

Narratives of Return

A Transpacific Tradition

I am to return to China, where I have never been.

—MAXINE HONG KINGSTON, *The Woman Warrior*, 76

Prologue

SOME YEARS AGO, I returned to Asia for the first time in my adult life to present a paper on “narratives of return”—a newly minted category I soon learned was deceptively simple—at a conference in Taipei. In researching accounts of diasporic Chinese offspring who returned to their parents’ ancestral country, I had learned that I was not alone in the experience of growing up in America with a felt affinity to the imagined community and turbulent history of China while living far from it. My parents had passed away, and when I landed in Taipei, heard Mandarin—familiar yet opaque—and saw Chinese faces, I felt a strange joy, as if returning to my family. At dawn, as I looked out the window of my guest house on the campus of the Academia Sinica, I saw men and women in loose clothes performing their *tai qi* exercises on the handkerchief of grass surrounded by the hotel driveway. Inevitably, their wide, slow steps and circling arms reminded me of my late father, the only person I had ever seen practicing *tai qi* in my hometown. Now that I had arrived in an unknown country where morning *tai qi* was more common than jogging, the feeling was bittersweet.

Many years earlier, I had explained to a close friend that the garrulous mother in Maxine Hong Kingston’s memoir, *The Woman Warrior*, was not the least bit typical of my family or of the other Chinese families I knew. Among the families of immigrant professors, doctors, and engineers with whom I grew up in Pittsburgh, not one of the fathers or mothers told Chinese ghost stories, chanted about Fa Mu Lan, or told stories about life in China. On the

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contrary, the mothers gave the impression that they lived to tell their children to eat more, put on a warm jacket, and press steadily forward to a secure future in America, preferably as a scientist, engineer, or doctor. Despite the fact that my father, a scholar of Chinese history, taught Chinese language and literature at the University of Pittsburgh, we children (or at least, we younger children) were not instructed in Chinese history, Chinese language and literature, or family history at home. If anything, my mother wanted to be sure that we learned algebra early and took an interest in computer programming.

Perhaps it was unusual, even among Chinese Americans, that I had never visited China while my parents were still alive, but I thought I could trace this omission—not only to the cold war politics that cut off so many ties between mainland Chinese and their families in the West but also to the specific culture of my family. Both my father and my mother were the eldest children of large families; their fathers belonged to two generations that had felt responsible for leading China into the modern age. My paternal grandfather, Chu Ching-nung (Zhu Jingnong), was a prominent educator who served as vice minister of education under the Republic of China and also a lifelong friend of the scholar and diplomat Hu Shi (Hu Shih). My maternal grandfather, Chao Ts'ai Piao, whom I knew only as a kindly old man, had been a lieutenant general in the Nationalist army under Chiang Kai-shek. With these credentials, both my grandfathers became political exiles when the Chinese Communist Party drove the Nationalists out of mainland China in 1949; neither ever returned to live on the mainland, and both lived out their last years in America. My father and uncle had already come to the United States to study by 1949, but my grandfathers left their wives and all their other children behind; of eleven remaining children, only my mother and one more uncle would ever be able to leave the mainland. My father, who had been a Nationalist officer in the war against the Japanese and had celebrated their departure in 1945 by arranging for graduate study in the United States, did not consider it prudent to return after 1949. From Seattle, where he was studying, he wrote to my mother, whom he had met when she was a teenager, inviting her to come to his new city to complete her college education—interrupted in 1949—and to become his wife. To protect us American-born children from the intrigues of the past and entanglements in the future, they never went back, they encouraged us to perfect our English, and they told us almost nothing about the family they had left behind. Profoundly mistrustful of all things Communist, both my father and my mother died without saying anything about contacting their Chinese relatives. Among their personal papers, I found a few letters from family members and many, in Chinese, from friends I had never heard of. Though deterred for so many decades from visiting China, I followed in the footsteps of my

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father and grandfathers—literally, by attending and teaching at universities where they had been students and teachers, and figuratively, by becoming a scholar of Asian American literature. This choice enabled me to transfer my literary imagination from England (the country I had entered in my teens by reading Austen, Orwell, Shakespeare, and Shaw) to China. I was therefore deeply touched when I found *Cultural Curiosity*, historian Josephine Khu's collection of personal essays by the children of diasporic Chinese about their first-time visits to China, and I resolved to write this book.

