Negotiating the Past:
Gender Inequality in Chuang Hua’s Crossings

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Abstract
Chuang Hua’s Crossings (1968) deserves a special place in the literary history of Asian America. Written at a critical juncture of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the neglected novel heralds Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior (1976) inasmuch as the issue of gender is central in both works. The protagonist of Crossings, Jane, was born in China but has grown up in the United States in a patriarchal household. After she engages in a love affair in Paris with a French journalist, Jane’s familial and personal pasts continue to invade her consciousness, and discernible in the episodic flashbacks are the interrelated issues of parental gender bias and the discord between the female protagonist and her brother. As the fourth daughter of a Chinese patriarchal family, Jane has enjoyed less parental attention than her two younger brothers, particularly James. Therefore, when James incurs the displeasure of his parents by marrying a Caucasian woman without their consent, Jane transfers her repressed grudge against her spoiled brother to his wife, whom she feels is a “barbarian.” This paper explores the blending by Chuang Hua of two complex symbolic themes—the very traditionally Chinese theme of patriarchy and gender discrimination and that of racial discrimination—which we get when the possibility arises (to the delight of the family patriarch, Jane’s father) that James’ wife will have a son. At the end, after various twists and complications, Jane decides to go to Paris for a year rather than expose the real source of her hostility toward her brother’s wife: the “Law of the Father.” The reading of the novel offered here also takes Chuang Hua’s intensive deployment of the past as suggesting that it is never really “past,” but rather an integral part of the present.

Keywords
Chuang Hua (莊華), Crossings, the past, gender inequality, patriarchy, radical difference, miscegenation
How dare you question me! I am Father. I can do no wrong.

I am Father I know what is right.  
—Chuang, Crossings 196, 197

I. Introduction

In view of style, narrative form and content, Chuang Hua’s Crossings merits a special niche in Asian American literary history. In terms of plot, the long-neglected novel differs from its contemporary Chinese American fiction, since it deals not with the experience of living in a New York or San Francisco Chinatown, but with the shifting world of a Chinese female émigré born to an upper-class immigrant family. What distinguishes this diasporic narrative is its unique combination of a modernist technique of representation with Chinese literary devices. Written at the critical juncture of the Civil Rights fervor of the 1960s, the semi-autobiographical novel thematically heralds Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior (1976), as the issue of gender claims center stage in both works. However, because of its unconventional syntax and punctuation as well as its structural and formal fragmentation, the difficult novel was virtually ignored when it first appeared in 1968, and subsequently went out of print. Indeed, the novel received hardly any critical attention until it was republished in 1986 with a foreword by Amy Ling, whose “A Rumble in the Silence: Crossings by Chuang Hua” constitutes a pioneering study of the forgotten work. Apart from Ling’s

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1 Crossings is the only novel by Chuang Hua (莊華). As for information about the author, surprisingly little is known apart from a brief “biography” provided by Hailing Xiao: “Chuang Hua was born in China. She first went to England with her family at an early age and then to the United States. The author lived in New York City in the 1980s and in Connecticut. Further information about the author is not available at this time” (Xiao 117).


trailblazing 1982 essay, there are up to now only five other critical essays on Crossings, all of which were published in the 1990s.4

Now, four decades after its first publication in 1968, Chuang Hua’s Crossings deserves further investigation because the handful of critics on the novel have misread a number of important points; some of these misreadings have contributed to their failure to puzzle out a key thematic strand—that of gender inequality and its concomitant psychological and emotional impact on the female protagonist. For instance, Monica Chiu in her otherwise perceptive essay misinterprets the origin and timing of Fourth Jane’s pregnancy when she writes, “[a]lthough pregnant with the French lover’s child at the text’s conclusion, she gently refuses to stay in Paris” (120, italics added). Actually, Fourth Jane is pregnant sometime before she decides to leave for Paris. Her former American lover pleads her to marry him and keep the child; however, having decided to leave for Paris for a year, she has to get an abortion: “[O]ne cannot have child in retreat” (Chuang 203). It is not Sixth Michael who marries a Caucasian woman, as Karen A. Lee mistakenly proclaims, but Fifth James: “I would suggest that Fourth Jane’s anxieties concerning the changing structure of home, as regards to Dyadya’s imminent death and Sixth Michael’s marriage to a Caucasian woman, are further complicated by feelings of guilt from sexual transgression, if not post-abortion syndrome, and culminate in her deluge of tears” (80, italics added). Lee commits another conspicuous error when she writes that Fourth Jane “has not yet been sleeping with her French lover” (84). In fact, there are a couple of terse textual references to their love-making: “She woke up in the dark and wondered about the hour, remembered the silence before falling asleep after having been made love to” (40); “Clasping his body tightly, she tensed her hip muscles and in a final effort rose and met him” (69). But the most curious mistake some critics have made has to do with the sexual identity of the newborn baby of Fifth James and his Caucasian wife. Both Amy Ling and Veronica C. Wang erroneously regard the baby as a boy. In her foreword to the 1986 republished edition of the long-neglected work, Amy Ling writes, “Jane is shaken when her father backs off from his initial furious objection and goes to the hospital to visit his daughter-in-law and new grandson” (3, italics added). Presumably influenced by Ling, Veronica C. Wang makes a similar assumption by stating, “[y]et when the daughter-in-law gives birth to a son, Dyadya changes his mind, accepts her and his newborn grandson…” (31, 5

