

# **MULTIPLE IDENTITIES OF A CHINESE WOMAN AMIDST CHINESE PATRIARCHY AND WESTERN COLONIALISM IN ADELINE YEN MAH'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY *FALLING LEAVES***

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## **Abstract**

*In her autobiography, Falling Leaves (1997), Adeline Yen Mah writes about the lives of Chinese women caught in the clash between the existing Chinese patriarchal culture and the advent of Western colonialism in Hong Kong that she herself experienced. Helpless in the face of the overwhelming Western influx, Chinese women were subjected to Western racial discrimination in addition to the sexual discrimination built into Chinese culture. Everything Western, including Western blood, was considered better than anything Chinese. At the same time, the Chinese patriarchy was still a powerful cultural force in spite of the pervasiveness of Western influence. This became a doubly oppressive predicament for Chinese women. Nevertheless, in Falling Leaves, Adeline Yen Mah describes how she carefully chose and employed a variety of roles in order to survive. This paper argues that negotiating between the impositions of Chinese patriarchy and Western colonialism, Adeline constructed multiple identities that satisfied her*

*demand for integrity. She assimilated her Chinese ancestral roots into her identities but rejected the sexist practices in Chinese tradition. As for gender identity, she opted to be a woman who realizes her potential and who has the self-will to become successful even though this idea conforms to Western feminism.*

## **Introduction**

Adeline Yen Mah, the author of *Falling Leaves* (1997), presents us with her true story about growing up in a society where Chinese patriarchy and Western colonialism oppressed Chinese women. Living between these cultural forces, she presents a vivid picture of the complex abuses she suffered. On the traditional Chinese side, women were expected to be selfless and submissive to male authority. On the colonial side, Chinese people were instilled with the idea that anything Chinese was inferior to its Western counterpart. Thus, women who possessed Western qualities and imitated Western life styles might be deemed narcissistic and denigratory of other Chinese women, in spite of living in the native Chinese domain. Additionally, Chinese women who chose this route in the hope of escaping the bounds of Chinese patriarchy risked submitting themselves to new oppressive masters. Written in the *Bildungsroman* tradition, this autobiography depicts the experiences of an unwanted Chinese daughter during her journey to independence and her negotiation of the uncharted waters between the strong currents of her own culture and the surging waves of Western colonialism. Adeline's oppression is consistent with Spivak's claim that women in a colonized country lack a voice within their own patriarchal culture, and they are doubly unheard of under the colonial regime (cited in Bertens

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2003: 211). On this related point, Michel Foucault argues that those who hold language hold power (1978; cited in Gina Wisker 2007). Therefore, it is important to speak and write out, particularly for those whose experience of colonization renders them absent, silenced, and marginalized. In this light, Adeline Yen Man's autobiography, *Falling Leaves*, displays her resistance to Chinese patriarchy and Western colonialism as well as the construction of her multiple identities.

Adeline's autobiography incorporates her coherent multiple identities, acquired in the passage of her journey to independence. According to Leigh Gilmore, autobiography wraps up the interrupted and fragmentary discourses of identity that are presented as 'persons' themselves (1994: 17). Autobiography presents stories that we tell ourselves and are told, which hold us together as 'persons.' In addition, Gina Wisker (2007: 14) states that autobiography becomes a form of testimonial to survival and the establishment of identity. To illustrate this point, Adeline's act of writing an autobiography is tantamount to envisioning herself as a coherent whole amidst the fragmentary discourses arising out of Chinese patriarchy and Western colonialism. Not only did Adeline identify herself as a person amidst these fragmentary discourses; she also struggled against their limitations. Her narrative answers the dilemma faced by a Chinese woman imposed upon them by patriarchal practice and colonialism. These discussions are mainly based on the premise that Hong Kong in the second half of the twentieth century underwent a period of transition. This paper argues that amidst the impositions of Chinese patriarchy and Western colonialism, Adeline constructed multiple identities. In order to examine Adeline's depression, her discoveries and

her construction of multiple identities, the analysis will be divided into three parts, beginning with traditional Chinese patriarchy, continuing with the colonial power of the matriarch and concluding with the construction of multiple identities.

