Chapter 4
Searching for a Way Out in Bone

Fae Myenne Ng’s novel Bone explores the conflicts of an immigrant family in relation to the social space of San Francisco’s Chinatown. Her story narrates a Chinese American experience of cultural and familial tension, exploring the various ways out of the tension. In her narration, the settings—Salmon Alley, the open market, apartments, streets, workshops, restaurants, the square, and the San Fran hotel—are depicted as old, narrow, and messy. This way of description conveys that these settings are at odds with the inhabitants and press them to leave these places. That the characters are all stuck in their settings is indeed one of their most striking features, and they all desperately search for a way out. Their ways out are either a physical journey away from home or more destructive, like suicide. The central pursuit of searching for a way out is fundamental to the immigrant conditions in Ng’s novel.

In this chapter, I will analyze Ng’s characters in light of their desire to find a meaningful way to tackle frustrating aspects of their life. I set my analysis in the background of Chinatown. My following theoretical analysis concerns hybrid identity in in-between space. Then I will analyze each daughter’s specific way of dealing with their in-betweenness. In the end, I will discuss how Mah and Leon, the first-generation immigrants, tackle life difficulties. I conclude that the differences between generations and within one generation show the heterogeneity of Chinese American culture. The protagonists’ desperate search for a way out of their ill fate, is on the one hand, part of their journey toward self-fulfillment. On the other hand, it reveals the paradoxes and problems of immigrant life.
Chinatown Background

Chinatown owes its origin to early Chinese immigrants settling down in the adopted country. It is a residential sphere closely linked to a history of racial discrimination. The history of Chinatown suggests the social space emerged “in response to intense periods of anti-Chinese violence” in the late-nineteenth century (Lowe 121). This anti-Chinese violence includes the promulgation of immigrant exclusion, restriction laws, and anti-Chinese labor movements. The various forms of violence either denied Chinese immigrants rights of naturalization, prohibited them from reunion with family, or excluded them from some occupation. The anti-Chinese laws and practices created feelings of fear and antagonism, forcing immigrants to retreat into their own social and spatial self-contained world. They were brought closer by a sense of common fate and destiny among them. As Leon says in Bone, “inside Chinatown […] it’s safe. Outside, it’s different” (B 181). This space of cultural specificity strengthened the solidarity of this group of immigrants.

In the context of immigration, the idea of space contains underlying social and political meanings. Chinatown exists as an “other” space in relation to the dominant culture. This “otherness” is marked by the history of a marginalized people and the constraints of racial oppression. Geographically, Chinatown is situated in the US. Culturally, it exists outside the sphere of the dominant culture. This paradoxical situation reminds us that the understanding of this space needs to be renegotiated and remapped in relation to other cultures that have curious connections with this space. The reconsideration of the identity of this space calls to mind the identity of Chinese Americans. Both identities are richer in meaning than their names suggest (to be discussed in the next section “In-Between Space and Identity” of this chapter).

In Ng’s text, Chinatown is Leon’s family’s primary space. It is presented from an inside and outside perspective at the same time. As the narrator Leila moves between the two cultures, the inside perspective is juxtaposed in comparison and contrast with the outside one. The problems of setting up, blurring, and traversing cultural boundaries and spaces are played out with Leila’s and her people’s movement inside or outside of it. The occupants of this space resist being grounded in this fixed context. They are always in some movement. Hence, the fixed geographical location constitutes dynamic processes of reorientation.
The narration explores the geopolitics of identity through the protagonists’ engagement with public and private spaces in Chinatown. The detailed descriptions of some places in Chinatown show the immigrants’ cultural specificities. However, this does not mean Chinatown is a static or changeless society. The domination of Chinese culture in Chinatown is constantly subverted when its residents (especially the second- and later-generation immigrants) try to break away from the enclosure to embrace a larger world.

The world of Chinatown provides the context in which action is seen to be culturally specific. In this vein, Chinatown is what Lisa Lowe calls “the very emblem of shifting demographics, languages, and populations” (65). A detailed account of all the neighboring houses, associations, and workshops in Chinatown reveals the everydayness of life there. The varied locations in Chinatown are posited either as a background of a theme or as a theme itself. Raised in Chinatown, Ng utilizes the very thing that might have confined her artistic imagination to open up the confinement. As is noted by Sau-ling Wong, “How Chinatown is represented in a writer’s work is often regarded as a touchstone of his/her artistic credibility” (“Ethnic” 252). Ng’s narrative of family and communal life interweaves personal, historical, and political discourses. By writing a Chinatown story, Ng opens this seemingly closed world to non-Chinese readers.

The opening lines of the novel set the narrator’s family at a disadvantaged position in Chinatown:

We were a family of three girls. By Chinese standards, that wasn’t lucky. In Chinatown, everyone knew our story. Outsiders jerked their chins, looked at us, shook their heads. […]
“A failed family. […] Nothing but daughters.” (B 3)

For the failed family, Chinatown is a place of loss, sadness, and dullness: Ona’s suicide, family conflicts, and discrimination. The settings in the novel are mostly negative referential places orienting the reader: buildings of darkness, gloominess, dampness, and crampedness. These places expose the reader to the unpleasant smell of Leon’s room, the narrow, messy scene of apartments, and the tense laboring in the sweatshop. These scenes reveal frustration, boredom, and suffocation of life. The depiction of a baffling world mirrors the inner world of its residents. The house and the life within are the essence of their life. If a
person’s material structure of a dwelling is vital to his or her identity (Johnson 137), the novel’s spatial depiction not only provides a setting for the practices of daily life but also constitutes a crucial factor in problematizing the inhabitants’ identities.

Like Chinatown, the family environment is at odds with its members. The oddity is intensified by Ona’s death. Unable to find a socially supported way out, unable to face all the losses, each one takes out anger on others:

Mah called Leon a do-nothing bum. He called her a bad mother, the world’s worst wife. I tried to stay out of it, but when Nina shouted at them to shut up, I yelled at Nina to show more respect. (B 124)

In the chaos, the characters attempt to escape from the oppressive family atmosphere. Since the frustration mostly surrounds the cultural position of the immigrants, they strongly express a wish to be elsewhere.

**In-Between Space and Identity**

In *Bone*, the politics of space plays an important role in the protagonists’ identity development. The word “between” is a recurring term to describe the three daughters’ position spatially and figuratively. They are situated in “between worlds”: “Their facial features proclaim one fact— their Asian ethnicity but by education, choice, or birth they are American” (Ling, *Between* 20). Their position of in-betweenness is emphasized again and again with the words like “middle,” “between,” and “in-between.” The concept of in-betweenness is significant because it not only refers to the space that links or separates two worlds emotionally, geographically, and culturally, but also connotes movement, precariousness, and indefiniteness of spatial fluidity. The latter connotation is important because in the story the fluidity is especially developed through a series of movements which orient the protagonists’ identity development. Their in-betweenness compels them to reorient their subjectivity by frequently crossing the border of their dwelling space (Chinatown) and cultural space (Chinese America). The depiction of the three daughters’ search for a way out of in-betweenness underscores the relationship between space and its function in shaping a person’s identity.
Scholars like T.S. Eliot comment on the negotiations between a new culture and its parent culture in an in-between space of colonial societies. Their comments “have an ironic resonance with the contemporary condition of third world migration” (Bhabha, “Culture’s” 54). So in-betweenness is not a condition specific to postcolonial societies, for immigrants may also be subject to an in-betweenness in which two or more cultural discourses meet and negotiate with each other. For them, it is also “theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, […] to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (Bhabha, Location 1).