Return, Melancholia, and Remembrance of Scholars Past

The experience of returning to China—or, more broadly, of latter-generation Asian Americans visiting their parents' or ancestors' homelands—is a germinal motif in Asian American literature that has not yet been fully examined. At the outset of the field, the scholars and writers inventing Asian American literary studies were hard pressed to claim recognition as *American* writers with a place in the *American* tradition. Early anthologists such as Kai-yu Hsu, Helen Palubinskas, Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong created a nascent Asian American literary tradition by focusing on texts written and published in English and centered on Asian Americans within the United States. Although texts with Asian settings and protagonists who crossed the Pacific have been available since at least 1909, the early scholars of Asian American literature did not fully address their transpacific nature. Elaine H. Kim's early, influential study *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*, for instance, discussed some texts set wholly or partially in Asia or the Pacific but also focused largely on literature about the struggles of new arrivals and their children (whom I call the first and second generations, respectively) to claim a place in America; claiming America remains a central theme of the literature and the scholarship. Since then, the postnational turn in Asian American studies, the increased focus on postcolonialism and globalization in American studies, and the participation of multilingual scholars with expertise in other literatures have provided new tools and paradigms for reimagining Asian American literature as something both more inclusive and less cohesive, more like a literature of global diasporas. This critical broadening (which I discuss below) has coincided with an explosion of Asian American publications and of memoir and travel writing in general, as well as with the rise of creative nonfiction and various forms of roots journeys by Asian Americans and others.¹ The theme of return is now so widely recognized that it has been taken up by numerous scholars as well as creative writers; it

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appears in popular media from cookbooks and travel articles to feature films and documentaries.² At the same time, a growing body of scholarship has theorized the autobiographical impulse, the memory and memorials, and the forms of mourning and melancholia particular to U.S. minority subjects and communities.

I argue that there is within Asian American literature a body of texts that includes narratives of returns to Asia: both literal return visits by Asian emigrants and symbolic returns, first visits by diasporic offspring that symbolize returns to their roots. This motif has grown stronger, particularly among Chinese American authors, since the 1980s, due both to publishing trends in the United States and to globalizing trends favoring increased travel and rapid communications, including China's policies of openness since the 1980s. I argue that this literature addresses and seeks to remedy widely held anxieties about cultural loss and the erasure of personal and family histories from public memory. Moreover, the writers of return narratives register and respond to the melancholic ghosts of personal and family losses through acts of remembrance—or, more specifically, through the use of *countermemory*, defined by George Lipsitz as memory rooted in “the local, the immediate, and the personal,” starting with “the particular and the specific” and building “outward toward a total story.” According to Lipsitz, “counter-memory looks to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives” and “forces revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past” (212–213, qtd. in Davis, *Relative Histories* 15–16). Speaking specifically of the stakes in an Asian American context, Viet Thanh Nguyen has described Asian American countermemory as an “oppositional” practice that contests “dominant memory” and is “engaged in recovering what has been forgotten about and forgotten by Asian Americans”:

Since Asian immigrants began arriving in large numbers in the 19th century, other Americans had not seen them as part of an American imagined community. Americans excluded Asian immigrants from American memory, rendered symbolically, for example, in photographs of the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad that did not include any of the thousands of Chinese workers who were crucial in building it. Against this exclusion and erasure from dominant memory, Asian Americans engaged in practices of countermemory. . . . Countermemory is oppositional memory, the memory of the subordinated and the marginalized, memory from below versus memory from above. Much of Asian American memory is an exercise of countermemory, one engaged with recovering what has been forgotten about and forgotten by Asian Americans. (“Memory” 154)

