Monstrous Matrilineage in Chinese American Literature

By Leina Hsu

My mother’s eyes are *jian*.\(^1\) She stands in my bedroom and fishes long-lost items out of thin air. She scans nashi pears at the grocer’s and walks away with the sweetest bunch. Her eyes are always there, prodding at the truth. The first time I got drunk, I covered up my face as I stumbled into the house, certain that the moment our eyes met, she would know. In another life, she would have been a master of espionage or an astute detective.

My parents immigrated from China to America in the 1990s after proving themselves as prospective graduate students. My father went to Columbia University and my mother went to Fordham, though she likes to remind me that she tested higher than him on the GRE. With two degrees under her belt, a sharp mind and sharp eyes, my mother should have had the world at her feet. Yet, for first-generation immigrant women, opportunities never came that easily.

After giving birth, my mother stayed at home to watch me while my father worked two jobs to make ends meet. Those days were more pushed through than lived. As my mother watched me grow, so did my father watch his career. They moved from state to state in pursuit of new and better possibilities. In 2003, they became naturalized US citizens. If the story had ended there, perhaps they could’ve lived out an American Dream.

Soon, I was old enough to wander without my mother’s watchful eye. However, after more than a decade of sleepless nights and deepening anxiety, my mother’s health was at an all-time low. I was fifteen when her lifelong ailments began catching up to her, sixteen when she could no longer eat, sleep, or walk on her own. When her illness ate away her composure, I sometimes felt myself a mother, comforting her just as she did me.

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I saw all the parts parents hid from their children: weakness, rage, immaturity, and eventually hopelessness.

Many like to assert an instantaneous and natural connection between mothers and daughters that assist the passing down of knowledge. Nonetheless, this myth alienates those with more ambiguous feelings as well as places the sole responsibility of childcare onto the mother. Past the partition, many encounter the reality of unstable roles, unaddressed trauma, and incompatible desires that may take a lifetime to reconcile. Love, tugged to the very extremes of both selfishness and selflessness, can become indistinguishable from pain. Thus, at the core of mother-daughter relationships is a certain misalignment.

My experience of mother- and daughterhood is inseparable from my identity as a Chinese American woman. It is at once Asian and American, loving and scarring, ancestral and transient. As a result of our marginalization, we are already made monstrous by society. Thus, it is by necessity that we take unconventional and sometimes socially taboo approaches to maternity and filial piety.

In a patriarchal society like China, where women’s voices are often regulated, our mothers become role models of womanhood and personhood. Consequently, my mother’s guidance, her heartache and tenderness, all hold the essence of her mother, and her mother before her—cementing our matrilineage. On one hand, the relationships between Chinese American mothers and daughters can be intense and insular. On the other hand, they are a part of the web of all Chinese American matrilines, interlinked by our history, stretching centuries back and across continents. Evidence of this matrilineage emanates from the written works of Chinese American women.

Therefore, I will analyze monstrous matrilineage within Chinese American contemporary literature. I will draw from the novels The Joy Luck Club (1989) by Amy Tan, Bone (1993) by Fae Myenne Ng, and Severance: A Novel (2018) by Ling Ma, three stories that center second-wave Chinese American immigrants and their children. In doing so, I intend to explore monstrosity as both genealogical trauma and resistance, so that what wounds Chinese American mother-daughter relationships is also what undermines established familial structures, exposing what is possible for matrilineal resistance to patriarchal power.

Defining Monstrous Matrilineage

Monsters emerge out of the shadows to lurk at the foot of our childhood beds: they are simultaneously unknown and terrifyingly intimate. The fear they generate comes from this violation of boundaries, effectively shocking dissonance into every part of their victim’s psyche. The ghosts, skeletons, and zombies that haunted our adolescent imaginations are also a part of the greater cultural imagination. They represent society’s collective anxiety toward inscrutability and contradiction.
In his essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen postulates that monsters are “harbingers of category crisis”; they manifest as “disturbing hybrids” that “resist attempts to [be included] in any systematic structure” (6). In essence, monsters cannot enter the mainstream as much as they do not want to be a part of it. Cohen’s analysis of monstrosity takes inspiration from Jacques Derrida’s concept of différance, which highlights “the [simultaneously active and passive] spacing by means of which elements are related to each other” (Derrida 27). Therefore, monsters occupy the obscured spaces between normative categories, from which they agitate entrenched systems. Said monstrous différance is crucial to the deconstruction and reinvention of accepted ideologies and institutions. René Girard notes that “difference that exists outside the system is terrifying because it reveals the truth of the system, its relativity, its fragility, and its mortality” (qtd. in Cohen 12). Our society is constructed to hide or shame its “unsightly” parts; monsters rip us from the comforts of that ignorance. While this paradigm shift can be devastating, it also allows us to see the possibilities of resistance outside of perceived limitations.

At the end of his essay, Cohen writes, “monsters are our children” (20). They can disappear into unseen corners of the world just to return with critical knowledge. They ask us to “reevaluate our cultural assumptions about . . . our perception of difference, our tolerance towards expression.” Ultimately, they question “why we have created them” (Cohen 20). Thus, the relationship between the monster and creator is a familial one. Parents must reckon with the monstrosity they have created, much of which comes from themselves. Children come to love and hate their creator; they also become preoccupied with the notion of redemption for them both.