### **Traditional Chinese patriarchy**

According to Confucian ideology, Adeline was ranked lowest in the household hierarchy. Since she was the youngest daughter of a deceased mother, she was subordinate to her three brothers, Gregory, Edgar and James. Also, in accordance with the rules of Chinese seniority, she was subordinate to her elder sister, Lydia. Needless to say, these five children of the deceased mother were marginalized when their father, Joseph, remarried a Eurasian woman, and they—the father and his new wife—had their own children. Moreover, as Adeline's mother had died a few days after delivering her, her family believed that she was a curse. Thus, being born to a rich family did not bring her good luck.

There was, in fact, an event that dramatically illustrates the large gap in the social status between Adeline and her father as the aloof authority of this household. When Adeline and her siblings were asked to choose one of the seven ducklings, they all choose strong and healthy ducklings and left her the smallest, weakest and scrawniest one. She identified herself with this poor duckling. However, it was chosen to be the object of a test when her father wanted to ascertain how well his dog obeyed his orders. The father's dog bit Adeline's duckling and it died the following day. This event is only superficially about the duckling and the dog, and more substantially an issue of the relationship between father and daughter. The dog represented the father's power,

and Adeline's poor duckling represented her powerlessness. Like her duckling, Adeline needed love and care. When the father wanted to show his mastery of the dog, Adeline unwillingly resigned herself to the situation by letting her duckling be the one put in jeopardy. Because she was bound to dutifully obey her father in accordance with the principle of the three obediences,<sup>2</sup> she could not resist him by showing her anger towards his dog. This episode shows that her status was not only the lowest among her siblings but even lower than the father's dog, because the dog was cared for and loved by her father as she was not.

Adeline Yen Mah—as the one with the lowest status—needed love from the people who had authority in the household. Concerning love, Emma Goldman claims that love is the strongest and deepest element in human life and love powerfully decides human destiny (1969: 323). In this autobiographical work, not surprisingly, Adeline longed for her father's love and, in order to win it, she, by all possible means, devoted herself to that end. Although her grandfather, whom she called *Ye Ye*, loved her, he had no authority in their house. He belonged to the traditional Chinese world which, in this period, was threatened by materialism and Western authority. Being loved by a man of inferior status, Adeline could not satisfy her need for love because she still felt classified as unwanted. Therefore, acceptance by her father was necessary to her.

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<sup>2</sup> The principle was determined by Confucianism. Woman obey the three submissions: submission to the father, then the husband, and then after the husband's death, the son.

Nonetheless, the harder she tried to be accepted by her father, the more she became the object of jealousy. As a Chinese daughter, she was supposed to lack ability. When her academic performance was superior to that of her brothers, she was threatened by them. Conspiring against Adeline, they mixed their urine with orange concentrate and duped her into drinking it. This was the reaction of the three brothers who felt uncomfortable with their sister's achievement. Una Stannard explains that men feel threatened unless they are with a woman who is less intelligent than they are (1972: 197). This episode in the story depicts the typical exclusion of the woman by the culture of male supremacy. Her three brothers' act of devilment presumably stemmed from their overwhelming fear or envy of her academic excellence. This shows that although a woman had the opportunity to receive an education, her success was not valued as men's.

Apart from being mistreated by her brothers, Adeline's academic accomplishment did not bring her the desired acceptance from her father. Instead, it got her into trouble. The fruit of her success turned to ashes when her father, instead of complimenting her, commented, "Her successful performance at school has given her a high opinion of herself. [...] She must be taught to be obedient and modest. She should know her place and realize that her opinions and desires count for nothing" (Mah 1997: 85–86). This inevitably leads to the conclusion stemming from patriarchal ideology that Adeline's attributes, hard-work and self-determination, were not acceptable to the family. However, it seems that Adeline did not cease in her attempt to win her father's love. In this phase of her childhood, she

acceded to patriarchal authority rather than demanded justice of it.

As well as in the household sphere, Adeline also confronted sexist practices in a rigid occupational sphere—the hospital in which she worked. Miriam Gilbert notes that the medical sphere is a microcosm of society at large (1970: 64). On a regular basis, the male doctor asserts his maleness and the female nurse is a sexual object. In particular, one of the primary functions of the nurse is to appeal to and flatter the male ego in order to fulfill the needs of the patient. This is the scenario that played itself out in the Hong Kong hospital where Adeline worked. Parallel to the household unit and Chinese society, the patriarchal system was a factor affecting Adeline's occupational role as doctor. She claims, "Sexual discrimination was rampant and blatant. Male doctors earned 25 per cent more than female doctors of the same rank, although we did identical work and took equal numbers of night calls" (Mah 1997: 148).

