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DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Prejudice, Cultural Clash and Female Role in the Novels of Ying Chen

Obor: Anglistika a Amerikanistika - Sinologie

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Praha, květen 2012

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně s použitím citovaných pramenů, literatury a dalších odborných zdrojů.

V Praze, 7/5/2012

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I would like to thank my supervisor Klára Kolinská, PhD, for her sustained support and patience.

I have no objections to the MA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

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Abstrakt

Kanadská spisovatelka čínského původu, Ying Chen, se proslavila jako autorka francouzsky psaných románů, ve kterých zkoumá imigraci, která je úzce spjata s vykořeněností z původního prostředí a ztrátou původní identity. Svou literární tvorbou se primárně zaměřuje na severoamerické čtenáře, proto ve svých dílech detailně vykresluje historické události a sociální fakta Číny.

Ying Chen je představitelkou autorů, kteří patří do skupiny tzv. spisovatelů-imigrantů. Páteř její literární tvorby tvoří opakující se téma nacionalismu, feminismu, imaginace a imigrace, která může vést ke ztrátě původní identity. Ying Chen zkoumá, zda je možné, aby člověk zaměnil svou původní identitu, která mu byla vtisknuta jeho rodiči, za zcela novou. Ve svém druhém publikovaném románu, *L'Ingratitude* (Nevděčná), Ying Chen promlouvá skrze ústa dominantní matky a říká: „Člověk, který nemá rodiče, je nešťastný jako národ, který nemá svou historii.“ Těmito slovy svým čtenářům naznačuje, že nelze zaměnit svou národnost, národní historii a identitu. Je třeba, abychom přijali sami sebe, tak jak to zdůrazňuje ve svém románu, *Immibile*, „Já jsem já“.

Abstract

Ying Chen is a Canadian writer of Chinese origin who writes in French. In her novels, she investigates immigration which is closely connected with displacement and the loss of one's original identity. Her literary work is primarily aimed at the North American readership so she includes a lot of details of historical events and social facts about China.

Ying Chen belongs to the group of authors who are labelled as immigrant writers. The majority of her literary work centres around the recurring themes of nationalism, feminism, imagination and immigration, which can lead to a loss of original identity. Ying Chen investigates whether a person can exchange his identity, that which was given to him by his parents, with a new one. In her second published novel, *L'Ingratitude*, Ying Chen speaks through the character of the dominant mother and says: "A person without parents is miserable, like a people without history." With these words she indicates the impossibility of exchanging one's nationhood, national history, and identity. We need to accept who we are, and she emphasises this fact in her novel, *Immobile*, saying, "I am myself."

Introduction

Canada, the second largest country in the world, could be compared to a magnet which has been attracting people from around the world for various reasons for a long time now. In this sense we can say that Canada is a multicultural nation, referred to as a “cultural mosaic”.¹ This term expresses the concentration of various ethnic groups with their specific cultures and languages. The Canadian government has implemented this “friendly” policy in their agenda, which means that Canadian inhabitants cannot be discriminated against because of their race, culture or religion.² It is a nation of racial and cultural harmony sought after by many foreign political refugees and racially discriminated people who come in quest of new identities and a new life.

Canadian multiculturalism is seen as a positive approach to understanding and developing equality between people of various races and cultures. This has led to a high immigration rate to Canada, especially from Asian nations. Nowadays, Chinese-Canadians form the second largest Canadian minority, making 3.9% of the whole Canadian population. The greatest Chinese immigration wave of the second half of the twentieth century was activated during the late 1990’s before the ‘handover’ of Hong Kong to the People’s Republic of China, which took place on 1st July 1997. Political instability of Hong Kong in the 1990’s and a fear of the political change connected with the handover caused a higher

¹ Cultural Mosaic. The first use of the term *mosaic* to refer to Canadian society was by John Murray Gibbon, in his 1938 book *Canadian Mosaic*. Gibbon clearly disapproved of the American melting-pot concept. He saw the melting pot as a process by which immigrants and their descendants were encouraged to cut off ties with their countries and cultures of origin so as to assimilate into the American way of life. Wikipedia. 2010. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 15 April 2010 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_mosaic>.

² Multiculturalism in Canada. The 1988 Canadian Multiculturalism Act affirms the policy of the government to ensure that every Canadian receives equal treatment by the government which respects and celebrates diversity. Wikipedia. 2012. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 15 April 2010 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_Multiculturalism>.

number of political emigrants. Most of the refugees succeeded in fleeing their native island and began their lives anew in Canada or other countries. Some of the Chinese emigrants or Chinese-Canadians have become successful and socially acknowledged figures of Canada. Some of them have become influential Canadian politicians such as Douglas Jung, Art Lee and Raymond Chan³ and some have taken a literary path such as Ying Chen, Jim Wong-chu, Garry Engkent, Sean Gunn, Ariel Grue Lee, Lydia Kwa and many others. Those who decided on literature were challenged to choose one of the two officially approved languages to produce their literary work. Canada officially recognises two languages: English and French⁴, but at the same time it promotes the use of minority languages. Amongst the minority languages, the southern dialect of Chinese, Cantonese (the proper Chinese term is Yue4 Yu3, 粵語)⁵ stands out. This predominance is historically connected with the onset of Chinese immigration which commenced in the second half of the 19th century. However, the Canadian population at that time was only a little over 3 million, which meant that working positions had to be filled by ‘new people’; those who came to Canada in search of new working possibilities. Thus, the year 1858 triggered the Gold Rush, which caused an influx of

³ Raymond Chan. Raymond Chan, [...] (b. 1951) is the first Chinese Canadian to be appointed to the Cabinet of Canada. A member of the Liberal Party of Canada, Chan was elected to Parliament in the 1993 federal election, defeating then Defence Minister Tom Siddon in the riding of Richmond, British Columbia. Chan is the third Chinese Canadian to be elected to Parliament, after Douglas Jung, who secured a seat in 1957, and Art Lee in 1974. Wikipedia. 2010. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 15 April 2010 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raymond_Chan>.

⁴ The Official Languages Act. The Official Languages Act is a Canadian law that came into force on September 9, 1969,^[1] which gives English and French equal status in the government of Canada.^[2] This makes them "official" languages, having preferred status in law over all other languages. Although the Official Languages Act is not the only piece of federal language law, it is the legislative keystone of Canada's official bilingualism. It was substantially amended in 1988. Wikipedia. 2010. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 15 April 2010 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Official_Languages_Act_\(Canada\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Official_Languages_Act_(Canada))>.

⁵ Yue Chinese. Yue, commonly known as Cantonese [...] is a primary branch of the Chinese language comprising a number of dialects spoken in southern China mainly in the provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi, Hong Kong and Macau, and in various overseas communities. The English name "Cantonese" is sometimes taken to refer to the dialect of Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Macau, which has emerged as the prestige variety of Yue. Wikipedia. 2010. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 15 January 2010 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yue_Chinese>.

people, especially from Mainland China and Taiwan, where they were deprived of such opportunities. Being driven by a vision of achieving wealth and better social status in the eyes of their countrymen, they were determined and ready to make the effort to succeed. Despite the fact that Asian immigrant workers were under constant stress, which was caused by racial discrimination, they were ‘appreciated’ and needed when a tremendous plan concerning the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway⁶ came into question. They proved to be fast and effective workers whose demands, when compared to European workers, represented only a small fraction. Although they were hard workers, they were paid the lowest possible wages and were provided with substandard accommodation. After having completed their task, they were no longer needed and were made redundant. Yet these negative factors did not prevent other people from immigrating to Canada. Regular Canadian citizens began to feel that such immigration was becoming unbearable. This resulted in the passing of The Chinese Immigration Act in 1885, which concerned new Chinese immigrants. Upon their arrival to the country, they were obliged to pay an entrance fee of fifty dollars, which was continually raised in the following years. The government hoped that this would reduce the number of new Chinese immigrants. The year 1923 brought even harsher changes to the Chinese immigration; the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed.⁷ Their identity ceased to exist within the

⁶ Canadian Pacific Railway. The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), formerly also briefly known as CP Rail (reporting mark CP) between 1968 and 1996, is a historic Canadian Class I railway founded in 1881 and now operated by Canadian Pacific Railway Limited which began operations as legal owner in a corporate restructuring in 2001. Its rail network stretches from Vancouver to Montreal, and also serves major cities in the United States such as Minneapolis, Chicago, and New York City. Wikipedia. 2010. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 15 January 2010
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_Pacific_Railway>.

⁷ Chinese Immigration Act, 1923. The Chinese Immigration Act, 1923, known in the Chinese Canadian community as the Chinese Exclusion Act,^[1] was an act passed by the Parliament of Canada, banning most forms of Chinese immigration to Canada. Immigration from most countries was controlled or restricted in some way, but only the Chinese were so completely prohibited from immigrating. Wikipedia. 2010. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 15 January 2010

Canadian political framework. As a result, the Chinese already living in Canada were cut off from their families and virtually no family reunions were possible. The majority of them lived in their secluded places which came to be known as Chinatowns.

The Chinese had to wait till the end of WWII, when a new conception of world history was born. Acts of violence, national and racial discrimination forced many nations to change their immigrant legislation. Canadian politicians were among the first who realised the necessity of the introduction of human rights. In 1947, the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed and the Chinese living in Canada were finally able to receive full citizenship.

Another important milestone was marked by the year 1971, which brought another tremendous change to Canadian society. ‘Institutional racism’⁸ was eliminated at all levels and ‘the philosophy of multiculturalism’ prevailed. The pinnacle was reached in 1980, when the Chinese Canadian National Council was established.⁹

Having reached racial equality and social acknowledgement, the Chinese were finally able to enjoy all the rights and benefits of the country as legitimate inhabitants of Canada. They could freely move around the country and settle in both English and French Canada. Accordingly, they acquired the proper language depending on the part of the country they had chosen to live in. This ‘language rupture’ is closely connected to the Canadian history of two rival nations, i.e. Great Britain and France. This

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Chinese_Immigration_Act,_1923>.

⁸ **Institutional racism**. Institutional racism (also structural racism and systemic racism) is any form of racism occurring specifically within institutions such as public government bodies, private business corporations, and universities (public and private). Wikipedia. 2010. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 15 January 2010

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institutional_racism>.

⁹ **Chinese Canadian National Council**. The Chinese Canadian National Council (CCNC), known in the Chinese-Canadian community as Equal Rights Council [...], is an organization whose purpose is to monitor racial discrimination against Chinese in Canada and to help young Chinese Canadians learn about their cultural history. Wikipedia. 2010. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 15 January 2010

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_Canadian_National_Council>.

facet has also affected to a great extent the body of literature, which is divided into English and French literary circles. This ‘language border’ reflects both the historical and unofficial political division of the country. During the second half of the twentieth century Canadian immigrant writers exercised a strong influence on the literary concept of both English and French Canada. Their writing provides us with a brand new literary perspective and dimension. Their literary work predominantly deals with transcultural problems, while the context of their stories is usually set in their native country. By writing, they are trying to cope with an unprecedented cultural pressure or a culture shock,¹⁰ and a loss of their original identity within a new nation. This psychological treatment of their wound seems to help them find a new identity within a scope of their new existence. The most striking feature of their writing concerns how their ‘mother culture’ is mirrored in their literary work. Thus, they are forming a new literary history. However, “migrant literature” does not only represent literature which only focuses on the life of migrants. Chinese-born Canadian authors especially, divert their attention from the native country of their parents in order to see a new reality which is a product of their time.