Nevertheless, there is a kind of monstrosity particular to mothers and daughters. Under patriarchy, women’s voices are silenced, so that they turn to “the guidance of a godhead most like them—their mothers” (Godfrey 9). Consequently, their connection is not only forged in parenthood but oppression. Mothers come to discover that the lived experience of mothering is jarringly distinct from the institution of motherhood, which prescribes a model of correct behavior (Duncan and Wong 164). Motherhood asserts that all mothers possess an innate ability to attach to and provide for their children. Contrarily, writers like Roksana Badruddoja recount deeply contradictory moments of maternity, which are simultaneously “rewarding” and full of “high personal, psychological, and physical costs.” Badruddoja wonders about her daughter, “Will she hate me? Will she understand? Will she forgive me?” (321).

Barbara Almond identifies mothers’ fear of creating “monstrous offspring” through bad child-rearing (xii). The institution of motherhood maintains that every action of a mother is thoroughly absorbed by their children so that a single mistake can have dire consequences. In turn, mothers come to see their children as direct reflections of themselves. Such identifications that are “the source of good interpersonal attunement” also “may
lead to unconscious and disturbing repetitions [of personal trauma]” (Almond 17). Daughters especially provoke the reliving of said trauma, as mothers must equip their daughters with the knowledge to survive a society that wounded them.

Specifically, critical explorations of Black American motherhood in literature have laid bare the social monstrosity accorded to marginalized mothers, offering a foundation for analyzing Chinese American monstrous matrilineage. Compared to the “angelic” white mother, Black mothers are frequently portrayed as neglectful and uncaring, forwarded by the “welfare queen” trope of single Black mothers using welfare for selfish reasons. According to Nikta Sadati, “the effects of this monstrification on the psyche of the black mother and her inability to identify as woman and mother is ‘one of the most significant afterlives of slavery’” (10). As a result, Black mothers are stripped of the freedom to experience maternal ambivalence without consequence. In “Our Sacrifice Shall Not Be Required: Examining Maternal Ambivalence and Refusal in Black Motherhood,” Candice J. Merritt writes of the importance of creating “a genealogy of black maternal monstrosity” that “finds potential in black maternal failures and defeats” (78).

What manifests is a monstrous matrilineage. Daughters inherit genealogical suffering and genealogical defiance from their mothers. Each generation ventures to heal, just as each generation leaves some things unaddressed. What reemerges time and time again is the realization that patriarchal societies have no place for mothers who cannot perfect their “natural” caregiver duties or for daughters who cannot perform traditional, submissive womanhood. In consequence, monstrosity laces every mother-daughter relationship. Coming to terms with this shared state of différance opens up the gates to collective, unending matrilineal resistance. As Cohen notes, monsters always return (20).

**The Joy Luck Club and Ghosts**

In a lifetime of strife, one becomes invariably haunted, be it by vengeance, regret, loose ends, too much love, or too little of it. Ghosts, in their intangibility, are ironically the most tangible form of haunting—perceptible culminations of fear and desire. The specters of our personal nightmares also find their roots in cultural and historical trauma. As Parul Segal writes for the *New York Times*, “[ghosts] emanate from specific cultural fears and fantasies . . . . They are social critiques camouflaged with cobwebs; the past clamoring for redress.” Flashing between 1920s–1940s China and 1980s San Francisco, *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan tells the multigenerational story of haunted Chinese American mothers and daughters. In the novel, “ghostliness” is the consequence of Chinese American women’s oppression, a state of invisibility that muffles their voices as well as a method of survival that mothers pass down to daughters. Nonetheless, this insubstantial way of life alienates daughters, who, in reaching out, find only wispy
shapes in their mother’s place. By coaxing ghostliness, along with its associated pain, into materiality, Tan’s mothers and daughters embrace their monstrosity and, in turn, each other. Their declaration and subsequent wielding of social “abnormality” is a powerful demonstration of matrilineal resistance.

From the backstories of the Joy Luck mothers, Tan brings to light the incessant heartache and subjugation endured by Chinese women that turn them into ghosts. As a part of traditionalist ideology, patriarchal submission becomes rooted at the core of Chinese women’s identities. An-mei Hsu speaks of her own mother, who is forced into concubinage after becoming a widow. She is unable to fulfill the traditional roles of the faithful wife and virginal mother, rendering her a social outcast. An-mei’s grandmother tells An-mei that her mother is a “ghost” whom “[they] are forbidden to talk about” (Tan 42). When An-mei’s mother attempts to return, her grandmother scolds, “Who is this ghost? Not an honored widow. Just a number-thirty concubine. If you take your daughter she will become like you” (46). Therefore, without honor, Chinese women not only lose their personhood but also the important resource of familial ties. An-mei’s grandmother emphasizes how ghostliness finds its way into matrilineage; she warns An-mei that she may also become a shadow of a person in her mother’s proximity. In doing so, An-mei’s grandmother paradoxically furthers matrilineal ghostliness by upholding the system that demonizes her daughter. Her stance can be traced back to patriarchal society, in which “a mother may energetically support [the oppression of] all women in order that she herself or her own daughters [—in this case, granddaughters—] may thrive within its rules, relative to other women” (Ninh 128). Ultimately, the grandmother’s own distancing from monstrosity isolates her daughter.