Given the common condition of in-betweenness between the two peoples in postcolonial and immigrant societies, my analysis of how Ng’s protagonists, in their immigrant in-betweenness, articulate their cultural differences will also use some postcolonial theories of in-between space and identity.

Scholars relate the concept of hybridity closely to the in-between space.1 Hybridity constitutes a discourse translated through the spatial metaphor of in-betweenness. In an interview with Rutherford, Bhabha refers to the diversity of cultural hybridization in in-between space. As he says, “The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Rutherford 211). Other scholars and critics, too, recognize, and elaborate on the strength of hybridization. David Goldberg notes two ways in which hybridity may manifest itself. On the one hand, hybridity fuses the “antithetical senses into new expression and form.” On the other hand, it commits “to undoing the necessary singularity of the authoritative voice” (82). The unsettling capacities of hybridity suggest “new forms of thinking, new categories of knowing rather than resting (in)secure in settled ways of seeing and comprehending the world” (81). Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin also comment on the generating forces of hybridity: “hybridity and the power it releases […] allow] a means of evading the replication of the binary categories of the past and [develop] new anti-monolithic models of

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1 Robert Young explains the itineration of the concept of “hybridity” from biology to racial theory and cultural criticism. He says, “hybridity […] implies a disruption and forcing together of any unlike living things” (158). By analogy, this concept is applied to mixed-race unions and culturalism (158-59).
cultural exchange and growth (Post-Colonial 137). The dynamics of movements points to the hybrid nature of the in-between space. These formulations on hybridity though different in nuances, facilitate communication between worlds. As Bhabha says: “the hybrid strategy or discourse opens up a space of negotiation” (“Culture’s” 58).

In-between space is denoted by several spatial metaphors like Bhabha’s “Third Space,” Mary Pratt’s “contact zones,” and Chinese American critic Amy Ling’s “between worlds.” Bhabha’s “Third Space” is a passage through which the two places are mobilized for the production of meaning (Location 36). This space, Bhabha argues, “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity” (37). Pratt terms “contact zones,” “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (4). In contact zones, the meeting, clashing, and grappling of cultures provides opportunity for reconstruction, new understanding, and thought. In Asian American context, the “between worlds” generates “Asian American sensibility” as Frank Chin proposes. This sensibility is distinct from being Asian and white American. It is “neither Asian nor white American” (Cheung, “Reviewing” 2). For Chin, one’s Asian birth, where one’s sensibility is formed, weighs more than actual life in Asia (“Fifty” 34). Whatever the term may be, critics try to define a person’s identity in relation to the space where he or she lives or which he or she occupies. As Edward Said says, “the self is constructed by its place in the culture and that place is determined by a number of complex interactions” (23). People living in-between set up complicated relationships with the two worlds, and their identities are especially built on, among other factors, new circumstances generated in this space.

However, in-between space is always depicted as problematic in its double function of connecting and disconnecting the two worlds. While scholars argue if mixed identities generated by cultural hybridity in the space complete, oppose or represent each other, Leslie Adelson challenges the paradigm in her critical essay “Against Between: A Manifesto.” She argues “the trope of ‘betweenness’ often functions literally like a reservation designed to contain, restrain, and impede new
knowledge, not enable it” (245). Adelson also claims that “[t]he imaginary bridge ‘between two worlds’ is designed to keep discrete worlds apart as much as it pretends to bring them together” (246). Influenced by her view, Jim Jordan further argues that in the two worlds “the migrant subject [is] either suspended in motion or trapped between them” (490). He concludes that the two worlds paradigm is “merely an impediment to a more differentiated appreciation of the literature of migration” (488). In both views, the formulation of between worlds works against the dynamic nature of cultural hybridity, and it actually functions as an impediment to the understanding of increased hybridity in this space.

Both Adelson’s and Jordan’s argument against the formulation of the two worlds paradigm is built upon the frame that this paradigm is “a model of two fixed entities” (Jordan 490), or a model of two “mutually exclusive collective identities” (Adelson 245). But in my study, neither of the “two entities” are fixed, and their collective identities are not exclusive either. Chinatown is a world of hybridity of two or more cultures where the fluid identity of its residents is constantly being (re)moulded and (re)shaped. The seemingly monolithic community is in fact strongly heterogeneous. Like the Chinese American identity which is not simply Chinese plus American, I would say that Ng’s depiction of the identity of Chinatown is not that of a town populated by Chinese immigrants situated in the US either. It is a place that emerges as a product interrelation of spaces, and an expression of heterogeneity (Lowe 121). It is what Bhabha terms “the in-between space,” the intricate borderline of “the cutting edge of translation and negotiation” (Location 38).

In their translation of, and negotiation with, cultural differences, there are moments when the protagonists (Ona and Leila especially) feel suspended, trapped, or even locked as is mentioned by Adelson and Jordan. I would say the suspension offers the suspended people a moment at their suspended place to think about “how to position myself and in what direction to move?” As the narrator Leila says, “I didn’t want anything to be the same. I wanted a new life” (B 15). The trapped position stimulates them to dislodge themselves and move toward another direction. This implication reinforces the idea that in-between is a space of reorientation. It explains why the three sisters’ free
movements of driving, falling, and flying are endowed with an affirmation and a sense of beauty.

In the era of globalization, no culture is isolated from other, nor is any culture fixed, since global changes take place in every passing second. Like all other cultures involved in and related to one another, Chinese American culture is also marked by irregular development and nonequivalence. Lisa Lowe evokes terms of heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity in describing Asian American culture. She argues that in terms of generation, class, and language differences, Asian American construction not only is hierarchical and familial but also more importantly works horizontally across lines of gender, race, and national origin (63). This culture is in a state of positioning and development, of being “partly inherited, partly modified, as well as partly invented” (65). Cultural differences in the third space, as Bhabha says in an interview, “very often set up among and between themselves an \textit{incommensurability}” (Rutherford 209). If this “incommensurability” implies something beyond measurement or description by the prevailing system of language (McLeod 220), then Bhabha’s formulation further hybridizes the present representation of the uncertainty of the space.

In accordance with the hybrid nature of space, what happens in-between is also a matter of flexibility, possibility and creativity. People of different backgrounds come together, mingling and mixing, thus producing new values, meanings, and references. Their mobility in turn mobilizes the culture to which they belong. Living in-between, a person unconsciously contests and reconciles himself or herself with others. He or she experiences hybrid moments and feels ambivalent, ambiguous, and divided. Thus he or she is in a state of fluidity and mobility with an aim of relocating himself or herself. If identity formation is understood as “a product of cultures and histories in collision and dialogue” (J. Clifford, “Diasporas” 319), the effect of the collision and dialogue is a hybrid development of subjectivity. This answers the question of what it means to live in-between—between dislocation and relocation, between a past home and a present non-home feeling and a future real home.

Adelson also argues the imagined bridge in-between two worlds does as much to separate as it does to connect. For me, the importance of the figurative space does not lie in its function of connection or disconnection. I would like to direct attention to tracing what causes this connection or disconnection. Bhabha notes that people now in the
moment of temporal and spatial transit create new signs of identity (Location 1). As he says, “the ‘third space’ […] enables other positions to emerge […] displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives” (Rutherford 211). These “other positions” reconcile the clear-cut division and articulate a discourse of difference.