Adeline's endurance of sexist practices was not limited only to her home country. She also confronted them in her first marriage in America. In her relocation to America, Adeline married Byron, a Chinese man, just six weeks after their first meeting. Although Adeline had expanded her life into the occupational sphere, she had to do the household chores in order to have a happy marriage. Although Adeline had assumed the male role of doctor, she was expected to submit to male domination at home. As opposed to Byron's occupation as a waiter in a Chinese restaurant, which required attentiveness, not decision, Adeline's career as a doctor revolved around matters of human life which constantly called for careful decisions. Nevertheless, her gender

role in the household sphere was drastically different from that in her occupational sphere. At home, she played the attentive role of the waitress, whilst her waiter husband became the master who made decisions about important matters. In her domestic, attentive role, Adeline devoted her life to serving her husband and child in order to live up to the prescribed norm. The point is that the gender roles of women in the household are difficult to change, no matter how well a woman proves herself to be capable of working alongside men. Men and women are often thrown back into out-dated Chinese gender role-playing, she implies.

Adeline—living in Chinese societies in Hong Kong and abroad, in household or occupational realms, in her childhood or adulthood—found the patriarchal culture to be inescapable. Besides the traditional Chinese patriarchy, she was imposed upon by the colonial power, the new authority. This made her route to independence all the thornier.

### **The colonial power of the matriarch**

The parental bond between the father and the children in Adeline's household was broken by their mother's demise. In accordance with the doctrine of the two spheres,<sup>3</sup> he, who belonged in the public sphere, left these family members in the controlling hands of the stepmother. His

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<sup>3</sup> It is a nineteenth century concept concerning the segregation of the two spheres of life: the public and the private. The husband (or men in general) was in charge of the public side of life while the wife (or women in general) was in charge of the private side of life. This meant that the man went to work, voted and participated in civic activities while the women cooked, raised the children and took care of other domestic duties.

brutal neglect opened the door to the colonial power of the Eurasian stepmother. The father's new wife—Jeanne Prospersi or *Niang*—represented a woman of Western culture. The fact that this stepmother was called *Niang*, a synonymous Chinese term for 'mother,' suggested that she was not a replacement for their deceased mother, as the children's dead mother had been called *Mama*. Nonetheless, she assumed the surrogate position equivalent to that of their mother.

The fact that *Niang* had French blood made her a privileged person in this family and made people of Chinese blood less privileged. The author writes, "He (father), like many Chinese, had come to see Westerners as taller, cleverer, stronger, and better. She (*Niang*) could neither read nor write Chinese and was proud of this because it proclaimed, yet again, her western heritage" (Mah 1997: 29). Besides, *Niang* created an atmosphere that menaced the Chinese members of the family, where the value that everything Western was better than things Chinese was pervasive. She invariably wore Western clothes both at home and in her daily life outside and she lived among Western luxury items such as an imitation Louise XVI coffee table, Burgundy-red velvet couches in her living room and red-velvet curtains, to mention just a few. Furthermore, she had connections with Westerners. As a result, when she gave parties, the less privileged members of the household had to disappear from sight, even though this was their home. Adeline described:

Spectacular dinners were held at home. Invitations were treasured because of the quality of the food and *Niang*'s cosmopolitan guest list. During these parties, *Ye Ye* and we

the stepchildren . . . were never mentioned or introduced. It was understood that we should keep ourselves hidden in our rooms, and not embarrass anyone by our presence, especially when there were westerners. (Mah 1997: 97–98)

The point is that the household was permeated by Western tastes and the values of the colonizer—*Niang*.

As well as living among these Western household items and décor and having Western guests, *Niang* created an emotional atmosphere of colonialism in the household by renaming her five stepchildren. Because the act of renaming is common when there is a change of power, Jun-pei, Adeline's elder sister became Lydia. Her three elder brothers, Zi-jie, Zi-lin, and Zi-jun were named Gregory, Edgar and James respectively. Adeline, whose Chinese name was Jun-ling, was also renamed. This implies these children were owned by the new power. *Niang*'s act of renaming the children showed her power to erase the children's identities, which had been molded by their natural mother. The loss of their Chinese mother suggests the loss of their cultural identities. More significantly, the children's names in their mother tongue which were associated with the mother were replaced by the new language of the dominant culture. This milieu suggests that the colonizer *Niang* wanted these children to be under her control as her colonized subjects.

