

## Interethnic Conflicts and Dialogues: Towards the Asian American Sisterhood in Lisa See's *China Dolls*

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Lisa See's *China Dolls* presents the ethnic and gender experience of Asian American female dancers in the early twentieth century. Her story reflects their marginalized position in terms of race, sex, and class. Her narrative of sisterhood is an example of cross-ethnic solidarity that recognizes the differences between women. Similar experiences with racial discrimination and patriarchal family have formed the basis for their empathy. Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory speaks to the marginalized position of those characters, whose positions were beyond the discourses of either white feminism or Asian male scholars' criticism of racism. As See draws public attention to these underrepresented ethnic groups, she establishes their active agency by presenting the maturity of their relationship. This paper reveals that Asian American sisterhood writing could transcend the limitations of male-dominated Asian American narratives, challenging the established feminist discussions that ignored the experience of ethnic minorities.

*Keywords:* Lisa See, *China Dolls*, sisterhood, Asian American literature, diasporic studies

Asian American writer Lisa See ( 鄭麗莎 ) was born in Paris and spent her childhood with her Chinese American family in Los Angeles Chinatown. Her great grandfather Kuang Si ( 鄺泗 ) was a Cantonese businessman, whose story of immigration to the United States inspired See's first autobiographical novel *On Gold Mountain* (1995). From 1995, See started to write a series of China-themed novels, ranging from detective stories to love stories. In particular, See became increasingly interested in portraying the female bond, exemplified by her most known novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005) that focused on the sisterhood between two Chinese women in a remote southern Chinese village in Hunan province. This novel marked a watershed in See's historical writing that gradually shifted to an exploration of female relationship of Chinese or Chinese American women.

In a 2017 interview, See attributed her interest in female friendship to the marginal and repressed role of women in

history: "They are part of history for every step of the way, and yet we rarely hear their stories" (Chi, 2018, p. 70). She hoped to reveal this hidden part of "her-story" to readers rather than a male-dominated perspective of "his-tory." For her, stories of Chinese American women represent the unique experience of a group, who would often be ignored not just in the male-centered discourse of Asian American history, but also in the white feminist scholarship of women's history. Her interest in Chinese American history, especially that of Chinese women, contributed to a series of novels such as *Shanghai Girls* (2009), *The Dreams of Joy* (2011), and *China Dolls* (2014).

*China Dolls* presents the story of three Asian American female dancers from the 1930s to the 1980s, but a major part of the story is set between 1938 and 1948. This novel not only shows See's portrayal of sisterly bond between Asian American women, but also traces the ignored history of Chinese nightclubs. The story is told against a background of the late 1930s when the US is still in the lingering vestiges of the Great Depression. In 1939, The Golden Gate International Exposition is opened on Treasure Island in San Francisco, originally planned as a celebration of the newly completed Golden Gate and San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridges. The exhibition is the home to expositions and entertainment

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shows and sweeps away the gloomy economic atmosphere, offering an auspicious chance for Chinese businessmen to launch a “Shine for 1939” campaign (Dong, 2014, p. 7). The Forbidden City is the first Chinese American nightclub outside of Chinatown. The owner of that club, Charlie Low, is a pioneering spirit of Chinese American entertainment, and shapes the history of nightclubs in the US. Chinese nightclubs offer a platform for those women to demonstrate their amazing talent for performance and to find a way to squeeze into the limelight of the white-dominated American entertainment industry.

The sisterhood among the three characters Grace, Helen and Ruby is central to the novel. They are intimate friends, co-dancers, and competitors, who work together in the nightclubs Forbidden City and *China Dolls*. Their relationship is a complex mixture of friendship and sisterhood, mirroring the tension between individuals caused by career competition or unrequited response to one’s marginalized position in the tripartite relationship. Grace and Helen are both second-generation Chinese Americans and Ruby is a second-generation Japanese American (*nisei*). This story also reflects the conflict between Chinese and Japanese Americans when the US braced for the Japanese threat in WWII and incarcerated the Japanese community. By dramatizing their efforts to become well-known dancers, See shows readers a special group of Asian Americans that have received less attention both from scholars and the younger-generation Asian Americans. With their ethnic minority and working-class identity, Asian American dancers have been marginalized from both the mainstream white American and traditional Asian American communities. Female dancers are under pressure from their own community, as their work in these “immoral houses” is considered an “exploitative” image of women (Dong, 2014, p. 9).

Chinese scholars invested their interest in exploring representation of foot-bound Chinese women, traditional Chinese culture, and Chinese history in See’s novels. For example, (Minfang) Pan (2018) adopts Butler’s gender theory to reveal the sexual and linguistic implications of foot binding in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. Her research entertains the idea of subject-object relationship and highlights foot-bound women’s trauma. Many Chinese scholars also discuss representation of classic Chinese culture in See’s novels such as *Peony in Love*. (Zhiming) Pan (2018) argues that See differs from other Asian American writers for her commitment to highlighting Chinese culture in novels. For Pan, See demonstrates a real attachment to Chinese culture and actively

introduce Chinese culture to readers. In contrast with the scholarship on See’s earlier works, only a few scholars have discussed the characterization or theme in *China Dolls*. Dong (2018) explores how trauma studies would illuminate the relationship between these Asian American women. Li (2018) focuses on the symbolic meaning of the nightclub, considering it a space of intercultural exchange and a locus of seeing the clash between different races. Apart from a lack of discussion of the history of those Chinese nightclubs, scholars have not addressed the reason for these characters’ marginalized position. My focus on intersectionality theory would contribute to understanding how racial, gender, and class identities would be interwoven with an unequal treatment of these women.