Ergo, the first generation of Chinese American immigrants bears the wounds of their foremothers. Their ghostliness further evolves with the multiplicity of oppressions in the United States. Chinese American women are “silenced as a gender in China and further as a race in America” (Godfrey 8). When Gù Ying-ying marries a white American, her husband changes her name to “Betty St. Clair” on her immigration papers. Furthermore, he puts down the wrong birthdate—1916 instead of 1914 (Tan 104). Ying-ying’s entire heritage is dissolved for the sake of assimilation. Notably, her husband “proudly” enacts these changes, demonstrating that he has no regard for the significance of names or zodiacs in Chinese culture (Tan 104). Her marriage to a white American man is a microcosm of how Chinese immigrant women fare within America’s white-dominant structures. Ying-ying experiences voicelessness under the authority of her husband. She can only speak in “looks and silences,” sometimes frustratingly sighing, “shwobuchulai”—words cannot come out. Her daughter, Lena, witnesses Ying-ying’s husband “put words in her mouth” (Tan 106). Comparatively, Chinese American immigrant women lack power in the public sphere due to their racial and gender sidelining. Their social invisibility allows American society to project images of passivity, exoticization, and monolithism upon
them. Ying-ying’s husband regulates her identity and opinions, just as America regulates Chinese American women’s depiction, expression, and bodies. In Moms Gone Mad: Motherhood and Madness, Oppression and Resistance, Gina Wong identifies the constant overseeing of mothers as a panopticon, drawing from Michel Foucault’s theory of a figurative prison. Within the panopticon, mothers are “confined, . . . adjudicated, and punished” (Wong 8). As phantasmic presences, Chinese American mothers are also haunted by this omnipresent surveillance. For Ying-ying, the watcher is her husband; yet, he also represents the greater social compulsion to hold minority mothers to an impossible standard. Consequently, any detour from perfect, sacrificial motherhood provokes an “onslaught of guilt, shame, and self-repudiation” (Wong 8). When Ying-ying’s new baby dies, Lena observes her deterioration into a “living ghost” (Tan 113). For once, Ying-ying’s husband has “no words to put in [her] mouth” as her “failure” as a mother leaves her voice forever entombed. All in all, Chinese American women are made intangible by their monstrous histories, patriarchal docility, and racial powerlessness. These are the “unspoken terrors” surrounding Lena’s family home, devouring her mother “piece by piece, until she disappeared and became a ghost” (Tan 103).

In spite of the trauma associated with ghostliness, Chinese and Chinese American mothers view it as a necessary survival tactic for their daughters. In China, misogynistic beliefs command quiet servitude among women. In America, invisibility can sometimes be the only escape from social persecution. Either way, women’s only choices are between socially imposed monstrosity by deviating from norms or self-inflicted monstrosity by following them. In the novel, Ying-ying’s mother tells her that “a boy can run . . . because that is his nature,” but “a girl should stand still” until there is “comfort” in her own shadow (Tan 72). Essentially, while men are naturally free, women must take heed to control their impulses. Undetectability is presented as a state of safety. First-generation Chinese American women carry this knowledge into the United States, where they not only face discrimination as racial and gender minorities but also as low-income laborers. As a second-generation daughter, Waverly Jong’s mother teaches her “the art of invisible strength” from a young age, advising her to “bite back [her] tongue” when she cries. From her mother’s point of view, silence is a way of earning respect from others and, in turn, rising “above [their] circumstances” (Tan 89). Ghostliness is undertaken as a means of navigating the social roadblocks facing minority women. Shirley Hune writes that, within history, “the vast majority of Chinese American women remain unnamed and unknown” (175). Covertly, they played a crucial “economic and social role in their households” (Hune 174). However, ghostliness is still a means of operating within the system, thereby catering to gender and racial hierarchies.

As a result, long-term self-concealment drains Chinese American women of their cultural connection and selfhood. Ghostliness drives a wedge between mothers and daughters, who never have the opportunity
to fully realize each other. Ying-ying says that for years, “[she] kept [her] mouth closed so selfish desires would not fall out.” She “kept [her] true nature hidden, running along like a small shadow so nobody could catch [her]” (Tan 67). She was disciplined in her self-preservation. Yet, Ying-ying “rubbed out [her] face over years of washing away [her] pain,” showing that her monstrous inconspicuousness is also a trauma response. Eventually, she is silent for so long that “[her] daughter does not hear [her]” nor “see [her]” (Tan 67). Their estrangement is epitomized by two contrasting worlds: Lena only interacts with the palpable—“a list of things to buy, her checkbook out of balance, her ashtray sitting crooked on a straight table”—while Ying-ying is but a faint impression. Despite this detachment, Ying-ying recognizes that by clinging to ghostliness, she has introduced monstrosity into their shared matrilineage. She states, “we are lost, she and I, unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others” (Tan 67). The mother’s ghostliness is a source of intergenerational trauma for the daughter. When Jing-mei Woo is asked to recount her late mother’s life, she cries, “What can I tell them about my mother? I don’t know anything. She was my mother” (Tan 40). By losing her mother’s story, she also loses her main tie to China. Thus, without a basis of cultural and matrilineal identity, daughters come to inherit their mothers’ ghostliness. Looking at Lena, Ying-ying laments that “she is the daughter of a ghost” so “she has no chi,” which, in Chinese spiritual terms, is the energy of life (Tan 252). Tan introduces this phenomenon as the matrilineal staircase, where daughters succeed in the roles of their mothers. Nevertheless, they also “inherit the traits that imprison their mothers” (Godfrey 33). In the end, ghostliness transcends individual women to imprison their entire maternal line. It is the greatest threat to the preservation of Chinese American generational knowledge.