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4 For an overview of the six essays on Crossings, please see Ho 153-69.
5 Ling makes similar statements elsewhere (“A Rumble in Silence” 32; Between Worlds 109).
Actually, as I will demonstrate later, textual clues reveal that the baby is, in fact, a girl.

In what follows, I would like to draw on noted British sociologist Sylvia Walby, cultural critic Stuart Hall, and American writer William Faulkner to shed light on how Fourth Jane negotiates the past to make sense of the present, why Fourth Jane decides to quit the job she likes and exile herself to Paris, and why she does not invite Fifth James and his pregnant wife to her farewell party. A close symptomatic scrutiny of the formally innovative novel reveals that Dyadya and the Frenchman both subscribe to patriarchal ideology and that what underscores the father-daughter conflict is the issue of gender inequality. Composed of three main parts, this paper argues that being a loving but domineering patriarch, Dyadya must have been very disappointed upon discovering the true identity of his daughter-in-law’s baby, that what complicates Fourth Jane’s conflicting need to be independent and to be an obedient daughter is the awareness of her familial status as a subordinate sexual other, and that narrative negotiation of the past with the present encourages the female émigré to end the lopsided romance with the patriarchal Frenchman. In Part Two, I examine how the crucial events of the past are evoked and how they are related to Fourth Jane’s consciousness of gender inequality. Part Three investigates the two patriarchal figures in Fourth Jane’s life—Dyadya and the French journalist. Part Four centers on the female protagonist’s gender, racial and cultural negotiations, which together lead to the eventual confrontation with her father.

II. The Haunting Presence of the Past

Ostensibly, the fictional present of Crossings addresses the development and denouement of a love affair between Fourth Jane and a Parisian journalist. The love story occupies only about one third of the book, however, while the rest episodically unveils Jane’s family and personal pasts, which keep intruding upon the love affair. Why, we might ask, does the past figure so prominently in the emotional and psychological life of the female protagonist? How does Fourth Jane negotiate the past in order to make sense of the present? And how does Chuang Hua deploy events of the past to represent Fourth Jane’s spiritual odyssey? I argue that the narrative juxtaposition of the past with the present helps Fourth Jane sort out her own identity and that leading a diasporic life in Paris by herself helps Jane better understand the
parallel situation of her parents, especially her father. In comparison with the French journalist, Dyadya is a much more loving and sincere patriarch. This understanding encourages the female protagonist to end her hopeless romance in Paris.

The immigrant experience necessarily involves the simultaneous preservation of the old culture and the acquisition of the new. This process of integration in turn necessitates a juggling of past and present, there and here. In one’s adaptation to an unfamiliar and often hostile environment, the past invariably offers a relatively stable point of reference and comparison. For the immigrant, however, the past that he or she has left behind never remains static; instead, it is in constant flux. As Stuart Hall succinctly explains in “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation”:

> The past continues to speak to us. But this is no longer a simple, factual “past,” since our relation to it, like the child’s relation to the mother, is always-already “after the break.” It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. (224)

In *Crossings*, Chuang Hua likewise draws conspicuously on “memory, fantasy, narrative and myth” to chart the emotional and psychological contours of Fourth Jane’s life as a female émigré.

Specifically, before she leaves for Paris, Fourth Jane’s past consists of the succession of lives she has led in China, England, and the United States. Its duration spans, according to inferences from the text, the early 1940s up to 1966 or thereabouts. Though the text specifies neither the time of her birth nor the year of her initial arrival in the States and the year of her departure for Paris, some textual clues indicate that except for Seventh Jill, the other six children were born in China. Jane’s parents sent the six children out of China before the outbreak of the Chinese civil war in 1946, themselves escaping from their homeland near the end of the civil war in 1949. In his letter to Fifth James, for example, Dyadya points out that Seventh Jill has never been to the Far East (15). As is revealed in her long conversation with the French lover, Fourth Jane is already in the United States before “the outbreak of civil war in China” (122). On another occasion, the text makes clear that the warfare of which Dyadya speaks on page 18 while the family (with the exception of Fifth James) are celebrating Ngmah’s birthday must be the Chinese civil war, for later we see a Communist courier urging Dyadya to go back and “help rebuild new China”

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7 For an exploration of Fourth Jane’s search for identity and her diasporic consciousness, please see Wen-ching Ho’s forthcoming “Representing Diaspora and Identity Quest in Chuang Hua’s *Crossings*.”
So, it is not until 1949, when the civil strife was drawing to its close, that Dyadya and Ngmah left China once and for all. Finally, during their argument in the longest segment of the novel, Fourth Jane and her French lover make implicit references to the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which started in 1966. Of the recuperations of the past on Jane’s life, two stand out as most crucial, both having to do with Fifth James and his Caucasian wife.