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Within my study, narratives of return address retrievals of not only Asian or Asian American stories occluded from mainstream American history and memory but also stories that Asian Americans themselves are liable to silence or forget. In *Relative Histories: Mediating History in Asian American Family Memoirs*, Rocío G. Davis links countermemory to Marianne Hirsch's definition of *postmemory*, which characterizes the kind of memory work involved in family memoirs and is "distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection" (Hirsch, *Family* 22, qtd. in Davis, *Relative Histories* 16–17). For Hirsch, postmemory is connected to its source "not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (*Family* 22, qtd. in Davis, *Relative Histories* 16–17). Davis's study beautifully illustrates the ways that, within Asian American family memoirs, countermemory draws on the local and the personal to question official histories; postmemory, which transcends individual memory by crossing generations, is consciously shaped by the author's deep personal connections to her material and by her creative and imaginative agency (16–17). My study is indebted to her for these and other insights. Because loss, memory, historical erasure, and countermemory are not limited to Asian Americans, I hope my work resonates with studies of other literary traditions, though they are outside my scope here.

In addition to exploring the tropes of return and melancholia, which I discuss below, this book engages with scholarship on questions of form, genre, and reading practices. Narratives of return, it turns out, can appear within numerous genres, including drama, film, short stories, novels, travel narratives, ethnography, oral history, and various forms of life writing including autobiography, memoir, and family memoir. Given the range of genres and the tendency for many contemporary writers to write texts that complicate, combine, or confound genre expectations, it is beyond the scope of this work to survey the criticism of every genre deployed by writers of return narratives; nor does this study hold narratives of return to strict definitions of genres, themes, and plot devices. It does, however, describe the defining concerns of each kind of narrative introduced. As a literary critic of minority literature and of women's writing, I seek to resist the "window" paradigm of reading, in which the author's narrative choices are perceived as transparent and the literary text is read and judged as an objective document about the lives it describes. Such a paradigm implicitly assumes that the (minority or woman) author is a glorified clerk, lacking narrative versatility and mastery. Rather, I join with autobiography theorists and other scholars of Asian American literature to defend the poststructuralist premise that all the narratives are texts artfully and deliberately formed by their authors (or auteurs, for film), and that the formal elements of these texts are as significant as the stories they tell. In my view,

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the object of study may be (in the case of a nonfiction writer, for instance) not only the external events of the author's life but also the author's process of thinking about and rendering her or his life as a story. In reading a novel, I am concerned with not only the novelist's factual research or perceived accuracy but also the rhetorical effects of departures from verisimilitude: the contrived coincidence or happy end, the red herrings and unresolved questions, and those vital moments when characters misbehave. Drawing on autobiography theory, my reading practice highlights the tension between the published text and the author's source materials in order to emphasize the author's artifice (not as bad faith or inaccuracy but as creative agency) and the rhetorical effects of writers' literary choices. In arguing that Asian American narratives of return seek to address what I term "racial melancholia" through narrative acts of countermemory and postmemory, I also assert that the writers' interventions include acts of dissent from more established master narratives: both national narratives and, particularly in the cases of women writers, family narratives about success, failure, and the relative valuation of individuals within clans, families within communities, or communities within nations. In the tradition of Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts*, I argue that in texts that might seem wayward or rambling, Asian American authors break expectations about genre, authority, and factuality in order to tell a new story, and they usually tell readers that this is what they are doing. Like Barbara Christian and Donald C. Goellnicht, I also read creative writers as producers of theory in their own forms, usually through storytelling (Christian 226, Goellnicht 341–342).