These occurrences are consistent with Helene Deutsch's claim about the niche creation of the stepmother in the household (1973: 462). Deutsch, a psychologist, notes that in some cases, a woman can develop into a rejecting,

wicked stepmother because she is willing to assume the mother's role in the home of her husband only if the former wife is completely excluded from its emotional atmosphere. In this story, the coming of the stepmother led to the fading of the emotional attachment between these children and their natural mother. This also reminds us of the idea of hegemony, a term coined by Gramsci. Hegemony emphasizes how people's everyday lives and identities are defined in and through dominant social structures (Morton 2003: 65). From this perspective, the children in this story were dominated by the stepmother and were close to submission to the colonial power.

Like the relationship between the stepmother and stepdaughter of many fairy tales, the relationship between Adeline and *Niang* was an unhappy one. In particular, although *Niang* felt no maternal love for Adeline, Adeline sought it from *Niang*. She wished to be accepted by *Niang*, who never considered Adeline her daughter. Helene Deutsch asserts that the motivation for the stepmother mistreating the stepdaughter is very frequently the stepmother's jealousy of the love between her husband and his daughter. It follows that the stepmother strives to make her assumed rival harmless by degrading her, by imposing dirty menial work on her or by doing away with her through witchcraft. *Niang*, the stepmother in the real world, had the power to manipulate Adeline in the same way as the stepmother in the fairy tales does. She manipulatively put Adeline in a boarding school and let her endure loneliness. Adeline writes, "I did not know what *Niang*'s intentions were but my future was in her hands. Astonishingly, *Niang* smiled and patted me fondly on the head in front of the nuns." And *Niang* said, "How lucky you

are! . . . Mother Mary has agreed to admit you to the boarding school during the middle of the school year!" (Mah 1997: 100). Thus, because of Adeline's naïve feelings toward her stepmother, she suffered from terrible mistreatment. In this way, the wicked stepmother developed into the wicked witch, and Adeline became the archetypal Cinderella.

As a colonizer, *Niang* applied her codes of conduct to oppress Adeline. *Niang* claimed economic necessity as a channel to oppress Adeline but *Niang* herself applied the code of extravagance to her own advantage. According to Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, the theme of Necessity and Extravagance are abstractions represented in relationships between two different characters (1993: 13). The code of Necessity emphasizes survival, austerity and utilitarian ends. Extravagance involves the submission to impulse or desire. The two contrasting codes are applied to both Adeline and *Niang* but in different ways. In one circumstance, if *Niang* applied the code of Necessity, Adeline would apply the other and vice versa. For instance, Adeline's fate was ruled by *Niang*'s code of Necessity. More specifically, *Niang* paid Adeline no tram fare to school during her primary school period, abandoned her in boarding schools, paid no visits, thwarted her from extending her social life among her schoolmates, and let Adeline wear worn-out school uniform. *Niang* identified herself with the code of Extravagance. Once, the grandfather commented on *Niang*'s irrational desire for a costly Russian sable coat and called it "senseless extravagance" (Mah 1997: 27). Furthermore, in *Niang*'s daily life, she commuted by an expensive chauffeur-driven car, lived in a relatively large mansion, regularly attended social meetings, gave parties, and wore immaculate

clothing. That is to say, *Niang* employed the code of Necessity to oppress Adeline.

On the other hand, when Adeline applied the code of Extravagance, *Niang* saw it as superfluous and useless. In particular, Adeline wanted to continue relationships with her siblings by all possible means in spite of the fact that this violated *Niang*'s command. *Niang* ordered Adeline and her other siblings to disassociate themselves from Lydia, who had been disowned by *Niang*, otherwise they would be disinherited as well. Even so, Adeline extended help to Lydia and her family. Furthermore, Adeline was later willing to support Edgar—her brother in his coming to find work with her in California, although they had had no contact for many years. *Niang* agreed with the father's suggestion that Adeline should employ the scheme of 'Necessity' for Edgar. She advised Adeline to ignore her brother's plea for help. In brief, with her Extravagance code, Adeline had an impulse towards reconciliation with her siblings.