Kimberlé Crenshaw proposes the notion of “intersectionality” to challenge how privileged group’s voices could overshadow that of others. Crenshaw uses the example of white feminism to reveal the repressed voices of black women. A white feminist perspective would presuppose the discrimination against a woman in relation to her gender status. However, this one-axis interpretation would ignore how a black woman may suffer from both sexual and racial discrimination. In so doing, Crenshaw believes in the political value of intersectionality of challenging a structure that treats struggles as “singular issues” and presents “a descriptive and normative view of society” (1989, p. 167). Intersectional studies could traverse the single-axis boundary built on racial or gender categories, revealing the “absence of concepts adequate to the lived experiences of simultaneous oppression(s)” (Carastathis, 2016, p. 118). I find intersectionality a useful theory to illuminate the racial, gender, and class experiences of Asian American women. For example, Asian American men’s anti-racial voices often overshadow their female counterparts’ struggle to resist patriarchal oppression within their own community. Those working-class female dancers in *China Dolls* would also find it hard to find empathetic voices from their white female counterparts. In Lisa Lowe’s words, these Asian American women’s experiences could not be explained in feminist or Marxist discourse, but shows a “dialectical sublation of those earlier models of political subjectivity” (1996, pp. 163–164). I would draw on Crenshaw’s intersectionality theory to explore how See displays the powerful effect of Asian American sisterhood, focusing on how race, gender, and class would all shape the unprotected and marginalized status quo of these women.

This article examines the portrayal of these Asian American

dancers, especially condemned by the deep-rooted ignorance and prejudice within their own community. I define this representation as an example of intersectionality, regarding how their experiences with oppression were subjected to sexual and racial treatment in a white-dominated United States. See's representation of Asian American sisterhood challenges the white feminist dominated discussion of sisterhood. Non-western scholars also targeted the so-called sisterhood in a white feminist discourse, rejecting being excluded from this feminist discussion. Mohanty (2003) astutely contests Robin Morgan's argument that calls for a universal sisterhood based on women's shared status as the victim of androcentrism. For Mohanty, Morgan's problem lies in her inability to form a political unity that could consider the "material and ideological power differences" between First and Third World Women and acknowledge the "agency" of women (2003, p. 116). This article follows Mohanty's criticism and specifies the historical and cultural details of Asian American women's lives. To be more race-specific and class-focused, this article shows that See's novel presents the value of female solidarity in a dynamic political struggle against patriarchal power in both the patriarchal Asian American community and middle-class white American society. This struggle could be repressed and compromised by the patriarchal authority or the class and racial differences between women. However, See shows that the potential of Asian American sisterhood has its own resilience in rejecting being viewed as the weak or racially and economically inferior, and actively defines its own Asian American identity. It is through such a continuous struggle rather than a static status that See presents the value of sisterhood as an ongoing process rather than a political end. Given such a motif of feminist struggle, See's *China Dolls* challenges the established cultural nationalist or mainstream representation of Asian American women, as she presents a confident image of these Asian American dancers, who distinguish themselves from the stereotyped images of Asian American women, by their exaggerated appropriation of racial features, bold defiance of gender norms, sexual advances and being resilient characters with charismatic confidence.

### **An Ugly Duckling or a Beautiful Swan: The Racist Treatment of Asian American Women**

*China Dolls* shows a beautiful transformation of these Asian American women, from either an inexperienced dancer such as Grace or a woman who is new to dance (Helen), into

the most successful Asian American dancers in the country. In particular, they differ from each other in terms of class, racial and regional backgrounds. Grace is born in Plain City, a small town in Ohio, where her family are the only Chinese residents, and her father owns a small laundry. Grace is taught to dance from childhood and hopes to become a great dancer following the examples of Eleanor Powell, and Chinese dancers, Dorothy Toy and Paul Wing. Unlike Grace's upbringing, Helen comes from an influential Chinese family in San Francisco where her father runs a national business offering supplies to laundries. Helen is brought up in a traditional Chinese culture and required to follow the idea of filial piety or to conform to women's virtue of domesticity and submissiveness. Ruby is different from both her friends, as she is brought up in Hawaii as a Japanese American and is good at singing and dance. A discussion of race or class would not suffice to explain the diverse or even contrasting lives between these women. Considering the difference between Chinese and Japanese Americans, See's story brings forth how these Asian women would be affected by different racial, cultural, and class backgrounds. However, her description does not undermine the discourse of Asian American solidarity, but unravels the complex living patterns within a unitary racial discourse of Asian Americans. In particular, they all share a memory of being racially treated as the Oriental Other.