One such crucial event of the past concerns Fifth James’s defiance against his parents by marrying a Caucasian woman without asking their permission in the first place. Early on in the novel, following a childhood memory of her hometown with its gray city walls in the distance, a scene which is reminiscent of the walls encircling the garden of her American home, Fourth Jane remembers the intrusion of Fifth James’ unnamed wife, antagonistically referred to as a “barbarian,” into their garden. Fourth Jane’s use of the racial epithet “barbarian” indicates that her hostility toward her sister-in-law arises partly from ethnic pride (“the inflexibility of Chinese pride” [122]) and partly from the psychological displacement resulting, as I will illustrate in Part Four, from her parental gender prejudice.

Another critical past event is the shift in familial dynamics caused by Dyadya’s change of attitude toward James’ wife after being misinformed that she is to give birth to a male heir. If Fourth Jane feels her own sense of security threatened by the foreign intruder, she is shaken with grief and anguish when she learns of Dyadya’s acceptance of the “barbarian”: “In her last month he went to visit her while James was at work in the afternoon. She addressed him as Dyadya . . .” (174). Later on Dyadya goes to the hospital to visit his daughter-in-law and his new grandchild. Siding with her mother in remaining adamantly against the “barbarian,” Fourth Jane feels “a terrible danger crossing.” So she says to her father:

The oneness of you and Ngmah you have built so tightly you can’t undo overnight just to accommodate them. You taught me that first hard lesson, I survived the trial and accepted my place. (196-97)

The final showdown between father and daughter occurs after Dyadya discovers, to his utter disappointment, that Jane has not invited James and his wife to her farewell party. She explains:

. . . I played my part in your system of balances, forever ready to forfeit what was to my own advantage so as not to shake that first principle, the essential mode and core of my existence. It was a hard lesson to
come by and you required it of me. By now it has become a necessity, I hardly know how to be without it and I’m not prepared to throw it out for their sakes for their child. I want to go away. I want my separateness for a time. I don’t know who I am outside of the old context and I’m afraid I might not survive the new. Besides my presence would be insupportable to you if I were not on your side. (196, italics added)

Thus, at the outset of the novel, Fourth Jane is living in Paris trying to start a new life, one that is removed from the patriarchal and social constraints of the past.

Fourth Jane’s shame and the guilt induced by her out-of-wedlock pregnancy and subsequent abortion adds to her anguish over her parents’ troubled relationship. Now in her late twenties or early thirties, Fourth Jane has been dating an unnamed man who buys her plants and invites her to go picnicking on an island. She is apparently pregnant at the time of her parents’ rift over Fifth James and his Caucasian wife. Following Dyadya’s emotional outburst after she does not invite Fifth James and his family to her farewell party, we see Fourth Jane rowing on a lake and picnicking on an island with the man who proposes to her: “Marry me and have the baby. Don’t go away” (162). But she has already made the painful decision to go abroad for one year, hence his repeated requests and her parting tears. Here the “wall of pebbles,” while symbolizing the contradictory condition between security and bondage, reflects her own dilemma (202).

On the one hand, Fourth Jane has no intention of marrying the man, who is not of her own choosing but was instead chosen by her father. This fact is revealed by Dyadya’s confession over the phone, when he tries to introduce another man to her, this time a young Chinese man from Singapore: “I know I made a mistake with the last one. Definitely not for you. This one is for you . . .” (206). On the other hand, finding herself pregnant, she has to deal with “that living thing nestled inside of her” (199). What aggravates her emotional turmoil is the illegality of abortion at that time. As Brian W. Clowes has pointed out in “The Role of Maternal Death in the Abortion Debate”: “Abortion was not yet legal in New York State during the period of 1953 to 1964” (369). As a matter of fact, it was not until 1970 that New York State completely

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8 Her pregnancy is briefly alluded to four times in the novel: “The slow glide of the canoe made her slightly sick and accentuated the sensation of her body’s leaden weight that living thing nestled inside of her . . .” (199); “Amah do I imagine it stirring that coiled warmth inside one cannot have child in retreat sweet that other life a part of me alive and growing with each tick of time” (203); “Sweet, that other part of me stirring” (205); “I am taking you for a long ride she said to the life inside her . . .” (209).
removed all legal prohibitions against abortion (Garrow 834; Sedler 533). Near the end of the novel, the narrator mentions in passing Fourth Jane’s punctual arrival at the doctor’s office (212) after a failed attempt to satisfy her hunger for crabs—a late lunch of crabs. This appointment may well be for pre-abortion consultation or the abortion itself. The setting of the post-abortion is described on page 161: “She was soaking in her bed. The oilcloth under the sheet was crumpled and out of place. She felt hot and cold. She got up and was astonished by her body’s weightlessness...” In light of her traditional Chinese upbringing, these experiences must have left her feeling ashamed and guilty.

