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REVIEW ESSAY



“Report a Crime”: Fae Myenne Ng’s *Orphan Bachelors*¹

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Maxine Hong Kingston’s ingenious parsing of the Chinese idiom for revenge—*baochou*—as “report a crime” has heralded an Asian American heroic tradition in which “the reporting is the vengeance.” The act of exposing official crimes through writing is executed by Fae Myenne Ng 伍慧明 in *Orphan Bachelors: A Memoir on Being a Confession Baby, Chinatown Daughter, Baa-Bai Sister, Caretaker of Exotics, Literary Balloon Peddler, and Grand Historian of a Doomed American Family*. (In this review I refer to Ng as the author and Fae as the narrator.) Ng’s memoir divulges the impact of the Chinese Exclusion Laws and the Chinese Confession program, “two slamming doors” on her family and the immigrant community at large: “America didn’t have to kill any Chinese; her law assured none would be born” (119).¹ Ng’s family would have sunk into oblivion had it not been for the Chinatown daughter who emulates Sima Qian 司馬遷, the Chinese Grand Historian for whom filial piety and dedication to history were inextricable. Sima Qian, who chose castration over death to complete the 2000-year history of China started by his father, both prefigures the pangs of what David L. Eng calls “racial castration” and emblemizes Ng’s filial articulations.² This memoir reveals the personal and communal repercussions of the Asian Exclusion and the Red Scare. Ng, a champion storyteller, lays bare unspeakable official crimes and trumpets, in brazen Cantonese English, the exceptional perseverance, resilience, and gumption of ordinary people like the Orphan Bachelors, Betty Ann Ong 鄧月薇 (1956–2001, the American heroine of 9/11), Fong Wing Sun 方榮山 (1894–2021, a survivor of the *Titanic*), and Mrs. Lily Chin 陳余瓊芳 (1920–2002, mother of Vincent Chin). What greater revenge is there than reminding the citizenry of the enormous misdeeds perpetrated in the name of the nation and making these valiant ancestors speak again on the page?

As a long-time Asian Americanist, I am familiar with most of the watershed events in Chinese immigrant history covered in *Orphan Bachelors*: goldmining, railroad building (and equal-pay strike), exclusion, confession, and the killing of Vincent Chin. Yet this opus pricked up my ears anew when, for instance, Ng details: “The Chinese could only work the mines long abandoned by the white man. In 1852, all Chinese were fined twenty dollars every month with a Foreign Miners’ Tax. By 1870, this amounted to five million dollars, a quarter of California’s revenue” (42). About the railroad workers, Ng notes, “On the Steel

Road, each team of twenty Chinese Rail Men hired their own cooks” (44). Ng’s sister’s father-in-law’s great grandfather – Ancestor Lowe – was one such cook, who quickly “set up a rotation of meals: “dried oysters [蠔豉], scallops [乾瑤柱], shrimp and cod, fermented tofu [腐乳] and pickled vegetables [鹹菜] . . . mustard greens [芥菜], bok choy [白菜], and water spinach [空心菜]” (45). “He boiled their drinking water and had a tea wagon of fresh tea always available; the Chinese Rail Men rarely got dysentery” (45). The Chinese workers were given the more dangerous work, longer hours but were paid less than the white workers. On June 26, 1867, the Chinese did not work and demanded equal pay. They did not quite succeed, but got something more valuable: “Crocker [a railroad executive and one of the founders of the Central Pacific Railroad] was terrified . . . *We Chinese paaui zai* [炮製] *that Crocker!*” (46). *Paaui zai* [炮製] is a unique Cantonese expression meaning to “fix” someone bad via figurative implosion/explosion. In Fae’s vivid translation: “We Chinese blew Crocker’s mind” (46). When the Steel Road was finished in 1869, it was “not only ahead of schedule, but also under budget” (46). Early Cantonese immigrants were the antitheses of a docile model minority. But they indeed toiled intrepidly: “In those days, our forefathers did whatever was needed to make a living, and we Cantonese are masters at doing the impossible. When someone says, *can’t*, we say, *can*” (44).