The childhood experiences of these protagonists show the price of being an Asian American marginalized from the mainstream American society. In particular, the hyphen between Asian and American is ignored because people would consider them as Asians rather than Americans. For both Grace and Helen, their childhood is a time of loneliness, as Grace feels alienated from her white classmates and Helen suffers from domestic surveillance so that she could not freely make friends on her own. Grace's experience of being a Chinese American student demonstrates the otherness, despite her resistance to racial prejudice. In Grace's school, she meets the "evil triplets" that refers to three Finnish Girls—Velma, who used to be Grace's friend, Ilsa, and Maude. Those three girls would alienate Grace, bully her, and denigrate her racial features. For them, Grace is not Christian enough although she "was baptized in the same church as they were" (See, 2014, p. 56). These girls would chant: "Ching chong Chinaman sitting on the fence, trying to make a dollar out of fifty cents" (See, 2014, p. 56). The racist jingle reveals a stereotype of Chinese Americans: timid, cringey, and greedy. That impression is perpetuated in the racist descriptions of nineteenth-century Chinese laborers in the US. Grace's school life provokes

a surprising fact that those non-native Finnish Americans could taunt and racially abuse their Chinese peers in a school. Although both groups are the ethnic minorities, the Finnish Americans apparently enjoy a privileged status of being white and feel entitled to satirize and exclude those non-white ethnic Americans. This saliently presents the marginalized status of Chinese as “non-white” Other, that would not be racially and culturally assimilable enough for the white American society. Even if the Chinese people choose the same religion and education, their race becomes the visible mark to separate them from the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant society. For Grace, she is neither old nor mature enough to understand all the complicacy within her racial background.

Grace’s later working experience reveals how American identity was constructed based on “the socio-political and economic circumstance of the period” (Chae, 2007, p. 4). In 1939, the Golden State International Exposition is open for visitors, a great chance for people looking for a job. However, her interview turns out to be a frustrating example of her unrecognized American identity. She faces an embarrassing position as a Chinese American. In the interview, Grace is dismissed based on a paradoxical reason that she is Chinese and not Chinese enough: “With all the troubles in China, it wouldn’t be right” (See, 2014, p. 8) and “You’ve got to stop talking all perfect. You need to do the ching-chong thing” (See, 2014, p. 10). These two reasons are just racist excuses to stop Grace from getting her job. The so-called troubles reveal a more complicated relationship between the Asian identity, racial figurations of Asian immigrants, and the immigration policy of the United States. In 1939, China was in the third year of its war with Japan. The US issued the Equality National Act of 1934 that still retained the exclusion and alienation of Chinese immigrants, and would not abolish that until 1943, when the government issued the Chinese Exclusion Repeal Act. Lowe astutely points out that the orientalism “displaced U.S. expansionist interests in Asia onto racialized figurations of Asian workers within the national space” (1996, p. 5). His observation illuminates how those Asian Americans were cused between Asian cultures and the United States. Their American identities were not protected by laws but instead conditioned or inflicted by immigration policies based on racist treatment of ethnic groups. The immigration policies informed the mainstream public imagination of Chinese Americans as unassimilated foreigners. That was a pointer to the fact that Grace’s instinctive response, declaring her American identity, is ignored, and dismissed in the interview. Her embarrassing interview reflects the alienating status quo

of Chinese Americans.

If Grace’s experience reflects the conundrum of an ethnic woman’s racial status, the story of *China Dolls* shows the complexity of an unfair environment facing Asian American women. See presents the racially and sexually marginalized status of those Asian American women. While See describes the different families, she proves how critical an intersectional perspective would take its role in understanding these women’s lives. For Asian families, dance is not a good option. Asian parents would forbid their daughters from being part of show business, dismissing it as the career of “no-no girls.” Even for former Asian dancers such as Stanley Toy, it is better to be “professionals” rather than showing their thighs in public (Robbins, 2010, p. 92). These Asian female dancers would also become prone to the eroticized and racialized imagination of a Western male audience. When they are performing a seemingly exotic Chinese dance, they look like “delicate and breakable” China Dolls (See, 2014, p. 68). Additionally, white American male customers are condescendingly obsessed with those female dancers, treating them as both inferior China dolls and exotic sexy women. Those white men enjoy the pleasure of exploiting these women’s sexual charm and of abusing their physical traits. Asian American performers are consigned to an extremely oppressed status.

Through the presentation of their experience of racial discrimination, See foregrounds the role of sisterhood in mutual empathy and recognition of their marginalized position. In particular, the collective experience of these women sets them as a group sharing their anti-racist position. Ruby’s brother’s death in the wake of the Pearl Harbor attack forces them to face the war and their precarious position in the anti-Japanese movement. See sees this occasion a chance for her characters to address each other’s own trauma. In a mixture of monologue and dialogue, each character focuses on her own repressed memories. In this closed conversation that happens in a small room, the women’s voices have a dominant role in narrating their own secrets. In so doing, their personal trauma is linked with the history of war, as well as the emotional experience of each other. Helen reveals her unfortunate past of seeing the massacre of her in-law’s family by Japanese soldiers in China. Ruby admits the miserable loss of her brother Hideo, who is killed by the US army on a baseless suspicion of espionage. This conversation gives an outlet for the emotions and desires of women that have long been repressed from expression in either their daily lives or the male-dominated immigrant narratives of alienation or seclusion. Asian American women’s gender experience

is normally subdued or marginalized as a foil for a full representation of Asian American men's racial and sexual experience. However, See foregrounds how problematic the androcentric perspective is through this exchange of secrets between women.