The aim of this study is to analyse and explain the social, cultural and biological position of women as described in four francophone novels written by Ying Chen, a Chinese-Canadian immigrant, at the end of the twentieth century: *La Mémoire de L’Eau* (The Memory of Water), *Les Lettres Chinoises* (Chinese Letters), *L’Ingratitude* (Ingratitude) and *Immobile*. These four novels, which belong to the modern Quebec literary corpus produced by Chinese-Canadian writers, concentrate on similar types of female protagonists during different periods of time. The female

¹⁰ **Culture shock**. Culture shock is the personal disorientation a person may feel when experiencing an unfamiliar way of life due to immigration or a visit to a new country, or to a move between social environments. Wikipedia. 2012. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 10 April 2012 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_shock>.

voices overwhelm the texts, searching for their identity and a possibility to overcome all the obstacles of the past and the present in order to establish a new egalitarian system which would ensure sexual equality. This thesis further strives to discuss the biological position of women as the bearers of the nation, the typical features and unusual characteristics of the female protagonists according to Confucian doctrine, Chinese social order and society with a focus on the position of women.

The first chapter of the thesis introduces the Chinese-Canadian author, Ying Chen, and her literary work. It is followed by a subchapter which explains Ying Chen's literary sources by offering a concise outline of Chinese unification, with special attention to the main historical events that had a great impact on the formation of the Chinese political and social system, a general view of Confucianism and women's position in Confucian society. Other specific periods of Chinese history concerning Ying Chen's novels are introduced in the relevant chapters.

Since this study concerns the development of the women's position, female role and culture, the following chapters deal with the change of Chinese society in the past and the present. The second chapter investigates an interconnection between the Chinese symbol of women's independence and Lie-Fei, the protagonist of *La Mémoire de L'Eau*. The following subchapters focus on female subjection and the female ideal in China with the historical backdrop of the beginning of the twentieth century through the eyes of the heroine of *La Mémoire de L'Eau*.

The third chapter depicts the feelings an immigrant has when searching for his identity in a foreign culture. *Les Lettres Chinoises* is an epistolary novel recounting a national story which is gradually forgotten. Yuan sacrifices his nationhood and abandons his fiancée, Sassa, who wished to but cannot join him in his new world. Yuan and Da Li, Sassa's friend who also abandons her country, represent Canadian immigrants who are struggling to win a social position in the new country. They both

experience loneliness and frustration. They are challenged to learn a new language and to acquire a new culture. They are aware of the fact that by abandoning their Chinese nationhood, they need to find a new identity, a new community that will accept them.

The fourth chapter portrays a dysfunctional family. Its central idea experiments with the concept of death as revenge. The protagonist, Yan Zi, suffers in a destructive mother-daughter relationship which deprives her of the freedom of choice. In the novel, *Ingratitude*, Ying Chen alters the Confucian Canon which in the past enhanced a man's role in society. In this novel the role of a dominant father is suppressed and Mother accepts his masculine role.

In the last chapter, Chapter Five, the main protagonist suffers from emptiness and otherness. This part of the thesis investigates the novel *Immobile* which deals with the issues of alienation and exile. The heroine, who remains nameless throughout the whole story, is searching for her roots in her imagination. As she is an orphan, she could not inherit her origin and identity. She is immobile because she has no place to return. She wanders about in the pursuit of her imaginary identity which can never substitute the fact that if she has no parents, she can never discover her origin or her history.

Ying Chen's heroines represent rootless women in exile who search for their identity and womanhood. Each novel tells a story of rootlessness and displacement within the national boundaries.

1. A Concise Biography of Ying Chen and Introduction of Her Literary Work

Ying Chen (应晨), born in 1961, is a native of Shanghai, Shanghai Province, in the People's Republic of China. She graduated from Fudan Daxue (which can be translated as 'Heavenly Light Shines'), a famous Shanghai university established in 1905, where she majored in French and Literary Studies. She excels not only in French, which she studied at university, but also in English, Japanese and Russian. Not surprisingly, she originally set her mind on becoming a translator. However, later on she decided to further her education in Canada and to focus on creative writing. In 1989, she immigrated to Montreal, and in 1991 she enrolled at McGill University. As early as 1992, her first novel, *La Mémoire de L'Eau* (The Memory of Water), was published. This historical novel, set in the era of the last dynasty ruling China, Qing, (1644-1911), which was of non-Chinese origin, was closely followed by the epistolary novel, *Les Lettres Chinoises* (Chinese Letters), which is the intimate confession of a young Chinese couple. The male protagonist leaves China for Canada with a vision for a new life. He is trying to persuade his girlfriend to join him in the new country. Two years later, in 1995, Ying Chen published her third novel, *L'Ingratitude* (Ingratitude), which won her the Prix Fémina and the Prix Québec-Paris. *Ingratitude* has brought her recognition and prestige in the literary world. In 1998, the novel was translated from French into English by Carol Volk, and later on into many other European languages such as Spanish, Italian, Serbian and Polish. The central figure of the novel, a young woman called Yan Zi, has a difficult relationship with her despotic mother who strictly follows the Confucian doctrine. Yan Zi is

unable to free herself from her mother's constrictions and finds that only way out is through suicide.

The female protagonist of the novel *Immobile*, published in 1998, feels lonely and disdained while living in exile. She is trying to find her lost identity.

Ying Chen continued her literary activity during the first decade of the twenty-first century, a period during which she wrote two more novels, *Champ Dans la Mer* (The Field in the Sea) and *Querelle D'un Squelette Avec Son Double* (A Quarrel of a Skeleton with its Dual).

Ying Chen decided to use French in her literary work because she is oriented on the North American French readership and that is the reason she explains the history of China in detail. For this reason her novels have not been translated into Chinese. Ying Chen belongs to the group of young prospective Chinese-Canadian writers who offer a fresh perspective and give a new dimension to Canadian literature.

1.1. Literary Sources of Ying Chen's Novels

Ying Chen in her novels investigates the existence of individual identity which is bound by geographic spaces and is subject to collective identity. In her writing, she investigates many forms of nationalism, while drawing on various sources of different periods of time. Sometimes she reinvents Chinese history, borrowing elements from Chinese tradition and society to tell the story of Lie-Fei. On the other hand, in the novel *Ingratitude*, she is preoccupied with the concept of the modern woman. The female issue remains the main motif of her next novel, *Immobile*, set in modern times, in which she investigates migration as a specific passage which brings loneliness and frustration. Yet all these novels are unified by the invincible strength of the heroines to depart, to leave their homes, which drives them to continue on their way in the pursuit of their goals.

One of the striking features of Ying Chen's heroines is their femininity, which exists in spite of the unfavourable conditions the society they are living in imposes on them. These women, restricted by masculine society, are trying unceasingly to find an exit from this precarious state, since male society begrudges them the possibility of becoming important members of society. Moreover, male society requires them to be members of the community, but to be passive and dutiful female members. They are burdened with the duty to bear male heirs to ensure the continuity of the family and society. But Ying Chen's protagonists resist the roles which are attributed to them by Chinese culture. They rebel against the rock-ribbed system in their own way by trying to find their identity and origin. All Ying Chen's heroines live in a certain exile where time is unmercifully passing. No matter whether abroad or at home, they always feel like they are living in a foreign country where nobody understands them.

Another significant source Ying Chen uses in her text is

nationhood, Chinese culture and history. The history of China has been drawing the attention of many Western academics and the general public for a long time. This seems to be one of the plausible reasons why Ying Chen chose Chinese historic material to reinforce the literary core of her writing. Her literary approach could be compared to the old Chinese proverb: “A journey of a thousand miles begins where you are standing”. The population of more than 1.3 billion inhabitants is the largest in the world. China has experienced much turmoil and has seen many upheavals in its long history. Chinese monarchs and the political leadership had to tackle innumerable political disorders, which on the one hand resulted in losing the Mandate of Heaven,¹ but on the other it helped to build a new, though sometimes unstable, path for the Chinese people to take.

In the twenty-first century Mainland China² could be seen as a ‘modern alliance’ of twenty-two provinces with a few other provincial divisions ‘living under one roof’. The current state of unification was confirmed in the first half of the twentieth century after a string of bloody battles which had accompanied Chinese history all along. The first attempts to unify the Chinese states, at that time referred to as ‘kingdoms’, date back to the second half of the fifth century BC. This was a time of continual fighting and struggling to subjugate one’s neighbours in order to

¹ Mandate of Heaven. The Mandate of Heaven (Chinese: 天命; pinyin: *Tiānmìng*) is a traditional Chinese philosophical concept concerning the legitimacy of rulers. It is similar to the European concept of the divine right of kings, in that both sought to legitimize rule from divine approval; however, unlike the divine right of kings, the Mandate of Heaven is predicated on the conduct of the ruler in question. The Mandate of Heaven postulates that heaven (天; *Tian*) would bless the authority of a just ruler, as defined by the Five Confucian Relationships, but would be displeased with a despotic ruler and would withdraw its mandate, leading to the overthrow of that ruler. The Mandate of Heaven would then transfer to those who would rule best. The mere fact of a leader having been overthrown is itself indication that he has lost the Mandate of Heaven. The Mandate of Heaven does not require that a legitimate ruler be of noble birth, [...].Wikipedia. 2012. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 15 April 2012 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandate_of_Heaven>.

² Mainland China. Mainland China, the Chinese mainland or simply the mainland, is a geopolitical term that refers to the area under the jurisdiction of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The term generally excludes the PRC Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macau. Wikipedia. 2012. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 15 April 2012 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mainland_China>.

annex their dominion. This era is officially called ‘The Warring States Period’. It was a long era of conspiracy and political instability which took place from 475 BC to 221 BC. The behavioural code and tactics of the warrior kings were strongly influenced by omnipresent Confucianism³. One of the central ideas of the Confucian doctrine, also referred to as the Confucian ideals, is to achieve the ‘gentleman ideal’. This required a man to become the ‘noble’ or the ‘cultivated man’ (君子 Junzi). This was “[...] the man who had attained all-around self-perfection, [...]”.⁴ A man had to diligently study Chinese Classic⁵ texts in order to achieve the state of personal perfection. “The conventionally educated man will participate in the old ceremonies with due and edifying respect. He controls all his activities, physical gestures, and movements as well with politeness and with grace in accordance with the status mores and the commands of “propriety, [...]””.⁶

Confucianism was adopted as the central doctrine by the Han dynasty, which ruled from 206 BC to 220 AD. Then, during the tenth century, under the rule of the Song dynasty, Confucianism was simplified, and superstitious and mystical elements were removed. But the doctrine emphasised male authority which inevitably led to even stronger oppression of women by Confucian society. At every level women were forced to occupy a lower position which was viewed as natural.

The only privilege women were accorded was the position of a mother. This idea was instilled into them through limited education which

³ Confucius. Confucius ([...] lit. "Master Kong"; 551 – 479 BC)^[1] was a Chinese politician, teacher, editor, and social philosopher of the Spring and Autumn Period of Chinese history. Wikipedia. 2012. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 15 April 2012

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confucius>>.

⁴ Max Weber, *The religion of China* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964) 131.

⁵ *Chinese classic texts*. Chinese classic texts, or Chinese canonical texts, [...] today often refer to the pre-Qin Chinese texts, especially the Neo-Confucian titles of *Four Books and Five Classics* [...], a selection of short books and chapters from the voluminous collection called the *Thirteen Classics*. All of these pre-Qin texts were written in classical Chinese. As canons they are collectively referred to as *jing* [...]. Wikipedia. 2012. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 15 April 2012 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_classic_texts>.

⁶ Weber, 156.

included proper behaviour and self-discipline. Chastity was one of the foremost priorities of Confucian behaviour. A woman's role in a man's life was to unceasingly support her husband, to produce a male heir and thus to ensure the continuation of her husband's lineage. To achieve such absolute obedience, women were forbidden to study the Confucian Canon or other enlightening literature in order to remain benighted subjects to their fathers and husbands. Despite the fact that women were deprived of education and thus victimised by the Confucian ideology, there were a few significant women who broke with Confucian tradition. Among them stand out China's greatest woman poet, Li Qingzhao (1084-c.1151); the only officially recognised empress Wu Zetian, who ruled China for half a century (c. 657-705); and Empress Dowager Cixi, who unofficially ruled the country at the end of the Qing dynasty.