To enact matrilineal resistance, Tan’s daughters must withstand the dwindling spirit of ghostliness, bringing their mothers and themselves into corporeality. When Jing-mei says that she does not know anything about her mother, her aunt responds, “Your mother is in your bones!” (Tan 40). She proposes that there is an inherent source of matrilineal understanding buried within her body. Its extraction substantiates Chinese American women, but, in the process, also opens the wounds of their trauma. Tan writes that shou—filial respect—is “so deep it is in [one’s] bones” so that “the pain of flesh is nothing.” Therefore, a daughter must “peel off [her] skin, and that of [her] mother, and her mother before her” (Tan 48). It is the only way of seeing the truth about each other, breaking through the skin and flesh. There is a notion of dissipating the defensive masks that have accumulated over the years. Likewise, Lena has a vision of a girl pulling out a sword on her mother, saying, “You must die the death of a thousand cuts. It is the only way to save you” (Tan 115). She slices her mother’s body and asks, “Do you see now?” Her mother responds, “I have already experienced the worst. After this, there is no worst possible thing.” Taking her mother’s hand, she brings her back to the “other side” (Tan 115). The carnality of the moment acts in direct opposition to ghostliness. By exposing the bone, the
daughter also exposes the mother’s history of hardship, madness, and grief—her “worst” experiences. However, she also presents the possibility of hope and, more importantly, hardened perseverance. While ghostliness obstructs matrilineal affinity, corporeality, on the other hand, grants a sort of monstrous intimacy: the daughter is the mother’s injurer as well as her savior. Thus, the answer to monstrous trauma—brought forth by ghostliness—is monstrous resistance, since Chinese American matrilineages are inevitably monstrous things.

Moreover, Chinese American daughters move toward tangibility by defying silence in the matrilineage. For Ying-ying, time alone with Lena means being able to speak in Chinese, “saying things that [her husband] could not possibly imagine” (Tan 106). Lena’s presence brings to light a more embodied her, breaking through patriarchal muzzling. Still, Lena’s incomplete grasp of Chinese results in some meanings being lost. Ghostliness persists in these spaces of misinterpretation. After Ying-ying’s passing, Lena struggles to tell Ying-ying’s story to her two sisters. But, as the three of them reunite, “‘Mama, Mama,’ [they] murmur, as if she is among [them]” (Tan 287). The scene hearkens to a seance for the dead; in their ritual, they call to their mother, and in the process, substantiate her. The gap between words and meanings is closed when they finally understand what their mother had dreamed for all this time. Lena states, “Now I also see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood. After all these years, it can finally be let go” (Tan 288). Hence, she lets go of the torments of the past that haunted her mother. Wendy Ho defines the daughters’ resistance as “talk-stories,” a method of producing memory, culture, and identity within oral traditions. For Chinese Americans, talk-stories are where “a collective politics of memory and desire is negotiated that continually narrates [their] suffering and healing” (Ho 14). The perpetual entanglement of suffering and healing is a monstrous duality, but productive all the same. It is how communities redefine and archive themselves—“such an archive . . . tries to recover the fragments of the everyday marginalized subjects who intimately inhabit history, with their bodies and minds, hearts, and spirits” (Ho 16). In consequence, the traumas of ghostliness are not discarded but subsumed within talk-story resistance to educate and strengthen the next generation.

For Chinese American women, ghostliness is born from a life of submission, fortitude, and intergenerational trauma. Mothers and daughters have the power to continue that immateriality or trailblaze tangibility, however monstrous the process may be. Through carnal demonstrations of love and memory-stirring talk-stories, the women of The Joy Luck Club divulge strategies of resistance. Critically, the psychological and genealogical damage of ghostliness highlights the intersection of misogyny and racism that Chinese women experience in America. These systemic issues manifest as patriarchal households, social besmirchment, and internalized oppression. It is clear why some choose to obscure themselves and their daughters when Chinese American women’s bodies are written to be conquerable and
replaceable. By having authority over their own monstrosity, they are also able to control their corporeal texts, writing empathy, defiance, and justice for the next generation.