Despite the enormous crimes exposed, the book heartens, on account of the singular love stories and the courageous deeds inscribed. The marriage between Fae’s parents is not the least romantic, but the bond is unbreakable. After Mah found her grandfather’s hanging body, Deh bribes his way to get to Hong Kong, where he procures snake gall during his two-hour shore leave to heal his wife, sailing 7000 nautical miles to find a cure to restore her courage. Mah’s willingness to abide by Deh is forbearing beyond measure, because “whatever he endured in America was nothing compared to what he’d survived in China” (222).

The marriage is blighted by discriminatory legislation: “Exclusion and Confession worked in concert to cultivate suspicion within the community and ruin loyalties within families” (83). The Chinese Confession program (1956–1965), known as *Taan Bak* 坦白 in Cantonese, called on Chinese who had immigrated to the U.S. as paper sons to disclose their false status and the names of their “paper” relatives. Mah wanted Deh to confess to pave the way for her own mother to come to the U.S. Deh is reluctant: “If I confess, you deport. If I don’t, you deport . . . *I no fool*” (82). But he soon yields for the sake of their matrimony by confessing and swearing that his name – You Thin Toy – is fictitious (Figure 1). Whereupon his citizenship is revoked. Father “swore injustice” (119) and accuses his wife of using him.

Ng interlaces the father’s haunted life and the Orphan Bachelors’ vicissitudes with official papers – the fateful imprimaturs:

Exclusion, Confession, and Naturalization were [Deh’s] three paper gods. My father bought his paper name to enter America, surrendered it to stay in the country, and refused to relinquish both names when he naturalized. Maybe my father is a new species of tree in the Flowery Kingdom. (93–94)



Figure 1. Paper name in metal, made at sea. Courtesy of Fae Myenne Ng.

Orphan Bachelors surpasses American history. It takes an artist to trace its dark chapter to paper gods and to envision Father as a new arboreal species grafted in the Land of the Brave (albeit not free).

Although the memoir celebrates the parental marriage that endures against all odds, it is also a cautionary tale for women against matrimony, advancing gender concepts far ahead of the time, even today. Mah, a seamstress, has been both the primary breadwinner and homemaker, and she is beloved by all her children; seafaring Deh is later shunned by his two sons, perhaps as tit for tat, absence for absence. Upon learning about Fae's impending marriage, Mah offers prenuptial advice: "Do not love in pity. Throw grief into the ocean and let the Queen Mother of the Four Seas take the man who asks and asks" (222). The daughter takes the lesson to heart (153). After her brooding spouse survives an attempted suicide, Fae returns him on Mother's Day (as a present) to her "Augusta-raised" mother-in-law, "whose gleeful welcoming word was: 'Finally'" (148).

Ng, a self-proclaimed "Grand Historian of a Doomed American Family," is attentive to a crew of Orphan Bachelors, particularly to Deh. Words are the magnets that draw father and daughter together unto and beyond death. Fae muses: "While others took breaks at the steelyard, Dad soldered his paper name, You Thin Toy, a long weight of a sentence that I have on my writing desk now" (192). (Do pause to relish this polysemic "sentence.") The daughter takes after her father in savoring every word, especially any inscription by his hand. Once when he was in the wild ocean near Hilo, he mailed a note home addressed to Fae: "*Yuen leung*. I can't be at home" (94).

"Home." It can be translated to mean the place where a family lives. If I believed this translation, it meant his abandonment was about a street, a ghetto named Chinatown.

"Home." It can also be translated to mean family. This painful, intimate translation meant our father was giving up on us.

Yuen leung. My father intimated its meaning so that I understood: *yuen* means "willing," which implies original intention. *Leung* means "compassion."