One relatively recent event of the past that keeps haunting Fourth Jane is Dyadya’s prolonged death, which takes place after she has left for France. Dyadya looms large over the mind of Fourth Jane. On the one hand, he represents certain stereotypical social attitudes and is guilty of perpetuating the gendered dichotomies of human society. On the other, it is Dyadya’s unfailing love that holds the immigrant family together. His death continues to haunt Fourth Jane, in part because she feels she has failed to live up to his expectations. Hence, she once dreams of her dead father coming back and asking her, “What are your aspirations?” (158). Another reason for the haunting of Dyadya lies in Jane’s having opposed him, for in their confrontation Dyadya says finally, “And if I were to die would you be for her [James’s wife]? If I were to die how would you feel having opposed me?” (197). Hence Jane’s mixed feelings of discontent and guilt. His demise signifies not only the loss of a patriarch, as loving as he is domineering, but also a transformation of the family structure. As Fifth James is the firstborn son, he will, in accordance with the Chinese custom, become the new head of the family. In the wake of Dyadya’s death,

She sat through it three times, twice alone and the third time with Michael on a day they had dinner together. The first two times she found herself weeping just before the lights came on. (103)

What is this cowboy western that has triggered in her such a strong and sudden emotional response? Karen A. Lee recently identifies the film as *The Searchers*, which was produced in 1956 by John Ford. The captivity film addresses, among other things, the issue of racial conflict, identity and belonging. At this point, Fourth Jane is distancing herself from her tyrannical and possessive family and this process would eventually result in her relocation to France. After the film, Sixth Michael took her home, partly because she had just had an abortion earlier in the week and partly because “it was late and dark and cold” (106).
Ngmah and Seventh Jill have come to accept James’s wife, now a mother of one racially mixed daughter; however, Fourth Jane remains firmly set against her. Why? A symptomatic reading of Crossings reveals that what lies behind Jane’s hostility toward her sister-in-law has its roots in the parental gender bias and the corollary sibling discord between the protagonist and her brother.

III. French versus Chinese Patriarchy

In Theorizing Patriarchy, Sylvia Walby argues that “the concept of ‘patriarchy’ is indispensible for an analysis of gender inequality” and that “the concept and theory of patriarchy is essential to capture the depth, persuasiveness and interconnectedness of different aspect of women’s subordination, and can be developed in such a way as to take account of the different forms of gender inequality over time, class and ethnic group” (1, 2). Walby defines “patriarchy” as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (20).

In Crossings, the cross-racial romance between Fourth Jane and the anonymous French journalist turns out to be lopsided. Judging from the fact that the Frenchman turns out to be married and that his wife has just given birth to a baby (“she had had a baby” [154]), we may gather that the French journalist does not really love the female protagonist but basically exploits her for his own physical needs and pleasure during the period of his wife’s pregnancy. Occurrences of narrative present repeatedly indicate that the French journalist is a male chauvinist, who simply ignores her phone calls or the messages she leaves. As Veronica C. Wang has astutely pointed out, the Frenchman is “a self-centered, married ‘foreigner’ who has little time or patience for her but uses her for his own momentary pleasure” (33). Actually, the French journalist wants the displaced and lonely emigré to be something like a butterfly icon when he says, “I told you never to ask why. You must always be amusing and sweet and never ask why” (118). Moreover, instead of showing appreciation for her acts of love—elaborate Chinese meals prepared especially for him—he complains, “You’re always busy cooking whenever I come. It’s not much fun” (123). Once, she makes special efforts to cook an elaborate meal of roast chicken for him, but he “hardly ate the chicken she put on his plate” (66). At another time when she goes out of her way to order fresh sea urchins, his favorite sea food, the Frenchman says, to her dismay, “It tastes like sweetened clay. I can’t eat it” (98). As he controls the frequency of their meetings, she is “again reduced to a status of dependency, not dissimilar to her relationship with her powerful father” (Wang 32).
What kind of a person is Dyadya, who looms large in Fourth Jane’s consciousness when she is carrying on an affair with the French journalist in Paris? In the eyes of the female protagonist and her mother, Dyadya is a loving patriarch who figures importantly in their immigrant existence. Discernible in their stream-of-consciousness recollections of him is the sustained tension between vignettes about his gestures of love and those about the impositions of his male power. While preparing for the first family gathering after Dyadya’s death, Ngmah confesses to how she sometimes feels as if she were chattel while going out with him for dinner:

> Annoyance stiffened my body when he used to pause in front of shopwindows along our way to examine objects that might serve as suitable presents for First, Second, Third or Fourth. I was so impatient with cold and hunger and thirst standing with him by the window while he took his time looking. But should something happen to catch my eye and I would stop to look he would urge me along as if I were chattel. And if I did not follow fast enough he would dash off like a ship tossing from side to side with each stride, would cross the street before the light changed leaving me stranded on the corner while traffic zoomed left and right. (142)

For Fourth Jane, Dyadya’s patriarchal consciousness is most vividly shown in their confrontation over lunch on the day following the farewell dinner. This segment in a sense acts out Dyadya’s patriarchal authority as he repeatedly wants Fourth Jane to accept his order without questioning him: “I am your father and I know what is right for you” (195); “I am Father I can do no wrong” (196); “I am Father I know what is right” (197).

As a “Chinese of the old school,” Dyadya cherishes its heritage of filial piety and emphasizes the individual’s place and behavior within his/her social context. The ordinal numbers attached to Dyadya’s children as well as those of Uncle Two and Aunt Three designate their overall position in the family.11 On the occasion of Jane’s Grandma’s 84th birthday and her funeral the year after, the members of the extended family are “assembled in order of patrilinear precedence” (30). Jane’s father, Grandma’s eldest son, is prescribed by custom to lead both occasions (and other family gatherings like Ngmah’s birthday which is celebrated the last week in April):

11 The title of Jade Snow Wong’s 1945 autobiography *Fifth Chinese Daughter* bespeaks the same practice her parents uphold.
Dyadya summoned. Everyone came in from the garden to assemble in the living room, sitting on chairs, sofas, the carpeted floor. Dyadya said in Chinese We are together here today to honor our mother. (26-27)

Dyadya, Uncle Two, Aunt Three stood in a row in front of Grandmother’s coffin. . . .

Dyadya turned to address his sister and brother in a loud voice. Our mother is dead, her children are left alone. Prescribed by custom as eldest son he led the dirge while the two others chanted along in polyphony. (33-34)

Later in the novel, in another episode taking place more than two decades before, the narrator shows Dyadya’s unquestioning compliance to Grandma’s wishes, in his willingness to perform an operation on her when she summons him from his studies in Germany: “The telegram arrived in the middle of my studies. Since it was a question of my mother who would not allow anyone else to operate it was unthinkable that I should not return to do her bidding” (175). 12

Just as Dyadya plays his filial role dutifully, he also expects his children to play theirs. Take for example a small incident occurring in London. While they are preparing to take the tube to Kensington Garden after a day’s outing, Dyadya loses sight of First Nancy for a short while. Dyadya takes this opportunity to instruct her and Fifth James to assume the roles prescribed by their age and gender: “Nancy you are my firstborn and you are to lead. . . . James you are my firstborn son and you are to lead” (57-58). From Dyadya’s point of view, if First Nancy has accepted her role and has performed it to the best of her ability before he gives her away in marriage, Fifth James has apparently failed him by defying his order. Unlike Dyadya, who honors Grandma’s wishes by returning home from Germany, Fifth James, after serving as a soldier in the U.S. Army in Germany for more than two years, disobeys his father’s request to postpone his own marriage till he comes home. Contrary to Dyadya’s original expectation (“. . . the letter will do and James will return” [51]), James proceeds with his own plans to travel and get married while still abroad. In marrying a Caucasian woman regardless of parental opposition, Fifth James has shattered not only Dyadya’s initial plan for the whole family to travel back to their

12 On page 32, the narrator also briefly mentions Grandma’s first operation performed by Dyadya.
homeland, but also Ngmah’s cherished hope to “have clothes cut expertly and sewn to measure” (15).

Dyadya’s fury and disappointment betray his authoritarian tendencies and the tenacity of his Chinese upbringing; in other words, James’s defiance threatens his patriarchal authority. Moreover, he wants his firstborn son to observe the traditional Chinese wedding ceremony. That is what the patriarch means when he blames them, upon their return, for marrying “in the dark” rather than “in the light” (55). Dyadya’s patriarchal consciousness is brought into bold relief when James’s wife says, “I will share him with you fair and square”:

Dyadya roared, raised his clenched fist in the air to bring it smashing down on his own knee.