Applying the code of Necessity, *Niang* made Adeline's siblings embrace the concept of individualism. *Niang* invoked the concept of austerity in family relationships. Specifically, her concerns organized around bereavement, superficial relationships in society at large and money matters. Her impulses correspond to the idea of individualism which, according to Claire Chow, is a prominent feature of Western philosophy. It emphasizes individual choice over loyalty to family (1999: 49). In response to *Niang*'s act of hegemony, Adeline's siblings were unconsciously practicing the concept of individualism. *Niang* suggested that they consider each other as competitors. For example, *Niang* insinuated that Gregory

was James's rival, for they both worked for the father's business, and Edgar was Adeline's envious brother. Lydia, in order to reconcile with *Niang*, became treacherous to Adeline, who once was able to help her son. In other words, *Niang* successfully instilled the code of Necessity in terms of sibling relationships. The point is that *Niang*'s colonial power made Adeline's siblings adopt the Western idea of individualism. Even though the Western idea of individualism and the Chinese idea of harmony and relativism<sup>4</sup> are considered to clash culturally, her siblings chose to identify themselves with this Western form of behavior. This means that *Niang* successfully asserted her Western colonial power where Adeline's siblings were concerned.

In addition to the concept of individualism, *Niang* changed Adeline's siblings into materialists. According to Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, oppressed groups accept the condition of the world of elites as common sense; then their understanding of how the world works leads them to collaborate in their own oppression (William 1991: 413). In this story, all of her siblings accepted *Niang*'s hegemony as common sense and they collaboratively confirmed the values of materialism. Hence, the materialistic idea that *Niang* instilled in them led them to view the world in a materialistic way. Adeline's siblings, who hovered around *Niang*, identified themselves with this ideology and competed to curry favor with *Niang*. Anyone who kept in *Niang*'s good graces was financially supported but

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<sup>4</sup> Francis L.K Hsu asserts that the Chinese individual sees the world in relativistic terms. He is dependent upon others and others are dependent upon him. In addition, harmony is the key concept in all relationships between humankind (Sung 1990).

anyone who failed to do so was excluded from this household property. For example, *Niang* did not give anything to Susan—her own daughter—as a dowry upon her wedding because Susan did not allow *Niang* to interfere in her romantic relationship. In contrast, *Niang* provided Lydia with an enormous sum of money because Lydia followed *Niang*'s instructions as to marriage choice. In other words, *Niang* conditioned her children to be under her control through money matters. Financial support was used as reward for being under her control; whereas disinheritance and giving no money were considered a punishment. Therefore the children considered this reality as the condition of the world. In other words, the colonizer *Niang* controlled her colonized subjects by means of materialism.

In contrast to her siblings, Adeline did not adopt materialism. She was disinherited by *Niang* because she violated *Niang*'s command, offering her help to her sister—Lydia. This crisis was the chance for the latent sides of human nature to revive and express themselves. This situation revealed the true nature of her siblings, who had been enslaved by materialism. Whereas Adeline said, “It’s about family and fair play and our common journey in search of a mother” (Mah 1997: 258), James said, “You (Adeline) wanted to believe that we all shared your dream of a united family. In fact, no one cared except for you” (Mah 1997: 269). Accusing Adeline, he said, “it’s money you’re after, isn’t it? Money I can help you with. Tell me how much do you want” (Mah 1997: 258). His utterances released Adeline from her dependency on others for her own identity. James and the other siblings were too overwhelmed with the idea of materialism to be aware of the stepmother’s witchcraft.

*Niang*'s instillation of materialism remained powerful even after her demise. In this respect, materialism and colonialism supported each other.

Unlike her siblings, Adeline searched for concrete representations of family relationships to affirm her sense of belonging to her family. Referring to the issue of commodity, Karl Marx argues that capitalism is not concerned with the particular quality or usefulness of an object but only in the exchange of objects for profit. Furthermore, to capitalists, the value of a commodity is not defined according to any ‘inherent property’ of the object but rather by profit (Morton 2003: 102). In this light, James and the other siblings interpreted the property in *Niang*'s will as a commodity in the capitalistic sense. That is, for them, the property in the will was merely an object from which they would gain or be able to make a profit. They were not concerned about its ‘inherent property’ which, in this context, was the father’s procurement and concern for the family. Thus, all his children deserved it. In relation to *Niang*, inheritance meant the rapprochement between *Niang* and the children. In this situation, the affinity between the siblings was changed into an entrepreneurial relationship due to their materialistic ideas. While Adeline’s goal was, in this way, to reclaim her sense of ‘belonging’ to the family, her siblings’ were to request ‘belongings’ from their deceased parents.