Today I am older now than he was when he wrote this note, and I realize what it must have taken for him to ask for pardon. In our family culture, forgiveness is never an option, so we didn't have a word for it. I now know: my father was asking for a generosity of heart, for trust in his love. I can hear him intone: "*Disregard the outcome of my actions and trust my original intention.*" (94–95)

The daughter's close reading of Deh's seven words – "*Yuen leung*. I can't be at home" – moistens my eyes. *Yuen leung* 原諒 means "pardon" – "forgive me." It is rare (to the extent of unheard of) for a traditional Chinese parent, especially a father, to ask a child for forgiveness. Deh's message shows how much he *trusts* his firstborn to understand his *intention*. This absent father is not about to abandon his family, let alone his daughter, who in turn parses the idiom (word by word the way Hong Kingston renders *baochou* 報仇 as "report a crime") in an attempt not to forgive (utterly unnecessary) but to assuage his guilt: "I kept the card and whenever I read it, I become his child again, hopeless to help him. He'd had a hard life, and I'd had a lifetime of cultivating a plan to relieve him of suffering" (95). The author, who teaches a course on fathers and daughters at Cal, reads the father's signature as does a literary critic to further nullify the action for which he seeks her pardon:

“He didn’t sign with the formal ‘Father.’ Instead he used his paper name – the fake American name – as if his abandonment were also fake” (95).

Just as Hong Kingston ends *The Woman Warrior* with the story about T’sai Yen to evoke her fraught relationship with her mother Brave Orchid, so Ng uses the story about Sima Qian – told with gusto by Father “like an opera” (234), the suspense compounded in the daughter’s retelling – to convey her filiation and affiliation with Deh. This aforementioned Chinese official’s bio is more heartbreaking than fiction. A general (a good friend of Sima Qian) and his entire family were beheaded for losing a battle; Sima Qian, righteous and foolish enough to speak against this savage sentence, was given the choice of death or castration. This tale within a tale, in which the courageous heart and the loving heart beat in sync, is at once a tribute to Sima Qian and an extension of his filial mission – executed by Ng across time and space.

Writers of Chinese origin are alternately complimented or criticized for being exotic or mainstream, for being faithful to their ancestral culture or distorting Chinese lore, for appealing to the Orientalist gaze or demonizing Cathay. Please beware of putting an author Ishmael Reed extols as “among the globe’s finest writers” in any literary ghetto (book jacket, *Orphan Bachelors*). Ng, in honoring her parents and in alluding to the Grand Historian, is far from being a model American or a deferential Confucian. She gives neither nation-state any quarter. Readers are beckoned not so much to marvel at the staunch filiation of the two officials (Sima Qian and his father) as to shudder at the emperor who meted out inhumane punishments. Ng herself navigates strenuously for what Gish Jen dubs an “interdependent self.”³ She tells her Berkeley students that she expects them to “put themselves first, to break the rules I don’t want them to become America’s new artillery – doctors, technicians, engineers, and lawyers – the new coolies who will fuel this country’s economy” (165). The author might have disappointed her mother by refusing to procreate and her father by distinguishing herself in the barbarian tongue (English) that had dictated his cribbed and cabined life, but her parents would surely be gratified by the daughter’s “sacrificial papers”: *Orphan Bachelors* is a filial testimony extraordinaire that transmutes the “book of lies” by which Deh entered the U.S. as a “paper son” into a timeless epic. This grand historian is also the *zhiyin* nonpareil of both Mah, the textile artist, and Deh, the wordsmith. I too disappointed my father, a physician who wanted his children to study medicine and made Eldest Brother learn taichi; and Mother, a housewife, who wanted me to marry someone in Hong Kong after high school and be around for good. Though a Typhoon accident, of six children I was the only one who shared her love of Cantonese opera. I believe I too am honoring my parents by teaching taichi and Cantonese opera across the Pacific.