Share? Share my son? James is my son he belongs to me. He is my firstborn son of my flesh and blood and through him are my other sons born as I am my father’s son and he the son of my grandfather. . . . You did not ask my permission to take what is mine. I never gave it. You married in the dark not in the light. You are giving me permission to share my son with you! I never gave you permission to take my son. What is mine unless I give it must be asked of me. My daughters of my flesh and blood I gave away. I gave permission to the men who asked me permission. Each one of them faced me in the light and asked my permission. (55)

As if to comment on what Dyadya has said about his daughters, the narrator in reminiscing about First Nancy’s wedding in the succeeding segment, remarks, “Dyadya did not give her away but kept his First and all his rest in self-raging love and self-sweet bondage” (57). To restore his eroding authority, Dyadya punishes James by “exclud[ing] him for many years” both physically and financially (178).

But it may be difficult for the American-educated son to fully understand Dyadya’s reasoning now that he was just a baby while in China. In fact, as the narrator has indicated, both James and his new bride believe that they had acted “sensibly”:

We wanted very much to get married. We wanted to travel and it seemed to us a good opportunity since we were abroad to do both rather than come back and wait. We are sorry if you do not think we did the right thing. Besides she has a crowd of relatives whom she did not
want at the wedding and that was why we decided to do what we thought was the sensible thing. (53)

The father-son conflict is complicated by yet another issue—the question of interracial marriage. Obviously, just as Dyadya tries to introduce his fourth daughter to a young Chinese suitor from Singapore, both he and Ngmah would prefer that their firstborn son marry a Chinese woman, presumably with a view toward protecting the racial purity of the family tree. This desire is manifested in their incipient planning to travel to China, for the first time in more than twenty years, to find a Chinese bride for James (“. . . what woman among those eligible will he choose, help him choose” [15]). Hence their hostility toward James’s Caucasian wife, whose first physical appearance is depicted as an invasion into the family’s metaphorical walled-in sanctuary:

The barbarian stood outside the barred gate of the wall. After fruitless years of patient search, with gnawing heart, she found a weakness along the immense wall encircling the garden, found, followed, married Fifth James and entered the garden at dusk. (50)

If Fourth Jane supports her parents in opposing the marriage, her opposition derives not so much from an ingrained fear of racial crossing, in view of the fact that she engages herself in an interracial affair while in Paris, as from sibling discord with roots in her parents’ gender bias.

### IV. Gender Inequality and Sibling Discord

In *Crossings*, most of the events Fourth Jane recalls while living in exile in Paris are concerned with herself, her parents or her siblings, underscoring the centrality of the family. And the family is, according to Sylvia Walby, “conventionally considered to be central to women’s lives and to the determination of gender inequality” (61). Fourth Jane’s consciousness of gender inequality is subtly exemplified in her memories of parental behaviors and family regulations. For instance, a memory vignette opens with a gender-based difference in meal time: “The boys took their meals separately behind the closed doors of the dining room . . . an hour earlier than the girls . . . ” (94).

Occupying the middle position in a well-to-do family of seven children, Fourth Jane not only enjoys fewer familial privileges than her younger brothers, but even
receives less parental attention than First Nancy or Seventh Jill, the last born who is, according to the dominating patriarch, “loved like all the rest but a little more” (180). In a succession of flashbacks of their sojourn to England, the narrator displays the privileges enjoyed by the two sons, James in particular:

Nghmah held James bundled and bonneted upright in her arms. Her face glowed with fierce pride at presenting to all comers her long-awaited firstborn male whose features resembled hers. Michael perched on a high stool, frowned. (94-95)

Another scene shows James and Michael dressed identically, but the former is enjoying his more privileged status as the firstborn son while reading a Chinese comic book: “James held open the pages of a Chinese comic strip book with Chinese words formed in the balloons. Timid and eager, Michael peered over the other’s shoulder for his share” (95). Then the narrator symptomatically displays the father’s gesture of love for his long-awaited firstborn male:

Wearing a heavy winter overcoat and in golfer’s cap and golfer’s ribbed stocking sat Dyadya on a park bench cradling James in the crook of his arm. James’s head rested firmly on Dyadya’s heart, the length of his body embraced in Dyadya’s arm. (95)

Significantly, Dyadya’s recollection about Fifth James after “Account 595225” begins and ends with “I waited for him a long time.” This sentence is repeated once more in his stream-of-consciousness recollection. Dyadya’s three repetitions also hint at the tremendous pressure Nghmah was under after giving birth to four daughters. Likewise, Fourth Jane’s gender-crossing Chinese name—“Chuang-Hua belonging in name both to the male attribute and the female” (31)—heralds the increasing parental desire to beget a son in the patriarchal Chinese society.