In the crisis of being a native in a colonial culture, Adeline opted to employ a passively conscious resistance against *Niang*'s aggressive colonial power. The Western colonialism described in Joseph Conrad (1902)'s novella *Heart of Darkness*, shows how the colonizers, particularly Kurtz, aggressively abuses the



natives. In addition, Gina Wisker says that this novella indicts the pointless violence of imperial power (2007: 10, 88). Kurtz, who has gone mad, is more culpable and excessively brutal than the local chiefs. Similar to Kurtz, *Niang* aggressively abused Adeline, as she recounts,

She slapped me again, this time with the back of her hand across the other cheek. . . . I wiped my streaming nose and eyes with the back of my sleeve and saw blood. To my horror and shame, I realized that *Niang*'s slaps had caused a nose bleed, and my face was stained with a mixture of tears and bloody mucus. (Mah 1997: 69)

*Niang*, in this light, was compared to Kurtz, who is corrupted by his sense of superiority and self-indulgence. In opposition to Western colonialism, Adeline adopted a policy of passive resistance, especially when she was disinherited by *Niang*. Apparently, she did not contest the will written by *Niang* for two reasons. On the one hand, the act of contesting *Niang*'s will would indicate an aversion to her siblings, instead of to *Niang*. On the other, Adeline was intent on resisting everything about *Niang*, especially her personality. That is to say, she did not want to behave as aggressively as *Niang*. For Adeline, the aggressor was not necessarily the victor. As she said to James, her brother, "It was a great misfortune for us to have had *Niang* for a stepmother. I won't contest her will. I will never allow her to triumph over me" (Mah 1997: 270). This means that Adeline resisted *Niang*'s hegemony consciously. Adeline proved that her conscious resistance disempowered *Niang*'s attempt to trap her into a materialistic pitfall. On the issue of the colonized and the colonizer, Hans Bertens reasons that the colonial power's lack of complete control

is possibly a result of acts of conscious resistance on the part of the colonized (2003: 209).

Immersed in the mainstream of Western colonialism in concurrence with Chinese patriarchy, Chinese women were forced into subordinate positions. Conversely, when *Niang* exerted her colonial power to control Adeline, Adeline resisted *Niang*'s. However, Western colonialism in combination with Chinese patriarchy left no ground for Adeline to make a stand.

### Constructing multiple identities

To stand tall within the spheres of Chinese patriarchy and Western colonialism, Adeline constructed multiple identities. Behrs suggests multiple identities or a pluralistic sense of self could be part of the normal individual's adjustment to society. Gergen, additionally, suggests that an individual who saturates him/herself in social diversity can hardly be expected to develop a sense of self or identity that is not diversified and, in many respects, variable or inconsistent (cited in Leon Rappoport, et al. 1999: 97–98). The author of *Falling Leaves* is a case in point. She was exposed to the realities of both her home country and the Western world and subjected to the forces of Chinese patriarchy and Western colonialism. Instead of giving in to despair, she made her own fate. In so doing, she selectively constructed multiple identities and made use of them as the means to survive amidst these impositions. Her multiple identities were constructed with the aid of various strategies, namely selective interaction, education and the experience of dealing with upside-down reality.

In terms of selective interaction, Adeline turned to Aunt Baba when she had bad

times and needed somebody to console her. Swann and Pelham suggest that people tend to establish relationships with partners who see themselves as they do (1987; cited in William B. Swann Jr. 1987). People gravitate towards social relationships in which they receive self-confirmatory feedback. In this story, when Adeline was bitten by her father and *Niang*'s favorite ferocious dog, Aunt Baba helped to raise her spirits. As Adeline remembers,

Aunt Baba held me, rocked me, dried my tears and understood. Jackie was their favorite pet. It would be best to say nothing, cause no trouble, draw no attention. . . . We then comforted each other in our usual way: by looking at all my report cards from kindergarten to the most recent times. In these records lay our secret weapon, our ultimate plan. One day, I was going to be famous writer? Scientist? Doctor? Anyway, a famous 'something'. And the two of us would leave and set up house of our own. (Mah 1997: 61–62)

In this situation, she felt uncomfortable talking to her parents but interaction with her Aunt Baba, who always took her side, relieved her from the oppression of her father's and *Niang*'s authority. Moreover, Aunt Baba was her model of the independent woman in that she wanted to be financially independent. As Adeline writes, "What was on her mind . . . : (was) that the salary would give her some measure of independence" (Adeline 1997: 49–50). Through Aunt Baba's moral support, Adeline established her sense of self in this connection and relatedness. Furthermore, Adeline's selective interaction with Aunt Baba provided her with a powerful sense of her own capability and

her aspiration to independence. The experience that Adeline gained and shared with her Aunt Baba had a crucial influence on Adeline's determination. It helped her to construct the frame of mind that empowered her to stand her ground in the face of Chinese patriarchy and Western feminism.