Jordan recognizes the endurance of the two worlds paradigm on the one hand. But on the other hand, he opposes the paradigm by arguing that it is “an outdated characterisation of all migrant writing” (488). I would say that as long as there is a rift or, in Jordan’s word, a “fault-line” (490) between two worlds, be it caused by migration, colonization, or exile, the paradigm will “endure” as an important characteristic of diasporic and immigrant writing. It endures to negotiate the binary relations and promote interaction between cultures.

**Ona’s In-Betweenness**

The narrative of *Bone* portrays a social environment in which immigrants, especially the second generation, are surrounded by cultural duality or pluralism. In Leon’s family, Leila and Ona especially feel caught in-between. Inheriting Chinese cultural heritage in the American context, they cannot be separated from either culture. They are precariously caught in between while trying to maintain a balance between attachment and detachment, ideals and reality. The second-generation immigrants as a whole are situated in a complex space of paradoxes of belonging to both/neither worlds and cultures. In Bhabha’s words, they are in a dynamic space set up by culture, history and reality. It is a transformational space of “rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are neither the One […] nor the Other […] but something else besides, which contests the terms and territories of both” (Location 28). The indefiniteness of Bhabha’s “something else besides” already hints at a fluid experience of cultural identity construction.

Throughout the text, the narrator frequently reaches back to connect the death of Ona and pieces together the details of all the losses

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3 Jordan negatively views the prevalence and persistence of the two worlds paradigm. He says, “formulations and metaphors […] arising from the two worlds paradigm can outlive their usefulness and become regressive clichés and stereotypes” (498).
resulting in and from the death. Under the apparent cover of nothing out of the ordinary and the parents’ irrational association with their own fault, the narration, as it goes on, reveals strong reasons for Ona’s suicide:

She was the middle girl, the in-between one. (B 51)
Maybe being in the middle, Ona felt more stuck than either Nina or me. I think Ona wanted to be equally divided about her loyalties to Mah and Leon. (112)
Ona felt stuck. In the family, in Chinatown. Ona was the middle girl and she felt stuck in the middle of all the trouble. (139)

The repeated use of the term “middle” foregrounds Ona’s “middle” situation. She is a middle daughter in the middle of an entangled web of family relations. She is caught in-between her love to her boyfriend Osvaldo (the son of Leon’s betrayed business partner) and loyalty to her parents, who deny her love with Osvaldo. Ona’s middle position not only applies to the family, but can be extended to a larger context. Ona is also in the middle of Chinese traditional values of family, filial piety, American individualism, and freedom of pursuing a love of her own choice. Her cultural identity as Chinese American (another in-between position) draws the reader’s attention to a deeper reason underlying her suicide.

In the family, there is no one for Ona to resort to when her love with Osvaldo is denied by her parents. Ona likes to hang on with Leon in Chinatown streets, which, for her, “was better than staying home” (B 158). She identifies more with Chinatown, and is unable to adequately adjust to the dominant culture outside it. Outside Chinatown, “[s]he never felt comfortable, even with the Chinese crowd that Osvaldo hung around with; she never felt like she fit in” (173). She does not know where she actually belongs because of mixed feelings toward home. Helpless and unable to adjust, Ona is in a state of being cut off from a social network, or even from the family, or the community, but “she didn’t have an out” (173). She gives in to a form of self-destruction. Her broken bones function as symbol for the victimhood of cultural conflicts. Poverty, conflict, and disrupted family, her parents’ attempted suicides are all factors that place her at high-risk for suicide.\footnote{The text reveals that Mah attempted to commit suicide by jumping into a river when her first husband deserted her and left for Australia (188). Leon, after 152} Instead of “nothing
out of the ordinary” (108), the reasons for Ona’s suicide are a consequence of an interplay of individual, familial, and cultural factors.

So, instead of asking the question “why?” as is repeatedly asked in the narrative, the question that I want to ask concerning Ona’s suicide is, “How does Ona’s ‘middle’ position condition her in-betweenness in the novel?” The answer is complicated. As a Chinese American, Ona has a complex relation with her family and community: she neither fits in her Chinatown home nor outside of Chinatown. She is in a “perilous intermediate position,” where she feels “neither here nor there, unable to indulge in sentiments of belonging to either place” (McLeod 214). The “intermediate position” becomes fatal when she is driven into a dead end by the dilemma of choice between sticking to Chinese tradition of filial piety and pursuing her individual love. The “middleness” strains Ona to the breaking point. Her inability to let go pushes her to climb up to the roof.

Ona herself is a victim of “middleness,” but her suicide also puts others in a “middle” situation. She jumps off the building three days before the Chinese New Year. The “untimely” tragedy poses a problem for people who come to mourn Ona. They are caught in a dilemma. It is the time to be happy and not to be happy, to congratulate and to mourn, to say “Happy New Year” and to accept condolences. So the narrator says: “The mood was odd. People […] were scared to be happy and scared to be sad” (B 132).

**Leila’s In-Betweenness**

Like Ona, Leila is also in a state of inner conflict. She struggles with herself, her family, and her culture. She does endless housework and helps Mah with sewing. After Ona’s death, Leila accompanies Mah to recuperate from the loss of a daughter. Living together for a long time, Leila witnesses more of Mah’s hardship, hence understands more:

But over the years of listening, I learned that Mah was just lonely. All she wanted was someone to talk to. I learned to listen until I knew what she wanted, and then to tell her what she needed to hear. (B 163)

discovering Mah’s betrayal in marriage, threatens to “jump from the Golden Gate” (31).
However, Mah’s over-dependence “gave [Leila] an uncomfortable power, too much control” (112). She seems to be stuck in Mah’s grief over Ona’s death and cannot get away from it. The mother’s attachment becomes the binding force for the daughter and makes her feel “overwhelmed.” Leila complains, “I hadn’t had a minute to myself since coming home” (18). What she wants to do is “to break away from always being the Big Sister” (15). The family duties and obligations deprive Leila of freedom of choice. Hence, in the quest of self-fulfillment, detachment from Mah’s over-attachment seems the best option.

Leila is also in a position in-between the two cultural worlds. In the narrative, Leila is constantly cruising between Chinatown places and the Mission, her boyfriend’s house outside Chinatown. She is living simultaneously in two juxtaposed physical and emotional worlds. One is with Mah, a Chinatown home filled with old-world odors of bitter ginseng and honeysuckle balminess, of narrow streets, messy apartments. The other is at the Mission, a place full of sunshine and grandness, with champagne and sex, of her boyfriend and later husband Mason with good looks and a pleasing smell of faint metal in his hair. It is also a world of cruising around in a Camaro, BMW, Volvo, or Mercedes, meeting and going out with friends. Leila likes to live with Mason, which seems to temporarily free her from all problems, but Mah needs her comfort. Leila is struggling with in-betweenness: she feels “being pulled back and forth between Mah and Mason,” and between “Mah’s being alone and Mason’s waiting for [her]” (B 50).

Here, the theme of cultural duality is projected onto generational conflicts between mother and daughter. Leila marries Mason without first telling Mah or organizing a big celebration, which goes against the traditional Chinese way of a parental arrangement of marriage. When Leila tells Mah the news of her marriage,

No answer. […]
She still didn’t say anything. […]
She didn’t even look at me, she just walked away. […]
She threw the empty box on the floor and gave it a quick kick.
“Just like that.

