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Chapter One

Introduction: Definitions, Context, and Literature Review

To clarify meanings of the key concepts in this monograph, the following part of this chapter offers a discussion of the definitions of terms such as Asian American, Chinese American identity, Chineseness, Americanness, life writing, and Chinese American life writing. Then, to provide some basic background knowledge for the understanding of Chinese American experience in general, a historical context is included. The third section of this chapter offers a literature review of the research conducted on the identity issues in the field of Chinese American studies.

1.1 Definitions

1.1.1 Asian American and Chinese American

> *"Asian" refers to a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent, including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan ... It includes people who indicated their race(s) as "Asian" or reported entries such as "Asian Indian," "Chinese," "Filipino," ... and "Other Asian" or provided other detailed Asian responses. (Humes, Jones, and Ramirez 3)*

Asian Americans are those in American population who have the above origins and identify with the above race(s). Asian Americans, as a diverse and complex

group of American population, have enjoyed a steady growth rate over the past two decades (see Table 1).

Table 1 Growth Rate of Asian American Population, 2000-2020

U.S. Census	Asian (alone)	Growth rate	Percentage
2000	10.2 million	—	3.6%
2010	14.7 million	43.3%	4.8%
2020	19.9 million	35.5%	6%

Compared to the population census in 2000, the Asian American population in 2010 experienced the fastest growth rate of 43.3% from 10,242,998 to 14,674,252, which accounted for 4.8% of the whole U.S. population (Humes, Jones, and Ramirez 4). As the 2020 U.S. census shows, almost 20 million people in America identified as Asian, which is a 35% increase over 2010 and accounts for nearly 6% percent of the whole population. If we take multiple race combinations into consideration (approximately 4.1 million identified as Asian combined with another race group), Asian population in America makes up 7.2% of the whole U.S. population and are now the largest growing racial and ethnic group in the U.S. (Hull).

Among the 15 response categories of the race question in U.S. Census form, seven are Asian. Chinese was the first Asian response category added to the U.S. decennial census in 1860, first in California only and then in other states ten years later. The Chinese population has been the largest detailed Asian group. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Chinese population, alone-or-in-any-combination, was 4 million in 2010 (Hoeffel, et al. 15) and rose to 5.4 million in 2020, making up 24% of the Asian population (Hull). The next two largest Asian origin groups are Indian Americans (21%) and Filipino Americans (19%) (Hull).

1.1.2 Chinese American Identity, Chineseness, and Americanness

Chinese American is one of the hyphenated American identities. To understand this identity, we need to put it in the context of the development and acceptance of the hyphenated American identity. The term "hyphenated American" was originally associated with negative meanings and was viewed with suspicion, especially before and during World War I. It was used to criticize

Americans who still had some loyalties to their countries of origin. The term was popularized by former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, who proclaimed in a speech to the Knights of Columbus in 1915:

> *There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americans. When I refer to hyphenated Americans, I do not refer to naturalized Americans ... a hyphenated American is not an American at all ... There is no such thing as a hyphenated American who is a good American. The only man who is a good American is the man who is an American and nothing else.*

By denunciating the existence of a hyphenated American identity in a time of war, former President Roosevelt called for full assimilation and loyalty. The suspicion and fear of foreignness in the American identity continued during the Second World War (WWII) when Japanese Americans were put into concentration camps and Italian Americans were marked as "alien enemies" (Powell 8). However, in the 1960s, during the civil rights movements, Americans of different ethnicities proudly claimed a hyphenated identity as African American, Asian American, Native American, Italian American, Irish American etc. Ever since then, more and more Americans consider the hyphenated American identity to be more inclusive because it "encompasses the full complexities and nuance of identity" and "explodes the narrow concept of an American identity rooted in a single culture" (Powell 7). Nevertheless, as Annette Harris Powell further points out, "An ideologically charged marker, the hyphen (the adjectival phrase, the slash or the actual hyphen) continues to generate tension and challenge ideas about what it means to be American" (4). Among the various hyphenated American identities, Chinese American has encountered perhaps the longest struggles and crises, given the 61-year-long Chinese Exclusion act in American history, the strained U.S.-China relations between 1949 and the early 1970s, and then the fluctuated U.S.-China relations afterwards.