**Bone and Skeletons**

For Chinese American families, there are no empty closets. The most unsightly things, our skeletons, are always buried deep within. As we traverse countries, cities, and residences, the skeletons remain, hidden in our bodies. Yet, the self-preserving tactic of keeping secrets can also lead to self-destruction, with immigrants losing their sense of identity and community against capitalist demands. *Bone*, by Fae Myenne Ng, is set in San Francisco’s Chinatown, where the Leong family lives and works. Under the survive-or-perish lifestyle of low-wage laborers—despair, resentment, and skeletons begin to pile up between the mother and daughters, culminating in the devastating suicide of the middle sister, Ona. Bones are a representation of their “inside stories,” almost too monstrous to uncover in the face of an already-precarious state. However, in unearthing these heavy memories, the Leong women revitalize their connection to the Chinese American community and realize the importance of sustaining the matrilineage against social alienation.

Like *The Joy Luck Club*, *Bone* explores the theme of being haunted by trauma. Each member of the Leong family regrets their inactions surrounding Ona’s death. Leila, the oldest daughter, remarks, “We live with the ghost, the guilt.” Their collective silence further deteriorates their remaining familial relationships, as though they all “just snapped apart” (Ng 13). The lack of communication around trauma weakens genealogical ties. Nonetheless, by rooting matrilineal voicelessness in bone symbolism, I ascribe this kind of experience as particular to the toil of Chinatown, where poverty is rampant. In Chinese culture, bones are emblematic of one’s destiny, even in the afterlife. Leila recalls, “the oldtimers believe we have a heavenly weight, and that our fates can be divined by the weighing of our bones” (Ng 150). Contrarily, in America, bone imagery often has negative connotations, such as “skeletons in the closet” and being “worked to the bone.” Such sayings reflect the isolation and misery of the Leongs, who do not dare to dream of a happier fortune. When the father, Leon, fails to send Grandpa Leong’s bones back to China for burial, he believes that is when the family’s “bad luck” begins (Ng 47). The bones, like them, are stuck in America with a waning connection to China. They capture the duality of Chinatown, where hopes for a better future are met with unspeakable hardship.

In *Bone*, monstrosity bleeds into the family when Chinese American immigrants are confronted with ceaseless social stagnancy. The Leongs visit a cemetery in an effort to locate Grandpa Leong’s bones. The Chinese are all buried at the same spot: a “dead-end street,” in which “half-singed funeral papers from Chinese burning rituals [are] stuck in the bushes” (Ng
The cemetery is a metaphor for Chinatown, where, similarly, a group of Chinese immigrants gathers to endure cutoff paths and unfulfilled ambitions. In Chinese culture, funeral papers are burned to send money to the afterlife. Yet, being half-singed, the notes represent prosperity that never came to be. At the gravesite, the family struggles to find Grandpa Leong because the buried bones are constantly getting displaced by new bodies (Ng 73). This cycle establishes Chinatown as a place where you are constantly at risk of falling through the cracks and is reflected in the lived experiences of the Leongs. “Mah” (mother) and Leon’s relationship is strained by work; without money to “pass life with,” they view Chinatown as a “dead place” (33). For the immigrants, life seems to be more like death than it is different from it, with Leila observing, “It wasn’t just death that upset Mah, it was life, too” (Ng 76). The daughters are inhibited by their parents’ circumstances, generating bitterness. Nonetheless, they still feel indebted to their mother in particular, so they stay and enable matrilineal stagnancy. Nina tells Leila that she has “always been on standby for [her parents],” yet “they won’t move a bit” (Ng 31). But Leila believes that she cannot leave Chinatown, saying of Mah, “I can’t help it, I just feel like I owe her” (Ng 181). Even though their shared condition propels intimacy, it can also have dire consequences. Because Ona “felt stuck . . . in the family, in Chinatown,” it drove her to suicide (Ng 136). Consequently, monstrous tension develops between Chinese American mothers and daughters, where daughters simultaneously blame their mothers for their immobility and, out of a sense of responsibility for them, choose their own immobility. Moreover, under capitalistic notions of productivity, the matrilineage scrambles to preserve its value. The Leongs are considered a “failed family” because they have “nothing but daughters” (Ng 1). Chinese American women lacked power in society, making them particularly vulnerable to the trappings of demanding, low-wage labor. As opposed to Chinese men, “the bodies of Chinese women were rarely sent back to China for burial” (Ho 69). The treatment of their bones is emblematic of their disconnection from China and their inferiority in America. In the graveyard that is Chinatown, the Leong women are confined.

In order to sustain themselves in this draining environment, Chinese Americans feel the need to keep their skeletons in the closet and weaknesses away from prying eyes. Nevertheless, when secret-keeping starts extending to the family, the resulting solitude can disrupt and even overturn the matrilineage. Mah is always “afraid of what people inside Chinatown are saying” (Ng 109). Her daughters end up adopting this attitude. Leila knows that any bit of personal information about them is a “bone for the gossip-mongers” (Ng 1). But even she acknowledges that “Ona kept more inside than either of [them]” (Ng 109). According to Gina Wong-Wylie, under social exclusion, many Chinese American women “silenced themselves” from the shame of “poverty, . . . stigmatization, and internalized fear” (140). However, the personal repercussions of learned secret-keeping are devastating. After Ona commits suicide, Leila’s parents say she “should have said
something” even though she was raised to stay silent (Ng 23). Still, reticence persists in the family after the traumatic event. Ona becomes a “silence in [their] lives” and Mah even tries to hide the urn when she sees it (Ng 13, 124). In fearing the loss of face, they also fail to untangle their feelings about Ona and find solace in each other. They bear the worst outcomes of it alone, including matrilineal turmoil. With Ona’s death, “everything is all turned around, all backward” (Ng 13). While daughters typically inherit their mother’s trauma, Mah instead carries the “weight” of Ona’s sorrow (Ng 92). Ona’s suicide unnaturally severs the lineage, so that memories and emotions have no place to go but back. In turn, Mah allows all of her other matrilineal lines to decay: she cries over Ona for dying and Nina for leaving, and Leila feels she “doesn’t count” as the “living present daughter” (Ng 88).