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5 Mason is a mechanic working at a garage. He sometimes borrows the cars he repairs.
Did it and didn’t tell.
Mother Who Raised You.
Years of work, years of worry.
Didn’t! Even! Tell!” (B 21-22)

Mah’s reaction shows the cultural difference between the two generations. Their difference is set up by class and leads to a conflicting interpretation of female subjectivity.

On the one hand, the Chinese-born Mah and American-born Leila have different cultural values. Leila’s idea that marriage is a personal matter, “no big deal” (B 22) seems ridiculous to Mah, who believes “[m]arriage is for a lifetime, and it should be celebrated” (23). In this sense, the conflict between the two generations of Chinese American women “thematizes how the trope of the mother-daughter relationship comes to symbolize Asian American culture” (Lowe 79). The intergenerational difference “allegorizes the differences between ‘native’ Chinese values and the new ‘westernized’ culture of Chinese Americans” (63). On the other hand, success in education and employment raises Leila to a higher social status. She accepts American ideology and wants to arrange marriage in her own way. For her, marriage is part of but not all of her life. Leila repudiates the repression of her mother’s traditional idea about marriage through her inner counterattack: “I wanted to say: I didn’t marry in shame. I didn’t marry like you” (B 23).

In her family, Leila, too, is in-between: living between Leon and Mah, though she “didn’t like being in the middle of it” (B 6). The result is that she feels lost between Leon’s noisy loneliness and Mah’s endless lament (24), and “locked into living Mah’s and Leon’s lives for them” (112). With Nina, Leila is embarrassed to find herself between being older but making less money (100-01). Leila grapples with the problems and contradictions she feels in her in-between position. She wants “something that would unlock [her] from Mah, this alley, Chinatown” (184) and a life of her own without “worry[ing] about Mah or Leon or anybody else” (171).

Even riding a car leaves Leila in-between—she is “sandwiched in between two trucks” (B 64). She describes the experience of driving in the busy traffic:
Rush hour, and we were stuck in the middle of it: the late-afternoon glare, the heat, the thick gasoline smell of idling motors, the tension of everyone wanting to be anywhere else but on that bridge. (113)

This “stuck” feeling can be considered mimetic of Leila’s real life situation. She is caught in the glare, the heat, and the unpleasant smell. She wants to be somewhere else but is still stuck. Life does not flow in a smooth manner.

Leila’s work, too, puts her in a position of in-betweenness. She works in a Chinese school as a liaison between school and parents. Leila describes her feeling of going into homes and talking to parents: “Every day I’m reminded nothing’s changed about making a life or raising kids. Everything is hard” (B 17). In one of the home visits to her students’ family, Leila narrates her depressed moment of “[b]eing inside their cramped apartments” (17):

The sewing machine next to the television, the rice bowls stacked on the table, the rolled-up blankets pushed to one side of the sofa. Cardboard boxes everywhere, rearranged and used as stools or tables or homework desks. The money talk at dinner-time, the list of things they don’t know or can’t figure out. Cluttered rooms. Bare lives. (17)

The apartment shows the life of its inhabitants and mirrors the larger community. The living conditions are characterized by a bareness (reminding the reader of the bare bones that Mah sucked), crowdedness, and messiness. If home is “a symbol of psychic wholeness” in which a person could become what he or she was, what he or she is and will be (Jung, Memories 252), the “cramped apartment” identifies with its dwellers’ status and the narrator’s state of mind. The “home” scene drives out the peace of mind and does not evoke any sense of belonging in its narrator. The repugnance from the unpleasant scene generates Leila’s desire to seek an alternative home space.

In the messy apartment, the boundaries between private sphere and work are violated. The cramped scene reminds Leila her family lived like that, too:

My bedroom was also the sewing room, so I lay in bed, listening to all Mah’s worries. They kept coming, one by one and then repeating again. In between, the motor ran. (B 80)
The private domestic sphere is relocated and functions at the same time as an additional workshop under economic pressure. The space which should have been one of private family life is now occupied with work. The extended use of the private bedroom emphasizes the importance of survival over leisure, and necessity over extravagance. The modern human desire for privacy is replaced by the need of economic production for making a living. Leila’s private space is occupied with hard working and Mah’s worries. The temperament of the Chinatown apartment actually reflects Leila’s inner self, and her own conditions—narrowness, darkness, and congestion.

Not only is personal space violated, but family and business are mixed up. In looking for Grandpa Leong’s bones, Leila comes to the Hoy Sun Ning Yung Benevolent Association for help and climbs the narrow squeaking staircase:

On the second floor, the rumble of machines and the odor of hot steamed linen made my nostrils feel prickly; these sensations brought back memories of working in Tommie Hom’s sweatshop, helping Mah turn linen pockets. Ironing the interfacing for the culottes. The time I sewed my finger. The awful exactness of the puncture point where the needle broke nail and skin. An exacting pain. A racket of mah-jongg sounds, plastic tiles slapping and the trilling laughter of winners filled the third floor. The fourth smelled of sweat. Sharp intakes of breath, sudden slaps, guys grunting. Master Choy, White Crane Gung-Fu Club. (B 75)

The space of Chinatown is “hybrid” in its literal sense. Bedrooms are appropriated as workshops; the living room, bedroom, kitchen, and dining room coexist in a single space; the family room fulfills business needs. Leila is disgusted with the filthy and depressing effect of Chinatown with its crowded appearance, and smelly odor. Chinatown, the marginalized space in Leila’s narration, poses a question to her: where is home?

So many in-betweennesses render Leila split in half: she resists and insists, “[a] part of [her] wanted to go and join in […], but another part just couldn’t move” (B 101). In her mind, she is afraid of being “too American” when she is offered a gift from Leon (186) and admires Mason’s resistance to gambling, which she finds “too Chinesey” (183). She does not like Mason’s cousin being “so white” (43), and at the same time their friend Zeke’s “too Chinatown” way of doing things (40).
Regarding Nina’s escape, Leila holds an ambivalent view, too. She resents Nina “her fast move, her safe distance [...] of] three thousands miles” (91), but she also admires Nina’s attitude, her courage of heart, of doing what she wants (32) and always thinks “Nina had the best deal because she escaped the day-to-day of it” (15). Leila seems to be caught in a moral, political and cultural uneasiness, and, beyond that, the in-betweenness of others in the scene of Chinatown and the US.

Leila is caught in-between in so many aspects that in the process she loses herself. There is nothing left of her she can call her own. She wants to use lipstick to light her face up, but then she “heard Mah’s voice: You’re not going to a party” (B 154), and she puts the lipstick away. She wants to say something when Leon refuses to go back home for his welcome-home meal but says nothing. Locked in in-betweenness, Leila even loses herself to Mah. Her presence is so habitual that Mah ignores her:

I resented Mah her stubborn one-track moaning—crying over Ona who was dead, crying over Nina who was gone. Crying over her two lost daughters. I wanted to shake her and ask, What about me? Don’t I count? Don’t I matter? There I was, the living present daughter, and Mah was hung up on the other two.
I wasn’t dead. I wasn’t gone. (91)

In attempting to ask Mah “Don’t I count? Don’t I matter?” Leila wants to emphasize her presence. It seems important for Leila to find a way to speak out her inner interrogation so as to be recognized and valued as an important human being.