Finally, this book is inspired by the personal journeys of my two grandfathers, who earned advanced degrees in America and returned to help defend and modernize China in the early twentieth century, and of my parents, who entered the United States as students in the 1940s and stayed to become U.S. citizens. As an English professor focused on Asian American literary studies, I have sought to understand their stories in the contexts of Chinese history, Asian American history, postcolonial theory, and Asian American literature. I felt that the perspectives of the educated Chinese who studied abroad and returned to serve China in the Republican period (1911–1949) had largely been forgotten. Modern references to wartime Chinese history, it seemed, focused more on Chiang Kai-shek's failures of military and civilian leadership than on the idealism of modernizing reformers such as my father, my grandfather, and my grandfather's close friend Hu Shi. Most attention, of course, is focused on more recent events. Asian American studies, focused on immigration and social justice within the United States, has historically marginalized the stories of educated Chinese who studied here and returned to China, or who arrived in the United States before 1965. And the postcolonial

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theorists I read in graduate school focused on British and European imperialism, everywhere but in East Asia. Discussions of U.S. neoimperialism, in the Pacific Rim and elsewhere, came later. To my knowledge, Asian American studies has included little theorization of Japanese imperialism or of the evolution of China's self-image, from the imperial center of the Qing era to the collapsing dynasty, which sought to ward off Western imperialism with a new model for Chinese modernity, to the rising power of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. And many of the working-class models for Asian American self-images, developed by West Coast or Hawaiian scholars, seemed not to describe my parents, a professor and his college-educated wife who settled (in Gary Okihiro's useful phrase) "east of California" (qtd. in E. Lee, "Asian American Studies" 250nn10–11). Part of my book is driven by a personal interest in the task of historicizing the unwritten narrative of my ancestors' arrivals in the United States and the desire to see the fields of Asian American and American studies encompass and more seriously consider the roles of educated Asian immigrants of the early twentieth century. In revisiting stories about my Grandfather Chu, and researching chapters on Yung Wing, the Chai family, and other educated Chinese, I have been delighted to discover extensive work on the topic of Sino-American educational exchange from Yung Wing to the present era (e.g., Bieler; M. Hsu, "Befriending" [*Journal*], "Befriending" [*Trans-Pacific*]; LaFargue; H. Li; Qian; Rhoads; and Ye), which informs my chapters on Yung Wing and the Chais. My other chapters seek to expand the scope of Asian American cultural inquiry similarly. In Chapter 7, I draw from among the many narratives in which Japanese American writers tell stories that seek to understand Japan in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s in order to describe the methods used by novelists Lydia Minatoya and Ruth Ozeki to pose questions about the responsibilities of Japanese people to engage with questions of history and memory.

Why Now? History, Memory, and Decolonizing Asian Histories

Why read Asian American narratives of return, and why read them now? In one form or another, travel narratives have always been part of Western culture and identity, and as Americans grow more and more economically dependent on and culturally connected with other peoples through travel and new media, U.S. interest in other cultures has never been greater. Within the academic and publishing worlds, the movement for some decades has been to demand space for new voices and new subjectivities that have heretofore been silent or invisible.

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In his overview study *Travel Writing*, Carl Thompson notes:

From the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, the genre played an integral role in European imperial expansion, and the travel writing of this period is accordingly highly revealing of the activities of European travellers abroad, and of the attitudes and ideologies that drove European expansionism. Similarly, modern travel writing can yield significant insights in the ideologies and practices that sustain the current world order. (3)

In the same decade in which Asian American studies found a foothold in academia, the Palestinian scholar Edward W. Said published *Orientalism* (1978), a founding text of postcolonial studies, arguing that European travelers' perceptions of other peoples and cultures were shaped by the writings of previous travelers and that these writings, which depicted non-Western peoples as exotic, emotional, and childlike in their inability to think rationally and to govern themselves, constituted discourses that justified Western colonialism. Said's insights, coupled with the turn to cultural studies in English and American studies, opened the way for academics to attend to what had been deemed the "minor, somewhat middle-brow form" of travel writing, elevating it to a legitimate object of study (Thompson 2). Following Said's cue, postcolonial studies developed as a field that illuminated the colonial and imperial subtexts of cultural texts from canonical works of literature to "middlebrow" travel narratives, while also bringing new prominence to the publications of writers from regions and nations formerly colonized by the European powers. In this context, contemporary travel writing has emerged as a genre that, through its narratives of individual contact with "other" cultures and peoples, helps to negotiate cultural anxieties about the changing relationships in this era of globalization, particularly between Western powers and their citizens, on one hand, and formerly colonized cultures and peoples, on the other.