See's story suggests how to establish solidarity across people of ethnic differences. Essentially, Asian American women empathize with their racial, cultural, economic, and regional differences. This acceptance of difference does not undermine the solidarity of Asian Americans but unites them as a group based on their varied experiences of oppression. Instead of generalizing their experiences of racial discrimination, each one's experience of racial discrimination constitutes the context of how Asian Americans were marginalized in different circumstances. Lowe argues, "these differences represent greater opportunity to affiliate with other groups whose cohesions may be based on other valences of oppression rather than identity" (1996, p. 74). In other words, those women are able to achieve a more inclusive understanding of each other and to find a common aim in their lives. Solidarity based on identity could be fragile as it is fluid, unsteady, and culturally self-centered. By recognizing the racial differences, Asian American sisterhood could draw on concrete examples of racial discrimination rather than abstract identity discussions, transforming their traumatic experience into active anti-racist arguments. Helen's trauma as a wife in the war would strike such a strong emotional response from Ruby and Grace, who both suffer from the loss or alienation of family. The example of their talk demonstrates the essence of fostering sisterhood based on their consistent struggle against racial discrimination. As they have been used to belittlement as ugly ducklings in their childhood, the sisterhood between them contributes to their transformation into beautiful swans in their careers and lives.

### **Ignored Daughters and Interracial Lovers: Asian American Daughters' Family and Marriage**

The father-daughter conflict is a tricky challenge facing these Asian American women. In each protagonist's family, the father oversees the social life of his daughters, ignores their needs, and even abuses this relationship. For example, Grace suffers from her father's physical violence. That traumatic experience leads to Grace's own fear of being hurt again, resulting in her daunted reaction when dealing with any conflict with her partner Joe. For these daughters, fathers

are traditional, strict, and overwhelmingly oppressive. Such a typical impression represents the established authority of Asian fathers in the family and community. It also reveals the challenging fact that fathers would be the first to repress their daughters' desire for a new life. See shows how the interracial marriage of daughters would bring an awkward challenge to the authority of traditional fathers. She employs such an unorthodox interracial love to challenge the traditional ethics or patriarchal power in the Asian American community.

See presents the complicacy of the generational conflict by focusing on the cultural and class differences between each woman. For example, Grace and Helen come from Chinese families, but Grace is born into an isolated Chinese family in a small town where she could see no other Asians. She has no knowledge of either Chinese culture or the history of Chinese immigrants like Helen. Helen is born into a traditional Chinese family, where her parents require her to follow the rule of "filial piety." She feels her own life monitored by her parents,

I wasn't allowed to take dance classes, as you know. My brothers and I could speak only Chinese at home. I wasn't permitted to play on the street or in the park. I've never had a girl friend. I've never even had a girl from school come to my house (See, 2014, p. 32).

If the difference between Grace and Helen shows the complex cultural identification within the Chinese community, Ruby's story reveals how family education is based on cultural tradition and nationalist passion. Ruby's parents are typical homesick *issei*. They strictly follow traditional Japanese cultural norms and take pride in their emperor and his imperialist plan. They force Ruby to accept the whole set of their values, despite her strong resistance. Those racial or cultural differences pose a challenge to sisterhood between Asian American women.

For See, differences pale in comparison to their shared experience of challenging patriarchal authority and their consistent struggle for an independent American life. They are also similarly positioned at "the cultural, racial, and political boundaries of the nation" (Lowe, 1996, p. 162). See uses a first-person narrative perspective and each heroine takes her turn to tell her story in one chapter. Using such a narrative perspective not only presents a full picture of the story from different angles, but also reinforces the readers' impression that these women are involved in the same event and their fortunes are deeply related to each other. In so doing, See connects the experience of each character by contextualizing their shared family experience and fight against patriarchs. It works like a multi-angle camera to show their marginal

position that leads to their fight for an American life. Such a narrative perspective also foregrounds women's own voice, presenting a female's perspective on her position within an Asian family, or revealing the tension between Asian American women and the mainstream American society.

Through the examples of father-daughter conflicts, See reveals how daughters disobey cultural norms and desire to get rid of their family's marginalized status. Unlike their daughters, the first-generation Asian fathers adopt a conservative position by withdrawing from the white American society. They would choose to preserve their tradition and refuse to assimilate into the US. For example, Helen's father Fong and Ruby's parents refuse to become naturalized as US citizens. For them, their life as immigrants in the United States is temporary while their roots are in Asia. Racial discrimination segregates them from the mainstream society. Consequently, Asian fathers choose to stay within their own closed community, to counterbalance the hostile social environment and relocate their homesickness onto preservation of the Asian tradition in families. For example, Ruby's parents would teach her the Japanese language and how to be a proper Japanese girl, following their gender norms. However, Ruby refuses her parents' idea and challenges their blind support of Japan's role in the Second World War. Her mother calls her "an ungrateful daughter," while Ruby responds, "I am not ungrateful or unpatriotic. ... I love America, and I believe in peace" (See, 2014, pp. 80-81). Her position reflects an independent and rebellious spirit in Ruby, who refuses to be indoctrinated with her parents' nationalist teachings. Her desire to lead an American life also undermines her parents' effort to pass on their Japanese culture to the daughter. Ruby's rejection of a patriarchal Japanese tradition is firmly shown again when the US government's released Japanese people from incarceration. By that time, Ruby has lost her brothers in the war, one killed at sea by the US army and the other died in the service of the US. Given that tragic result, Ruby's parents request her to join them in returning to Japan. The chasm between Ruby and her parents leads to different choices, as she stays in the US and her parents leave for Japan. Her choice suggests a complicated result. It is an autonomous decision of the Asian daughter who defies her own patriarchal family. It is also a challenge to the nationalist or even imperialist fantasy held by the issei Japanese. More importantly, Ruby's story conveys the role of Asian American women in transcending a male-dominated narrative of diaspora, demonstrating a feminist sensibility based on her own racial and cultural choices.