Confucianism was an ideal doctrine for monarchs to control their subjects. They emphasised their power through the Mandate of Heaven which accorded them the title of absolute monarch. The first actual unity of China was achieved in 221 BC by Qin Shi Huang, who appropriately called himself 'The First Emperor'. However, "his" China did not last for thousands of years as he had intended it to. The final unification of China, as we know it today, was achieved by the Qing dynasty over the course of five centuries.⁷

During the last twenty years of the Qing dynasty, which was of Manchu origin (non-Han/non-Chinese), China was trying to catch up with Western modernization. However, this step forward was not favourably accepted by some reactionary political factions controlled by high officials. Modernization and the economic opening of the country to the Western world brought foreign investment, the Western style of education, and

⁷ Qing Dynasty. The Qing Dynasty was the last dynasty of China, ruling from 1644 to 1912 with a brief, abortive restoration in 1917. It was preceded by the Ming Dynasty and followed by the Republic of China. Wikipedia. 2012. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 15 April 2012 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qing_Dynasty>.

Christianity. The strictly closed Chinese society was suddenly confronted with the open, egalitarian Western system. This was a signal for political and religious factions to revolt and try to seize political power. The last decade of the 19th century was marked by revolution and foreign attacks. The Japanese saw that Chinese political and economical strength had been weakened and decided to use this opportunity. In 1894, Japanese troops attacked China in an attempt to seize Chinese political power over Korea. This Sino-Japanese war lasted a year and was terminated on 17 April 1895 with the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki. This treaty was a positive move for the liberation of the Korean Empire and ensured that Korea was officially recognised as an independent country. Shortly after the Treaty of Shimonoseki, at the end of the nineteenth century, another blow came from the north-western province of Shandong, which was controlled by the Germans. The Germans' open demonstration of conceit and disdain of the Chinese caused the natives of the Shandong province to detest Christianity and foreign influence even more. This displeasure turned into outrage which ended with the notorious uprising known as the Boxer Rebellion (1898-1901). The bloody Boxer Rebellion claimed many lives, both foreign and Chinese. The rebellion finished in 1901 with the signing of The Boxer Protocol, which was a cataclysmic treaty for the Chinese in terms of territory concessions.

The Qing dynasty was the last to officially approve Confucianism as the government's ideology. The last decade of this Chinese monarchy was a period which influenced Ying Chen's novel *La Mémoire de L'Eau*. In the course of the novel, we experience the fall of the Manchurian rule which was followed by the declaration of Manchukuo, a puppet state governed by the Japanese covering the area of Manchuria and eastern Inner Mongolia. At this time, united China was quickly falling apart. Foreign countries claimed their war rights by seizing Chinese territories. For instance, Great Britain acquired Hong Kong and the New Territories,

while Portugal obtained Macau. Meanwhile, other parts of China were occupied with the Civil war (1927-1950). During this dismal period of Chinese history, Sun Yat-sen, on 12th January 1912, officially declared the Republic of China and became the first provisional president. On 10th October he was replaced by Yuan Shikai, a general who exercised great influence during the last Qing dynasty. The period of his presidency was called ‘Yuan Shikai’s dictation’. On 18th January 1915, a Japanese ambassador delivered a memorandum to Yuan Shikai which, if accepted, would drive Western powers away from the country. But this would also cause a loss of Chinese control over the state. This memorandum had to be slightly altered due to the fact that the foreign powers were unsatisfied with the Japanese claims. Still, on 9th May 1915, Yuan Shikai accepted this memorandum. This day is known as a ‘day of national shame’. Ordinary Chinese people began to revolt and boycott Japanese goods in reaction to Yuan Shikai’s military rule and his “collaboration” with the Japanese. After Yuan Shikai’s death in 1915, China fell apart politically. This was an occasion for private usurpation of individual territories. These territories were then governed by self-elected rulers who did not respect the official orders from Peking. This ‘Period of Warlordism’ was finally finished in the 1920’s by a long march from Canton to the north which was organised by Kuomintang.⁸ This march was followed by many other marches. However, the best known was the Long March of 1934 from Jiangxi province which helped Mao Zedong ascend to power. On 1st October 1949, Mao Zedong proclaimed the People’s Republic of China and became the first president. He remained in office until his death in

⁸ Kuomintang. The Kuomintang of China^[4] [...], sometimes romanized as Guomindang (GMD) via the Pinyin transcription system, and translated as the Chinese Nationalist Party,^[6] was one of the dominant parties of the early Republic of China, from 1912 onwards, and remains one of the main political parties in modern Taiwan. Wikipedia. 2012. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 15 April 2012 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuomintang>>.

1976. The end of his era brought a decline to the Gang of Four⁹ and China could finally be politically open to the world once again.

The twentieth century brought many positive changes to Chinese women. Their significant transformation can be seen in the change in their position in modern society. In the past they had to be dutiful, obedient and abide by the Confucian Canon. Their identity was dependent on their family who could change it at any time. But now, modern women are trying to find a new identity which will enable them to become equal members of society. They sacrifice their identity, even their lives, in order to defeat the old oppressive, dysfunctional system. But in both the past and the present they have always been seen as the bearers of the nation. Their primary role is to ensure the continuation of the nation which will share its history and will enlarge it with a new national story. However, it seems that their battle has not yet been won. Women's rights are still centrally controlled by the government. In 1978, the Chinese government introduced a one-child policy which prohibited women of Han nationality¹⁰ to bear more than one child. Only women from Chinese minorities¹¹, rural people, and those who were an only child themselves

⁹ Gang of Four. The Gang of Four [...] was the name given to a political faction composed of four Chinese Communist Party officials. They came to prominence during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and were subsequently charged with a series of treasonous crimes. The members consisted of Mao Zedong's last wife Jiang Qing, the leading figure of the group, and her close associates Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen. Wikipedia. 2012. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 15 April 2012 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gang_of_Four>.

¹⁰ Han Chinese. Han Chinese or Han People [...] are an ethnic group native to China and are the largest single ethnic group in the world. Han Chinese constitute about 92% of the population of the People's Republic of China (mainland China), 98% of the population of the Republic of China (Taiwan), 74% of the population of Singapore, and about 20% of the entire global human population, making it the largest ethnic group in the world. Wikipedia. 2012. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 17 April 2012 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Han_Chinese>.

¹¹ Ethnic minorities in China. Ethnic minorities in China are the non-Han Chinese population in the People's Republic of China. The People's Republic of China (PRC) officially recognizes 55 ethnic minority groups within China in addition to the Han majority. Wikipedia. 2012. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 17 April 2012 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnic_minorities_in_China>.

are exempted and are allowed to give birth to two children. The government set this rule so as to decrease the enormously growing population of China and it has been in effect until now. Nevertheless, this law has also had a negative impact on society. It has triggered an avalanche of abortions and female infanticide. Parents wish to insecure a male heir who will continue to live with them after his marriage and would financially and physically support them. In this way they follow the same pattern which was practised in the past.

The second half of the 20th century saw a few more changes which brought increased welfare to Chinese society. In 1950, the Land Reform, and the Marriage Law came into effect. The Marriage Law was an attempt to improve the current position of women in society. Yet the fact that land could still be solely owned by men enforced male predominance in Chinese society. Throughout the whole history of China male predominance plays a dominant role. Yet there were also a few women who had significant influence over their husbands, many of whom were emperors, but these women did not publicise it, or want their subjects to know this fact. They would be politically and militarily active on behalf of their husbands. Hence the lack of strong women as rulers prevented society from concentrating on female members. The Chinese social order of the early 20th century was still not ready to accept equal rights between men and women. During the Great Leap Forward 1958-59 women were forced to leave their homes to join the great 'industrial revolution'. Peasants were compelled to leave their farms to go to work in factories. China was eager to catch up with the rest of the developed world. Grandparents gained child custody which tightened their family bonds. Women gained more self-esteem, because now their country needed their physical strength to build a new nation. The government became more relaxed in their attitude towards household units and advocated that fathers do not dominate and oppress their children and wives. Such fathers

stripped of their rights are represented in the novel *L'Ingratitude*. Yan Zi says of her father: "Seeing him speak, I used to think of a well-made doll, both lucid and devoted. He had been the game itself. I preferred Father the speaker to Father the reader or thinker."¹² Yan Zi's father has been silenced and blinded by society, because now it is time for women to take control.

Under Mao Zedong the Marriage Law of 1950 gave women the right to divorce their husbands, which in turn enabled them to develop economic independence. Finally, women's social status improved which meant a revolutionary break with the Chinese past. However, in this time of revolution the nation desperately needed women to mobilise their strength and demanded that they devote their lives to building a new strong Communist nation. This bold challenge brought modern women together. They were ready to fight their enemy, to build a new liberal nation and to receive re-education. The era of Mao Zedong was presented as a constant fight for a brighter future which required strict discipline and obedience. Despite having made these laws, the socialist regime had great difficulty accomplishing their egalitarian goals. From this point of view, however, the old system was still thriving under the veil of modernism. Women were now "public slaves" to the new nation.

During the Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 to 1976, China was far behind the developed world in scientific and technological fields of knowledge. Intellectuals were prohibited to write and to publish their work unless censored. University professors were removed and publicly criticised in order to find "the culprits" who were guilty of spreading Western education.

Another turning point in the lives of the Chinese people came in 1976 when Chairman Mao passed away. The new leadership, which was

¹² Ying Chen, *Ingratitude*, trans. Carol Volk (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998)30.

immediately appointed, repudiated the radicalism of Mao, since during his era China stagnated in many industries. China's economy reached a complete standstill which called for radical measures to be taken. As a reply the new government set up 'four modernisations'. This new plan was to positively influence industry, agriculture, science, technology, and defence. During the 1980's the old agricultural communes were decollectivized, which brought new opportunities to privately owned farms. China again opened to Western investment and to modern Western ideas and philosophy. The Chinese tried hard to push forward economic development through advances in science and technology. This was reflected in the national curriculum which was closely tied to the needs of the economy. The new leadership emphasised the necessity of being economically competitive with the rest of the world. The 'open door' policy was applied to education and helped to bring foreign investment. In 1985, the Compulsory Education Law was passed in order to eradicate illiteracy.

2. Political Turmoil and the Symbol of Women's Independence in the Novel *La Mémoire de L'Eau*

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the world saw many changes in social and political spheres. The Manchu dynasty, which ruled in China from 1644, began to modernise the country in an attempt to become one of the leading countries of the world. It was a dramatic transformation accompanied by many political losses. The greatest impulse of the social development was the lost war with Japan. Chinese society was shocked because they did not consider Japan an equal threat to Western countries. Japan had always been under the influence of Chinese culture, but it had suddenly changed into a strong enemy. The Chinese economy was crushed, but the Chinese wanted to survive. This inexorable fate convinced them of the necessity to reform many fundamental spheres. One of the most important was industry and education, which led to the establishment of the Imperial University of Peking in 1899. Chinese students were funded by foreign patrons to study abroad. With the help of foreigners and their capital the Chinese began to build railroads. Members of the middle class, who began to thrive at this time, were not only hungry to learn new information, but thanks to foreign investment and new working positions, they could also afford to entertain themselves. In 1873, the first Chinese newspapers published by the Chinese appeared, and in the 1880's journals began to be widely published. Foreign literature, especially English literature, such as Walter Scott and Charles Dickens, translated into Chinese during this period, became very popular. The end of the twentieth century was a time when China was experiencing dramatic social transformations, yet there were still some changes waiting to be accepted by Chinese society. In 1893, New Zealand was the first country to give women the right to vote. This was a historical event for women, which

signalled a change in their independency, and other countries such as Australia, Finland and Norway very soon followed this ‘political’ example. Nonetheless, the situation varied in different parts of the world. Chinese women had no political rights and were legally incapacitated until the mid twentieth century. They had to wait until the year 1947, two years prior to the declaration of the People’s Republic of China, to vote for the very first time. Until that time they were mere property of their families or husbands.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese women were still deprived of the rights and advantages that most Western women possessed. For women in Chinese society it was an extremely difficult task, if possible at all, to break free from their families in order to become independent and equal members of society. Such women would be scathingly criticised in the past, however, the twentieth century slowly began to see a shift in the role of a woman.