In addition to reporting the crimes of Exclusion and Confession and the sorry aftermath, the Chinatown daughter is intent on proclaiming her Toishanese inheritance: “I heard the dialect of the hundreds of thousands that came from my homeland in Canton: the hatchetspeak of my great-grandfather working the abandoned gold mines; the seething courtesy of my great-uncle, a houseboy in San Antonio who later lost his business in the Watts riots; the gutter-hissing of army uncles, cousins, and brothers; and the blasphemous cussing of my merchant seaman father” (139–40). “Toishanese is shouted, not spoken,” Ng continues. “Their speakers are loud, not only because they are fearless but also because they’re uninhibited and *baa-bai*; everything is their business” (140). The last sentence glosses the adjective *baa-bai* 巴閉 in the book’s subtitle; it means arrogant, pushy, flashy, or flamboyant. Ng further expatiates:

Baa-bai is a uniquely Cantonese term that my parents used to describe the arrogant customer or the grand banquet, anyone who commanded a room with confidence. I was responsible for my siblings, and if they did wrong, it was my fault, so I was the *baa-bai* sister, bossy and loud, with grand responsibilities. Outside the home, I was my parents' translator and there was no tolerance for shyness or fear. There could be no grievance I would not translate and no room too scary to enter.⁴

Orphan Bachelors, more so than Ng's *Bone* and *Steer Toward Rock*, resounds to the Toishanese cadence, music, expletives, and humor, so much so that the characters spit and sputter, chant and lament off the page. The memoir's unusually long subtitle signifies on the Cantonese idiom *cheong hei* 長氣—an expression used by poet Nellie Wong in *The Death of Long Steam Lady*: 長氣婆之死. *Hei* (*qi* in Mandarin) is an omnipotent word that can steam and chill. "Just add *hei* to any characteristic to accentuate its potency," Mr. Lowe (Ancestor Lowe's great grandson) cracks (48). Fae tells that when Deh fumes about injustices, his fury can be compressed into "*hei*, the breath, our core energy," but Mah would accuse him of having "*long-winded hei* [長氣]" (47; Ng is roguishly redundant in her English translation here). There are more: "*gik-hei* [激氣]" (47) means being vexed, *sigh-hei* 噉氣 means wasting breath (i.e., no point talking to someone), "*san-hei* [生氣]" (55) means lively, *toon hei* 斷氣 means dead, "*God-hei* [神氣]" (55) means god-like, pompous, *yoan-hei* 冤氣 means clingy, sticky, *ciu-hei* 潮氣 means coquettish, *tsam-hei* 嘔/嘔/譟/嘔/嘔/侵氣 means talking over and over about the same point, and "*wok-hei* [鑊氣]" (48) means giving off the kind of torched aroma that only a flaming wok can fire up. (Ideographs and unquoted expressions and are my 長氣 contributions.)

Cantonese lament is staggering. Ng's "report" of the well-known hate crime against Vincent Chin pierces our eardrums anew when his mother's native tongue is amplified: "Despite practically being ordered to speak English in court, she's resilient in her sorrow by speaking her own powerful Cantonese, in diction, in tense, in truth" (78). "I understand Mrs. Lily Chin's dialect," Fae tells. "It's the language for lament . . . the pulse behind the mother's sigh, the despair behind her silence" (76). She asks her students whether Mrs. Chin should be allowed to give her statement in Cantonese and to consider the "memory of their own ancestral language as an unadulterated power of voice" (76).

Ng's accentuation of Cantonese conjures up for me Liza Chan 陳綽薇 (1953–2019), a beloved classmate from Hong Kong and the attorney who, along with Helen Zia, led the fight for the federal charges that resulted in the two killers being accused of two counts of violating Vincent Chin's civil rights under Title 18 of the U.S. Code. When Ronald Ebens was acquitted of all charges, Attorney Chan was devastated: "For too long, it has been too searing for me to revisit my 'failure,' on such an epic scale and under the harshest limelight."⁵ Liza explained why the transcript of the tape recordings of her interviews with witnesses is full of errors:

It was my accent—still somewhat heavily British-tint then—that apparently threw the transcribers off . . . not unusual at all in those pre-BBC America, pre-globalization days . . . That, or if I were to be cynical, seeing that I appeared Chinese, the court reporter decided implicitly that I must have been speaking "Chinglish," and thus, consciously or subconsciously made a mess of the transcript of my oral presentation.⁶

