, like many young Chinese-Americans, barely remembers what this ‘very important’ meal is for” (12). Kingston describes the leftover party food that the brother

eats: “The chicken still sat whole on the table. Pieces of the roast pork from a whole pig, noodles, and lettuce remained. [...] He ate the rock sugar on red paper his mother handed him; he ate the leftover pork. She hacked the white chicken for him. No, his appetite hadn’t come back yet; he’d have to do more duty-eating” (537). During this scene, the character, as Sledge asserts “eats without relish and only out of a sense of duty. Yet despite his lack of appetite, his very attendance suggests that he has returned from the ‘dead’ back into the embrace of the family, another survivor” (12). While the brother’s previous rejection of food indicates his rejection of the war, his acceptance of his family’s food similarly reflects his acceptance of his family and culture.<sup>7</sup> The character is still traumatized by the war, but he does “duty-eating” in order to reconnect with his family. The brother eventually attains a sense of normalcy, as Kingston writes that “his appetite did gradually increase. He had survived the Vietnam war. He had not gotten killed, and he had not killed anyone” (537). Once the brother removes himself from the war, he regains both his appetite and a sense of his identity. His relief that his service is over is mirrored by his increasing consumption. The character’s constantly fluctuating relationship with food is thus indicative of both his physical resistance to the war and his involvement in it. Kingston essentially uses foodways to create a discourse of resistance to the war that establishes the brother’s significance within American history and constructs an Asian American male identity based upon the racial politics of the war in Viet Nam.

The depiction of food, consumption, and appetite in *China Men* is thus closely connected to Kingston’s project of redefining Asian American masculinity. The author posits Tang Ao’s dramatic gender transformation at the beginning of the text as a metaphor for the changing gender roles and identities of the men within the narrator’s family. Food and consumption practices function as a racialized and gendered discourse that articulates a multifaceted masculinity, as well as the racial politics of Asian American male identity throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This connection between appetite, food, and altered gender norms is especially apparent in the stories of the narrator’s father and the bachelors from the laundry, Ah Goong, and the narrator’s brother from the Vietnam War. While these characters have different appetites and relationships to food, foodways nonetheless work to establish an Asian American male identity that resists hegemonic conceptions of masculinity and constructs a racialized solidarity. Food and consumption practices enable the various generations of Chinese and Chinese American men to unite as Asian Americans and claim the American landscape and history as their own.

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<sup>1</sup> In her study of South Asian diasporic fiction, Anita Mannur notes, “For some years, food has been garnering interest as a subject for cultural and literary inquiry” (10). For other works that discuss the significance of food and foodways in Asian American literature and pedagogy see the 2011 volume of *AALDP*. Also, see *Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader*, an upcoming collection edited by Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan IV, and Anita Mannur.

<sup>2</sup> In *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature*, Wenying Xu argues “that food and eating occupy a significant place in the formation of Asian American subjectivity” (8). Jennifer Ann Ho

comments on the intersection between food and Asian American labor in her study on the role of consumption in the Asian American bildungsroman: “Food has historically been a complex and fraught arena for Asian American subjectivity since Asians in America became coded by and through their relationship to the food they cultivated, picked, packaged, prepared, and served” (11).

<sup>3</sup> Mannur asserts that food “feeds into the literary rendering of Asian American subjectivity. Food provides a language through which to imagine Asian alterity in the American imagination” (13).

<sup>4</sup> Xu states that “food and eating often serve as a set of gendering and gendered signs that circulates in everyday life. Not only are eating disorders most frequently associated with girls and women, but also certain foods are considered to be men’s or women’s” (5).

<sup>5</sup> In discussing the connection between food and domesticity, Mannur notes, “Food and cooking are among the rituals most associated with domesticity” (20).

<sup>6</sup> Sau-ling Cynthia Wong analyzes the “alimentary images” (20) of the text, asserting that “the immigrant creed of dietary fortitude is most fully explored in Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*” (28). In his analysis of *The Woman Warrior*, Paul Outka also argues that “Kingston’s attempt to enunciate a self that is simultaneously enduring and dynamic is organized within her book in terms of Maxine’s passionate concerns with food and the creative imagination” (451). Outka notes that Kingston “defines and redefines food and hunger in ways that constantly blur that too tidy distinction” (451) between essentialism and constructivism.

<sup>7</sup> Patrycja Kurjatto-Renard also comments on the connection between food and family, as she states that “food can be seen as a link with one’s family and ancestors, which is visible in the preparation and celebration of ethnic dishes on foreign soil, so the refusal to eat represents the denial of one’s past, or an unwillingness to connect to one’s family” (216).

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