Apart from her selective interaction, Adeline considered education a means of attaining a world where she would be admired. According to Steele (1988), people are motivated to find something positive to affirm about themselves. Especially if one dimension of self is threatened, they are motivated to compensate by succeeding in other areas. In other words, they will enhance some facet of the self-concept and take the form of the favored adaptive identity over a less adaptive or maladaptive one. In this story, Adeline's academic success compensated for the lack of love from her family. When her identity as the youngest daughter of the family was damaged by the fact that her father ignored her and *Niang* did not love her, she attempted to be successful in her studies. As she writes, "Nothing I did ever seem to please father, *Niang* or any of my siblings. But I never ceased to believe that if I tried hard enough, one day Father, *Niang* and everyone in my family would be proud of me" (Mah 1997: 60).

Not only did education compensate for her lack of parental love, it helped her construct multiple identities. Adeline was an outstanding student in varied fields of knowledge. She studied in schools in Hong Kong and England and in schools where lessons were in Chinese and English. Adeline counted Chinese as her mother tongue. She acquired English as her second language. As for her

occupation, she studied medicine and later became a woman in the traditional male occupation of doctor. This means, whereas Chinese patriarchy and Western colonialism locked her into the world of silence, education opened up to her vast fields of knowledge. Her knowledge helped her to become an independent woman. As Betty Friedan would argue, education itself helps provide a new image—and inspire in girls the impulse to create their own woman's role (1970: 355). For women, as well as men, education is an imperative for human evolution. In addition to what she learned in the classroom, Adeline was a self-educated person who loved reading, always spending her free time in large libraries where the books came from the Western world. As she wrote, "Oh, what magic it held for me to walk into this treasure trove where the written word was king! [...] I was usually the only one there," (Mah 1997: 103–104). Through education, she found herself in a room with all its windows open on to the outside world.

Apart from immersing herself in the reading world and her school lessons, her education included lessons of life, drawn from her own experience of upside-down realities that helped her create her multiple identities. Contrary to expectations, Adeline witnessed gender equality in the traditional Chinese world. This environment was supposed to be very sexist. In fact, Adeline saw *Ye Ye*, her grandfather, as one who treated women fairly. He called himself "a one-woman man," although society in his epoch admired men with many wives (Mah 1997: 14). Furthermore, her grand-aunt—whom Adeline called *Gong Gong*, a masculine kinship term which means 'grand uncle'—assumed a male role as the

founder of her own bank, The Shanghai Women's Bank, in spite of the fact that women were supposed to be incapable of conducting business in her time.

In addition to gender equality in the traditional Chinese world, Adeline's experience of upside-down reality also included her relocation to work in America. Adeline received hospitality from Westerners and indifference from her parents. In the Western world where Adeline was considered a stranger, people were more supportive of her than her parents. Although materialism is a philosophical tradition in Western civilization, some Westerners were not attached to material reality as strictly as her parents were. When Adeline prepared to relocate to work as a doctor in a hospital in America, her parents ignored her need for money to buy a plane ticket. George, her brother, told her, "They don't care where you go from this point. . . . But don't think you're going to get a free ticket from them, because you aren't" (Mah 1997: 155). In contrast to her parents, Adeline's request to borrow money against her future earnings was accepted despite the fact that she was just a stranger to her prospective colleagues. A secretary of the hospital wrote a note, "I was touched by your letter. I just want you to know that our home will always be open to you" (Mah 1997: 156).

Furthermore, the experience of Western hegemony over her mother country was an upside-down reality. Adeline was indoctrinated with the feeling that her own race was inferior. This contrasts with a widely held assumption that natives should live in their own country with ethnic pride. Apparently, Chinese people felt inferior in their home country. People of Western blood, or who mimicked the Western

culture, could easily take advantage of colonial opportunities to mistreat Chinese citizens. For example, while *Niang* threw luxurious parties for her cosmopolitan guests, the grandfather and children—Chinese residents in this household—were expected to stay hidden in their rooms.

These upside-down realities made her understand the world as it really is, not as it is assumed to be. Adeline's journey to independence accordingly deviated from the false assumption of a fixed absolute reality to one of a variety of realities. This made her attain a pluralistic sense of self.