**Nina’s Negotiation with In-Betweenness**

Suspended in-between, the three daughters build different ways to withdraw from the precarity. This breach can be extended to Chinese cultural heritage. The novel represents their courageous steps away from home in a respectful way. Home, as I use the term here, refers to both the family’s personal dwelling place in a narrow sense and as an ethnic community separating a group of people from others in an extended sense. The feeling about being at home is articulated according to their specific complicated relations with Chinatown. In the following, I will
analyze how the three daughters use different ways to negotiate their in-betweenness.

Nina is the most Americanized among the three sisters. Though born into a Chinese family, she does not identify with her parents’ Chinese way of doing things. As she says to Leila:

> Look, you’ve always been on standby for them. Waiting and doing things their way. Think about it, they have no idea what our lives are about. They don’t want to come into our worlds. We keep on having to live in their world. They won’t move one bit. (B 33)

The uncrossable boundary between “they, their” and “we, our” sets the two worlds into disjuncture. Even eating out in “their world,” a Chinatown restaurant, turns a joy into a cause for depression:

> “The food’s good,” she [Nina] said, “but the life’s hard down there. I always feel like I should rush through a rice plate and then rush home to sew culottes or assemble radio parts or something.”
> I agreed. At Chinatown places, you can only talk about the bare issues. In American restaurants, the atmosphere helps me forget. (26)

If life is a bare necessity for the first-generation immigrants, later generations, with better education and language skills, are not satisfied with the bareness of life. They also want leisure and luxury. So they go beyond the presentation of third world women as having needs and problems. They have choices and the freedom to act as well.⁶

Living in Chinatown, the daughters do not seem to belong there as their parents do, nor do they want to be defined by Chinatown, as Chinese. There is a distinct moment of marginality when the waiter asks, “You two Chinese?” (B 36) when Leila and Nina dine out in a Spanish restaurant. Leila’s irritated response, “No. […] We’re two sisters,” (36) showcases the insult she feels. They are Americans, and do not want to be identified as Chinese. This also suggests they are suspended in-between different cultural contexts. Their Chinese backgrounds are right there even if they are “Americanized.” Their facial features categorize them as non-Americans, and are what Lisa Lowe terms “foreigners-

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⁶ Mohanty writes about Perdita Huston, a women’s rights activist, for whom “women in the third world countries […] have ‘needs’ and ‘problems,’ but few […] have ‘choices’ or the freedom to act” (“Under” 64).
The incident shows that the image of an “outsider” is very difficult to change. By nationality, they are Americans, but are excluded by the cultural and racial boundaries of the US. A character in Wayne Wang’s film *Dim Sum* asks: “You can take the girl out of Chinatown, but can you take the Chinatown out of the girl?” (qtd. in Lowe 65). Similarly, their Chineseness cannot be taken away even when they leave Chinatown and think of themselves as Americans. Simultaneously, being an insider physically and an outsider racially and culturally puts them in a constant state of inner struggle to relocate themselves in a proper physical and cultural position.

Situated at the intersection of the two worlds, Nina tries to maintain a balance, which is reflected in the relationship with her Chinese background in a paradoxical way. Her experiences of traveling to “exotic” China strikes Leila as paradoxical. Despite the fact that she repeatedly positions herself in a way other than “Chinese,” ironically, Nina cannot dissociate herself totally from the old culture, nor from the intricate connection with her cultural background: she works as a tour guide to China. Nina does not like anything connected with China or Chinatown, but she takes her tours to cities in China, and she likes the national guide, a Chinese man. Thus, her way of making a living is still connected to her cultural background.

Nina watches the effect of her parents’ old-world control over children. Leila is locked into living Mah’s and Leon’s lives for them. Ona breaks under their need for loyalty. Observing this harmful effect, Nina consciously does things on her own. She leaves home and works in New York as an air stewardess then as a tour guide. She has new boyfriends Mah and Leon, who do not even know about. She turns rebellious in family conflicts by bringing up her abortion, which could otherwise have been kept as a secret. She takes a detached attitude toward Ona’s suicide: “Let it go […]. Ona had her own life. It was her choice” (*B* 51). If suicide is Ona’s choice, all the anti-traditional acts are Nina’s life and choice. This is her way out, her escape from responsibility and frustration at home. More characteristically, her work involves the movement of flying. This movement represents an invitation to the world of freedom, and symbolizes her spiritual elevation. Thus, leaving

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7 Lowe uses the term to refer to descendents of Asians. They are born in the US, but are still seen as immigrants (5-6).
home for Nina is a step forward because she locates herself out of physical and cultural restraint in pursuit of freedom and individuality.

**Ona’s Negotiation with In-Betweenness**

Ona leaves everything behind in a destructive way. After she dies, the family regrets and mourns all that might have been but was not. Leon turns his anger inward in the form of guilt. Mah blames herself for making bad choices in her marriage and having an extramarital love affair. Leila regrets not noticing any signs of Ona’s depressed mood, despair, or any previous attempts. She constantly states she “could have done” something that could have prevented this downfall. She blames herself for not being duly concerned about Ona. Nina blames the family, Salmon Alley, Chinatown, everybody, and everything.

Ona’s death disrupts the fast-running engine of everyone in the family by giving them insight into the question of what is the true meaning of life. They examine and ponder themselves, which gradually provides a natural way out of their cultural and family dilemma. The narration encourages a reading of Ona’s suicide as moving from the tragic to the positive, and as evocative for the family’s future. Before, and shortly after, Ona’s death, the reader sees a lot of tragedies and chaos in the narrative: a half-broken family, the bankruptcy of the family business, family quarrels and conflicts, Leon’s over-intense reaction, restless ranting, noise, nonsense, cursing, Mah’s inconsolable grief, Leila’s caught-in-between dilemma, and Nina’s escape to thousands of miles away. As the narration goes on, Nina takes Mah for a trip back to Hong Kong to relieve Mah’s grief and Leila enjoys her time staying with her husband. Leon’s restlessness seems to be replaced by the largeness of an aspiring vision. Further, he expects to have dinner with Leila, and not only fixes the Singer, but also polishes it. This is unexpected for Leila, and contrary to Leon’s usual way of doing things: “he never finished anything he started” (B 13).

Ona’s death provides a moment for the family to integrate themselves with adversity. The narrator Leila comments:

> Somehow, I knew it would be the same as always. Leon would go back, ship out on the next voyage, sail away. We’d wait for him again. Tomorrow and tomorrow would be the same. (B 181)
Life resumes its usual track. The individual search for meaning takes place in the everyday events of contemporary life. The protagonists learn to let go of what has happened in order to take in the new. The tension is replaced by a willing acceptance. In a peaceful atmosphere, the family finally comes to understand Ona’s death with new meaning:

Leon told us that sorrow moves through the heart the way a ship moves through the ocean. Ships are massive, but the ocean has simple superiority. [...] Inside all of us, Ona’s heart still moves forward. Ona’s heart is still counting, true and truer to every tomorrow. (145)

The impact of sorrow is finally overcome by the superiority of the heart. In their hearts they are united as a family, because what they hold in their heart is what matters and their heart never travels (193). As the narrator says, “All of us took that trip, but we came back to ourselves” (15). Physical distance sets the protagonists apart, but they are an emotionally-united family. The family unity is strengthened by their acceptance of one another’s individuality and choice of life. The family value that exists in their mind is more important when they travel inside and outside Chinatown, past and future, life and death. In the words of Carl Jung: “Once the past has been breached, it is usually annihilated, and there is no stopping the forward motion” (Memories 263). The breach of the past is a result from settlement of being at odds with their culture, family and themselves. With the mingling and alternating of these polarities, there rise images both of contradiction and harmony, negation and acceptance, interdependence between life and death that lead to self-discovery, radiance and renewal.