This turbulent period of Chinese history became the subject-matter of the novel *La Mémoire de L’Eau*. All the political coups d’état and social changes masterfully form the background of the story. The plot is set in the early twentieth-century China and follows the life of Lie-Fei as narrated by her granddaughter. Lie-Fei was born into a prosperous Chinese family of officials in 1907. This is also the year an important female representative of Chinese feminism, Qiu Jin, was decapitated. At the end of the nineteenth century, Qiu Jin was a young, married, Chinese mother who, under the Western influence, decided to pursue her studies in Japan. By this time the already modernised Japan had become a popular destination for Chinese students and literati.¹ After Qiu Jin returned to China, she became an active representative of female emancipation. A propagandist women’s magazine, which she published, became her tool to

¹ Scholar-official. Scholar-officials or Scholar-bureaucrats or Scholar-gentry [...] were civil servants appointed by the emperor of China to perform day-to-day governance from the Sui Dynasty to the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, China's last imperial dynasty. Wikipedia. 2012. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 16 April 2012 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scholar-bureaucrats>>.

inform women of Western progress in female issues. Here, she showed them how to become financially independent from their fathers and husbands. She encouraged them to find employment which would bring them economic independence. At the same time, she drew attention to education which was the key to such 'independence'. While studying in Japan, Qiu Jin became politically active and joined a few illegally organised Chinese revolutionary groups. Among them, the most significant were the Chinese United League led by Sun Yat-sen² and the Triads. Members of these groups shared the same political vision of Chinese democratization. They believed that the Manchus needed to be overthrown in order to establish a new democratic China based on the Western structure. It was a time of uncertainty for the Qing dynasty, but of hope for social and economic change for the ordinary Chinese. It was only a matter of time before the Manchurian power would be overwhelmed. Nonetheless, the members of these factions were betrayed and for attempting political disintegration they were beheaded. In July 1907, the thirty-one year old Qiu Jin was arrested and repeatedly tortured, then she was sentenced to death by public decapitation. Her death became a symbol of Chinese women's independence.

Qiu Jin's pursuit of women's independence in China and her fight for women's rights and education are connected with Lie-Fei's life. Lie-Fei possesses the same strong personality and will to resist oppression. In the novel we follow Lie-Fei as she grows up and the political situation of the county radically changes. In 1912 when she reaches the age of five, Dr. Sun Yat-sen declares the Republic of China and becomes the first

² Sun Yat-sen. Sun Yat-sen (12 November 1866 – 12 March 1925)^[1] was a Chinese revolutionary and first president and founding father of the Republic of China ("Nationalist China"). As the foremost pioneer of Republic of China, Sun is referred to as the "Father of the Nation" in the Republic of China (ROC), and the "forerunner of democratic revolution" in the People's Republic of China. Wikipedia. 2012. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 16 April 2012 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun_Yat-sen>.

provisional president. The year 1912 marks the beginning of a new political era.

2.1. A Chronicle of the Golden Lotus (Female Subjugation)

The phenomenon of Chinese foot binding is the least investigated subject area of Chinese society. It cannot be compared either to the practice of nineteenth century Victorian women who were accustomed to corsets, nor to the African women's custom of lengthening their necks with copper rings. Foot binding is a genuinely Chinese phenomenon and an exclusive aspect of Chinese society.

By 1912, which marked the end of the Qing dynasty, such practice was customary for Chinese women of the upper classes. The process of foot binding began at the age of five, a time when they were, according to the Confucian Canon, to be strictly separated from boys. On the one hand, foot binding was a symbol of nobility, but on the other, it put women in the position of "domestic slaves". According to the Confucian doctrine, women were regarded as 'inside people', while men were labelled as 'outside people'. The position of 'inside people' meant that women, especially unmarried women, could not freely leave the house unless given permission and attended by their maid. Their subordinate position was enhanced by an operation which irrecoverably deformed their feet in order to make them look fragile and sexually attractive. The physical condition reflected women's subjugated position in the Chinese society.

This unique aspect of Chinese society plays the main role in Ying Chen's first novel, *La Mémoire de L'Eau*. The story is narrated by Lie-Fei's granddaughter who, while tracking her family's origins, tells the story of several generations. She is a good narrator of the historical development spanning from feudalism to Mao's revolution. All the historical facts support the inevitable change of the woman's role which is to come. And thus the narrator becomes especially interested in the aspect

of foot binding and further investigates it as an individual cultural facet. During her search she finds many cultural attributes connected with the practice of foot binding which is used as a cultural metaphor. And when Lie-Fei asks her teacher, who had earlier explained the Confucian order, who she should obey, we can clearly recognize that the character of Lie-Fei bears Ying Chen's immigrant status, since her granddaughter talks about her as someone who has been excluded. Later, when she is married, she is excluded from her mother-in-law's kitchen because she is not a traditional woman with properly small, bound feet. The act of immigration is enhanced by her forced move to Shanghai. Based on these facts, we can interpret Lie-Fei as a foreigner in her native culture.

Another outsider is Uncle Jérôme, who is a friend of Lie-Fei's father. He symbolises novelty and the arrival of a new era. Uncle Jérôme, who excels in Chinese and the knowledge of Chinese culture, teaches Lie-Fei French and his culture. Uncle Jérôme can be seen as a comic character who is painstakingly attempting to assimilate into Chinese culture, but he also helps Lie-Fei find her own self. Eventually, through his teaching, Lie-Fei discovers the fact that it is not Uncle Jérôme who is a foreigner or an outsider, but it is her who is a foreigner in her own country. But Lie-Fei needs to undergo a long transformation until she understands all the social and political facts of her time. The main part of the story begins in 1912, when Lie-Fei reaches the critical age of five, which is the alarming signal for the "butterfly transformation". She spent her first five years "pupating", but now she is physically mature and ready to undergo the painful "operation" which will be carried out by her mother or amah¹ at home.

¹ Amah (Occupation). An amah or ayah, [...] is a girl or woman employed by a family to clean and look after children etc. It is a domestic servant role which combines functions of maid and nanny. Wikipedia. 2011. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 16 April 2012 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amah_\(occupation\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amah_(occupation))>.

Lie-Fei put enfin caresser ces petits pieds dont l'image la hantait depuis longtemps. [...], elle se reprocha de ne pas avoir vraiment éprouvé ce qu'elle s'était s'attendue à éprouver au contact des pieds de sa mère . En effet, elle n'avait senti que l'os dur comme le bois, et déformés à l'intérieur des très belles chaussures colorées.²

Lie-Fei could finally caress those [Mother's] little feet, an image which had been haunting her for a long time. [...], she reproached herself for not truly feeling what she had expected to feel when seeing her mother's feet. She had actually felt bones which were as hard as wood and deformed, but covered in very beautiful socks.³

Lie-Fei feels abhorred by the look and the touch of her mother's crippled feet which look like two solid hooks. She cannot find the beauty she had heard of before and she feels compelled to tell her mother a lie. At the thought of such an inevitable torture awaiting her daughter, Mother herself feels sorry for Lie-Fei. Through Lie-fei's eyes we can see and learn the truth hidden inside the beautiful 'socks'. The 'socks', Lie-Fei refers to, were tiny beautiful shoes made of colourful fabric, which were worn in order to cover her mother's stumps. Her mother, as a representative of ladies of virtue, had accepted the role of a passive sufferer in order to confirm her family's nobility. To keep this hallmark of one's nobility, on a lucky day girls as young as five were forced by their mothers to begin binding their feet. It was a long and extremely painful process which required the virtual breakage of the foot bones. Howard S. Levy further explains: "One end [of the bandage] was placed on the inside of the instep, and from there it was carried over the small toes so as to force the toes in and towards the sole. The large toe was left unbound. The bandage was then wrapped around the heel so forcefully that heel and toes were drawn closer together. [...] The foot [...] was subjected to a coercive and unremitting pressure, [...] to make the toes bend under and into the sole

² Ying Chen, *La Mémoire de l'Eau* (Québec: Leméac, 1992) 12-13.

³ My own translation

and bring the sole and heel as close together as was physically possible.”⁴ During this process which lasted several years, until the bones ceased growing and stabilised their form, small chunks of flesh and layers of skin peeled off as a result of putrefaction.

Another reason for this process was as a symbol of beauty. The origin of the beauty of bound feet is rather arguable. Old Chinese literature is abundant in stories of charming, wise foxes that disguised themselves in the form of a beautiful young lady and bound their feet in order to cover their animal paws. After such a transformation, they went to seduce and ensnare a young, handsome man, usually a student or a scholar. At first, it appeared to be an act of romance, driven by pure lust. However, it was a pitiful act for the handsome man as it ended with his death. On the basis of these stories, the sinologist Du Halde believed that it was in the twelfth century when the last empress of the Shang dynasty started copying these foxes by binding her feet. This version seems to be rather implausible and thus we may incline to another version that says this empress had a deformed foot (clubfoot). She decided to cover both her feet by binding them with strips of thick cloth. This foot binding caused a sensation among young women and it soon became a widespread fashion. There are other such similar versions, but none of them is convincing enough to be trusted. Due to the insufficiency of persuasive material regarding bound feet until the tenth century, we cannot determine the exact period when this “fashion” really originated. In other words, until the Song dynasty there is no proof that foot binding was widely practised. Women of the previous centuries were depicted as healthy robust women who played various sports with men. Therefore, it is impossible for them to have had bound feet. The first plausible evidence comes from the tenth century when Li Yu, a sovereign-poet, had a favourite concubine who had a

⁴ Levy, H.S., *Chinese Footbinding, The History of a Curious Erotic Custom* (Taipei: SMC Publishing Inc.,1966) 26.

slender waist and was an accomplished dancer. He presented her with a six-foot-high lotus of gold. He then ordered her to bind her feet with white silk cloth so that when dancing on the lotus, the tips of her feet would resemble a moon sickle. However, the text testifying the veracity of this story has not been preserved.

Chinese culture is rich in various symbols of strength, intelligence and beauty. For instance, women with a white face have been considered beautiful until the present. Therefore, Chinese women and men have been diligently taking care of their facial beauty, because beauty has been a symbol of nobility. Both female and male beauty has been praised in numerous Chinese poems which also provide us with essential information about the Chinese society of the time. During the tenth century, under the rule of the Song dynasty (960-1279), one of the famous poets of the period, Su Shi, lived. Su Shi was a highly educated man who travelled around the country and kept records of his journeys. Travelling and living at the court inspired him to write refined poems portraying the beauty of nature and women. In one of his poems, he extols the beauty of 'lotus feet'.