Then, what does "Chinese American" mean? What tension does it generate and in what way does this identity challenge the ideas about what it means to be American? According to Michi Fu, Chinese Americans are those American individuals who can trace their ancestry or origin to China (45). However, the meaning behind this identity is far more complicated than Fu's definition. Even for the general term to represent them, there are many kinds of punctuation, such as "Chinese-American," "Chinese/American," "Chinese, American," "Chinese

(American),"① "(Chinese) American,"② "$\frac{\text{Chinese}}{\text{American}}$,"③ and "Chinese American" (Liu, *Chinaman's Chance* 49-50). Different punctuation emphasizes different meanings. However, of all these different ways of punctuation, Liu finds the "nonpunctuated punctuation powerful, a thing of beauty" (*Chinaman's Chance* 50). In this case, the real hyphen, slash, comma, parenthesis, the horizontal line between the numerator and the denominator, and the adjective phrase, are all variants of the ideologically charged marker—the hyphen in this hyphenated American identity.

Why does this monograph use the adjective phrase "Chinese American" instead of other hyphen variants? Here, Eric Liu and Maxine Hong Kingston's explanations are used as justification. Liu admits that "Chinese-American" is the standard grammatical form for describing an American of Chinese ethnicity; however, he is bothered by the hyphen in between because it seems to imply "an interaction rather than a person" (Liu, *Chinaman's Chance* 49). Liu prefers the term "Chinese American" with a simple white space in between the two words. He explains that the term "Chinese American" consists of a modifier and the modified, with "American" being the noun preceded by the adjective "Chinese" (Liu, *Chinaman's Chance* 50). In this sense, Liu echoes Maxine Hong Kingston, who advocates in "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers" that

> *We ought to leave out the hyphen in "Chinese-American," because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight, as if linking two nouns. It looks as if a Chinese-American has double citizenship, which is impossible in today's world. Without the hyphen, "Chinese" is an adjective and "American" a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American. (60)*

Following Kingston and Liu's preference, this monograph uses the term Chinese American to refer to the particular group of American population who have origin in and ancestry from China. It is important to note here that

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① Chinese (American) is an identity for those Chinese whose Americanness is so shadowed by their Chineseness that they do not want or need to be assimilated to the mainstream American society either because they live in Chinatown or because they have the ability to live completely or mostly by their Chineseness in America. (Liu, *Chinaman's Chance* 50)

② This identity is for those Chinese Americans who are very assimilated and who make every effort to be as American as they can and to "pass for not-at-all Chinese" (Liu, *Chinaman's Chance* 50)

③ According to Liu, this is a mathematical notation worth pondering. He states that "Chineseness is the numerator, the thing ever to be divided, diluted; Americanness, the denominator, the base against which the other thing is compared, pressed, and brought down to size." (*Chinaman's Chance* 50) He realizes as he gets older that this "notation captures the intergenerational experience—the rate of change" (*Chinaman's Chance* 50).

although Chinese American is defined as such, the real situation is much more complicated and diverse. As Chiou-ling Yeh points out, not all Chinese Americans, although often categorized as such by the mainstream and ethnic press as well as government agencies, agree with this identity, and some may prefer to identify themselves as Vietnamese Chinese Americans, and others even choose to identify more with their transnational identity ("Introduction" 9).

A further definition concerns the two groups of Chinese Americans—first-generation Chinese American and second-generation Chinese American—for the convenience of reference in this book. First-generation Chinese Americans refer to the community of Americans who immigrate to America from China (Fu 46); second-generation Chinese Americans refer to the community of Americans who were born in America, but they have at least one parent immigrating to America from China (Fu xix). According to Benson Tong, the second-generation Chinese Americans also include "foreign-born children who arrived in the United States before they attained adulthood" (240), but they may also be identified as the "one-and-a-half generation" Chinese American (240).

The identity "Chinese American" contains two parts: Chinese and American. However, it does not necessarily mean that Chinese Americans are both Chinese and American. Then, what do the Chinese part and the American part mean? Here two terms are introduced, Chineseness and Americanness, for the discussion.