Liza was so mortified that she knelt in front of Mrs. Chin for forgiveness. She might have uttered *Yuen Leung*, to which Mrs. Chin might have answered: *Disregard the outcome of your actions. I trust your original intention.*

Like Hong Kingston in *The Woman Warrior*, Ng devotes an entire chapter to the “Ballad of Mulan.” Instead of kowtowing to hegemonic Chinese culture, both authors stress the ballad’s “barbarian” origin: “Mulan was a barbarian from China’s northeast province” (135). Fae listened to her aunt chanting the ballad when she was eight: “My heart was afire . . . *Jik jik fook jik jik*. Mulan is at her loom. Mulan is sighing The staccato incantation stunned me” (131). This poem ignites Fae’s devotion to her parents, who had to brave the New World “with nothing, no horse or bridle, no rein or whip, and no long, sharp sword. They came only with their desire to fight and conquer and capture the best life” (132). Fae as a child is moved not only by the ballad’s filial message but also by the rhythmic sound, which makes her exclaim, “Begone math! I wanted to learn the Ballad” (132). She feels empowered by the language: “*jik* sounds like a thrust, an attack” (131). She tells how the ballad has illuminated her young mind: “work sounds can be art . . . a woman’s work can be noble” (134).

The sound of the first line even inspires her to “study textiles and then to write” (132). Weaving and textiles intertextually connect Mulan and Mah, who not only worked as a sweatshop seamstress by day, but also continued to sew by night to make extra money and trendy costumes for her children. To Fae, Mah is an organic artist, of a piece with the art of sewing:

As a child, I looked at my mother’s back more than into her face. When I discovered Tillie Olsen’s *I Stand Here Ironing*, I understood I could write about labor as love I am still the daughter standing behind my mother’s sewing chair. I know the intimate contours of my mother’s skull, the soft points on her ears the dip of her lobes, the round of her back, and the protrusion of her shoulder blade . . . and smell her scent as her hands and feet dance cloth to life. (117–118)

Ng further links the ballad with the story about Mencius’s mother, who moved three times so her son would behave. He finally did when the mother sheared the beautiful cloth she had woven to convey her disappointment in the pre-mature Sage. The Chinatown daughter won’t need such a heartrending lesson. Back in Chinese school, she has already learned “Song of a Wandering Child” 《游子吟》, a famous Tang poem that associates maternal love with sewing (Figure 2).

In her Ethnic Studies course on fathers and daughters during the pandemic, Professor Fae assigned “The Ballad of Mulan” in Chinese along with Arthur Waley’s translation. “When was the last time your parents helped you with homework?,” she asked (133). Annie, one student, said her father had bragged endlessly about Cantonese being the “true language for poetry,” but she didn’t believe him till he recited the ballad and transformed himself into “an exuberant, confident man, a word warrior” (133–4). Michelle, another student, offered to recite the ballad’s opening lines: “she seems to take two breaths before shifting into Cantonese and . . . she has the famed opera star Bak Sheut-sin’s elocution” (134). Bak Sheut-sin 白雪仙 (1928–) was one of the most celebrated divas in Hong Kong, still alive and coaching. On the last day of class, Fae/Ng played my recitation (albeit in the guise of Aunt Juvenda) from Curtis Choy’s documentary *What’s Wrong with Frank Chin?* and her students