We find that self-induced isolation is a catalyst for the complete disintegration of Chinese American matrilineages. In Saving Face: The Emotional Costs of the Asian Immigrant Family Myth, Angie Y. Chung acknowledges the assumption that “honest communication,” which is “prized in the ideal American family[,] is] largely absent in the Asian family” (45). Truthfully, studies show that Asian families “selectively preserve [certain] cultural values,” like face-saving, “to help them adapt to the constraints they face in their new surroundings” (Chung 47). Under the context of assimilation and survival, these cultural values become reconfigured to unforeseen consequences, such as the amassing of skeletons. Likewise, Ho reads the subtext of Bone as “the traumatic injustices in the United States that haunt the family’s intimate spaces”—hard labor, humiliation, defeat, and rejection (58). Thus, Chinese American mothers and daughters lose the cultural tools that help them process their experiences of displacement and grief.

The Leong women begin to rebuild their matrilineage by revealing their bones, that is, their most haunting memories. Ergo, they counter notions of ruthless competition and social estrangement. Upon returning to the Chinese cemetery, Leila and Leon finally find Grandpa Leong’s grave. Seeing it, Leila reflects, “Remembering the past gives power to the present. . . . Our memories can’t bring Grandpa Leong or Ona back, but they count to keep them from becoming strangers” (Ng 85). She believes that memories are the key to encouraging love, as they can maintain the most seemingly futile relationships, the ones with the dead. Therefore, their past should not be holding back their present but rather acting as nourishment for new and existing relationships. While Leon thought there were “more dead than living” during their first visit to the cemetery, Leila realizes that “if Ona were here, . . . Ona would tell us that there are more living than dead” (Ng 86). By bringing light to the living on these grounds—living people and living memories—she begins to recognize the community that is Chinatown. Not only is their family bonded over Grandpa Leong and Ona, but all the residents are united over the mourning and celebration of every person in that graveyard. Found in the bones are their shared history, sacrifices, and hopes for a better life. For instance, the other Chinese sewing ladies from Mah’s work become a great source of comfort for her. “They knew all the necessary
rituals to get through this hard time,” demonstrating the significance of shared cultural knowledge (Ng 102). They coach her to “talk,” especially of the “good things” that accompany the bad memories. Hearing this, when Mah is told, “You had a nice daughter,” she responds, “Three nice daughters” (Ng 129). Hence, by confiding in the community, she is able to reacknowledge all her matrilineal lines, joining the past with the present. For Chinese American women, the “telling and retelling” of stories allows them to “disentangle the layered meanings of their experiences” and create “collective memories” (Ho 19). They carved out supportive networks as a form of resistance and would go on to organize and unionize against the very labor issues causing their toil (Ho 73). On the other hand, Leila confronts her skeletons and defies stagnancy to build her own life. On her way out of Chinatown, she sees it no longer as a place holding her back but as a place filled with things that remind her to “look back, to remember” (Ng 191). The cemetery, the sewing ladies, and the reminiscence all prove one thing true, Mah’s words from a long time ago: “bones are sweeter than you know” (Ng 28).

With Bone, Ng showcases how cutthroat social conditions and repressive skeleton-keeping stifle Chinese American matrilineages. Cemeteries are symbols of the greater immigrant experience in Chinatowns, where lack of opportunity keeps inhabitants in a monstrous state of limbo. Under a host of burdens, matrilineal ties begin to wilt; sometimes it is a slow death as with Leila’s burgeoning detachment, and other times it is a brutal awakening like Ona’s suicide. Ng offers community and connection as forms of resistance. By letting their memories out, the Leong family comes to find that they share the same “bones” as the people around them. As a result, allyship is a fundamental element in contesting oppression. In tandem, the novel shows that, for Chinese Americans, matrilineages are rarely passive phenomena—they must be nurtured and championed by mothers and daughters to survive. Solidarity within Chinatowns, especially between women, aids survival, making matrilineal bonding a communal and ultimately liberatory objective.

**Severance: A Novel and Zombies**

For second-generation Chinese Americans, feeling disconnection is a prevalent experience. Not only are they the navigators of multiple cultures, the Western society they live in actively hampers their integration. America essentially “zombifies” immigrants: propelling them into tedious routines with little chance for mobility, draining them of vitality and ambition. As a result, second-generation children are effectively severed from their cultural heritage; they have to replicate authenticity by piecing together fragmented parts, along the lines of Frankenstein’s monster. In Severance: A Novel by Ling Ma, a fever spreads through the world, turning people into mindless and repetitive creatures. Their symptoms mirror the con-
dition of Chinese Americans, who have long faced encumbrance and dismemberment. As one of the few survivors, Candace Chen experiences the extent of brutality and submission that persisting in America demands. Her matrilineage, having once been complex and wounding, becomes the motivation she needs for liberation.