According to Dr. Siao See Teng, "Chineseness" refers to the meaning of being ethnic Chinese. It is what binds together the millions of Chinese outside China (Liu, *The Accidental Asian* 10). However, as an abstract, contextual, and even sentimental concept, its meaning is contestable because "it is possible to identify at various levels as Chinese or with the Chinese nation-state" (Louie 191), and it depends on the agent interpreting it for his or her purpose (S. S. Teng). Chineseness refers to Chinese culture, the idea of China, and the sentiments of being Chinese. Chineseness is something abstract but not unreachable. It is something that can be built and reinforced: "Overseas Chinese [can] build on their 'Chineseness' both individually and through community activities which reinforce their importance of family, networks and language" (Sun 107). However, it is not "a mystical, more authentic way of being; it's just a decision to act Chinese" (Liu, *The Accidental Asian* 10). Chineseness can be embodied in a person and become an aspect of his or her identity. It is a separate category of identification from race and "a form of identity coexists with other dimensions of identification: gender, class, region, [and] politics" (Louie 214-215).

Andrea Louie argues that "as Chinese identities are produced simultaneously on local, state, and transnational levels," the formation of Chineseness is a "dynamic" process (20). Within a transnational context, Chineseness can be "used to reinforce a sense of rootedness, or turned to a commodity," but "like all axes of identity, [it] is not a fixed or bounded category, and its meaning only becomes relevant as people use it as a tool to define themselves in relation to others" (Louie 21). Sylvia Van Ziegert, a second-generation Chinese American growing up in Houston, Texas, describes how her Chineseness becomes concrete when she interacts with her Chinese cousins, uncle, and aunt. In the eyes of her cousins, who were raised in a very "Chinese" way, Ziegert becomes "less Chinese" since she is married to a non-Chinese (Ziegert 2). Ziegert is also required to behave Chinese when her Chinese relatives are around, and she is even openly criticized by her uncle and aunt, who had grown up and lived in Hong Kong, China until they moved to the U.S., "for not being Chinese enough" and "for being too American" in her daily behavior (Ziegert 2).

Similarly, Catherine Rottenberg indicates in the front flap of her book that Americanness addresses the question—"What it means to be an American." Leo Marx specifies in the "Introduction" of *The Americanness and Walt Whitman* that Americanness is "the essence of the American way" (v), "the distinctive characteristics of American experience" (vi), "American culture" (vi), and "the American consciousness" (vi). Americanness can simply refer to "the quality or fact of being American or having American characteristics" (*Oxford English Dictionary*), but its meanings are diverse and dynamic depending on the agent interpreting it for his or her purpose. As Liu writes in his memoir, "The meaning of 'American' has undergone a revolution in the twenty-nine years I have been alive, a revolution of color, class, and culture" (*The Accidental Asian* 35).

Both Chineseness and Americanness have contextual and contestable meanings. We can set up the context and subject for the analysis and understanding of these two aspects of identity by reading life writing by Chinese Americans, as "life narrators have to anchor their narratives in the world of their own temporal, geographical, and cultural milieu" (Smith and Watson, 2010: 11-12).

1.1.3 Chinese American Life Writing

Life writing has gradually developed into a major genre of study during the past three decades. Coined by critics, this umbrella term has several definitions.

Marlene Kadar offers a definition of life writing as she introduces her edition *Essays on Life Writing*:

> *Life writing is the most flexible and open term available for autobiographical fragments and other kinds of autobiographical seeming texts. It includes the conventional genres of autobiography, journals, memoirs, letters, testimonies, and metafiction, and in earlier definitions it included biography. It is a way of seeing literary and other texts that neither objectifies nor subjectifies the nature of a particular cultural truth. (n.p.)*

Timothy Dow Adams also points out that in the past "life writing [was] just English for biography," but "many scholars now use the term to refer to personal narratives in general" which includes not only autobiography, biography, memoir, and diary, but also journal, letters, personal literary criticism, confession, oral history, daybook, documentary, travel writing, *testimonio*, film and television autobiographies, performance art, as well as poetry (vi).