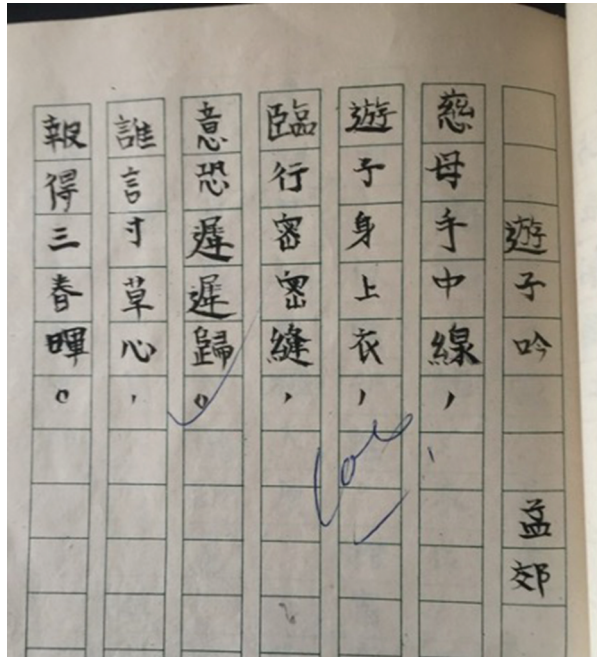


Figure 2. “Song of a Wandering Child” 《遊子吟》 by Meng Jiao 孟郊 in Fae’s hand. Courtesy of Fae Myenne Ng.

sent me grateful notes afterward.⁷ When preparing for class the previous eve, Fae picked up a square of paper that had been “floating” around her desk for years: “To my shock, it was ‘The Ballad of Mulan,’ all 360 characters ... written in my father’s hand, his once-bold calligraphy wobbly from dementia” (135-6). What an uncanny clincher to a seminar on fathers and daughters.

Ng has infiltrated Cantonese/Toishanese (which both Chinese and American canonical gatekeepers consider to be a mere dialect) into her prose. Suffice to introduce just one expression—*taan sai gai* 嘆世界—to show how Ng adroitly uses the idiom to weave together Deh’s Taoist bent, the orphan bachelors’ disposition, Fae’s emulation of Deh, and the esprit de corps exuded by the two exotic tortoises bequeathed by Tim, her youngest brother. Fae, the Sister-Caregiver notes: “Tortoises are one of the longest-living creatures on earth. They are master energy conservators and live by a different time count From them, I’ve learned how to meander, to have a temporal sense of luxuriating in time” (183). Her observation circles back to the parents: “My mother needed me to ‘do more,’ while my father urged that I ‘do less.’ And now, these tortoises teach me that by doing less, I am doing more” (183). “*Taan sai gai* was Dad’s guidance for the good life,” as manifested by the tortoises – “grand masters of the unhurried tempo, wandering through life, observant and carefree, moving with curious abandon” (184). The pets meander back to Tim: “My exotics – my flaneur and flaneuse – teach me that it’s not my last moment with Tim that is the true count of our love. The true accounting is in the magnificent fan of our many, many moments” (184). And conjure up Deh and the lone Bachelors: “Even if I’m a workaholic, I still want what the Orphan Bachelors wanted: to *taan sai gai*—luxuriate in time—to idle through my day” (141).

This Cantonese expression – rendered by Ng as “luxuriating in time” and translated by me, more literally, as “basking in the cosmos” – cannot be found in any definitive Chinese dictionary (Figure 3). Although Cantonese is rarely taught in American and Chinese schools, most Chinese scholars do now recognize that Tang and Song poetry rhymes perfectly only in Cantonese. Teacher Owyang, Fae’s teacher in Chinese school, told her that “when poetry is recited in Cantonese, the rhymes are brighter because the tones have retained the sounds of ancient Chinese” (134). Ng writes in “All Stories Float Ashore” that Cantonese is her original tongue: “I didn’t hear English till I entered Kindergarten; I also went to Chinese School where my love for poetry grew. But now, my rusty Chinese is out to sea and I struggle, afloat in a darkness as if among ship debris.”

In this memoir, English – not Cantonese – is dubbed the barbarian’s tongue: “Though written in the barbarian’s language, may this manuscript translate to the song of everlasting hope that travels wordlessly back home” (239). This last line ending with “home,” along with the father’s and daughter’s retellings of Sima Qian’s peerless filiation, recalls the coda about Ts’ai Yen in *The Woman Warrior*: “Here is a story my mother told me The beginning is hers, the ending, mine”; Ts’ai Yen “brought her songs back from the savage lands, and one of the three . . . is ‘Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,’ a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments.



Figure 3. Typhoon Baby (King-Kok Cheung, circa 1959) basking and luxuriating in the new territories (Hong Kong)—practicing *Taan Sai Gai*. Courtesy of the author.