Anointed with fragrance, she takes lotus steps;
Though often sad, she steps with swift lightness.
She dances like the wind, leaving no physical trace.
Another stealthily but happily tries on the palace style,
But feels such distress when she tries to walk!
Look at them in the palms of your hands,
So wondrously small that they defy description.⁵

Su Shi picturesquely depicts the movements of a lady with bound feet which he likens to blooming lotus flowers. He is enchanted by her graceful dance, but at the same time he contradicts himself when

⁵ Levy 47.

describing the difficulty she has when walking. Nevertheless, at the end of the poem his sexual interest in the lady's "impairment" prevails and he indulges himself in the beauty of her lotus feet. Su Shi's poem serves as hard evidence that proves the widespread popularity of bound feet in the tenth century. The Golden Lotus (金蓮 Jin Lian), a poetic name for bound feet, were highly popular among men. They found such beautifully shod tiny feet sexually attractive. The ideal length of the Golden Lotus was 7 centimetres. Women with bound feet became such fashion icons that they even influenced rural women to such an extent that they began to bind their feet, as well. Nevertheless, for rural women who could not avoid doing manual labour, hobbling on the stumps was an uncomfortable state. Fang Xuan, a Manchu aristocrat who lived two or three hundred years ago, wrote exalting essays about fragrant lotuses. In his essays, he advised men on how to handle these delicate feet. He suggests: "Do not remove the bindings to look at her bare foot, but be satisfied with its external appearance. Enjoy the outward impression, for if you remove the shoes and binding the aesthetic feeling will be destroyed forever."⁶ He further divides bound feet into five main categories and eighteen variants. He also stresses the fact that bound feet need to look plump, soft and frail.

There are many records referring to beautiful delicate feet written by men. However, beauty is in the eye of the beholder and women did not always approve of the set parameters as Lie-Fei confirms in the conversation with her amah:

- [...] on va t'enserrer les pieds! [...]"
- Pourquoi?
- Mais pour les rendre beaux!
- Beaux comme quoi?
- As-tu vas les pieds de ta mère?
- Ils ne sont pas beaux.
- Hum! Alors tes pieds seront beaux comme des lotus.

⁶ Levy 112.

- Qu'est-ce que c'est, des lotus.
- Ce sont des fleurs.⁷
- [...] we are going to bandage your feet! [...]
- Why?
- Beautiful like what?
- Well, to make them beautiful!
- Did you see your mother's feet?
- They are not beautiful.
- Oh! Well then, your feet will be as beautiful as lotuses.
- What are lotuses?
- They are flowers.⁸

Lie-Fei is evidently refusing to accept such a symbol of nobility which will not only deform her physical appearance, but also her mentality. Deformation as a result of cultural tradition will impose on her collective identity, labelling her as a noble mother of the nation. Lie-Fei is trying to reject her community of origin by openly demonstrating unwillingness to accept the image of the community. Nevertheless, she is ensnared in her "social caste" which expects her to adapt to the social views of women's position and to follow them. These are accentuated by her amah Ai-Fu in the following extract.

Maman Ai-Fu s'était donc trompée: On voulait que ses pieds ressemblent aux racines et non aux fleurs de lotus.⁹

And so amah Aifu made a mistake: they had wanted her feet to resemble the roots and not the flowers of the lotus.¹⁰

Her amah is trying to explain the difference between the noble and the non-noble origins. She demonstrates this by saying that she is an ordinary Chinese woman who has to work and thus needs to have natural

⁷ Ying 13.

⁸ My own translation

⁹ Ying 59.

¹⁰ My own translation

feet. Accordingly, she compares her feet to the roots of the lotus, while Lie-Fei's feet are the beautiful lotus flowers. But this metaphor conceals a deeper meaning connected with the lotus. Lie-Fei's Golden Lotus grows from the roots which are deeply rooted in stagnant muddy water. Amah Aifu, who is at the bottom, represents the solid working class supporting the upper class. But the water on the surface is unstoppably flowing towards the beginning of a new political era which will establish a new social order. However, there is another important message in amah Aifu's words. She is trying to remind Lie-Fei of the fact that she, as the lotus flower, is imprisoned in the muddy water of her country which is closely connected to the hard and fast rules of Chinese tradition. Lie-Fei begins to understand this cultural aspect when her husband becomes seriously ill and their doctor advises him to consume lotus roots.

[...], la pneumonie était une des maladies << chaudes >> qui causaient la fièvre. Le médecin lui recommandait donc des aliments de nature << froid >>, comme les racines de lotus.¹¹

[...], pneumonia is one of the << hot >> illnesses which cause fever. Therefore, the medicine I am going to recommend him is of a << cold >> nature, just like the lotus roots.¹²

In this context, Lie-Fei remembers the time when her grandfather was taken ill and lotus roots were administered to him as well, but with no effect. The roots could not save his life. The roots of the lotus cannot heal anybody's wound. They are only a symbol of well-rooted female subjection in the Chinese society in which women are bearers of the collective's honour. Women are responsible for the continuation of culture and tradition.

Lie-Fei undergoes the first stage of the operation, and her feet will

¹¹ Ying 59.

¹² My own translation

never look natural any more. She has been marked by the old system, but she will not bear the stigma of the old time, since her father has been influenced by the new revolutionary ideas and does not believe in the old Chinese system of nonsensical symbols and paradoxes. He orders her feet to be unbound so that they can continue to grow. Still, her feet will never be the same. She is always struggling to find the right size and the right shape of shoes that will fit her feet, but this is an impossible task. Lie-Fei's partially crippled feet represent the state in which she is now; torn apart between two different social systems, between the old and the new world. She chooses the Western system and thus "curses" her family. During the feudal time her large feet are scorned by society. Later on, during the Cultural Revolution¹³ she becomes a target of the new communist system. Yet Lie-Fei strives to become a representative of the new nation; the nation which will be free of any unreasonable burdens.

Foot binding was a symbol of social backwardness and of female subjection which was practised until the beginning of the twentieth century. The view began to slowly change after the 1890's, when Western missionaries emphasised the necessity and practicality of natural feet. During the first half of the twentieth century, foot binding thus became a relic of the imperial era.

During the existence of imperial China, a few Chinese emperors attempted to abolish this "atrocious" and passed a law which banned the cruel custom of foot binding. Nonetheless, all such laws remained without any effect. Only non-Han people such as Manchurian and Mongolian

¹³ Cultural Revolution. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, commonly known as the Cultural Revolution [...], was a social-political movement that took place in the People's Republic of China from 1966 through 1976. Set into motion by Mao Zedong, then Chairman of the Communist Party of China, its stated goal was to enforce socialism in the country by removing capitalist, traditional and cultural elements from Chinese society, and to impose Maoist orthodoxy within the Party. The revolution marked the return of Mao Zedong to a position of absolute power after the failed Great Leap Forward. The movement politically paralyzed the country and significantly affected the country economically and socially. Wikipedia. 2012. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 16 April 2012 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_Revolution>.

women refrained from binding their feet. The last, non-Chinese, Qing dynasty condemned this practice as barbarian and outlawed this custom. Nevertheless, foot binding continued to be practised until it was officially banned by the government of the People's Republic of China, which brought the ultimate end to this custom. "Foot binding was denounced as a reactionary and anti-democratic vestige of an autocratic age, [...]."¹⁴

¹⁴ Levy 28.

2.2. Traditional Upbringing

Lie-Fei's early upbringing and education was a typical example of the traditional way in which Chinese girls were raised. There were many strict rules which had to be followed. A different concept of Chinese beauty, as compared to the Western concept, had an impact on the upbringing of Chinese daughters, which differed radically from that of boys. Girls were brought up in a very strict way, which meant that, from the age of fourteen, they lived separately from the male part of the family and were taught womanly behaviour. The Chinese female concept emphasised the importance of femininity, which meant the girl got up earlier than her brothers, dressed neatly and properly and helped in the kitchen. She did not have many toys to play with, had to speak quietly, walk carefully and sit with her legs tightly together. She had to learn to be modest. She could not laugh openly, she could only decently smile. She was aware of the importance of her virginity, because this would be the most valuable "item" when she got married.

In intellectual families, girls were also taught how to read and write. Therefore, there were always many gifted female writers and poets. There were many illustrious educated women living during the Han, the Wei and Qin dynasties. Despite the fact that literacy for both men and women was limited, much Chinese poetry and literature became internationally recognised works of art. Women inclined to the art of painting and poetry, because it was a widely accepted opinion that writing short lyrical poems best suited the female soul. The greatest Chinese female poet, Li Qingzhao, wrote numerous beautiful short poems telling of lonely, rainy nights, and happiness. In one of her poems we read:

Spring returns to my lonely chamber,
Once more spring grass is lush and green.
Some red plum blossoms are open,
Others have yet to bloom.
I grind tea bricks into fine jade powder
In a pot carved with azure clouds,
Still under the spell of the morning's dream,
Till all of a sudden I am woken
By a jug of spring.¹

The tradition of female poetry lasted until the Manchurian era when it reached its pinnacle. During the Qing dynasty there were almost one thousand women who wrote poetry. Under the influence of Yuan Mei, who objected foot binding, female writing became a fashion. However, there was another scholar, Zhang Xicai, who opposed female writing because he thought that it destroyed the healthy ideal of femininity.

The modern female ideal is a woman who possesses modern knowledge, which means she has been educated in the Western style, but on the other hand, she reveres traditional behavioural codes and is conservative and demure.

¹ Wang, Jiaosheng, *The Complete Ci-poems of Li Qingzhao: A New English Translation*, 18 April 2012 <http://www.sino-platonic.org/complete/spp013_li_qingzhao.pdf>.

3. An Aspect of Immigration in the Novel *Les Lettres Chinoises*

Ying Chen's first novel tells the story of Lie-Fei who feels like a social outcast in her own country. We can actually talk about the first signs of investigating the issue of migration which spans from the first to the second novel *Les Lettres Chinoises* (Chinese Letters). These first two novels are explicit references to China with special attention to Ying Chen's hometown, Shanghai. These two novels develop an intercultural dialogue between the country of origin and the new adopted country. In *La Mémoire de L'Eau* it is a dialogue between Lie-Fei and Uncle Jerôme, while in *Les Lettres Chinoises* most of the dialogue is reflected in letters exchanged between two Chinese lovers who are separated by geographical space and differences. *Les Lettres Chinoises* is an epistolary novel recounting the story of a young Chinese couple, Yuan and his fiancée, Sassa, and Da Li, Sassa's friend. Yuan is a young twenty-two-year-old man who wishes to pursue his studies in North America. And thus he decides to leave China with a dream of beginning a new life in Canada. He first emigrates to Vancouver, but later he moves to Quebec. However, the departure represents his separation from Sassa. Sassa cannot leave the country, since she needs to wait to obtain her passport. Yuan is convinced that Sassa will join him in Canada later on, but by continually reading their letters we discover that Sassa seems to have become reluctant to leave her homeland and is going to remain in Shanghai. Instead, it is Sassa's friend, Da Li, who decides to leave the country to move to Quebec. Sassa, now abandoned by her fiancé and her close friend, resorts to writing letters to both Yuan and Da li.

Yuan, who left for Canada to study computer science, is caught

between two different cultures. Despite the fact that he felt emptiness when still living in China, he cannot separate himself from being part of his own Chinese culture. In Canada he has the status of an immigrant which drives him to find a new identity. In his letters, he confides to Sassa about his despair when he says that everybody needs to have a country of origin. When he arrived in Canada, he suddenly found himself in a place where people spoke a different language. He was unfamiliar with their customs, which made him feel separated from their community. This echoes the exclusion left by Lie-Fei in *La Mémoire de L'Eau*. Both Yuan and Sassa feel lonely and abandoned and thus they try to keep their love alive through writing letters to each other. One day Sassa receives a red maple leaf from Yuan, which reminds her of the redness of their national Chinese flag, but she also remembers soldiers who perished in the Vietnam War and the Canadian maple leaf becomes a new symbol for her. Sassa sees death in its redness, a death of Yuan's nationality. Yuan has thus sacrificed his community and nationality, because he has already found a new one.

The geographical distance which physically separates them at first, turns into an emotional distance between their hearts. Their letters which were full of love and promises at the beginning of their separation, begin to be slowly filled with memories of the past. Both Sassa and Yuan are no longer looking ahead, but tend to seek comfort in their past.

