Summary

This study entitled, *Transculturation: Writing Beyond Dualism*, focuses on three works by Chinese American women writers. It is an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural investigation of transculturation. The prefixes “inter-,” “cross-” and “trans-” explored throughout suggest dynamism. It is an interdisciplinary study because it inquires into issues from fields of feminism, diaspora studies, immigration history, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies. Movement of immigrants from one country to another leads to transformations in their home and host countries. These changes involve aspects such as nationalism, cultural assimilation, identity (re)construction, and personal development. Single disciplines, or a limited range of disciplines, are not enough to address such a wide range of topics. An interdisciplinary approach is required to understand the impact of immigration on socio-politics, culture, and personal identity.

The “trans-” feature in this study is presented in two aspects. On the one hand, the protagonists are given the “trans-” power to negotiate tensions inherent in their culture and identity. They negotiate their cultural heritage and the mainstream culture, and construct themselves as new ethnic minorities who fit with their new surroundings. On the other hand, the transformative quality goes beyond the literary characters. Each of these three works presents itself as a “trans-” agent able to change traditions of Chinese American literature or a dominant history in one way or another. Lan Samantha Chang’s *Hunger* touches upon immigrants’ psychological ailments as a result of their maladjustment to the new land and their unfulfillment of personal pursuit. The depiction of the protagonists’ mental problems moves away from the conventional narrative arc, which pays great attention to immigrants’ severe physical pain. In doing so, the novella changes previous Chinese American writings that widely deal with the impact of immigration on cultural and
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political domains. Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone* presents a realistic account of immigrant history from the end of the nineteenth century. The realistic narration displaces the official account, which imagines equality in American immigration and citizenship policies. It instead narrates another story of how Chinese immigrants survive discriminatory policies in the normalization of their citizenship, and cultural adaptation afterward. *The Woman Warrior* displaces a traditional fact-based autobiography in Chinese American writing with a story based on imagination, dream, and fantasy. The factual fictionality structures the writer’s “real” life writing. Through talk-story to its readers, the novel infuses diverse genres and narrative modes. The non-linear narration not only renews historical stories but also renovates the genre of autobiographical writing, and the oral tradition of talk-story.

My exploration into the transformation of the above two aspects, in terms of literary characters and of literary tradition or immigration history, makes this study “cross-cultural,” which traverses boundaries between Chinese and American culture. Chinese culture is traditionally influenced by Confucian philosophy, which advocates social harmony and ethical virtues such as filial piety. American culture respects ideas of personal struggle, freedom, individualism, and independence. My cross-cultural study bridges the cultural differences by combining and contrasting culturally specific norms, values, and ways of perception in one frame. This provides a deeper cross-cultural understanding of the multicultural US. In doing so, I do not mean to eliminate cultural differences, but to “cross” them (i.e. to nurture them together to produce a new variety) by bridging and reconciling them in meeting the two systems. This “crossing” is built on a recognition that respects cultural specificity of individual cultures, communities, and persons. The three dynamic features (inter-, trans-, and cross-) make clear that neither the cultural subjects nor the cultures themselves are fixed uniform entities, which function coherently. They are constructed fluidly and have the capacity to react to the changed and changing situation.

The narrations of the dynamics of each immigrant culture come from the writers’ dual position of Chinese American cultural backgrounds. This position is determinant in making their protagonists’ cultural bearings. The writers’ problematic backgrounds are at the same time a precious asset to be nurtured. It enables them to depict literary characters who are caught in the discrepancy between the sets of social
norms prescribed by their parents’ home cultural heritage and by American mainstream culture. In writing, these writers form protagonists in circumstances of compromise and negotiation between the expectations of the two cultural ideologies. Caught in-between, some literary characters choose to accept American values and doctrines, and wish to be as American as possible. Others may retain some of their home culture in their American life. In whatever case, they endorse to some degree both their minority and mainstream identities. Their Chinese ethnic background and present American dwelling are right there and cannot be dismissed. The meeting of the two conditions generates conflicts, which are experienced as opportunities to open up new possibilities to (re)locate their identity. Their dual membership in Chinese heritage and American mainstream is central to their definition of themselves. Their Chinese cultural heritage continues to have influence on their American upbringing. This inevitably contributes to changes in the broader sphere of mainstream culture.