Among the girls, Fourth Jane often does not enjoy as much parental attention as First Nancy, Second Katherine, or Seventh Jill. This is subtly revealed in the ear wax-cleaning episode, which is quoted at length here because it encapsulates Jane’s familial status and the inadequate parental attention devoted to her:

It was First Nancy’s turn. She proffered her head under the light. Nghmah bent over to look in her ear. She held a small metal rod the size of a crochet hook but instead of the hook at the end there was a tiny
spoon-shaped tip no bigger than a seed pearl. With this instrument she gently loosened and pried out the wax sticking to the walls of the ear. Jubilation when a chunky fragment came up, paper thin fragments veined like wings of flies. Sometimes she lost it in the unreachable recesses of the ear. Then it was Second Katherine’s turn. If Ngmah had any patience left she took on the rest according to preference.

Ngmah why not me, why not me? (95-96, italics added)

The in medias res opening of the episode suggests that James, and possibly also Michael, have preceded First Nancy in receiving Ngmah’s loving attention. In what follows, the third-person narrator illustrates Jane’s subsequent frustration after Fifth James, in a vain attempt to take out her ear wax with a hairpin, inflicts a sharp pain:

. . . She shied and tossed her head. The pin dropped to the floor. She nursed her ear by pressing the lobe hard against the opening.

What happened? Did you let the pin drop in my ear?

Yes.

Why?

I was bored. I didn’t want to continue.

He walked away from her, sat down at his desk by the window, opened a book and began to read. (96)

Apparently, her parents’ gender bias has propelled Fourth Jane to bear a repressed grudge against Fifth James, repressed because “she [can]not contradict him [her father]” (196). So, she displaces her dissatisfaction with the unequal treatment she has received in the patriarchal family upon James’s wife, the object of the family’s collective discontent.

Significantly, this unhappy childhood memory appears right after adult Fourth Jane has had an impetuous argument with James’s wife in Dyadya’s hospital room, where the patriarch lays dying. Disregarding Jane’s suggestion that they let Dyadya sleep, James’s wife tries to wake him up by persistently whispering in his ear. As his eyes remain closed,

again she rubbed the back of his hand with the tips of her bird-like fingers so that his hands and arms trembled from the onslaught of her fierce persistence.

What are you doing to him!
The other stepped away from the bed and rushed out of the room.

He did not move or open his eyes. (93, italics added)

The narrative juxtaposition of the unpleasant experience of the past with an incident of the present serves as a telltale sign of the strained relationship between the two siblings. Moreover, Fourth Jane’s “What are you doing to him!” together with the narrator’s subsequent syntax seems to imply that Fourth Jane holds James’s wife partly responsible for Dyadya’s eventual death. Another telltale signal of the sibling discord lies in the fact that apart from the unforgettable ear wax-cleaning episode, there is virtually no dialogue or communication between Fifth James and Fourth Jane. That she deliberately refrains from inviting James and his pregnant wife to her farewell party provides further evidence of their strife.

In the eyes of Fourth Jane, who grows up and lives through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Dyadya’s gender prejudice comes to the fore again when his mistaken information that “she [James’s wife] was to bear James’s son” (174) prompts him to accept her as his daughter-in-law. The text does not specify how Dyadya gets the wrong information; however, it does offer clues for the identity of the baby. On the evening of Ngmah’s dinner party, the first family reunion since Dyadya’s death, Fourth Jane saw the baby girl opening the door to her room:

The door to the corridor swung open. A child stood in the doorway and stared inside. Composed, she held her ground, enormous eyes unflinching from the stare of the other. Her stubby child shoes made sharp abrupt thumps on the bare wooden floor as she approached the bed. She stood feet apart, riveted to the floor, directly in front of the other. The mother entered.

Oh, there you are. Hush. And don’t touch. Don’t touch Aunty’s things. (144, italics added)

After a short and formal greeting with Jane, the mother “took the child’s hand and led her out” (145, italics added).

Overlooked by critics like Amy Ling and Veronica C. Wang, this seemingly trivial detail turns out to be crucial because Dyadya’s change of attitude toward James’s pregnant wife appears to hinge on the (mis)understanding that she is going to give birth to a son. As the narrator discloses through Dyadya’s stream of consciousness:
In her last month he went to visit her while James was at work in the afternoon. She addressed him as Dyadya and why not? No matter what the past she was now a member of the family, she was to bear James’s son. Another life, another promise. . . (174)

The quote seems to suggest that what prompts the patriarchal Dyadya to acknowledge James’s Caucasian wife as his daughter-in-law is the expectation that with the upcoming birth of a male heir, the family’s patrilineal line of succession will be secure. In other words, at this point Dyadya is concerned primarily with the issue of patrilineage rather than that of interracial mixture. For Fourth Jane who grows up in a patriarchal household while receiving an American education, Dyadya’s unannounced change of attitude not only endangers the long-cherished parental unity but brings into bold relief his ingrained gender bias.