It translated well.”⁸ *Orphan Bachelors* is a love song – to parents, siblings, friends, eponymous bachelors, fellow writers, tortoises, and to the art of telling. It, too, translated well.

Ng’s memoir is for me the most potent literary tonic since *The Woman Warrior*. Upon retirement I had intended to do something completely different – teaching taichi and Cantonese opera through the UCLA Fiat Lux program. It turns out my old and new ventures are interwoven: *Jik jik fook jik jik*. The coda of *The Woman Warrior* begins with the narrator’s grandmother ordering her entire clan to attend Cantonese opera, notwithstanding the risk of their emptied house being ransacked by bandits. The bandits raided the theater instead, while their home remained intact – “proof to my grandmother that our family was immune to harm as long as they went to plays.”⁹ In *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*, Hong Kingston describes how a 90-year-old *qigong* master infuses her with *qi*: “I feel power shot into me, heating my core, glowing . . . I am strengthened to this day.”¹⁰ The teacher, whose hair is “jet-black,” tells Maxine: “Keep working on your chi kung; your hair will turn black.”¹¹

Like a *qigong* master, Ng breathes *hei* into her memoir, at times in the same breath as Cantonese opera. “In the summers, the traveling opera troupes performed at the Sun Sing and we went every night for weeks. The sweatshop played the operas and the ladies sang the songs of betrayal, treason, and forbidden love as they sewed” (18–19). The sewing ladies must know how to let their *qi/hei* flow, for one needs to breathe through the *dantian* 丹田 to sing Cantonese opera. Hence Ng calls attention to how Michelle, the student whose elocution resembles Bak Sheut-sin, takes “two breaths” before her Cantonese recital. The omnipresent “*hei*” that circulates throughout the memoir gets special mention in the “Author’s Note”: “‘*Hei*’ is the Cantonese word meaning breath/mood/energy . . . Throughout the book, ‘*Hei*’ is a nod, wink, and riff on the tenacious and loquacious spirit of the early *Orphan Bachelors*” (241–42).

This memoir has stunned me into a disconcerting self-discovery. During my first year as a doctoral student at Berkeley, I taught Cantonese as a TA for the Department of Ethnic Studies. Yet I have never put that experience on my CV, lest the eyebrow of an English don be raised. I also had to keep my crush on the Bard in check lest Asian Americanists considered me elitist and Shakespearians suspect me of being an imposter. Once an external reviewer of my promotion accused me of plagiarism (plagiarizing Horatio?) because my dissertation on Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Milton is entitled “The Woe and Wonder of Despair.” At UCLA I have done my share of promoting diversity, and many former students are now pioneers of Burmese, Filipina, Japanese, Korean, South Asian, Thai, African, Latinx, interethnic American literary studies, also Pacific Islanders and Caribbean cultural studies. Yet I have never touted Cantonese, let alone Cantonese opera, when Cantonese/Toishanese was the lingua franca of over 80% of early Chinese immigrants. When the *AIIEEEEE!* editors astutely coined the term “self-contempt” to refer to the blind acceptance by Americans of color of the white standards of beauty and excellence, I averred that I was immune. Now I am “surprised by sin,” for the lack of pride among Hong Kong natives and Cantonese Americans in our indigenous culture was and is very much a form of self-contempt. My two seminars next Fall are entitled “Learn through Play: Studying Chinese and American Literature through Cantonese Opera” and “Fiat Qi/Hei.” It takes a *Jook-Sing* artist – a “*Baa-Bai* Sister” – to jolt me into wagging my mother tongue in the classroom.

Notes

1. All citations of this text and page references are to Fae Myenne Ng, *Orphan Bachelors: A Memoir*. I thank Fae Myenne Ng for her *guandao* meticulous readings and for her “tenacious and loquacious” suggestions.
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3. Gish Jen *Tiger Writing: Art, Culture, and the Interdependent Self* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2013).
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10. Maxine Hong Kingston, *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* (New York: Knopf, 2011), 208.
11. *Ibid.*, 208–9.

Notes on contributor

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