Some critics remain suspicious of the genre. Dinah Roma Sianturi asks whether travel writing ultimately can "divest itself of its imperial origins . . . [and] move forward and achieve discursive maturity" (qtd. in Youngs 3n16). In the introduction to their 1998 survey *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing*, Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan argue that contemporary travel writing "frequently provides an effective alibi for the perpetuation or reinstallation of ethnocentrically superior attitudes to 'other' cultures, peoples, and places," as well as flattering the "nostalgically retrograde" middle-class reader with distinctions between the tasteful "traveler" and the common "tourist" (viii). And in *The Picador Book of Journeys* (2002), Robyn Davidson asserts that popular interest in travel narratives "is marked

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by nostalgia for an era when home and abroad, occident and orient, centre and periphery were unproblematically defined” and for “the illusion that there is still an uncontaminated Elsewhere to discover” (6, qtd. in Thompson 5). Others, however, defend the genre as fostering “an internationalist vision, and implicitly, a cosmopolitan attitude that encourages tolerance, understanding, and a sense of global community” (White 251, qtd. in Thompson 6) and, at its best, as seeking “to overcome cultural distance through a protracted act of understanding” (Porter 3, qtd. in Thompson 7).

When Asian American authors create their own travel narratives, they consciously enter and often critique this tradition by complicating the traditional image of the cosmopolitan traveler—predominantly white and male—as a global and imperial subject visiting prospective, current, or future colonies or trading partners. By focusing specifically on the subset of Asian American narratives of return, I argue that when Asian Americans write of visiting their personal or ancestral homelands, their texts depict ambivalent interactions with family members and new acquaintances who may register as unfamiliar but who also share a common language, past, or culture that the traveler must negotiate. For instance, the Sri Lankan Canadian author Michael Ondaatje’s return narratives explicitly discuss the double vision of the returning diasporic traveler. In his memoir *Running in the Family*, he interlaces family anecdotes and scenes of family interviews in Sri Lanka with the writings of British colonial visitors and native writers, implicitly challenging readers to consider to which group he belongs. In his novel *Anil’s Ghost* (2000), Ondaatje describes the human rights investigation done in his homeland by an expatriate Sri Lankan, Anil, and her Sri Lankan colleague, Gamini, in a period of civil war and government corruption. Anil recalls Gamini’s critique of American movies and English books that end with the visitor departing from the war zone and gazing down from his airplane window: “He’s going home. So the war, to all purposes, is over. That’s enough reality for the West” (285–286). At the novel’s climax, Anil is forced to present their investigation results alone, in a hostile public forum, after their evidence has been stolen, while Gamini observes from the audience. When she says, “I think you murdered hundreds of us,” openly accusing the government of murdering its citizens—and she includes herself as a Sri Lankan with the pronoun “us”—Gamini recognizes her courage, after fifteen years abroad, in giving “a citizen’s evidence” (272, emphasis added). For Asian American women writers, as I discuss later, the critique of the cosmopolitan travel narrative can also proceed by calling up female traditions of oral history and women’s life writing.

Indeed, as literary critic Rajini Srikanth has pointed out, American readers need to retrain themselves to conceptualize their culture as genuinely inclusive of subjects formerly viewed as outsiders, and to see the nation as global,

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transnational, and deeply interconnected with other sites around the world. Srikanth argues that readers should reconsider the supposed polarity between nationalism and cosmopolitanism as a productive dialectic. For instance, she posits that “a meaningful relationship between people begins with a willingness to acknowledge each other’s painful histories; such acknowledgement is particularly difficult when the parties involved have themselves been responsible for the tragedies” (23), and that it is also true that “only when nations appreciate each other[’s]” traumas and match their actions (foreign policies) accordingly will there be a likelihood of global cooperation” (27).