Dyadya’s acceptance of James’s wife makes Fourth Jane feel “a terrible danger crossing” (196) as she sides with Ngmah in remaining adamant against the “barbarian.” In this new context, staying would expose the true reason behind her antagonism towards James’s wife and bring about an open rebellion against the patriarchal law of the Father (“I am Father I can do no wrong” [196] or “I am Father I know what is right” [197]). Hence, Jane’s painful decision to leave for a year. Her decision is painful not only because she has to quit the job she likes but also because she is pregnant with the child of an anonymous lover who helps her tend the garden terrace of her rented New York City apartment where she has been living alone. Interestingly, in refusing to recognize Fifth James’s wife, Fourth Jane switches positions with the Caucasian mother-to-be in the mind of the enraged patriarch. The former becomes “the barbarian” (196) while the latter becomes “the better daughter” (197).

**V. Conclusion**

Chuang Hua’s episodic representation of Fourth Jane’s negotiation with her past reveals that the past constitutes an important and inescapable part of her present. In other words, her present grows out of her past. As Stuart Hall has perceptively reiterated:

> We bear the traces of a past, the connections of the past. We cannot conduct this kind of cultural politics without returning to the past but it is never a return of a direct and literal kind. The past is not waiting for
us back there to recoup our identities against. It is always retold, rediscovered, reinvented. It has to be narrativized. We go to our own pasts through history, through memory, through desire, not as a literal fact. (“Old and New Identities” 58)

A remark by William Faulkner made at the University of Virginia is decidedly pertinent to any discussion of representations of the past. In response to a question concerning his use of the stream-of-consciousness technique and his objective in using long sentences over short ones, Faulkner replied:

To me, no man is himself, he is the sum of his past. There is no such thing really as was because the past is. It is a part of every man, every woman, and every moment. All of his and her ancestry, background, is all a part of himself and herself at any moment. And so a man, a character in a story at any moment of action is not just himself as he is then, he is all that made him, and the long sentence is an attempt to get his past and possibly his future into an instant in which he does something. (84)

In Requiem for a Nun, Faulkner makes a similar remark through the mouth of Gavin Stevens: “The past is never dead. It is not even past” (92). In History as a System and Other Essays: Toward a Philosophy of History, Jose Ortega y Gasset points out more succinctly that “the past is man’s moment of identity” (213).

In Crossings Chuang Hua creates an adult female émigré born in China but growing up in the States in a patriarchal household where she does not have an identity of her own. After she engages in a love affair with a French journalist who turns out to be an egoistic adulterer, her family and personal pasts keep invading her consciousness. Discernible from the episodic flashbacks represented by Chuang Hua are the interrelated issues of parental gender bias and the corollary discord between Fourth Jane and Fifth James. Being a fourth daughter of a Chinese patriarchal family,

\[13\] I quote Faulkner because I see both thematic and formal correlations between The Sound and the Fury and Chuang Hua’s Crossings. Thematically, the past looms large in the consciousness of the characters in both works. In Crossings, memories of family pasts figure importantly in the mind of Fourth Jane. Formally, Chuang Hua also employs the modernist stream-of-consciousness, multiple narration, and interior monologue techniques. As is the case with Faulkner, Chuang Hua demands that the reader actively participate in the creative process. Apart from its narrative peculiarity, Crossings is likewise distinguished by its experimental structure and form as well as by its method of fragmented narration.
Jane enjoys less parental attention than her two younger brothers, particularly Fifth James. Therefore, when James incurs the displeasure of his parents by marrying a Caucasian woman without their consent, Fourth Jane transfers her repressed grudge against Fifth James to his wife, who is antagonistically perceived as a “barbarian.” As gender concern lies at the heart of the patriarch’s change of attitude toward James’s wife after he is wrongly informed that she is about to give birth to a male heir, Fourth Jane sides with Ngmah in remaining adamant against the mother-to-be. This explains why she does not invite James and his pregnant wife to her farewell party. Under such a new context, staying around would expose the real cause of her hostility against James’s wife and lead to an open rebellion against the law of the Father. Hence her painful decision to exile herself for a year. Furthermore, Chuang Hua’s deployment of the past seems to suggest that the past is really never “past,” and, as Faulkner suggests, is an integral part of the present. Finally, in view of its narrative and thematic similarity to and precedence over Maxine Hong Kingston’s famous 1976 memoir, we can now better appreciate why Amy Ling hails the forgotten work as “[a] precursor of . . . The Woman Warrior” and “a major landmark in Asian American literature” (Foreword 1).

Works Cited

14 In her pioneering essay on Crossings, Ling similarly regards the novel as “the work most like a precursor to The Woman Warrior” while showering it with praise as “masterly,” “challenging,” “unusual,” and “exceptional” (“A Rumble in the Silence” 29, 36). In Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry, Ling writes, “in form and style it anticipates Kingston’s The Woman Warrior” (108).


___.*. Foreword. Chuang 1-6.


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