Oui, mon ange, j'ai pris ces deux photos de toi au printemps pendant la floraison. Que tu paraissais simple, modeste et timide!¹

Yes, my angel, I took these two photos of you in the spring when the flowers were in bloom. Oh, you seemed to be so simple, modest and timid!²

¹ Ying Chen, *Les Lettres Chinoises* (Québec: Leméac, 1993) 57.

² My own translation

It begins to be evident that Yuan and Sassa will have no common future, since the only time they shared together and now cherish in their hearts is the past. Although, their common past becomes a bridge which still connects their lives, there is no hope of a common future.

Their relationship reflects the loneliness of their nation as the community. Yuan slowly begins to adapt to the new culture and stops believing that Sassa will join him. The fact that Sassa is separated from Yuan makes her suffer and she gradually becomes an outcast from her family. She bears the loneliness and emptiness of her nation, which eventually causes her to become ill. After having been hospitalised, she decides to tell Yuan the truth because she is too tired to bear such a community's responsibility. She parts with him because she feels alienated from him and from her family members. The continuation of correspondence is not broken even when Sassa is in hospital. But these letters are addressed to her father, which allow us to gain a new perspective into the story. But there are also letters from Da Li who has in the meantime fallen in love with someone of Chinese origin. It seems that the person is Sassa's Yuan. Da Li has also become alienated from her Chinese origin. She has lost her original identity and has acquired a new one which will help her find her way in the new community. Her love of this new community symbolises a new life and a rejection of her old culture and nationality. Da Li does not feel ashamed of the rejection of her past because she has been uprooted and cannot see any connection with her Chinese culture anymore. In her letter she says: "Je les trouve les unes comme les autres laides, têtues, à l'origine des préjugés, coupables de conflits douloureux, destructeurs et vains."³ ("I find them [the roots] all ugly and obstinate, the source of prejudice, the cause of painful conflicts, destructive and vain.")⁴ Da Li's words symbolise the disconnection of her

³ Ying 65.

⁴ My own translation

original nationalism. This reference to roots again echoes *La Mémoire de L'Eau*. These roots are dead and cannot keep her in her place of origin any more. Despite the fact that she criticises the Canadian system, she refuses to go back to her homeland. Thus, the character of Da Li represents a person who has parted with his or her national allegiance. But Sassa can see that and warns her not to get rid of her cultural identity, because it will make her a complete outsider in every community she joins. But Da Li does not listen to her friend's "preaching". Instead, Da Li decides to leave Canada, because she could not find her identity there, either. She continues her journey to Paris where she goes to pursue her study of history. Da Li always carries her immigrant status as a burden regardless of the community she lives in. On the other hand, Sassa herself is aware of her troubles with her own culture and identity. She feels foreign within her community and believes that her illness is a result of this mental state.

Au fond, je reste aussie déracinée que toi, même si je reste encore sur cette terre où je suis née. [...] Je suis née étrangère dans mon propre pays. [...] Voilà pourquoi je souffre, Da Li. [...] J'ai tellement mal au corps que je ne sens plus ma douleur du oeur.⁵

When all is said and done, I am also uprooted just as you are, even though I remain in this land of my birth. [...] I was born a foreigner in my own country. [...] Well, that is why I am suffering, Da Li. [...] My body is so aching that I cannot feel my heartache any more.⁶

Sassa's passport application was turned down for an unknown reason. Sassa had been anxiously waiting for this document which perhaps would have helped her win back her love. The refusal to issue the passport could be interpreted as a symbol of her failure to do her duty to the nation. Sassa wanted to run away from her homeland, from her original identity.

⁵ Ying 66.

⁶ My own translation

She openly admits that she feels like a social outsider, different from the others, and this may be the reason her nation rejects her. As a result, she is not allowed to leave the community. Sassa is destined to remain in her homeland and suffer for her nation, because she has betrayed her nationhood.

Yuan has also betrayed his country by changing his identity, but he was not directly punished by the system of his country. He has established himself in the new culture with the help of his auntie who is also a Chinese immigrant. Yuan and his auntie represent the immigrants who are willing to take on a new identity and to abide by the rules of a new community. Yuan calls this state 'being civilised'. His current state reminds us of former colonies where native peoples were forced to abide by the new rules of the occupying country. Nevertheless, Yuan is neither a colonialist nor is he a subject to colonisation. He was not forced by any community to change his identity. He decided on this of his own free will. In one of his letters addressed to Sassa he apologises for not having written to her during the Spring Festival.⁷ He explains that he and his auntie do not keep the traditional Chinese festivals anymore, because they are Canadians now, and as such, it would be shameful to show their otherness. They avoid anything which is connected to their old country including Chinese restaurants. In any case, the food served in those restaurants does not taste authentically Chinese, because the taste has been altered and adapted to the taste of the Westerners. Such restaurants are the equivalent of the current position of Yuan and his auntie; trapped in the

⁷ Chinese New Year. Chinese New Year is the most important of the traditional Chinese holidays. In China, it is known as "Spring Festival," [...], since the spring season in Chinese calendar starts with lichun, the first solar termin a Chinese calendar year. It marks the end of the winter season, analogous to the Western Carnival. The festival begins on the first day of the first month [...] in the traditional Chinese calendar and ends with Lantern Festival which is on the 15th day. Chinese New Year's Eve, a day where Chinese families gather for their annual reunion dinner, is known as *Chúxī* [...] or "Eve of the Passing Year." Because the Chinese calendar is lunisolar, the Chinese New Year is often referred to as the "Lunar New Year". Wikipedia. 2012. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 16 April 2012 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_New_Year>.

middle of otherness. They have been punished for the betrayal of their country by being excluded from both the Chinese and Canadian cultural communities. They will always bear the status of an immigrant.

Sassa voluntarily allows Yuan to leave her and her nation by parting with him. Yuan can thus “discard” his Chinese nationality. He has already grown accustomed to the Canadian way of life and is also able to speak the new language. His final transformation and adaptation to the new culture is shown when he calls himself “nouveau-né” (newly born). Yuan’s immigration symbolically represents the impossible existence of their shared national story.

Sassa is left alone by Yuan, who had failed to fulfil his male duty to look after his fiancée. He did not insist on keeping their relationship alive and allowed Sassa to end it. However, Sassa did not see any other possibility because she was firmly attached to her culture and community. But it is she who eventually loses her nationhood and her love. Her weak body and her death symbolise the collapse of their shared national story and disbelief in their further existence.

3.1. Comparison of Two Versions of *Les Lettres Chinoises*, 1993 and 1996

In 1996, Ying Chen produced a new version of *Les Lettres Chinoises*. The most significant difference between the 1993 version and the 1996 version is the fact that the local colour of the original text was extracted. In the first version, it was obvious that the novel was written for the North American readership and that was the reason Ying Chen meticulously describes China and explains the Chinese cultural and historical context. In particular, the character of Yuan's father, who represented the Confucian system, is slightly changed. In the new version his Confucian role is less accentuated by being called "Master Con".

The original version offered a different perspective of immigration through the character of auntie, and Da Li's journey to Paris. France is depicted as a centre of civilisation, whereas in the second version it is only a centre of language. The first version portrays differences in generational behaviour and maps the discrepancies in the local colours. With such comparisons, Ying Chen enhances the differences between the Chinese and American cultures. In the second version, she emphasises the differences in the personal positions of the same generation. Sassa is here contrasted by Yuan who abandons not only her, but also his religion after the Cultural Revolution.

Still, both the versions of *Les Lettres Chinoises* keep the same immigration motif as *La Mémoire de L'Eau*. It thematically focuses on exile and the urgent need to adapt to the new conditions of the foreign surroundings. However, there is a difference in time information. In *La Mémoire de L'Eau*, Ying Chen keeps track of the time and informs the reader of important historical events. The novel begins in 1912, during the last year of the emperor Pu Yi's rule, and then it proceeds with the

nationalists and Communists. But in *Les Lettres Chinoises*, she stops providing the reader with any time information. The space where the letters should be dated, Ying Chen leaves blank. It seems that by leaving such blank spaces, Ying Chen intends to evoke the universality and timelessness of her literary work.

4. Ingratitude – “A person without parents is miserable, like a people without history”:

Maternal Oppression in the Face of Nationalism

Ying Chen’s third novel, *Ingratitude*, is a family portrait of a dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship. The novel portrays a young woman, Yan Zi, who ultimately dies under the wheels of a truck. This accident prevents her from carrying out her plan to punish her mother for not standing by her, for being selfish and cold. She had planned to punish her mother by committing suicide, which would ruin her family prestige and lineage. By committing suicide she would dishonour her family, because according to Buddhism suicide is a negative form of action. If Yan Zi had committed suicide, it would have been suicide in anger, and she would not be reborn in a happy realm due to her negative final thoughts.

At the very beginning of the novel we hear the protagonist’s view of the relationship with her mother.

“I WAS BURNING WITH THE DESIRE TO SEE MOTHER suffer at the sight of my corpse. Suffer to the point of vomiting up her own blood. An inconsolable pain. Life would be slipping through her fingers and her descendants would be escaping her. As my body began to rot in the warmth of the days, her genes would stop circulating in my veins, would get lost at the bottom of the uniform earth. She would no longer have a child.¹

The novel begins with Yan Zi’s failure to commit suicide. The narrator died a death she had not planned, accidentally run over by a vehicle, which prevented her from taking revenge on her mother. Under these

¹ Ying Chen, *Ingratitude*, trans. Carol Volk (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998) 12.

circumstances her mother will weep over her daughter who died in an accident, but she will not be punished.

Ingratitude is the story of a young Chinese woman, Yan Zi, who took her destiny into her own hands. Yan Zi tells her own life story in which she emphasises that the dead are more revered than the living. She feels abandoned and unloved by her family just like Sassa in *Les Lettres Chinoises*. However, Yan Zi is an active character who tries to solve her problems radically by deliberately cutting off her family ties.

Ying Chen again investigates the idea of escape and forgetting one's own family and nationhood, which seems to be a common theme among immigrant writers. She reminds us that we cannot choose our origins, identity or our family. The narrative structure fragmented into segments of time provides an insight into the heroine's frustrated attempts to see her life as a meaningful whole. Yan Zi, lying in her coffin for inspection by funeral visitors, decides to retell her life story in flashbacks, beginning at the end. She begins to talk about her current and unchangeable state, a death, which slowly unfolds backwards to her birth. She recounts what her mother was like before she gave birth to her. Before she came to this world, Mother was expecting to raise a model child, who would respect and cherish his or her parents in the same way she cared for the birds that she used to rear in a cage. Instead, Yan Zi feels betrayed by her mother's egotistical love.

“Her belly bore a dark line in the shape of a snake. [...] I came out of there! [...] But the dark line on this stranger's belly cried out to me: You can't get away from me, I'm the one who formed you, your body and your spirit, with my flesh and my blood—you're mine, all mine!”²

Yan Zi feels abhorred by her mother's appropriation of her sense

² Ying 15-16.

of self, and by her feelings of being Mother's chattel and feels compelled to take revenge, a plan which becomes her main motivation. She sets her mind on the worst thing possible that would leave Mother torn apart, and would cause her to suffer even in her next life. Her visceral voice is screaming in despair: "I don't owe you anything, Mother! You've always wanted me to be just like you, you live in my body without any invitation, and you decide so much of my fate! You're such a tyrant!"³ The authoritative control derives solely from a sense of possession. Mother's despotic approach to Yan Zi proves to be possessive, which has a negative impact on the heroine's maturing by constant pressure on her psyche. That her daughter will take after her and reproduce her genes is just an ephemeral hope that Mother is praying for. "What could she do when the sky itself decided to punish this wicked girl who rebelled against the order of things?"⁴ Yan Zi, as compared to the rest of the Chinese community, is an extraordinarily strong individual who is ready to punish her parents by departing from the world. She escapes their dominion and leaves them puzzled behind.