In the appendix of *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson define life writing as "[a]n overarching term used for a variety of nonfictional modes of writing that claim to engage the shaping of someone's life" (197). They further emphasize the autobiographical and biographical natures of life writing: "The writing of one's own life is autobiographical, the writing of another's biographical; but that boundary is sometimes permeable" (197). Smith and Watson perceive life writing as a subgenre of life narrative and stress the nonfictional, autobiographical, and/or biographical features of life writing. In the second edition of *Reading Autobiography* (2010), Smith and Watson offer a more concise and inclusive definition of life writing as "a general term for writing that takes a life, one's own or another's, as its subject" (4). However, they make a distinction between life writing and life narrative by pointing out the difference in their forms of medium, saying that the former refers to the written forms of the autobiographical while the latter refers to all sorts of acts of self-representation in no matter written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital forms of medium (2010: 4). More recently, in 2013, Alfred Hornung defines life writing as a term that "covers autobiography, biography, journals, diaries, e-lives, Internet blogs, performances of self, film and video clips, photography, comic visualizations, musical orchestrations etc." ("American Lives: Preface" x). Hornung's definition of life writing, as well as Adams's, is similar to Smith and

Watson's definition of life narrative. Based on Hornung and Adams's definition, life writing and life narrative should be used interchangeably.

From these definitions over time, we can see that life writing as a genre is becoming more and more comprehensive and inclusive. As time passes and with the development of mass media, more and more forms of life writing come to readers' and researchers' reach. We can conclude that life writing, as acts of self-narrative and self-expression that take the producer's own life or the life/lives of other individual(s), family(-ies), or group(s) as their subject, includes diverse forms of written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital productions such as autobiography, biography, memoir, letters, journals, testimonies, meta-fiction, personal literary criticism, confession, oral history, daybook, documentary, travel writing, film and television autobiographies, musical orchestrations, artistic performance of self, poetry, as well as e-lives, Internet blogs, photography, comic visualizations, etc.

Nowadays, with the development and popularization of self-media techniques, life writing, with its various forms, has become a powerful tool for people from different backgrounds to express themselves. Life writing is especially an effective way of expression for those people whose life experiences are usually unseen and whose voices unheard: "Members of oppressed and silenced groups instinctively recognize this core attribute [of 'expressive freedom'], making life writing a leading form of expression in postcolonial and minority literature today" (Eakin 5). For example, as an important component of American minority literature, Asian American life writing has been dealing with major issues such as "diaspora, assimilation, education, Americanization, citizenship, racism, and identity" (G. Huang 4) which are the core in Asian Americans' daily life. These major issues center around one purpose, i.e., the continuous pursuit of one's true self and searching for a sense of belonging in a changing world.

Besides being an advantageous form of self-expression and self-reproduction, life-writing texts can also represent "their subjects in relation to their cultures, tracing their interactions over periods of time" (Hornung, "Transnational Life-Writing" 536). As Elizabeth S. Cohen points out, "life writing offers one forum for exploring the process by which culture … intervenes between the writer and the text" (86). She further explains the importance of culture in "shap[ing] text": "[c]ulture defines the words, the gestures, the units of meaning, the patterns of arrangement, through which people, among them writers, package their experience both for themselves—in consciousness and memory—and for others—

in text" (86). Hornung stresses the importance of recognizing cultural differences in nowadays world: "With the transition from a modern to a postmodern age, the processes of acculturation changed from the demands of assimilation to the recognition of cultural differences" ("Transnational Life-Writing" 536). Under the context of multiculturalism, "the practice of life-writing has become a form of intercultural negotiation with the goal of realizing a transcultural form of existence" ("Transnational Life-Writing" 536-537). In a word, transnational and "[t]ranscultural life-writers challenge beliefs in national allegiance and geographical boundaries" ("Transnational Life-Writing" 537). As Chinese American life experiences are usually transcultural and/or transnational, it is necessary to anchor the study of Chinese American life writing in a transcultural and transnational context.

However, Chinese American life writing is not a separate or established genre yet. It is usually incorporated in Chinese American literature, which serves as a unique subcategory within Asian American literature. According to Amy Ling, "Chinese American Literature, simply and most inclusively defined, encompasses biography, autobiography, short stories, novels, poetry, and plays written by Americans of Chinese ancestry" ("Chinese American Writing"). Chinese American life writing goes beyond the narrow sense of Chinese American literature, although part of it is included as well in literature. Chinese American life writing includes autobiography, biography, memoir, letter, diary, journal, testimony, meta-fiction, personal literary criticism, confession, oral history, daybook, documentary, travel writing, film and television autobiography, musical orchestration, artistic performance of self, poetry, as well as e-live, Internet blog, photography, comic visualization that are composed, performed, produced, or written by Americans of Chinese ancestry. From its definition, we can see that Chinese American life writing, as a very inclusive and diverse genre, can offer us insights from various perspectives about Chinese Americans' lives. As life writing is generally anchored in particular historical, cultural, and social contexts, it is important to have an overview of Chinese Americans' experiences over time and place before examining their life works.