Leila’s Negotiation with In-Betweenness

The novel opens with a scene in which the narrator Leila is looking for Leon roaming in Chinatown. Later, the search is repeated more than once and it is extended to other contexts: searching for Grandpa Leong’s lost bones together with Leon, for Leon’s affidavit of identification in his “paper archive” in the San Fran, and for the reasons for Ona’s suicide. The constant search may be seen as a symbolical reflection of Leila’s situation. She is searching for something definite, concrete, for an answer. It is also her search for a way out, and for her independence
outside Chinatown. Thus, the search constitutes a Chinese American woman’s search for a self in general.

Driving a car in search of something seems to put Leila in a state of fluidity. The fluidity suggests her way to relieve her stress: “Up Broadway I drove fast, made every light: Grant, Stockton, Powell. No stops, a straight shot through the tunnel” (B 14). The nonstop driving is symbolically representative of her flow of mind. For Leila, driving is like flying, a way to relax:

Mason had the sun roof open, and it felt like we were flying […]. Mason likes to drive fast, not to speed but to sail. […] I’ve always felt safe with him behind the wheel. […] Being with Mason, being on the road, moving fast in a nice car, I relaxed. (42)

Cruising around seems to set Leila free from frustration and to let it go. The going back and forth, inside and outside Chinatown thematizes the travel and is symbolically an act of bridging the gap. As Leila is driving here and there, the cultures travel with her too. Frequently crossing the boundary seems to evoke the temporality and fluidity of being simultaneously insider and outsider, and of belonging and not belonging.

When Leila gets the news of Ona’s death, she picks up Mah and Leon from home in the car. Enclosed in the Camaro, Leila watches Chinatown streets:

From the low seats of the Camaro, I looked out at the streets and saw the spidery writing on the store signs, the dressed-up street lamps with their pagoda tops, the oddly matched colors: red with green, green with aqua blue, yellow with pink.
Looking out, I thought, So this is what Chinatown looks like from inside those dark Greyhound buses; this slow view, these strange color combinations, these narrow streets, this is what tourists come to see. I felt a small lightening up inside, because I knew, no matter what people saw, no matter how close they looked, our inside story is something entirely different. (B 144-45)

Situated in the US, Chinatown’s view appears to be odd even from the perspective of an “insider.” Leila’s perception from inside the car of “our inside story” sets up a boundary between the two cultural spaces of Chinese and American. Foregrounding the boundary emphasizes the difference between “what people see” and “what is.” On the one hand, it is the difference that constitutes what their “inside story” is. On the other
hand, the difference leaves room for “outsiders” to probe into their “inside story.” The distance between “what people saw” in Chinatown and their “inside story” of Chinatown calls for an urgency to explore more deeply inside. In this sense, it is an invitation of possible negotiation between the two.

In Leila’s “Chinese world,” Mah’s unhappy marriages, trapped position in the home and frustration in her dead-end job serve as a negative model. Afraid of being or marrying like her mother, Leila keeps wondering “Will I be like her? Will I marry like her?” (B 191). In pursuit of a marriage of choice, Leila calls up the courage and says to Mah, “I’m going to move to the Mission with Mason” (190). Leila finally speaks out from the family and cultural constraint in a pursuit of self-importance. Contrary to what Leila has expected, that “she’d slap me, hit me with a hanger, call me names” (191), Mah says, “Give it a test. […] Remember to have a way out” (191). Mah’s advice, “to have a way out,” is what Leila and other protagonists have always been searching for. Mah speaks from her failure in her two marriages: lack of choice leaves her no way out. It is exactly “choice” that set the two generations apart. Marrying Mason, Leila can both rid herself of emotional “bitterness,” as well as shed the name “bitterness” (to which her biological father’s name ‘Fu’ translates in their dialect) (18). Leila and Mason have been together for four or five years, and she is attracted to Mason’s generosity and ability to let go of worries (19). Leila marries for love, love of her own choice. Her marriage contrasts with Mah’s, who marries for survival, as a result of a lack of choice.

**Significance of the Daughters’ Decision**

The three daughters choose to be away from home in a way true to their own lives. Their choices result from their relation with their space of home. Their attitude toward home complicates the relationship between being in and belonging to a geographical location. Ng problematizes the politics of home by introducing the problems of living here and desiring to be elsewhere, of feeling “not at home” at home. Rosemary George regards identity as being “shaped by the individual’s experience of home” (26). If so, the daughters’ exit from of Chinatown, be it through escape, suicide, or change of residence, can be considered acts of building an identity defined by their orientation outside Chinatown.
Caught in the opposition of attachment to and detachment from home, the daughters show different ways of pursuing individual freedom and self-fulfillment. Despite the positive meaning in Ona’s suicide and Nina’s escape as I have discussed, their acts are not without weakness. Their negotiation with the two worlds goes to extremes. Ona and Nina each represent one extreme of attachment and detachment. Ona is inflexible, unable to adjust life at home or outside Chinatown. Nina is too flexible, taking a detached, having-nothing-to-do attitude toward it and ready to make all adjustments. Ona seems to be steadfastly stuck in the betweenness and cannot get out of it. Nina willingly assimilates into the new culture by withdrawing herself physically and emotionally from all involvement in Chinatown.

Leila, however, balances between the extremes of attachment and detachment. She is with the family when the tragedy occurs. With everyone’s acceptance of and recovery from it, she moves out. This is also a balance between the two conflicting cultures, and between two roles of being a filial daughter and devoted wife. Unlike Ona and Nina, who struggle to locate themselves either completely within or outside of the immigrant context, Leila’s frequent boundary-crossing renders a sense of cultural flexibility between the spaces. Her final moving out emphasizes her individuality. Her “upward mobility” to a desirable white neighborhood entails a wish of rising to a higher social position. The moving is not a closure for negotiation with her familial and cultural backgrounds. Rather, it is an extension of the negotiation to a larger context and a beginning of a new negotiation with another space. Her identity is to be redefined in that new space.

Leila’s act represents the process of her transition from worrying, loss of self, to reclaiming herself in new surroundings. She leaves the unhappiness behind and takes in the other side of herself: bright and independent. She turns her mobility out of Chinatown into a mobility of cultures. In my opinion, Leila’s move out does not spell disconnection with Chinatown, or by extension, with her Chinese home culture. Nor does it reflect a “regressive effect” or a “disempowering effect” that results from the two worlds paradigm as is formulated by Jordan and Adelson. Rather, it is a “progressive” step forward. Socially, it raises her to a higher position. Spiritually, Leila feels relieved from Mah’s burden. Politically, she breaks the cultural and family confinement and moves forward and upward as an independent Chinese American woman. She is
empowered to transmit and transform actively between cultures, which facilitates the communication between the two worlds and blurs a reading of a fixed two worlds paradigm. Instead of privileging a view of assimilation or non-assimilation, Leila’s example suggests another possible way of constructing subjectivity in the hybrid Chinese American culture, a dynamic negotiation amongst heterogeneous spaces.