The story is narrated by Yan Zi's soul, but Ying Chen reminds us that there is a real body, a body which is decomposing, a body which stinks, a body which has stiffened. But for Ying Chen it is the soul that is essential, because it can cross any geographical distances and cultural barriers.

Yan Zi's reality is distorted by the fact that her well-educated father, a scholar, failed to fulfil his duty as a dominant and executive member of the family.

"I didn't find many intelligent things in books. Otherwise, I would have had more respect for Father, who wrote books."⁵

³ Ying 20.

⁴ Ying 22.

⁵ Ying 10.

Her father had been accidentally hit by a truck, but he survived the accident. Nevertheless, it left him without the ability to tell right from wrong, and unable to write refined essays. In the past her father used to work as a university professor and wrote essays which were very popular. He was a highly educated man who was able to control the course of events. Unfortunately, this paralysis transformed him into a firmly installed statue, quietly observing the world around him. “He looked at me as if he didn’t know me.”⁶ His ignorance and physical disability to make rational decisions prevented him from being able to protect his daughter. The character of the strong dominant mother, who is the centre of the household, helps to highlight the weakness of Father’s paternal role. His masculine and paternal roles have no influence on family events. Yan Zi herself turns into his enemy, because she feels betrayed by him for leaving her in her mother’s control. Hence their family has been thrown out of balance, which is reflected in the unhealthy mother-daughter relationship. Ying Chen portrays their relationship within the family using elements: Yan Zi represents “fire”; Mother is “water”; and this tension is further intensified by Father represented by “oil”.

“Alas, Father was made of oil and, like oil, kept separate from water, pushing fire to madness.”⁷

Yan Zi was always diligent in her schoolwork, helped Mother with housework and ate little food in order to become an exemplary young woman and to please Mother. She would even avert her eyes from men as was required by the Confucian Canon. She would pretend not to see and not to hear. She wished to be her mother’s disciplined daughter. Yan Zi’s character is a demonstration of the moral values of the typical Chinese

⁶ Ying 28.

⁷ Ying 28-29.

woman which were valued by society. But her character changes when she realises that she cannot make Mother love her. Mother could never forget about the scar on her belly, which does not symbolise a physical defect, but a scar in her heart which Yan Zi cannot remove even by being an obedient loving daughter. Due to the fact that Father is “socially” impaired, Mother accepts the role of a father in the patriarchal society. It seems that Ying Chen investigates the nature of Mother as the head of a family who follows the same pattern established by the male society. She construes her as a cold-hearted person who follows her own interest. Mother does not caress or praise her daughter. She can only see her shortcomings.

“This made me feel ashamed of my youth. To please Mother, I had to grow old. I wanted to be her age, the enviable age of fifty. At fifty, according to Kong-Zi, one becomes perfect. One stands straight, one is no longer confused, and one understands one’s destiny. And more I thought about it, the older I became. The question of death haunted me. I saw it as the only possibility of deliverance, of avoiding fate before encountering it, before the age of fifty. [...] On the contrary, to survive you had to be content with our youth, be daring enough to plunge into the pond where the moon waited, where light reigned.”⁸

In this part the heroine remembers the famous poet Qu Yuan (屈原 Qu1 Yuan2) with whom she identifies. Qu Yuan (340?-278 B.C.) is allegedly an author of a lengthy sad poem, *Li sao* (Encountering Sorrow), in which he portrays his bitter life in exile in the south of China. Qu Yuan was a gifted poet who could see through the emperor’s disloyal retainers, which made him unpopular with those with high-ranks. He was slandered by them and wrongfully accused of conspiracy against the emperor, which resulted in his condemnation to leave the capital for the south of China. Here in exile, he wrote his famous poem, *Li sao*, in which he criticises the

⁸ Ying 34-35.

political system and disloyalty of retainers to the emperor. He is trying to purge himself of guilt by justifying his deeds. He emphasises his love for the emperor and his wish to stand by him. He felt sorrowful having to live in such seclusion, somewhere where the light of the capital cannot reach him. He was unable to find any solution to his situation. As a result of his sad fate, he decided to end his life by drowning himself.

Yan Zi is first searching for salvation in the arms of her colleague, Chun, who is already in a relationship with another female colleague. By seducing him, Yan Zi is aware of the shameful situation she has created. Nevertheless, she is unwilling to end their relationship, even though Mother is begging her to save the “face” of their family. Mother does not like Chun because he, as she describes him, is somebody with superficial knowledge and qualities which would make him only an ordinary husband. Moreover, she dislikes strong men, since such men could steal her daughter, who she sees as her property, away from her. Therefore, she advises Yan Zi to leave him and to remove this stigma of shame. Instead, Mother’s words ignite Yan Zi’s hatred and she continues her romance with Chun, who says:

“I’m your big wolf, you’re my little rabbit, don’t ever think of escaping, you belong to me, do you hear, you belong to me, to me alone . . .”⁹

Although Mother exercises her power over Yan Zi’s education and requires her absolute obedience, through Chun’s words Yan Zi realizes the truth of Mother’s words, which in turn makes her feel ingratitude towards her parents. Her parents, though their roles are exchanged, serve as a symbol of traditional society, culture and origin. This symbol of tradition was violated by Yan Zi’s behaviour and refusal to conform to the conventional order of society. Their relationship was already interrupted by Yan Zi’s existence in Mother’s womb. The womb is a metaphor of the

⁹ Ying 108-109.

nation, which she was forced to enter. The refusal of her national community and cultural rupture form the same motif as Ying Chen's other novels. Yan Zi refuses to accept her origin and the culture she was born into. Being tied to her parents and her country, makes her aware of being owned by them. The ownership limits her existence within the boundaries of one nation. She is urgently looking for a way out, but she realises she cannot exist as nobody's daughter. Her words echo Yuan explaining to Sassa that everybody needs to be part of a community; everybody needs to belong somewhere. But without one's family, an individual cannot join any community. Therefore, Yan Zi asks herself: "But would I be capable of living without her? What would I become if I were no longer her daughter? If I moved elsewhere, my new neighbors would ask me where I was from [...]. [...] They would find it strange if I told them I had no parents. Everyone had to have a mother and a father [...]. You couldn't come into the world alone. You couldn't exist without parents."¹⁰

Yan Zi's death symbolises her rootlessness. She is hovering in a vacuum because she does not belong to any community. Her vacuum thus becomes a symbol of her otherness. She is ensnared by her otherness like Sassa and Lie-Fei. After having reached such state of emptiness, she begins to regret that she had abandoned her community. However, she recalls a conversation with Mother which made her realise she can never fully abandon her original ties.

"I want to be me, Mother."

"You can't be you without being my daughter."

[...]

"No one is ever alone. You're always someone's son or daughter. Someone's mother or father."¹¹

¹⁰ Ying 10-111.

¹¹ Ying 131-132.

Mother convinces her of the impossibility of escaping her origin. She emphasises that she will always be part of a certain nation or a certain community. She cannot leave and pretend that there is no Mother or Father. Otherwise, she would not be accepted by the rest of the community. She would be no one's daughter.

“A person without parents is miserable, like a people without history.”¹²

Ying Chen in this novel ponders over the idea of suicide, loss of one's nation and betrayal of one's own family origin. She investigates whether it is possible to escape from the community or the nation one was born into. Ying Chen speaks through the narrator who, at the end of the story, regrets having betrayed her parents. She is now aware of the coldness of death which has irrecoverably separated her from her identity and origin. We can interpret these ideas as an immigrant's experience of foreign culture to which he or she does not belong to. But at the same time it is experience of the alienation from the original community.

“My memory of Mother melts into the uniform light. My memory evaporates like the cloud that carries me. Through the fog of this memory, like an enchanted lament, comes the last human voice, maybe the cry of an infant: “Mother”.”¹³

¹² Ying 111.

¹³ Ying 154.

5. Immobile – “I am myself”:

Searching for a non-existent origin

Immobile is a novel which is thematically related to *Ingratitude*, and further evolves the recurring theme of finding one’s origin and searching for ideal parents. The idea of searching is underscored by the character of the heroine’s husband who works as an archeologist. The time structure of this novel is more complicated and unclear than the structure of *Ingratitude*. The main protagonist searches for her ancestors, but such ancestors who she would be happy with. Nevertheless, she is aware of the impossibility of inventing one’s parents, because we are products of our parents, which means they were here before we came to this world. Yet, she is pondering over the possibility of living before her parents and thus to be her own ancestor.

“J’existe, tout simplement. J’existe avant ma naissance et après ma mort.”¹

“I exist, it is as simple as that. I exist before my birth and after my death.”²

This story is an attempt to change the interpretation of space and connect it with time. Ying Chen’s aim is to confuse the reader by the very concept of time. She wants to investigate the theme of immigration which is closely connected with exile and the loss of the original culture. Thus the heroine becomes a time tool through which we can see a different

¹ Ying Chen, *Immobile* (Paris: Actes Sud ,1998) 51.

² My own translation

perspective of immigration. We see a person without a family origin. This person is as naked as a newborn baby whose history is still to be developed. There is a parallel to Yan Zi, especially when she recalls her mother comparing somebody without parents to a country which has no history. In *Les Lettres Chinoises*, Yuan feels like a newly born person because he had found a new identity. He was reborn into a new community. Nevertheless, it seems that the character of Da Li is even closer to the main protagonist of *Immobility*. They both continue to search for their identity by abandoning their history and creating a new one. The nameless heroine does not know who her parents are and where they come from. She was an orphan found by an opera band. This is a contrastive point compared to the other novels. All the previous characters had their own origin which was imprinted in their character, but they were struggling to remove it and replace it with another one. They also had a place of origin with which they could identify. But she is searching for an identity of her own. The presence of the opera band creates an illusion of actors on a theatre stage. She tries to imitate their creativity and to write her own script. She was born into no community and she has no identity because she lost her parents. Her empty history allows her to fill it with a new record of her own. She says: “Encore une fois, je suis moi.”³ (Once again, I am myself.)⁴ By inventing her identity and her ancestors, she invents her new self. She hopes that her invented identity will help her feel wanted in a new community. She believes it will enable her to find a place which she could call home because she has never been at home anywhere. She is tired of this life, but she has no place to return. Her memory is vague and her mind is filled with the feeling of being an unwanted stranger with no place to go.

The narrator is a woman from nowhere; she is a lonely orphan who

³ Ying 9.

⁴ My own translation

tells the reader a double story. It is essential to follow both the different story lines at the same time. The story has many references indicating that the narrator is a constant traveler. We learn that she falls in love with a man, who is an archaeologist and whom she marries, on the train and leaves with him. Another form of travelling is portrayed by their journey to Canada where her husband is assigned a job. His profession helps the reader to realize that the best way is to follow the story as a certain kind of historic mystery. This signifies a journey to the past. He is tracing and trying to uncover vestiges of the Canadian past which are closely connected with immigration. In the course of his search he discovers the fact that his wife, the protagonist of the story, leads a double life. She believes that she lives in the past century and that she is a reincarnation of a prince's fourth wife. She exists in nobody's land. Ying Chen deliberately decides on the absence of the place, which signifies rootlessness. We cannot say whether she lives in Canada or China. However, her marriage to the Prince turns out to be unhappy. Their love vanishes very soon and he loses his interest in her. She brings a lover slave home, which upsets the Prince. He feels betrayed and challenges the slave. But it is the prince who perishes in the fight and she decides to follow him in death. Finally, the protagonist turns her own husband into a slave, which makes him realize that his wife has a split personality.

All the characters are nameless as if attempting to say that time and space is not important. It seems that Ying Chen is distancing herself from the novel. The characters of the book are only called by the letters of the alphabet S and A. It is universal and invites the reader to use his imagination to uncover their identities. The protagonist changes time and space to deliberately confuse the reader in order to bring two different epochs together. However, her husband warns her and tries to convince her that the past is dead and it is impossible to revive it from the ruins.