Critics are concerned with a simplified image of Asian American racial and class experience through a stereotypical portrayal of the generational gap. For example, Chae argues that Asian American multicultural writing decontextualizes the political and economic circumstances by focusing on other issues such as "generational gaps" (2007, p. 4). Similarly, Lowe opines that a reductive representation of cultural politics through intergenerational gaps would "displace social differences into a privatized familial opposition" (1996, p. 63). Indeed, the diverse cultural and racialized experiences of Asian Americans could not be fully represented through generational conflicts. Intergenerational conflict writing could produce an essentialized understanding of the Asian American family and ignore a wider racial, cultural, and class difference struggle beyond the story of family conflicts.

However, See's story of father-daughter conflict considers the various differences within each heroine's family, which foreshadows the formation of their sisterhood. Especially, the loss of family support is replaced by a strong female bond in the face of patriarchal oppression. The sisterhood has experienced a strong tension between patriarchal fathers and freedom-craving daughters. However, See's story suggests the complicated reasons for the conflicts in each family. Ruby struggles against her family's traditional Japanese education, rejecting the worst part of their imperialist ideas. Grace runs away from her abusive father and refuses to live in a working-class Chinese American family of patriarchal authority, economic failure, and racial marginalization. Helen's story reveals the change of an obedient Chinese daughter in a traditional middle-class Chinese family. As she loses her Chinese husband in the war, she becomes an unwelcome daughter in her own family and community, a pariah that would bring disgrace and bad luck. However, she develops the idea of resisting the gender bias and leaves her family. This change is explicitly brought about by her relationship with Grace and Ruby. Helen tells Grace, "That day, Grace, when you asked me to go upstairs with you into the Forbidden City, I went because I had nothing to lose. You rescued me from decades as a proper Chinese widow" (See, 2014, p. 184). The hope of new friendship rescues Helen from her suffocated life of being belittled in her family and alienated from her community. As a non-native Chinese American stranger, Grand actually shares much more in common with Helen in terms of their racial and sexual status. While See shows their shared identity of undervalued daughter at home, she presents the complex class, cultural and racial differences between Asian American women. These differences are presented in a

gender-specific story of family oppression. Each character's story reflects their own memory of dependence and subjection, which also contributes to the mutual understanding between these daughters. See shows the potential for them to realize their similarities beyond differences. In so doing, these women are able to cross the gender boundary between home and workplace and change from dependent daughters to independent working women, which marks their agency in pursuing their own careers.

See also reveals another question of interracial love by considering the context that US laws have further marginalized Asian American immigrants. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was launched to limit the immigration of Chinese people, which "barred Chinese laborers from entering the United States" but exempted "merchants, government officials, students, teachers" (Waters, 2014, p. 42). At that time, most of the state governments in the US issued their own laws against marriages between white people and other races. An American citizen would lose their citizenship if they breached the law. Consequently, the US immigration and marriage laws manipulated the identities of Asian American citizens through the racial and legislative categorization of white/non-white and citizen/non-citizen. Chinese men would be forced to find their partners in China or could not get married. From 1882 to 1943, Chinese women formed only a small number of the total population in the US. However, Asian American women's issues should not be ignored in Asian American and US history.

The interracial marriages in *China Dolls* present the daughters' challenge to marriage norms in the Asian American community, as well as an active choice of gaining their autonomy in a relationship. By presenting the interracial relationship, See addresses issues ignored in Asian American marriages. In a story of interracial love, an Asian woman could become "a foil" to represent the "virility and attractiveness" of the white male (Kim, 1982, p. 17). Asian women could easily be portrayed as the exotic object of white men's sexual fantasy and cultural fetishism. See uses the example of interracial marriages to contest the stereotypical image of Asian women. It is not by coincidence that both Grace and Ruby have fallen in love with a white partner. Compared with their parents, their interracial relationship or marriage challenges the patriarchal social norms in the Asian American community and the racist restrictions of the US marriage laws. Their choice also contrasts with that of their parents, representing a gap between the parents' marriage norms and daughters' emerging desire for a new marriage

and family life. For example, Grace's father could not find a wife in the US, because of anti-Chinese immigration policies and anti-miscegenation marriage laws. With the help of a missionary in the YWCA, Grace's parents get married and become the only Chinese family in a white-populated town. Ruby's parents are first-generation immigrants in the US who have limited contact with white society. Unlike their parents, Asian American daughters actively engage with white males and would even express their feelings for them. Their choices demonstrate a strong racial awareness of being American people, and a choice of assimilating into the United States through an interracial relationship and marriage.