Srikanth’s argument anticipates those of critical refugee studies and scholars of Southeast Asian culture and memory such as Viet Thanh Nguyen and Cathy J. Schlund-Vials. In *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Nguyen argues that American readers should resist the hegemony of nationalistic public memory by striving for a “complex ethics of memory, a just memory that strives both to remember one’s own and others,” while Schlund-Vials argues in *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work* that Cambodian American cultural production works to counter “historical amnesias” in migrants’ sites of origin and their countries of settlement, and to imagine or “engender . . . alternative modes for and practices of justice,” beginning with remembrance (4).³ For me, as for these authors, the ongoing task of transforming our knowledge involves retraining readers, in part by including literature by Asian Americans and other minority writers alongside other narratives of Westerners visiting the East. Specifically, this project includes not only the reading of travel narratives but also the reading and writing of return narratives: narratives in which immigrants return to their homelands or second-generation North Americans return to their ancestors’ homelands to reclaim that aspect of their heritage, identity, and culture.

One explanation for the public’s continued and renewed interest in the theme of return is that contemporary narratives of return—by writers of all ethnicities—negotiate cultural anxieties about modernity, history, and memory. In his overview of “memory discourses” of the past half century, Andreas Huyssen describes how they emerged in the West in the 1960s, in the wake of decolonization and new social movements in search of alternative and revisionist histories: “The search for other traditions and the tradition of ‘others’ was accompanied by multiple statements about endings: the end of history, the death of the subject, the end of the work of art, the end of metanarratives” (12). In other words, the search for formerly invisible stories and traditions has been accompanied by various forms of skepticism about the authority and objectivity of historical writing. At the same time, historical and other cultural references have become both more prolific and less clearly grounded in their original histories and cultures. As distinct cultures give

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way to a homogenizing global culture, and as memories of the past become decontextualized and appropriated by the present, there is a sense of greater anxiety about the loss of traditional cultures and ways of life as well as the loss of invisible or less-known histories; similar concerns arise about those histories that are appropriated and removed from their contexts by mainstream culture. According to Huyssen, the historical past formerly gave “coherence and legitimacy to family, community, nation, and state . . . but those links have weakened as national traditions and historical pasts have been deprived of geographic and political groundings as they are reorganized in the processes of cultural globalization” (4).

Huyssen asks whether such groundings are being forgotten and erased, as feared, or actually renegotiated. He suggests that a wave of memorial sites and events in Europe, the United States, and East Asia, accompanied by a brisk business in forms of history, memory, and nostalgia (including museums, retro consumer goods, historical documentaries, autobiography, historical novels, and public celebrations of national anniversaries), is a manifestation of a widespread fear that, in the wake of discourses critiquing the authority and objectivity of history, and the loss of the “coherence and legitimacy” that history is supposed to lend to everyday life and the public life of nations, we will forget the past and, eventually, our present (14). Indeed, he finds, since the 1980s issues of memory and forgetting have become dominant all over the world, but as “the culture of memory” spreads, the fault line between mythic and real pasts grows harder to draw (15–16). Despite the seeming globalization of memory discourses, much of the work they do—such as the commemoration of past wrongs by new regimes seeking legitimacy—must be done nationally and locally. Huyssen asks whether memory cultures in general can be read as reaction formations to economic globalization, since they involve reconstructing a local or national account of the past that informs the present (16). On one level, this seems like a persuasive conclusion. Srikanth, for instance, suggests precisely that nations must understand the particular traumas of individuals and of other nations in order to develop responsible and effective foreign policies.