In the case of Ng’s story about the in-between world, readers catch a glimpse of how contestation and reconciliation of tensions are played out as the protagonists try to reorient themselves. Unlike those described by Adelson, who are suspended on the bridge (246), the sisters, and Leila in particular, successfully “drives away from the bridge,” “reaches” outside Chinatown and starts a new life. Her example subverts Adelson’s formulation of the bridge as an insurmountable “cultural divide” (246). In this sense, instead of “keep[ing] discrete worlds apart” as Adelson has claimed (246), Leila’s relocation productively contaminates both. However, the bridging is not achieved by simply eliminating the differences. Bhabha describes this situation as follows:

it is by living on the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender, that we are in a position to translate the differences between them into a kind of solidarity. (Location 170; emphasis added)

Bhabha uses the term “translate the differences.” In Bone, the differences are translated by preservation, reconciliation, and occasionally by elimination. The differences do not set cultures apart, but relate one to another through “translation.” For Bhabha and Adelson, the borderline is a space that both separates and links two places. In my opinion, it is exactly in the paradoxical nature of both separation and linkage that possibilities lie where “individuals, groups, nations, and cultures seem to rub each other raw with the friction of difference” (Adelson 248). The result of the “rubbing” is commingling, reconciliation, and finally construction of something anew in this process. So instead of viewing Adelson’s “rub[bing] each other raw with the friction of difference” as negative, what I see is the productive capacities in resuming the inertia of translation and negotiation of differences.

From the above explanation, we can see that even within one generation, the contested and unsettling quality of the cultural space cannot be ignored. The differences among the daughters born and
growing up in the same backgrounds show they are not only different from Americans of non-Asian but also extremely different and diverse among each other. However, it is through this diversity that their identity is played out with unique individuality. The difference constitutes “what [they] really are” or “what [they] have become” (Hall 52). This difference is not simply the fact that they are “at different distances and generations from our ‘original’ Asian cultures” or “by various degrees of identification with and relation to a ‘homeland,’ and by different extents of assimilation to and distinction from ‘majority culture’ in the United States” (Lowe 66). More importantly, the distances, degree, and extents, as described by Lowe, are in different directions and in different stages of processes of identification and differentiation. So, even if all of them are distant to a home culture, they are diverse concerning specific matters. Their ways out of their dilemmas are marked by heterogeneity and diversity.

Stuart Hall claims that cultural identity is “[n]ot an essence but a positioning. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental ‘law of origin’” (53). Concerning Asian American identity, Lisa Lowe suggests a similar idea: “perhaps we can consider instead ‘Asian American cultural practices’ that produce identity; the processes that produce such identity are never complete and are always constituted in relation to historical and material differences” (64). So, identity construction is not a product but production, an on-going process. A person’s identity has been, is being and is still to be defined and modified in his or her environment, old and new. This applies to the construction of the daughters’ cultural identity in Bone. The three daughters are also engaged in positioning themselves. They create alternative ways to express cultural realities which are based on, connected with, but different from their Chinese predecessors’ and American contemporaries’ realities. In positioning themselves in a certain direction, the sisters have developed their own specific way of identity construction and acquired a Chinese American identity specific to each. Their positioning is a result of their desire to relocate or reorient themselves rather than being confined in Chinatown and metaphorically in Chinese culture. So in-between is not a space of rigidity, but of possibility and potentiality. The spatial movement establishes each of them as a Chinese American different from one another. The three
sisters’ different ways of coping with crises illustrate the idea of hybridity.

**Mah’s Way Out of Monotony and Grief of Life**

The first-generation immigrants move to the US full of ambition, but their lack of techniques and language skills expels them into lower economic and social positions. They cannot identify with American mainstream culture because of formal or informal discrimination. Failure and loss in matters of employment, and social and family affairs transform their ambition into frustration. In order to survive, they have to find ways to overcome frustration.

To escape the war Mah moved from mainland China to Hong Kong and then settled in San Francisco’s Chinatown. What can be noticed in her life is a lack of choice both in her marriages and work. In her first marriage, her husband picked her, and she married him “for a thrill” (B 12). However, he soon left her alone in the US with an unborn baby (Leila) and never sent for her as promised. Displaced, not belonging to the insecure place, Mah seemed to have no way out but to commit suicide. Fortunately however, she was saved from the attempted suicide. Her second marriage with Leon is for convenience. When her first husband “ran off on her, she married Leon to be saved from disgrace” (34). For a woman immigrant from a third world country, Mah brings with her fear of humiliation and degradation from a failing marriage. The lack of skill and language competency further confines her life. Spatially, Mah’s sphere is primarily in Chinatown. Culturally, Mah adheres to Chinese traditions, which is frequently reflected in her diet and the food she prepares. Her employment options are mostly limited to the sweatshops in Chinatown.

Mah and other immigrant women workers from the third world work hard as seamstresses. The female workers are subjects of transnational exploitation. They constitute a marginalized workforce living and working at the cultural and political boundaries of the nation. Their subordinated position, in terms of economy and class, pushes them to seek ways of fighting for justice. The narrator describes some of Mah’s strategies of resistance. She teaches another seamstress Rosa “all her secret tricks to fool Tommie,” their boss (B 164). These tricks provide some small and temporary relief on the job. The resistance is
limited, but it is a reflection of the most basic desire for political resistance against labor exploitation.

Sewing skills confine Mah to the Chinatown sweatshops, but they also serve as a way of releasing her anger and disappointment. Caught in a confined situation with little choice, Mah seeks her way out:

She was running the Singer, gunning the motor, letting the needle tear through an old strip of fabric until the thread ran out. (B 69)
She sewed harder; the needle roared, the motor belt gunned. (82)

Mah’s anger seems to fly with the needle. On one occasion, she prepares a delicious dinner of Leon’s favorites to welcome him home from a voyage, only to hear that he goes directly to the San Fran instead. Mah walks into her room and shuts the door. Then Leila hears the rattle and groan of the old Singer:

There was something strange about the sound of the machine, a kind of echo behind the thumping. I listened hard and then I heard it clearly, a tinny hollowness: Mah was running the Singer without any fabric. (70)

The hollow rattling of the sewing machine is Mah’s hopeless groan: her first runaway husband, her half-broken second marriage, overtime work, the humiliation of her extramarital affair, and loss of a daughter.

Whether in China or in the US, Mah is an oppressed figure, yet different in culturally specific ways. Her marriage, work, and remarriage signify a lack of choice and she can only accept what is offered. As a woman, Mah shows her weakness and venerability in character. She is heard to speak in a “tentative voice” (B 124), “a quirky […] voice when she wants to say yes but is afraid to” (114). Her soft voice indicates her weakness in decision-making and lack of individuality. Mah’s life is ordered by Leon’s comings and goings (182). When Leon is away from home for long a time, she undoubtedly feels helpless. The family tragedy of Ona’s death later makes her turn her frustration on Nina and Leila by bombarding them with harsh words. There is not another way out and Mah turns to Leila again with over-dependence on her.

After Ona’s suicide, Nina, who believes “a trip would do Mah good, a change of place does wonders” (B 91), takes Mah on a journey back to Hong Kong for solace and comfort. The trip helps Mah to start life anew, and to get away from all the unhappiness of Ona’s death.
mobility seems to produce much change, and Leila examines these changes on Mah:

Mah looked great, a good ten years younger. She’d finally put on some weight, and her coloring came back, a glow. She wore her makeup like she did in the old days, her Tommie Hom look, matchstick eyebrows and high-tone rouge and red lipstick. (98)

As Leila expects, Mah and Nina “come back relieved and renewed” from Hong Kong (24). The trip seems to have enabled Mah to unload the burden of Ona’s death in a magical way. It is a return to the fantasies when she was young, where she and her first husband spent a few good years eating well and dressing well. Revisiting such a life refills Mah’s life with vitality and freshness. Mah’s absence also relieves Leila, and Leila feels “as if she’d taken some of our sorrow about Ona far away” (95).