The interracial relationship or marriage reflects a complex process of cultural inheritance and transmission. Lowe argues that the making of Asian American culture is "messier," because the vertical transmission from one generation to another may consist of practices "partly inherited" or "partly invented" (1991, p. 27). In the example of choosing a boyfriend/husband, Asian daughters may not inherit the traditional value of their parents or may partly accept, partly adopt their own marriage practice. Ruby's choice of partners betrays a traditional Japanese idea, and entirely follows her own identification with white US culture. Her first boyfriend Joe is a white male student at the University of California, Berkeley. The racial and class differences do not prevent them from having a romantic relationship. Joe even plans to marry Ruby, although their marriage is suspended because of the anti-interracial law. For Ruby, her attachment to Joe involves a concrete idea of being an American: "Joe is so American. ... He's the *most* American person I've ever met. If I marry him, won't that prove I'm American too?" (See, *China Dolls*, 2014, p. 193) Ruby's situation is precarious when Japanese Americans undergo suspicion and alienation from the mainstream society. Her desire to get married is not only an emotional response, but also a strategic maneuver to get her American citizenship. Regardless of how sincere their relationship is, her choice of Joe counters the Japanese family tradition, reflecting her ambition to merge into mainstream American society through intermarriage.

If Ruby's case reflects a rejection of marriage norms, Helen's compromised marriage with Eddie is a mixture of both inheritance of and rebellion against Chinese marriage norms. Her marriage is an ad-hoc choice to save her from the misgivings of being jilted by Tim, who makes her pregnant. At first, Helen thinks Tim will offer her solace or a hope of re-establishing a family. However, this interracial relationship does not save Helen from her painful past but consigns her to

an even more embarrassing status. She thinks that the white partner is nothing but someone “not taking responsibility” (See, 2014, p. 142). To save her family’s face, Eddie chooses to marry Helen and be the stepfather of Tim’s boy, Tommy. This marriage not only saves her from being deserted by her family, but also follows her father’s expectation of marrying a Chinese husband. However, this marriage would contradict traditional Chinese norms. Eddie is a gay dancer that makes it problematic for the family to truly accept him. Father Fong’s contempt for his son-in-law exactly reflects the heterosexual Chinese value against homosexuality and an elitist bias against show business. Traditional Chinese families would deem performance as an indecent job. Fong’s later willingness to accept Eddie as part of his family reveals a post-war change in the family relationship. Eddie returns from his wartime service and becomes both physically and mentally wounded. However, for the big family, this son-in-law is much better than their daughter, who has been “a widowed daughter, or a divorced daughter” (See, 2014, p. 337). The Fong family decides to take in Eddie as a family member rather than Helen. Helen has been marginalized in a patriarchal family because of her former interracial relationship. For her parents, her interracial relationship with Tim and her son out of wedlock bring disgrace to the family. Helen has lost her status in the family because of that interracial relationship and premarital pregnancy. Paradoxically, her effort to conform to patriarchal norms by marrying Eddie results in her abjection. Eddie is considered as a valued son-in-law who conforms to her parents’ need for him to live with them. In so doing, Helen’s reproductive role and caring responsibility for the family have both been terminated. In this situation, Helen’s choice of leaving her own family and husband to live with her son reflects her rebellion against repressive patriarchal family life, which takes the form of a big family living in the Chinese compound.

The father-daughter conflict and interracial relationship reflect Asian American women’s struggle for their own rights and desires. Through these conflicts, See also reveals how political ideology, class difference and cultural background impacted the Asian American daughters’ attitude towards cultural tradition. By leaving the family, Asian American daughters refuse to follow an established path set by their parents to cultural convention and social marginalization. Their choice of white partners is an explicit decision to divert from their parents’ marriage norms. Their active advance in the relationship also counters the sexual and racial stereotypes that construe them as inactive and passive. In the face of

these racial and sexual discrimination, they gradually come to realize the importance of sisterhood in each other’s lives. The next part shows how these Asian American women reinforce their sisterhood despite challenges and differences, and its value to the understanding of sisterhood.

### **From China Dolls to Swing Sisters: A Feminist Bildungsroman of Asian American Sisterhood**

China Dolls is the name of a Chinese nightclub in New York and a nickname for these Asian American female dancers. The meaning of China Dolls, according to Asian performer Mary Mammon, refers to them as “so cute, so dainty” that they seem to “break” if people touch them (Dong, 2014, p. 119). This name not only shows how adorably charismatic these dancers present themselves, but also how easily they are subjected to racial discrimination and sexual objectification. Their unique status quo is inflicted by different forms of discrimination, which has rarely received attention from the anti-racist or anti-sexist struggles. For example, Asian entertainers have a history of racist treatment and low economic status. In the nineteenth-century US, Asian theatre performers were employed on the stage not for their talent but based on the assumption of “their racial and culture differences” (Lee, 2015, p. 3). Similarly, Asian American dancers were also characterized as exotic dolls to stir the curiosity of the white American audience. These female dancers had a lower social class rank because of their racial and sexual status. In turns, their racial and sexual experiences were also inexplicably related to their class backgrounds. The image of China Dolls embodied their marginalized racial, sexual and class status.