The protagonists’ dual cultural background is presented as a cause for cultural conflicts. This study explores the conflicts by introducing a series of concepts such as double consciousness, diaspora consciousness, cultural citizenship, between worlds, and Asian American sensibility. Although these terms differ in their historical background, referent subjects, and connotation, there is a dual force running through each. For this reason I use the term “dualism” to cover the diverse movements of the dual force. The relation between the constituents of dualism is not only a contradiction or confrontation as it is traditionally believed, but, rather, it also includes other relations such as ambivalence, acceptance, and reconciliation.

The various interactions between the two sides in the dualism generate changes. The encounter of two cultures produces possibilities and potentials in which cultural subjects (Chinese immigrants and Americans) and cultures adapt to one another and create something new. I use transculturation to conceptualize this process of change, which I define as a mutually influencing process in which Chinese and American cultures transform and are transformed in their constant contact. Transculturation involves a continuous process of change—the loss of one’s old culture, the incorporation of diverse cultural ways of life, and the formation of new cultural forms. In my study, I present the changing process that results from the duality of these complex relations in the
motifs of memory, self, symbols, space, allegory, and ambiguity respectively in the six chapters of textual analyses.

Chapter One explores the motif of immigrant memory in *Hunger*. This memory immediately juxtaposes two temporal spaces: that of the immigrant past and of the American present. The content of immigrants’ memory happens in the past, but it is constituted in and shaped by the displacement, difference, struggle, and hope they experience in their present host country. Immigrant identities are defined by a memory of the lost homeland and by a relation to the new situation. In other words, to make oneself in a new situation, one needs to adapt and integrate his or her memory into the new context. The text presents two extremes of identity construction based on memory. The first generation’s maladjustment to new cultural surroundings is mainly due to the fact that their memory of an immigrant past constrains their transcultural competence. The example of successful adjustment of the protagonist, a second-generation immigrant, is that her identity is built on a clear understanding of her current position as an ethnic minority. Her manipulation of her cultural heritage becomes a positive factor and an opportunity for self-development.

Chapter Two focuses on immigrants’ psychological problems in *Hunger*. Under the tension between a high pursuit in arts and a reality that denies this pursuit, between a crave for family love and respect and a family who ignores that, the protagonists split into two selves. One is engaged in fulfilling their “noble” pursuits. The other deals with the mundane necessities of daily life. The splitting intensifies the contention between personal ideal and social reality, and between what one hopes for and what one actually obtains. The intensified contention calls for a “trans-” power for the individual to bridge the rift between the two. Immigration tests a person’s psychological capacities to adapt to new situations. Without a proper social environment and flexibility in personal adjustment, the protagonists of the first generation immigrants fail to cultivate a sense of belonging or regain a sense of self-fulfillment.

Chapter Three studies the symbolic meaning of bone, paper, and neologism in *Bone*. These symbols bring up a history nearly lost in which Chinese immigrants were subject to restriction, deportation, and subjugation. The symbolic meaning prevails over the literal meaning by infusing this history with an additional meaning specific to this set of characters. The difference between the literal and symbolic meaning of
these ordinary objects and “new” words narrates two different histories of immigration and life afterwards. One is an “official,” “authoritative” account written down as “the History” of Chinese immigration. The other is a literary account deducted from the symbolic meaning. The symbolic narration of the latter account challenges and subverts the domination of the former.

Chapter Four traverses the spatial boundary of Chinatown in Bone. I define Chinatown as an in-between space that generates hybrid identities, fuses ethnicities, and mingles and blends cultures. The protagonists’ in-between situation is fluidly depicted as they travel inside and outside Chinatown. In this way, the story provides an inside-and-outside perspective from which one can achieve a deeper understanding of a people’s experience, a community’s history, and a country’s heritage. The Chinatown story suggests space is capable of becoming a means of expressing cultural distinctiveness and nurturing a paradoxical sense of belonging; that is, it belongs to neither, or both, of the two cultures. Thus, the story complicates the concept of “home” by narrating feelings of homelessness in spite of the physical presence of being home.