Ying Chen's novels are linked together with the perpetual effort to

uncover the history of her nation. Her universal message says that only when we know our national history, are we able to identify our origin. Knowing one's origin is closely connected with the nationhood and the native culture. Ying Chen questions whether it is possible to change nationality by changing the cultural context. She investigates the reason for emigration and its impact on the individuals' concept of nationhood. In the very first novel, *La Mémoire de L'Eau*, she traces the national past in China and in her native Shanghai. It is a story of injustice and the perpetual search for an individual identity within and outside one's nation. This crucial idea continues in all her other novels which could be seen as sequels of *La Mémoire de L'Eau*.

In *Immobile* the heroine changes the concept of time in order to be able to follow the lineage of origin backwards which will allow her to trace the beginning of her identity. By living in her memory she withdraws herself from society and does not allow any other living person to penetrate the walls of her seclusion. She escapes the laws of time, origin and parentage. Her invented memory of her previous existence fills the lack of roots. The protagonist is as rootless as Lie-Fei, Sassa and Da Li.

“Il me fallait plusieurs existences pour remplir mon néant, me délivrer de cette solitude d’orpheline. Pour que ma vie actuelle eût un sens, à moi aussi il fallait une Histoire, sinon plusieurs, même une invention, même un mensonge.”⁵

“I wished for more lives to fill my emptiness, to take me away from this lonely orphan. For my present life would have a meaning, to me it was also a History, if not more, even an invention, even a lie.”⁶

The absence of motherhood, which is connected with nationhood,

⁵ Ying 53-54.

⁶ My own translation

plays an important role in the protagonist's life. She thinks that giving birth to her own child could help her fill the gap she feels in her life and would give her an identity as a mother. But then she denounces the new motherhood as a possibility which could bring her happiness. She questions her status as a mother, because she doubts the possibility of being allowed to join society by becoming a mother. She does not believe in any such compensation for her non-existent relationship with her unknown mother. Ying Chen ponders whether motherhood can alleviate the burden of loneliness and confusion caused by the absence of origin.

The only person who seems to be able to understand her split personality is her husband, who, at the same time, succumbs to her as a slave. The past and space are changed by the immigrant into a dream. This dream conceals the nostalgic memory which continues to live in exile. But it seems that the author's message is that the past is neither a memory nor a dream. The past is real and lives in our memory. We cannot escape the existent past. We cannot undo what has already happened. In this way, it is impossible to create a new living past because such a path leads to madness. If the immigrant's past is not shared by the others of the community, it can live only in his memory. The immigrant cannot thus share the national story with the members of another nation. He cannot fit into their society. This national and cultural vacuum disorients him in time and space and his immigrant status reduces him to the position of immobility. The heroine is searching for a destination, but she does not know what destination nor where to look for it. She is lost in time and ensnared by her otherness. The absence of time and space prevent her from moving in the right direction, for this absence denies the existence of life. She is deluding herself which is caused by her obsession with tracking her origin. She urgently needs to fill this gap of origin, because she desires to be accepted by a certain community, but conversely, the absence of origin prevents her from becoming a legitimate member of the

society. The movement creates a vision of the immigrant's passage searching for his origin. At the end of her journey she realises the impossibility of travelling through space and time which only creates a false impression of movement backwards. Moreover, this distorted illusion evokes immobility which fills her vacuum. She is imprisoned by her false identity which gives her false illusions of a different space and time. At the end of the story she travels by truck which marks the possibility of the beginning of a new journey.

“J’abattais ma dernière carte. Un ultimatum capable de signer ma propre fin.”⁷

“I am laying my last card. The ultimate sign of my own end.”⁸

⁷ Ying 78.

⁸ My own translation

6. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis is to explore Ying Chen's concept of nationalism, origin and identity through the strong female characters of her novels. In the opening part, the thesis introduces Ying Chen as a prominent Canadian-Chinese author and presents the crucial historical facts of Chinese history. She uses her imagination to uncover the injustice and violence of the rock-ribbed feudal system which was defeated by Mao's China. But Ying Chen continues her search for faults in Mao's regime as well, and finds the same injustices which ruled during the Qing dynasty.

The central part of the thesis introduces female characters who refuse to be humiliated and constrained by masculine society. Their imagination becomes their weapon and they fight the social ideology which prevents them from becoming equal members of society. Lie-Fei is at first humiliated by being forced to bind her feet, but when her father orders her feet to be unbound, she feels released from social imprisonment. But she will always remain stigmatised by the feudal system.

The first historical novel, *La Mémoire de L'Eau*, is followed by a novel set in modern times. The female protagonist, Yan Zi, who was named after one of the birds her mother used to raise, tries to resist the Confucian Order by deciding to commit suicide. Nevertheless, she fails to fulfil her plan because she is accidentally hit by a truck which ends in her death. However, this accident happens at the beginning of the novel and the narrator's soul speaks throughout the whole story. But even when she was alive, she felt like a dead person. She automatically performed duties which were imposed on her by society through her mother. She had no free choice of her own. She was wrongly convinced that she would find peace in death.

Sassa and Yuan in *Les Lettres Chinoises* betray their nation by their exile. Yuan leaves his country, whereas Sassa falls ill. At first they believed they could share their national story and have a common identity, but they realised that they cannot succeed due to geographical differences. Yuan accepted the new culture which gave him the identity of an immigrant. Sassa, abandoned, lost her identity and faith of creating a new one.

The question of identity is a recurring theme in all the novels. The nameless protagonist of the last novel discussed, *Immobile*, represents the rootless immigrant in a foreign culture. The immigrant is a nameless intruder with no identity which could be recognised within the new nation. The nameless protagonist could be seen as a pinnacle character that combines all the features of the previous characters. Furthermore, this time Ying Chen underscores the necessity of creating one's own identity. The protagonist is prevented from finding her original identity because she has no family history. Ying Chen in her novel, *Ingratitude*, emphasises that everybody has parents, everybody is somebody's daughter or son. They create our origin which we can never escape even after our death. The identity and the national story are both imprinted in our mind. As a result, the nameless protagonist never finds her original identity. And this drives her to continue her perpetual search. It is a cyclic search which can never end.

Ying Chen's characters emphasise the impossibility of abandoning the original identity. She places an emphasis on local colour and national identity which can never be abandoned or fully changed. Some of her characters were able to adapt to a new culture and accept their new identities to a certain extent, but some, such as Sassa and the nameless heroine, continued to delude themselves that by travelling to other destinations they would find their identity.

All Ying Chen's stories cover the topic of disrupted nationalism

and displacement. Ying Chen's migrant writing depicts rootless women in exile who search for their nationhood and womanhood. Her female protagonists conjure up the image of strong, resistant female warriors who share the national trauma of a shattered identity.

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8. Resumé

Diplomová práce s názvem: „**Předsudek, kulturní střet a ženská role v románech Ying Chen**“ se především zaměřuje na postavení ženy ve společnosti, která hledá pravý původ své existence. Ying Chen se takto skrze své hrdinky snaží najít podstatu kolektivní identity a národní historie.

Ying Chen pochází z čínské Šang-chaje, kde vystudovala univerzitu Fudan Daxue. Jejím hlavním oborem byl francouzský jazyk a literární studia. Po ukončení svých studií se rozhodla pokračovat ve studiu kreativního psaní v Kanadě. Roku 1989 emigrovala do Kanady a roku 1991 se zapsala na McGill University. Rok poté vydala svůj první román, *La Mémoire de L'Eau* (Vzpomínka vody). Tento historický román je zasazen do posledního období císařské Číny, kdy vládla mandžuská dynastie Čching. O rok později vydává epistolární román pod názvem *Les Lettres Chinoises* (Čínské dopisy), který je intimní zpovědí čínského páru o vzájemném odcizení se a ztrátě své národnosti. Roku 1995 přichází s románem *L'Ingratitude* (Nevděčná), za který jí byla udělena cena Prix Fémina a Prix Québec-Paris. Hrdinkou a zároveň vypravěčkou je mladá dívka, která nás ze záhrobí provází svým minulým životem. Tento román se stal natolik populárním, že se roku 1998 dočkal své anglické verze. Poté byl přeložen i do evropských jazyků jako např. do španělštiny, italštiny, srbštiny a polštiny. V roce 1998 vydává román *Immobile*, jehož osu tvoří cesta, po které se mladá hrdinka ubírá směrem zpět, aby našla svou původní identitu.

Ying Chen svým vytříbeným stylem neúnavně zachycuje pocity imigrantů a ztráty původní identity i ve svých dalších dílech jako jsou *Champ Dans la Mer* (Pole v moři) z roku 2002 a *Querelle D'un Squelette Avec Son Double* (Rozepte kostry se svým dvojníkem) z roku 2003.

První kapitola této studie je věnována samotné autorce, Ying Chen, a nástinu jejích literárních děl. Poté následuje podkapitola, která vysvětluje zdroje, ze kterých autorka čerpá. Mezi ně patří především čínská historie, čínský politický a sociální systém a konfucianismus.

Druhá kapitola zkoumá propojení mezi čínským symbolem ženské nezávislosti a hrdinkou románu *La Mémoire de L'Eau*, Lie-Fei. Děj tohoto románu je zasazen do počátku dvacátého století a poukazuje na feudální přežitky, které omezovaly svobodu žen. Následující podkapitola se zaměřuje na podřízenost ženy a ženský ideál, které jí byly výchovou vštěpovány od útlého dětství.

Třetí kapitola vykresluje pocity emigrantů, kteří hledají svou novou identitu v cizí kultuře. Tento epistolární román, *Les Lettres Chinoises*, vypráví o nešťastném vztahu mladého čínského páru. Mladík Yuan opustí svou vlast, aby mohl začít nový život v Kanadě. Jeho snoubenka, Sassa, mu slíbí, že se k němu přidá, jakmile jí bude vyhotoven pas. Mezitím se do Kanady vypraví Sassina kamarádka, Da Li, aby zde rovněž našla svou novou identitu. Da Li spolu s Yuanem v nové zemi zažívají opuštěnost, zatímco Sassa je „uvězněna“ ve své vlasti a umírá. Yuan si nakonec zvykne ve své nové zemi, avšak Da Li se vydává na další pouť do Francie. Všichni tři protagonisté svým způsobem opouštějí svůj národ v touze najít novou identitu.

Následující čtvrtá kapitola podává obraz nefungující čínské rodiny. Hlavní myšlenkou tohoto románu je pojetí smrti jako odplaty. Popisuje destruktivní vztah mezi matkou a dcerou, Yan Zi, která se rozhodne svou situaci vyřešit sebevraždou. Její smrt by znamenala nejen fyzické přerušování jejich vztahu, ale především ukončení rodinné linie.

Pátá kapitola se zabývá románem *Immabile*, který pojednává o odcizení a exilu. Bezejmenná hrdinka byla jako dítě nalezena operní skupinou a ve snaze najít svou původní identitu se uchyluje k imaginaci a vydává se po cestě zpět, aby ji našla. Avšak jestliže člověk nezná své

rodiče, nemůže svou pravou identitu nikdy najít. Román končí začátkem nové cesty, která signalizuje cyklicky se opakující hledání své pravé identity.

Ying Chen je jednou z nejnovějších, ale zároveň i nejlodnějších tzv. spisovatelů-imigrantů, kteří patří do quebecké literární skupiny. Jejím literárním jazykem se stala francouzština, neboť svou literární tvorbu primárně zaměřuje na severoamerické čtenáře. Přestože lze na internetu najít některá z jejích děl přeložená do její rodné čínštiny, její romány v Čínské lidové republice nebyly nikdy oficiálně publikovány. Pádým důvodem proč tomu tak je, se jeví fakt, že ve svých románech vypovídá pravdu o utrpení svého národa a zároveň odsuzuje čínský nacionalismus, který člověka pevně spoutává ke své zemi.