1.2 Context: Being Chinese, Becoming Chinese American

In many respects, the initial motivations for early Chinese immigrants to come to the United States were similar to those of most immigrants: to survive and to thrive. In the mid-nineteenth century, China was overburdened with its population growth. Natural hazards contributed to at least four major famines in 1810, 1811, 1846, and 1849 that are estimated to have resulted in about forty-five million deaths. Besides, China was in a period of extreme chaos because of the invading and internal wars. The two Opium Wars (1840-1842; 1856-1860), in which the Qing government was defeated and humiliated by signing various unequal treaties, marked the decline of the Qing Dynasty of China (1636-1912) and provided the seeds for internal dissent that turned into rebellions and civil war such as the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement from 1851 to 1864. China, since the mid-nineteenth century, was a country torn by various problems—floods and droughts, opium addiction, industries in decline from foreign competition, conflicts with foreign countries, and internal rebellions. Of course, the lowest social classes were the most affected. Therefore, in order to survive and find a better life, thousands of Chinese, mostly young male peasants in Southern China, left their villages in the rural areas for America, Southeast Asia, and other countries.

Although America also experienced some internal and external chaos in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it built its national identity and strength in the most rapid speed it could, particularly after gaining its full independence from Britain in 1783. Although the country was torn apart by the American Civil War (1861-1865), it soon resolidified its bonds and resumed a more comprehensive development through the industrial revolution. In the coming years, by constructing transcontinental railroads, innovating industry, applying new technologies, and encouraging business domestically and internationally, the nation was gradually transformed to a more productive and populous industrial country by the late nineteenth century.

During this period, in order to search for work and fortune, many Chinese laborers migrated to America. As Iris Chang writes, "Frenetically, men in the Canton region [of China] ... borrowed money from friends and relatives, sold off their water buffalo or jewelry, or signed up with a labor agency that would front them the money for passage in exchange for a share of their future earnings

in America" (19). In the American West, they were recruited as "coolies" (a derogatory term derived from the Chinese characters "苦力 ‹*kǔlì*›" which literally means bitter labor) to extract metals and minerals, construct the transcontinental railroad, reclaim swamplands, build irrigation systems, work as migrant agricultural laborers, develop the fishing industry, and operate highly-competitive manufacturing industries. Three decades after the discovery of gold in California in 1848, about 300,000 Chinese coolies were recruited to work in the American West.

By immigrating to America, these Chinese men were expected to bring fortune and honor to their family. Coming to America with the "Gold Mountain" dreams, however, they were soon disillusioned by the brutal reality. Although they made great contributions to the construction of the transcontinental railroads and the building of the American West, their efforts and achievements were not officially acknowledged. What's worse, in the 1870s, when America slid into a nationwide depression, they became the scapegoat, especially in regions where they clustered in the greatest numbers. Now that the railroad was completed, the laborers found themselves out of work. Thousands of ex-miners and discharged track laborers, White and Chinese, roamed the region in search of jobs. With the newly arrived European immigrants and the Civil War veterans, there was not enough work for everyone.

Given these dismal economic prospects, the white American blue-collar workers began to feel threatened by Chinese immigrants who had the reputation of being hard-working, easy to manage, and asking for much lower wages. Culturally, everything about the Chinese—their physiognomy, their language, their food, and their queues—struck many whites as bizarre, making it easy to demonize them. In early Chinese Americans' memories, there was this most insulting slogan "first uttered by the Workingmen's Party in 1876 and repeated parrot-like every political campaign since: 'To an American, death is preferable to a life on a par with the Chinaman!'" (Lowe 27). Chinese were deemed as cultural threats, labor competition, and physical, intellectual, and racial inferiors. Therefore, white workers were determined to drive the Chinese laborers out of the city and eventually the country.