However, while Huyssen acknowledges minority memory cultures, his work seems primarily focused on local or national projects of public memory—official memories—with emphasis on European examples. Whereas Huyssen emphasizes local or national memory projects as a response to the perceived threats of globalization, I suggest that for Asian Americans, the rise of a memory-driven trope, the narrative of return, is also a way to expand Asian American subjectivities and histories beyond the borders of the United States. It is a move to reclaim or remember the Asian histories that an earlier wave of Asian American scholarship neglected and to engage with the collective

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work of Asian American countermemory described by Viet Thanh Nguyen (“Memory” 154). Moreover, Asian American return narratives function to combat the perceived demand that Asians join a public American culture in which Asian histories are far from prominent, and Asian American histories are arguably even less visible. If, as Asian American scholars claim, the erasure and forgetting of individual particularities is demanded as a condition of claiming U.S. subjectivity, then Asian Americans are admittedly not unique among ethnic and racial minorities in negotiating this demand. However, Asian Americans may feel called to honor multiple pasts among which there is, institutionally, less discursive space for the stories of Asian ancestors. Like other Americans, Asian American schoolchildren are taught to commemorate U.S. history as a narrative driven by European settlers and immigrants, Native Americans, and African Americans, and to mourn (or in some cases to celebrate) the loss of a way of life in which their particular ancestors may not have actually taken part and from which Asians have been actually and symbolically excluded (S. Chan, *Asian Americans*; E. H. Kim, *Asian American* 3–13; L. Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* 1–36; Srikanth 51–55). Therefore, a primary impulse of Asian American scholarship and literature has been simply to locate, record, describe, and imagine the stories of Asian immigrants and their offspring in America. Hence, oral history, autoethnography, autobiography, memoir, and the bildungsroman are central genres of Asian American literature.

At the same time, Asian Americans face the task of finding out about traditional pasts—historical pasts, ways of life—in our ancestral homelands even as those homelands have undergone rapid change in the eras of modernization and globalization. Also, as the Taiwan-based cultural critic Kuan-Hsing Chen has noted, modern Asian states must come to terms with their twentieth-century histories in order to avoid replicating the mistakes of imperialism in the twenty-first century, a three-part process he calls “decolonization,” “de-imperialization,” and “*de-cold war*” (3–4). Chen argues that globalization, as an opening of all markets to global trade and competition, has the potential to promote greater exploitation of less developed nations by more developed ones. In many regions, smaller countries seek to tame the forces of globalization by organizing their own regional systems of trade and cooperation such as the “African Union, the Latin American Integration Association, the European Union, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations” (K. Chen 5). In East Asia, however, this process has been impeded by the failure to confront Asia’s particular legacies of intra-Asian imperialism and colonization. This failure, he writes, is due to the imposition of cold war antagonisms and boundaries shortly after the end of World War II and the resulting focus on economic development. He seems to say that Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan substituted allegiance to the United States for the internal scrutiny needed for three pro-

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cesses: *decolonization*, “the attempt of the previously colonized to reflectively work out a historical relation with the former colonizer, culturally, politically, and economically”; *deimperialization*, “in which the colonizing or imperializing population examines “the conduct, motives, desires, and consequences of the imperialist history that has formed its own subjectivity”; and *de-cold war*, the imperative to “confront and explore the legacies and ongoing tensions of the cold war” (3–4). For instance, Chen asserts that Japan has never fully examined its history and responsibility as the colonizer of Taiwan, Korea, and Manchuria and an occupier of mainland China because immediately after Japan’s surrender in 1945, it was occupied by the United States and reconstructed as a U.S. ally. (In this process, as Sebastian Conrad has argued, Japan internalized accounts of the war that focused on the United States while largely forgetting its own actions in Asia until the 1980s, when the voices of other Asian nations made themselves heard [92–94].) Therefore, Chen asserts, other East Asian nations do not trust Japan to take part as an equal partner in regional integration, both because it is so dependent on the United States and because they fear that without clearer introspection, Japan is prone to repeat its history. South Korea and Taiwan, former Japanese colonies, have not fully acknowledged prewar colonial legacies in which for some subjects, Japan connoted not only an oppressive occupation but also (in the case of Taiwan at least) a force for modernization (toward which these countries may also feel ambivalent). Failing to reckon with the ambivalence generated by the experiences of colonization, right-wing regimes in Korea and Taiwan have adopted pro-American, anti-Communist mindsets that suppress dissent by equating it with pro-Communism. In Chen’s view, these countries will not be fully prepared to form strong regional alliances until they have loosened their practical dependence (in terms of trade, aid, and defense) on the United States, their profound cultural identifications with the United States, and their deep-seated mistrust of Japan and Communist China (K. Chen 5–13).