Leon’s Way Out of Life Pressure: Living at the San Fran

Leon, the narrator’s stepfather, came to the US with forged documents. Before his marriage, he lived at the San Fran, the old-man hotel, in Chinatown. After he finds out about Mah’s extramarital love affair with her boss, he lets out his anger by moving out of home at Salmon Alley and back to the San Fran. For Leon, the San Fran was home when he first arrived in the US. Decades later, it is his home again where he momentarily and falsely escapes the humiliation of “wearing a green hat” (B 156), which is the Chinese symbol of a cuckold. Leon lives in his same bachelor room. This helps to relieve his nostalgia and reminds him of a sense of belonging. Similarly, a series of American immigration restrictions and exclusions make the Chinese look back toward their motherland. Ironically, the exclusion policies do not exclude Leon, but captivate and catch him in life; Leila says, “fifty years later, here he was, caught in his own lie” (57). Living in the San Fran satisfies the displaced old man who always claims to go back “home” with a false feeling to live in his actual homeland, a desired place in his memory. The San Fran is also the family’s oldest place where, Grandpa Leong lived his last days. Their family history starts from the San Fran. For them, it is “[their] beginning place, [their] new China” (4). However, living in a hotel at the
same time signifies Leon’s instability and lack of attachment to the family.

The room at the San Fran, which Leon inhabits, also inhabits him. He seems to be caged and stuck in that room, unable to be elsewhere. It is a room on the ninth floor, next to the fire escape ($B_4$), a room that seems to connote his life of escape. When looking for Leon, the narrator Leila describes the room as follows:

Before I even got inside the apartment I could smell the junkyard odors: old oil and grease and rusting metal. And what I could see in the half dark was worse than what I smelled. I stepped over the piles of junk, old toasters and radio parts, old antennas—dumpster quality, all of it. Something crunched underfoot but I moved on, not caring what I destroyed. The living room was an even bigger junkyard. There was a bare bulb hanging over an old coat rack. In that strange factory light, everything looked dirty and grimy and completely useless. It was a disaster area. Screws and wires and lampshades, the shells of clocks, a bowling ball. (96-97)

The room is the setting of Leon’s life: fragmented, junky, and smelly. The narrator is sensitive to smells, a recurrent concern in the narrative. Whenever Leila comes to Leon’s room at the San Fran, she can sense the unpleasant old-man smell of “the familiar musty odor of cigarettes and booze and tiger balm” (66). The persistent smell in Leon’s room, in my opinion, gives a scent of old China. The smell is created and later thickened by its dweller with time passing, and functions to relieve his homesickness. But for Leila, the unpleasant smell is that of an old world, a smell with which she cannot identify.

After moving out of home, Leon is often “hanging around with Chinatown drift-abouts” ($B_{13}$), and “wander[ing] around Waverly Place, visiting the chess clubs” (172). Ng’s description suggests he is incapable of facing the dark side of life, and he can only retreat to his world of dreaming and roaming. Leon is a marginalized figure wandering in the streets of a marginalized space. The historical reasons that throw Chinatown into marginality contribute to Leon’s sense that this country is not his place. By wandering and hanging around here, he escapes from the real harsh life. He is a hanger-on, neither able to adopt nor to be adopted by this country. His living at the San Fran and wandering in the places of Chinatown is his way out. For a man full of hope and ambition but never achieving anything significant, Leon, as Mah points out, has
“his need to wander, to be lost in new places, new things” (162). By returning to the place where he began life in this country, “Leon’s life’s kind of made a circle” (4). This circle fulfills his impossible dream of going back to China.

Leon’s Way Out of Life Pressure: Working at Sea

Another way out for Leon is his going on a sea journey working on a ship. This provides him with a chance of self-exploration and meditation. Leon’s sea trip is more than a means of making a living. According to Mah, it is mainly an equivalent for transcendental experience and answers a variety of his needs. She notes that “[e]ach new scheme, each voyage was his way of showing […] his heart” (B 163). Leon’s sea journey constitutes a dynamic force which renews his spiritual vigor and generates his source of life. The healing effect can be seen every time Leon returns from a sea journey. He is full of stories and looks good, proud, and relaxed (65, 156, 160). Leila describes how he looks after one voyage:

I always thought that Leon came back more relaxed, a new man. I loved how he tanned, a dark sugar tone that made his white shirt glow, and I loved the way he smelled like the sea. (179)

Leila senses that even Leon’s smell changes from old-man odor to that of sea. A floating ship mirrors Leon’s state of life: drifting rootlessly and lonely on an “unknown,” precarious land.

The sea’s vastness and unpredictability are a big attraction to Leon who has ambitious plans and wild dreams. The sea, the ship, and journey are the life of Leon. Being at sea seems to be Leon’s freedom from the pressure of life: constant flights from the everyday frustration of so many failures, with the promise of a refreshed return. A sea trip gives him satisfaction and recovers his power. Mah lives with Leon long enough to know his need. As she explains, Leon seems fascinated with the ocean and is dependent on sea trips:

it was the movement of the ocean that drew him out, made him restless on land. Staying on land too long made Leon feel like he was turning to stone. The ocean was his whole world: complete. A rush of wind and water. The salt taste like endless crying. What opens for him in the hollow and still center of the ocean?
I remembered the word: Completion. […] Another word came: Escape. What Leon searched for, what Ona needed. (B 150)

The magic sea offers what Leon is looking for: completion and escape. Leon needs “completion” of his great ambition, and requires “escape” from frustration, disappointment, and displacement. The movement of a ship at sea also mirrors the flux of life, its ups and downs, resembling Leon’s condition.

Whether wandering in Chinatown streets or working at sea, Leon seems to live a life of floating and drifting. He does not want to live a “fixed” life, as he is fixed in the American land. But this “fix” does not make him rooted in the land. His movement satisfies his desire that he can always see something indefinite ahead, and there is always something “unfixed” waiting ahead for him to explore.

**Conclusion**

In *Bone*, all the five protagonists are in a certain sense in a bogged-down position. All persistently try to get out of their confinement. The narration endows the characters’ physical search for a psychological way out with recognition and affirmation. In their construction of a way out, they attempt to bridge the gap caused by migration. They try to locate themselves in a position which reflects and at the same time is defined by their cultural identity. Their search articulates their subjectivity and reveals the complexity of immigrant lives. The diversity of their movements signifies the diverse representations of subjectivity. In their movements, the characters struggle to locate their identities and relationship with particular locations. In all these cases, spatial mobility, fluidity, and individuality become crucial in the construction of the people’s identity as being mobile, fluid, and individual. In their spatial mobility, they undergo an inner journey to reach a higher state of “completion” (B 150). The cultural diversity of the characters disturbs any static definition of immigrant subjectivity, and subverts any stereotype, be it of Chinese nativist or of American assimilationist. However, it is precisely this fluidity and diversity of experience and identity this novel tries to engage. Threading the individual characters together with Ona’s death, the narration supplies a broad range of perspectives on the quest for selfhood. The fluidity of the protagonists’
self-construction, whether it is geographically, emotionally, or mortally, is closely linked to their immigrant history.