When the Shen Fever arrives from China, people are shaken by the paradigm shift it enacts in everyday life. However, for Chinese American immigrants, many are already made zombies by the pressures of succeeding in America. Candace’s parents decide to stay because of the Tiananmen Square protests, which prevent them from returning to China (Ma 176). But her mother, Ruifang, never really adapts, just as America never really has a place for her. Candace remembers “aimless, drifting afternoons” of driving with her while her father was at work, as well as wandering the city and “imagining different lives” (Ma 15, 42). Without recognition in the public sphere or at home, immigrant women feel the significant impacts of alienation after being uprooted. In order to find some sense of belonging, Ruifang would “manage [their] days” to be “constant and regulated,” a quality that Candace adopts (Ma 183). Repetition becomes ingrained within their matrilineal practices, turning them into docile bodies. Like her mother, Candace also leads an isolated life, with her salary only enough to “keep [her] head above water month to month,” where she “didn’t own property” and “didn’t have family” (Ma 13). After the pandemic hits, Candace questions, “What is the difference between the fevered and us? . . . Our days, like theirs, continue in an infinite loop” (Ma 160). For Chinese women, their presence in America is “anticipated to be temporary . . . suggesting a lack of national belonging” (Duncan and Wong 168). This non-permanence imparts stifling zombie-hood, as they are not given the opportunity to root themselves and socially or economically flourish. Moreover, “the assumption that [Chinese women] do not belong subsequently suggests that [their] children, too, cannot belong,” making oppressive subjugation an inherited affliction (Duncan and Wong 169).

Consequently, the children of first-generation Chinese immigrants experience a state of detachment, both from their cultures and their parents. Due to her efforts to assimilate, Ruifang imposes rules that make her an “antagonist” to Candace; she is always the one to “deny” and “punish” (Ma 184-5). For instance, in response to Candace’s attempts at communication, she would insist, “You’re not in Fuzhou. Say it in English” (Ma 186). When Ruifang starts to suffer from Alzheimer’s disease, she tells stories in “a garble of different languages: Mandarin, Fujianese, Chinglish” that Candace fails to grasp (Ma 181). In the same manner, she cannot understand Candace’s own “garbled Chinese”—there is a mutual disconnection resulting from their attempts to Americanize. Crucially, Ma portrays the matrilineage as a key carrier of cultural knowledge. Following her mother’s death, Candace also loses her relationship with her Chinese heritage. She only knows “encyclopedic details” about her hometown of Fujian; her comprehension is garnered from records rather than lived experiences (Ma 88). Her bids at
reproducing Chinese culture are uncannily inauthentic, much like how Frankenstein’s humanoid approaches but never captures the essence of a real person. She hosts a party where she makes shark fin soup, a Chinese delicacy, that turns out to be “sour and musty” because she uses dried fins (Ma 52). In keeping with the theme she describes as “vaguely Orientalist,” her friend brings out a mah-jongg set only for her not to know how to play (Ma 53). Her identity is akin to an heirloom recipe without the genuine ingredients, a mah-jongg set without the mastery of play: in each case, she misses the determining piece. As Jiayang Fan writes for the *New Yorker*, the “severance” Ma depicts is “the amputation of the immigrant’s past, preserved like a phantom limb whose pain is haunted with absence.”

While Shen Fever devastates the world, it grants Candace a sense of perspective, a magnification of not only Chinese American immigrant life but also local Chinese life under Western economic imperialism. As a Bible product manager, Candace is responsible for facilitating the production of the “gemstone bible,” which markets to younger girls through the inclusion of a gemstone. The workers who polish the stones, “they’ve been breathing in this dust and developing lung diseases” (Ma 24). The Shen Fever effectively brings the long-ignored conditions of Chinese laborers into American society as an airborne disease transmitted through spores. When it begins to plague Chinese factories, Candace is delegated to investigate them. In doing so, she bridges the diaspora, meeting workers who are also from Fuzhou. She reflects on her role in propagating “the emblematic text [of] Christian Euro-American ideologies” while simultaneously undercutting “the value of [their] labor year after year” (Ma 83-4). In Fuzhou, she is able to see the consequences of America’s zombification of Chinese workers more clearly. The experience also offers a moment of connection. Candace does not know the meaning of her Chinese name, and the director of the factory tells her it draws from an ancient Chinese poem. Later on, she receives an email from him containing the poem. Titled “Thoughts in Night Quiet” by Li Bai, it is about reminiscing about one’s “old home” from a faraway land (Ma 92). With newfound knowledge from her visit, Candace is able to ruminate upon the feeling of the “phantom limb”—the unaddressed pain of dismemberment and the yearning for a home she never knew.