While See focuses on the sisterhood between Asian American women, the story reflects their change from China Dolls to Swing Sisters. This change proves how their experience of racial discrimination are shaped by their gender, and of gender discrimination shaped by their race. Sisterhood is a pointer for readers to understand what Crenshaw terms the “oppositional politics of mainstream feminism and antiracism” in the lives of these Asian American women (1991, pp. 1467–1468). Swing Sisters is the name of their new dance group on Broadway, which represents their fame and accomplishment. This change demonstrates the importance of sisterhood in supporting them, when their need of family and lovers is displaced onto the relationship between these sisters. The consolidation of Asian American sisterhood is based on a similar or shared experience of racial discrimination and



sexist prejudice. Considering the identity or gender/ethnic split in Asian American literature, the story of Asian American sisterhood demonstrates the importance of recognizing differences. See does not blur the complicated ethnic or individual experiences of Asian American individuals. She also avoids constructing an “essentialized identity” that would undermine the unity between Asian American women and other women of color (Lowe, 1991, p. 31). Her concern with the triply marginalized situation of Asian American women defines the unique Asian experience of being an American. In its bildungsroman plot of the heroines’ change from a common person to a successful dancer, she demonstrates the extent of effort that these women have taken to develop their relationship against the backdrop of a challenging work environment. Thus, the story of sisterhood diverts from established presentation of identity politics in Asian American literature and shifts toward a feminist representation of the Asian American experience.

However, See astutely understands the challenges of writing about Asian American sisterhood. Those Asian American women could also slur each other because of their selfishness. They publicly show themselves off to prove their superiority. They would speak evil of each other to gain a leverage over the one in this relationship they dislike. Such a description makes sisterhood more compellingly persuasive and aesthetically valid. Although those acts could lead to disputes among them, they also demonstrate the reality and complexity of the intimate relationship when compromised and challenged by conflicts and differences. By overcoming these conflicts, See demonstrates the validity of sisterhood. She shows a more diverse emotional and social side of these women, challenging the flat or stereotypical characterization of Asian American women in literature.

The secrets revealed in the interlude before their debut show as *Swing Sisters* in *Broadway* presents a serious challenge to their sisterhood. While preparing for the show, Grace tells her friends of her upcoming marriage with Joe. It comes as a surprising blow to Ruby. Ruby criticizes Grace for this disruption and drags Helen in the dispute, which leads to another secret revelation. Helen reveals her sense of loss and resentment towards Grace. In this tripartite relationship, Helen has always taken an awkward middle position, sometimes feeling marginalized or ignored by Grace who is drawn by Ruby’s glamorous character. Being unable to resolve her uncomfortable position, she chooses to sell out Ruby to the authority during the national anti-Japanese movement. A deeper secret is that Helen cannot detach her traumatic

experience in the Second Sino-Japanese War from her relationship with Ruby. Sometimes, her attitude towards Ruby is skewed by her resentment towards the Japanese killers who took away her late husband and son: “But I also wanted to destroy you as my husband and son were destroyed” (See, 2014, p. 357). However, the important role of each one in the career and life of the others contributes to the resilience of their relationship. Helen realizes her mistake of turning Ruby in, as well as how deeply she needs Grace and Ruby over her hatred. Helen’s problematic role in the sisterhood reveals the transferability between love and hatred in a relationship. Through the dispute, See shows the problematic aspect of each heroine in their relationship. For example, Helen’s betrayal of Ruby derives from her traumatic war experience with Japanese soldiers. Grace holds ignorant and insensitive feeling towards Helen, and Ruby presents overt intention to prove her superiority and exploitation of their relationship for career success. Those problems show the tension within their lives, truly showing how an Asian American woman could feel marginalized and have a sense of insecurity in the cross-ethnic relationship.

However, their final change from *China Dolls* to *Swing Sisters* represents the value of sisterhood that is shown in their sophisticated understanding of differences. They could transcend their diverse racial and sexual experiences and realize their similarity in being an Asian dancer. Without the sisterhood between these three women, their dancer’s life would be in vain. In particular, the sisterhood also makes them sublimate this career dream to a desire for an American life, as Ruby tells the others: “You want an American life. I want an American life. Even Helen wants an American life” (See, 2014, p. 301). While presenting their shared interest in leading an American life, the novel also reflects what Patricia Chu defines as the task of Asian American literature. Chu considers that the Americanness is revealed in such a repetition of “the trope of survival,” which would link the “interdependent needs for material, cultural, spiritual survival” (2000, p. 4). According to Chu, this need for survival could transcend the constructed exclusive differences between Asian and American in literature. See’s story of these three women also conveys the same message of Americanness, by either detaching them from their patriarchal Asian American family or braving the challenges of being the ethnic group in a white society. Their sisterhood recognizes such a need and the differences between them.