Finally, mainland China was formerly the center of Asia, as the “Chinese empire” (which, Chen notes, is itself a Western term) dominated Asia until the incursion of Western imperialism in the mid-nineteenth century (K. Chen 269n1). This history has left other nations with residual suspicion and the Chinese culture with imperial ambition, which must be examined if China is to deimperialize. For the various nations, Chen warns against a simple decolonization process in which, rather than fully examining investments left over from the colonial period, a former colony defines itself primarily through resentment of the former colonial power and reactionary nationalism, a process that still leaves intact both the centrality of the colonizer and the primacy of imperialism as a model for national success. In China, the Communist-versus-Nationalist conflict and eventual civil war were manifes-

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tations of competing models for modernization (the Soviet socialist model versus the Western model of liberal democracy and capitalism). After 1949, the Nationalists tilted Taiwan toward the U.S. model and the Communists turned China toward the Soviet model. Chen, however, argues that China must seek the openness of that moment in the 1950s when the country sought to connect with other nonaligned (“third world”) nations: “Chinese solidarity with the colonized third world, which began in the context of the 1955 Bandung conference in Indonesia, was a crucial step in the opening up and reformulation of the self-centered worldview found throughout the history of the Chinese empire,” as exemplified in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s when the translation of world literature into Chinese manifested China’s openness to a “third world decolonization era” (K. Chen 11–12). Readers questioning whether China could or would cultivate openness to other nations without an imperialist agenda may consult Chen’s full argument and observe how China’s “One Belt, One Road” plan (for global trade, inspired by the ancient Silk Road shipping routes) unfolds. According to one expert, “China’s Belt and Road initiative is starting to deliver useful infrastructure, bringing new trade routes and better connectivity to Asia and Europe. . . . But [President] Xi [Jinping] will struggle to persuade skeptical countries that the initiative is not a smokescreen for strategic control.”⁴ Here, we need note only that Chen hopes Chinese intellectuals will search for a model in which Chinese development does not depend on reinstating China as an imperial or neoimperial center within Asia.

While most Asian American creative writers do not presume to lead in such intra-Asian debates, this book suggests that the memory work that is typical of Asian American return narratives—both biographical and fictional—may be understood as participating in multiple vital conversations. It is not only an aspect of the “memory discourses” that Huyssen and memory scholars have identified as a response to the questioning of history but also a crucial part of a larger, transpacific dialogue that may contribute to the work of decolonialization, deimperialism, and de-cold war, although Asian American perspectives inevitably differ from those of Asians in Asia. Although Chen’s articulation of his model postdates or coincides with much of the writing I examine here, most of the writers I have studied are aware that their international journeys and their published travel narratives are engaging not only with the writers’ interpersonal relationships but also with larger dialogues about the history that shapes contemporary relations among China, Japan, and other East Asian nations. Among millennial Chinese American writers looking back at their ancestors, for instance, the postcolonial task of reimagining China’s national narratives of modernization and its vexed relations with the West is undertaken, implicitly or explicitly, as the writers strive

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to weave that master narrative into the fabric of their family return narratives. And a number of stories of return to Japan, which in the eighties tended to address American fears of Japanese competition, have more recently engaged with its imperialist history.⁵ In many of these return narratives, Asian American writers portray their ancestors as defying or reinventing old-country expectations and traditions and themselves as negotiating with modern natives' expectations about them, the diasporic visitors. Moreover, these writers may also question U.S. imperialism or cold war ideology, acting as cultural theorists and critics in their own right. Yet most of their analyses focus on the personal. To engage with the larger issues of shifting regional dynamics would in some cases occlude the authors' fundamental aim of imagining, or bearing witness to, personal stories of exploration and discovery of their ancestral pasts—stories that demand to be told before the people in them are forgotten. One task these writers set for readers, then, may be to attend to their personal stories while also observing how their work engages with the ideological project proposed by Chen.