The anti-Chinese sentiments in the 1870s eventually led to the Chinese Exclusion Act, passed on April 17, 1882, for a period of ten years. In 1892, it was renewed with the more restrictive Geary Act, and, then, in 1902, it was extended for another ten years. Two years later in 1904, the Act was made indefinite and

applicable to U.S. insular possessions. The Chinese Exclusion Act prevented Chinese laborers from immigrating, settling down, owning land, voting, becoming naturalized citizens, and intermarrying with whites in America; it is one of the most discriminatory acts ever passed in U.S. history and the only one passed that prohibited immigration based on their ethnicity or nationality. The Chinese exclusion acts were not only strongly supported by the working-class Americans but also by the majority of the U.S. Congress and presidents during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Throughout most of the period from 1882 to 1943, only diplomats, students, and merchants and their dependents were allowed to travel to the United States. Chinese Americans were confined to segregated ghettos, called Chinatowns, in major cities and isolated regions in rural areas across the country. From the 1870s to the early 1940s, Chinese did not enjoy any good image in America. In California, they were stereotyped as depraved, threatening, and degraded coolies no matter whether they were coolies or not. Chinese were discriminated by mainstream Americans and were accused of many vices.

Chinese immigrants had been discriminated for over ninety years in America, from the 1850s, when California passed its first anti-Chinese laws, to 1941, when China and America became allies during World War II. As a courtesy to its war ally, America decided to repeal all Chinese exclusion laws in 1943, granted Chinese the right to become naturalized citizens and symbolically allowed 105 Chinese to immigrate to the U.S. each year.

> *Almost overnight, the attack on Pearl Harbor transformed the American image of China and Japan—and redistributed stereotypes for both Chinese and Japanese Americans. Suddenly the media began depicting the Chinese as loyal, decent allies, and the Japanese as a race of evil spies and saboteurs. After the attack, a Gallup poll found that Americans saw the Chinese as "hardworking, honest, brave, religious, intelligent, and practical" and the Japanese as "treacherous, sly, cruel, and warlike"—each almost a perfect fit with one or the other of two popular stereotypes formerly promoted by Hollywood, in characters like Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu. (Chang 222-223)*

The Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, particularly the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, brought in a new period in Chinese American immigration and Chinese Americans' lives.

Now Chinese Americans were liberated from a structure of racial oppression, the former legislation restored many of the basic rights that were earlier denied to Chinese Americans. A historical moment occurred on October 3, 1965, when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Immigration Bill and declared, "This bill says simply that from this day forth, those wishing to immigrate to America shall be admitted on the basis of their skills and their close relationships to those already here" (201). The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 put China on an equal footing with other countries at overall 20,000 immigrants per year, with preference given to family reunification and skilled and professional personnel. Under these new laws, thousands of Chinese people came to the United States each year to reunite with their families and young Chinese Americans mobilized to demand racial equality and social justice. As a result of new-generation Chinese Americans' efforts, on June 18, 2012, the United States House of Representatives passed a resolution that formally expresses the regret for the Chinese Exclusion Act.

As Chang writes, "For many émigrés, the journey across the United States became a journey of the soul, during which they crossed the invisible line from being Chinese in America to becoming Chinese Americans" (107). The Chinese, no matter as merchants, intellectuals, adventurers, miners, or coolies, brought with them their language, culture, social institutions, and customs to the new world—America. The coming of the Chinese immigrants has increased the ethnic and cultural diversity of America. While trying to become an integral part of America, they have enriched the meaning of being American by transnationalizing, transplanting, and transforming their Chineseness in their adopted country. The story of Chinese American immigration and integration goes on after the Civil Rights Movement, after they got equal rights to come and live in this country. The post-1960s period has witnessed new concerns and issues in Chinese Americans' life experiences, which are illustrated in Chapter Four and Chapter Five.

1.3 Literature Review

Due to the transcultural and transnational differences between China and America, identity issues have always been a part of the struggles of Chinese Americans, especially the second-generation ones. In recent decades, Chinese

American ethnic and cultural identities have become two major aspects of Chinese American studies. Following is an examination of the major research that has been conducted.