Their change to *Swing Sisters* also demonstrates how Asian American dancers strategically deploy their occupation

and counter sexual stereotypes of Asian American women. Dance gives an impetus for a positive change in these Asian American women's lives, enabling them to find a different image of themselves. They used to be considered as the indecent girls who ruin the reputation of their family. The nature of their work and their public performances challenges the traditional Asian value of women's reservedness and domesticity. Their performance subverts gender norms and creates an opportunity to transcend the gender-based boundary between home and outside. For example, the first performance of the Forbidden City, gave a moment for Helen to relieve the pressure of her oppressive patriarchal family life. As a dancer, Helen starts an entirely new life, which gives her an immense opportunity to show off her elegant femininity and draws her attention to a career beyond expectation. Her example shows how these women achieve their fame as Asian dancers, gain economic independence, and present a new image of themselves to their family and the community.

Their change from adorable China Dolls to successful dancers also reverses the racial stereotypes of Asian American women in the mainstream American society. At the very beginning of their careers, they are regarded as China Dolls, a term implicated with sexist and racist imagery of underscoring their exotic and sexy features. However, Asian dancers appropriate the exaggerated racial features, showing their bold defiance of gender norms and sexual advances with charismatic confidence, portraying the resilience of their characters. They would combine Chinese-style dance with American revues. In the debut show, the Asian dancers impress the audience with a flawless transition from an exquisite Asian show to glamorous lively performance:

We shouted out the opening syllables, tore off our hats, and tossed them into the audience. We ripped away our gowns to reveal red sateen corsets edged with the same fringe that hung from our parasols. ... Who would have guessed a Chinese girl could move like that? (See, 2014, pp. 68–69)

While dancers present their brilliant mixture of different programs, they also demonstrate their true "arms and legs" to a white audience. This creative reappropriation of racial features to draw the attention of a white audience presents an interesting effect. By adopting exaggerated Asian features, they could present the explicit message to people that they are both Asian and American.

The transition from China Dolls to Swing Sisters also reveals how this sisterhood shapes their character. In the story, female relationship, encouraging or discouraging, acts as a catalyst to their growth. Each of them has their own limitation

or weakness. Helen is confined by her patriarchal family and her dutiful obedience to tradition. Her relationship with the other two and engagement with the nightclub business opens a new interpersonal and social space. She gradually becomes more defiant of tradition. Her final choice of refusing her father's request to live with them represents that autonomy, signaling a farewell to her "natal family" and "so many bad memories" (See, 2014, p. 338). Grace faces a traumatic past of being physically harmed and verbally abused by her father. Her mother encourages her to work as a dancer in San Francisco. Her mother's tender love for her could also explain her naivety and sincerity in her friendship with others. However, she does not develop a strong critical awareness of her marginalized position, until Ruby forces her to face that:

I needed to start thinking of myself first- my happiness, my career, my heart. I was going to climb up. If that meant slapping some powder on Ruby-ugh-I'd do it. Lingered there, I began to feel fortified, even if it irked me that it had been Ruby who had jolted me awake. Damn her (See, 2014, pp. 157–158).

Through her competition with Ruby in the relationship and career, Grace learns to be more self-reliant and realizes her cowardice in the face of discrimination, bullying, and competition. The bildungsroman plot of their own change surpasses a narrow focus on racial or sexual issues. It involves a feminist spirit that can be disseminated for all women, representing a struggle against prejudice and unfairness. In so doing, *China Dolls* presents the female sensibility that merits its value of being not just Asian American but truly American.

## Conclusion

Given See's creative use of historical records, her novels are categorized as historical fiction, including *China Dolls*. In writing about Asian American female dancers between the 1930s and 1980s, See presents readers with an undervalued part of Chinese American history. Considering the lower social class of dancers in both Chinese and American society, the story of Asian American dancers marks their status as being economically, sexually, and racially marginalized. However, See also deploys their marginalized experience to reflect their encouraging resilience to chase their dream of becoming dancers. In the face of oppression, their similar desire for change establishes the foundation of sisterhood. In so doing, See shows their active agency rather than the position of being oppressed. See presents a different picture of Asian American

women who are confident dancers, independent daughters, and passionate lovers. Through a representation of conflict between the characters, the story reveals the importance of establishing interethnic solidarity through tolerance of difference and mutual recognition of their expectations for an American life.

This novel also challenges the previous themes of Asian American literature. Instead of focusing on a male narrative perspective or showing the passivity of Asian American women, this novel could enmesh Asian American history into a feminist bildungsroman. This feminist portrayal of Asian American women also unravels how race, gender, class all work together in their lives, as each form of oppression could be influenced by the other two factors. For these dancers, their confident and charismatic features contest the racial and sexual prejudice of white mainstream society and a conventional Asian American community. The story also impresses readers with the encouraging character of Asian women, who dominate their own lives and have an avid desire to change their life. Thematically, See presents a complex idea of Asian American sisterhood. The conflicts or secrets between them, as well as their diverse experiences, contribute to an aesthetic effect that complicates the understanding of female relationships and the Asian American experience. In displaying these women's persistent struggle for an American life, this story also extends its outlook beyond racial or sexual concerns within the Asian American community. See consistently questions the meaning of being an American citizen regardless of one's racial, gender or class backgrounds. Especially, she challenges the problematic and racist US judicial system that exerted pressure on these people who should be protected. Their story of ethnic minority and feminist solidarity reveals the history of a marginalized group in the US, envisioning a new picture of sisterhood or cross-ethnic relationship based on inclusive understanding of diverse racial and class experiences.

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