Chapter Five translates stories of the past in The Woman Warrior. The allegorical extension of literal meaning transplants stories of another culture into stories of “mine” in “my” present Chinese American culture. Thus, somebody else’s stories become “my” life experiences, and the old stories appear anew. Traditions are not obliterated but are revised for new use in the present. A personal family story serves as an expression of cultural specificity and political protest. Transplantation from one circumstance to another stems from a common background of gender and racial discrimination. If allegory is an “other speaking,” as is commonly recognized by theorists and critics, this other speaking in the immigrant text is by the “other,” of the “other,” and for the “other.” The writer speaks from an “other” position of an ethnic minority woman. Her articulation of women’s experience from this “other” position tells stories of women in old China and in contemporary Chinese American community. It fights against women’s “other” position of being racially and sexually subjugated to their white and male counterparts.

Chapter Six presents a constellation of meanings in The Woman Warrior from a postmodern perspective. The interpretation of a narrative depends on the narrator’s perspective rather than on any true account of
the narrative itself. The meanings perceived from traditional Chinese perspectives and from American contemporary ideology are constantly juxtaposed with each other. The juxtaposition produces perceptions, which, on the one hand, emphasize Chinese feudalist traditions of filial piety and collectivism, and on the other hand, stress American free choice and individualism. Thus, the juxtaposition of meanings serves as a reservoir from which heterogeneous meanings are generated—mingling and contesting one another. The result is a production of more meanings of hybridity in a deeper sense and of an extensive transgression of boundaries between disciplines, cultures, and ideologies. Postmodernism views this hybridization of meanings as deconstructing the domination of a Eurocentric perception of the world. Hybridization offers more alternatives to understand the cultural problems ethnic minorities face. The complexity of these meanings resembles the situation of the immigrant society from which they generate. The hybridity reinforces the dynamism of this community and affirms racial, gender, and ethnic difference.

In this study I further argue that a transition from contradiction between dual elements to transculturation better contextualizes the development of Chinese American culture. The double consciousness addresses the binarity ethnic minorities may feel about themselves within dominant culture. I extend the concept into a transcultural consciousness to account for a more complex in-between existence of Chinese Americans. The extended consciousness builds on hybridity rather than binarity, on evolvement rather than fixed positions. The expansion of dualism beyond contradiction allows for a consideration of heterogeneous immigrant experiences and existences. This consideration provides a more comprehensive approach to understand immigrant struggles, their identity constructions, and cultural developments. Chinese Americans’ experiences of immigration and cultural adaptation are especially important to understand the transition from contradiction to transculturation. On the one hand, Chinese American immigrants’ subjugated positions, based on a history of discrimination and restriction, propels their antiracist resistance to American racial policy. On the other hand, the displaced subjects need a better form to construct themselves in their bicultural context. They react to marginalization, displacement, and losses that result from their identity of being an ethnic minority. Moreover, they recognize the subversion of their inferior position is also
a construction of an autonomous self. Their transcultural consciousness not only affirms the diversities of in-between life but also enables them to develop transcultural competence to cope with the changes.

In my textual analyses, transculturation manifests itself in a variety of “trans-” acts: translation, transgression, transcendence, transformation, transplantation, etc. The protagonists acquire “trans-” competence as a strategy to cope with the tension between the two cultural systems. These “trans-” words suggest the flexibility of transculturation. They together demonstrate both diversity and commonality among the protagonists. Each protagonist explores specific ways to negotiate the tension between holding on to their cultural heritage and assimilating into the mainstream culture. The common part of “trans-” in their adaptive action indicates that despite their differences from the mainstream, from other (ethnic) minorities and even from persons of their group, they are commonly cultural subjects who seek change and construction. This change and construction is a progressive movement toward becoming a self-confident and self-dependent minority. Transcultural competence enables them to cultivate new hybrid identities. This creative feature can be perceived from two aspects concerning Chinese American experiences. On the one hand, transculturation resists the idea of assimilation into the dominant culture which critics like Frank Chin and Shirley Lim blame or criticize. On the other hand, it subverts a Eurocentric perception that stereotypes Chinese immigrants as alien and exotic. Transculturation moderates the two extremes of American assimilationism and Chinese nativism. It describes how heterogeneous cultures collide, reconcile, and hatch new cultures.

Transculturation takes place over time, and is taking place now and will continue to take place in future. Its temporal stretch prompts an urgency to look back into history and to orient oneself in the future. From this perspective, both identity and culture have a history, but they are not fixed on that history. They are constantly evolving and negotiated in their contact with other people and cultures. In a transcultural discourse, the difference from others is embraced as individuality specific to a certain person or culture. Thus, different elements exist when cultural subjects come into contact. This coexistence reinforces the importance of cultural negotiation in the multicultural US.