In the chapter titled "Race, Ethnic Culture, and Gender in the Construction of Identities among Second-Generation Chinese Americans, 1880s to 1930s," Sucheng Chan draws upon twenty-eight extant life writing pieces, including three books, seventeen life histories, four reminiscences, and a documentary study, written by second-generation Chinese Americans who grew up along the Pacific Coast between the 1880s and 1930s and explores the evolution of Chinese American identities during this Chinese Exclusion period. In his study, Chan combines historical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, and social psychological approaches to examine and understand the Chinese American ethnic identities developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Themes such as claiming to be American, negotiation between being American and being Chinese, racial discrimination, and the reconciliation with their Chineseness appear repeatedly in these life stories and show the development of Chinese American identities during that historical period. Chan concludes that Chinese Americans, especially the second-generation, are not only caught in between the majority European Americans and the minority African Americans but also in between the different worlds of America and China, and that to understand their sense of self, they need to "create a new world of their own—a Chinese American world" (158).

In their volume *Chinese America*, Peter Kwong and Dušanka Miščević discuss the changing sense of identification with being Chinese and American in different historical periods. During the Exclusion Era (1882-1943), Chinese American children tended to be more willing to acquire an American identity. They predominantly "showed a strong preference for American culture and a readiness to be Americanized—to speak and think freely" (Kwong and Miščević 173). By acquiring an American identity and denying their Chinese identity, they rebelled against their Chinese immigrant parents and felt negative or even ashamed of their Chineseness. However, when they thought they had acquired enough Americanness to be Americans, they were rejected by their white peers because of their apparent Chineseness. American-born Chinese writers, such as Pardee Lowe (*Father and Glorious Descendant*, 1943), Jade Snow Wong (*Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 1950), and Virginia Chin-lan Lee (*The House That Tai Ming Built*, 1963) were recognized by mainstream American readers because of their

writing about Chinese Americans as model minority. Their works had explored the Chinese American racial experience through stories of East and West conflicts, the generation gap, and interracial marriages, and rebelled against the feudal traditions that had been instilled in the Chinese American community by their immigrant parents. Although their works covered their pursuit of American individualism and desire to show patriotism and loyalty to America, the civil rights activists "did not see this as mirroring the authors' lives, which had been governed by intense social pressure to assimilate; it was simply unacceptable" (Kwong and Miščević 277).

Him Mark Lai analyzes that American-born Chinese's perception of their Chinese identity has gradually transformed from rejection to recognition in the post-WWII period. Lai suggests three factors can be attributed to the transformation: 1. multiculturalism; 2. the growth of Chinese population and the maintenance of Chinatowns in America; 3. the enhancement of mutual communication and relation between China and America (especially after 1979) (*Becoming Chinese American* 337). Social acceptance, communities and institutions, and transnational relations and family ties all contribute to American-born Chinese's identification with their Chinese heritage.

According to Judy Yung, Gordon H. Chang, and Him Mark Lai, second-and third-generations of American-born Chinese (ABC) who have benefited from the social changes of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s begin to have a more positive attitude towards their ethnic identity of being Chinese: "They are among the first Chinese Americans to successfully integrate into mainstream society, judging by their middle-class status, suburban residence, social lifestyle, and high rates of outmarriage" (230). They also point out that, even though the ABCs in the 1960s found a stronger sense of pride in their Chinese ethnicity, they needed to negotiate with new identities such as "hapa, gay/lesbian, and generation X" (Yung, Chang, and Lai 230). In addition, the identity—Asian American—"a pragmatic pan-ethnic identity" (Kwong and Miščević 275) was developed as "a reaction to white America's concept of Asians" (Kwong and Miščević 268).

Cultural identity of Chinese Americans is also a prominent topic of research. It is very important to maintain one's cultural identity; otherwise, one will get lost while interacting with others. June Y. Chu examines the bicultural identity of Chinese American children from the perspective of psychoanalysis, integrating "culture with Freudian theory" (200). The Freudian concept that "man is divided against himself" can be applied to the psychoanalysis of Chinese American

children, who, existing "in a world of duality," "constantly" need to reconcile "the bicultural identity"—"the Chinese side of the self with the American side of the self" (Chu 206-207). Bicultural identity is the most obvious and ubiquitous division of a second-generation Chinese American self. Cultural differences and clashes in their lives are the major causes of this division. Chu concludes that, in order to conduct psychoanalysis of Chinese Americans, it is important to recognize the existence of cultural conflicts in their lives and apply a therapy in light of the cultural differences (212-213).