As one of the last living people escaping New York, Candace joins a survivor’s group. Headed by a devout man named Bob, the group is a microcosm of how brutal and confining the American hivemind can be. Bob has the “religious conviction” that the group survives because they are “chosen,” revealing the Western exceptionalist mindset that persists at the expense of others’ lives (Ma 32). They break Candace’s phone after she joins, cutting off the last piece of her past, just as America buries immigrants’ history. Upon entering a family home, the group encounters a young fevered girl. Bob forces Candace to shoot the child. Although she initially refuses, with enough prodding, she shoots until “[she] lost track of what [she] was shooting” (Ma 71). This encounter demonstrates how immigrants are hardened and weaponized until they cannot even recognize the humanity in
those like them anymore. At some point in the killing, Candace finds herself “past the death barrier and into someplace else,” though she doesn’t know where (Ma 72). Harkening back to Cohen’s “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” the monster is born at such a “crossroads,” beyond death and limitation (4). Although the fevered child is originally seen as a mindless zombie by the group, Candace’s merciless actions throw her into monster territory, for she realizes how easy it is to be made monstrous and silenced by group-think. Cohen notes that often “the exaggeration of cultural difference” is turned into “monstrous aberration,” making Candace, the only Chinese American among the members, closer to staring down the barrel than she would like to believe (7). Not long after, the group discovers she is pregnant, with what she believes to be a girl, “Luna” (Ma 226). They imprison her to monitor and control her pregnancy, their surveillance and dominance penetrating Candace’s matrilineage. However, her venture into monstrosity breaks the illusion of security; it makes her aware.

Inspired by her late mother and her own motherhood, Candace embraces monstrous resistance to reclaim her matrilineage. After being trapped by the group, she has continuous visions of her mother. In these visions, Ruifang appears in the clothes she was buried in, an undead apparition of Candace’s most traumatic memory. She tells Candace to “get herself together” and “figure this out” (Ma 223). Notably, she speaks “perfect English” so Candace is able to understand her (Ma 269). The mother and daughter share hope and meaning in this state of liminality, unencumbered by society, language, or even death. Defying categorization, this monstrous space elicits communication and memory, both elements of resistance in The Joy Luck Club and Bone. “Escape now,” Ruifang demands, the matrilineage taking action to preserve itself (Ma 244). Candace listens, leaving the group in the middle of the night. She reflects on her previously aimless self, saying, “I am tired of it, walking and driving and searching for something that will never settle me.” She decides she wants “something different for Luna, the child of two rootless people”; she wants them to “stay in one place” (Ma 287). Thus, Candace also attains cultural autonomy; she rejects the purposeless lifestyle of cycling through the motions, as well as the cultural dismemberment of Chinese Americans through transplantation and displacement. With knowledge of her roots, her daughter will have a foundation for reconstructing her history and identity. As Patti Sinclair writes, “Our children offer us the sacred opportunity to overcome our deepest fears, challenging our life issues, our fallibility, and our humanness” (qtd. in Wong-Wylie 144-45). Matrilineal resistance gives Candace the drive to confront zombification, something that has haunted her family and all Chinese Americans.

All in all, matrilineal knowledge grounds individuals like Candace who feel untethered and undead in the United States. Mothers and daughters attain a deeper bond within monstrous spaces, enabling the radical reimagining of immigrant identity against American hiveminds. These spaces of differance have extra significance for Chinese Americans, who
have long been restricted by the notion of “physical, ideological, and geopolitical borders between nation-states” (Duncan and Wong 168). When these socially constructed borders are dismantled by transnational and generational knowledge transmission, so can second-generation Chinese Americans begin to reattach the mutilated segments of their cultural body.

Conclusion

Under the context of monstrous matrilineage, Chinese American intergenerational narratives like The Joy Luck Club, Bone, and Severance: A Novel interrogate the detachment, unspoken trauma, and immobility of immigrant mothers and daughters. Yet, the novels also bring to light their grasps for connection, community, and autonomy that aim to break destructive cycles. Crucially, the path toward healing must be paved by mothers and daughters in union, who embrace each others’ monstrosities by realizing their own. This process is seldom harmonious or linear in its encounters with anger and shame. As Erin Khuê Ninh points out, Asian American “filial angst” is often cast as a “cultural and interpersonal” conflict when it is also deeply “political and historical” (3). Realizing the expansive potential of matrilineal resistance can allow its greater application in transformative movements. (Talk-)stories of monstrous matrilineage “demand personal and institutional accountability . . . in their traumatized narration of memories that cannot be legitimated, . . . thought, spoken, or acted upon, in the dominant discourses and power distributions in a society” (Ho 20). Most importantly, this form of radical resistance is only accessible to marginalized communities as capitalization on being coded as monsters in America.

Ghosts, skeletons, and zombies—ugly, frightening entities—serve as signifiers of Chinese American women’s nonconformist, hard-to-swallow resistance. In terms of further research, the study of monstrous matrilineage provokes questions into what it could entail for “matroreform.” Wong-Wylie defines “matroreform” as “an act, desire, and process of claiming motherhood power; it is a progressive movement to mothering that attempts to institute new mothering rules and practices apart from one’s motherline” (135). Certainly, the introduction of monstrosity challenges the institution of motherhood, lending credence to the complicated lived experiences and unconventional rearing tactics of minority mothers.
Works Cited