Summarizing reasons for the cultural dynamics among Chinese Americans, Benson Tong concludes that the preservation and transmission of Chineseness—Chinese cultural identity—is a strategy of survival for them:

> *The lingering legacy of anti-Asian sentiments, as reflected in the anti-immigration climate of the 1980s and 1990s ... and the continuing entry of new Chinese immigrants (as many as two-thirds of the Chinese in the United States in the 1990s were foreign born) unattuned to U.S. culture have all perpetuated these so-called cultural dynamics. Kinship ties, benevolent associations, Chinese schools, family cohesion, and the informal transmission of Chinese heritage are still necessary for survival. (236)*

Chinatown in America is the cultural, political, and historical center of the Chinese in America. It is thus also an essential place for the preservation and transmission of Chineseness in America. Min Zhou bases her research on contemporary Chinese America on the study of New York's Chinatown and addresses the "research question: how has a longstanding ethnic community assisted immigrants in their struggle to make it in America without losing their sense of identity?" (2). Michel S. Laguerre explains the role of ethnic enclaves and communities in acquiring and maintaining their sense of identity. According to Laguerre, cultural enclaves, such as Chinatown, "reflect four main variables: the residents' place of origin (continent, country, state, city), their ethnic background, their status in society, and the location of their residence" (8). Additionally, names such as Chinatown "serve to identify the residents as 'others' and to indicate that they are confined to a specific spatial position in the urban landscape" (Laguerre 8).

In addition, studies also examine the role that China plays in the development and formation of Chinese American identities. For example, Ling-chi Wang proposes in his article "Roots and Changing Identity of the Chinese in the United

States" five dominant mentalities among overseas Chinese in the United States: *yeluo guigen* ("falling leaves return to roots")—sojourner mentality, *zhancao chugen* ("to eliminate the weeds, one must pull out their roots")—total assimilation mentality, *luodi shenggen* ("planting seeds in foreign soil and allowing them to take root")—accommodation mentality, *xungen wenzu* ("searching for one's roots and ancestors")—ethnic pride and consciousness, and *shigen qunzu* ("'wondering intellectuals' [who are far] away from their roots in historic China")—the uprooted mentality (197-204). All five mentalities are closely related to the Chinese root in China which has always played a "dynamic role" in the formation and transformation of overseas Chinese identities (Wang, "Roots and Changing Identity" 206). Wang elucidates that each of the five mentalities, although being "dynamic in character" and "constantly undergoing transformation," "has emerged from a concrete historical context and has persisted to this day among the oversea Chinese" ("Roots and Changing Identity" 205).

The above research has examined and discussed Chinese American identity in different historical periods, with different approaches, focusing on different groups of Chinese Americans. However, of all the studies on Chinese Americans' identity, few have systematically read and interpreted second-generation Chinese American life writing and focused on the study of how they negotiate their cultural and ethnic identities over time and place. As Him Mark Lai① points out in his autobiography (2011), the study of American-born Chinese—second and later generations—is one of the many blank pages awaiting further research and exploration because "[s]tudying the historical experience of this group would shed more light on the dynamics of Chinese assimilation into American culture" (142) and the development of their transnational and transcultural ties to China.

Criticism of Chinese American life writing still tends to focus on a small group of writers such as Sui Sin Far, Yung Wing, Jade Snow Wong, Pardee Lowe, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Amy Tan. Chinese Americans' life experiences inside Chinatown on the American West coast are widely explored and represented by works such as *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, *Father and Glorious Descendant*, and *The Woman Warrior*. However, there are many Chinese Americans living in other parts of America, whose life experiences usually draw much less attention from critics and common readers. To conduct more systematic research on Chinese American

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lives, it is important to include a broader spectrum of life works composed by writers living in different historical and geographical contexts. By reading the well-known life works by Jade Snow Wong, Pardee Lowe, and Maxine Hong Kingston, as well as the comparatively less-studied life narratives by writers such as Louise Leung Larson, Ben Fong-Torres, Evelina Chao, May-lee Chai, Eric Liu, and Eddie Huang, this research aims to examine the diversity and dynamics of the identity issues among second-generation Chinese American life writers and intends to provide some new insights to the study of the second-generation Chinese Americans' identity negotiation over time from the early twentieth century to the present, and over place from the American West, Mid-west, South, and Northeast, inside and outside Chinatown, and also across the Pacific Ocean to China.