These three factors made Adeline construct multiple identities through negotiation. This resulted in the creation of a hybrid identity. As Gina Wisker argues, hybridity refers to the creation of new transcultural rather than multicultural forms within the space produced by colonization, where people—indigenous, immigrated, settled, colonising and colonized—live and move (2007: 189–199). Hybridization involves new mixes of linguistic, cultural, political, and racial beliefs and forms. Hence, Adeline's multiple identities can be hybridized among different identity categories. According to Amy Ling, the three most fundamental means of identification are to be seen in terms of racial or national identity, gender identity, and individuality (1990: 104). In Adeline's case, her identities can be viewed in terms of her nationality and gender.

Where ethnic or national identity was concerned, Adeline selectively identified her race as Chinese. Adeline expressed solidarity with Chinese people while she was studying medicine in England. She says,

My Chinese friends were an important part of my life. Among them, I could drop my defences and be myself. I needed to speak my own language and relax with people who could laugh at the same things. . . . There were Chinese students not only from China and Hong Kong, but also from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Mauritius and elsewhere, bringing an international dimension to our mini-Chinese world. (Mah 1997: 132)

She associated herself with these Chinese friends who shared a common public culture. This community-based cultural identity of Adeline and her friends resulted in the creation of and an adherence to their Chinese ethnic identity. In this light, Adeline's sense of ethnic identity in England can be viewed as even stronger than that of Chinese people in Hong Kong—the place she had left. Amy Ling points out that Chinese migrants, whether motivated by homesickness, alienation or persecution, often hold tightly to what they have brought from the Old Country. Thus customs and attitudes that have been altered or have disappeared in the mother country may still be maintained and almost unchanged in isolated enclaves abroad (1990: 9). In this respect, Adeline and her Chinese friends established their Chinese identity in their mini-Chinese world.

As for gender stereotype, she opted to be a woman who realized her potential and who, as Adeline, chose education as the stepping-stone towards independence and success, although this was a Western-originated concept.<sup>5</sup> Instead of marrying a

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<sup>5</sup> As documented by Alison M. Jagger, the first feminist voices were heard in England in the

man and relying on him, she entered an ancient male occupation—that of doctor. She told her father, “I love my job and can see myself staying in it for the rest of my life” (Mah 1997: 183). In other words, Adeline’s construction of multiple identities derived from her strategic acts of selective accommodation. She did not assume any one of them to be the whole truth.

Concerning Adeline’s individuality, these multiple identities were constructed on the foundation of her integrity as revealed during the tribulations of her life. Jonathan Culler suggests that the process of identity formation places emphasis on an internal difference and projects it as difference between individuals or groups (2000: 117). Adeline’s individual identity lies in her difference from her siblings. While her siblings became materialists and submitted themselves to *Niang*’s colonial power, Adeline objected to materialism. She recognized and resisted the colonial power of the matriarch. While Adeline wanted to maintain the relationship with her siblings, they had been instilled by *Niang* with the idea of individualism. *Niang* disowned Lydia—Adeline’s elder sister—and she instructed Adeline and her other siblings to dissociate themselves from Lydia, otherwise they would be disinherited. Even so, Adeline helped Lydia and her family. Furthermore, Adeline was willing to support Edgar—her brother—to find work in California, although they had had no contact for many years.

Adeline’s individual identity also subsumed her true ancestral origins. Adeline says: “Life had come full circle. *Luo ye gui gen*. (‘Falling leaves return to

their roots’), I felt a wave of repose, a peaceful serenity” (Mah 1997: 274). This episode took place at the sickbed of her Aunt Baba, to whose care Adeline’s birth mother had entrusted her. At this point, she found love, and became fulfilled. Adeline’s pain on losing her identity as a Chinese stepdaughter of the elite Eurasian stepmother was cured by her sense of security in her personal coherence with her Aunt Baba. For Adeline, Aunt Baba’s life demonstrated a resistance to Western colonialism and *Niang*’s power. As Adeline comments,

Reflecting on her eighty-nine years which had spanned most of the twentieth century, I realized how wise my mother had been to entrust me to the care of my remarkable aunt. In her modest and unassuming way, she had guided me towards a spirit of independence which she herself had manifested by rebuffing *Niang* and remaining in Shanghai. (Mah 1997: 274)

In this respect, Aunt Baba represented a link with her ancestral roots and Adeline’s homecoming to Aunt Baba accordingly moved her to include her ancestral roots within her multiple identities.

As Adeline writes the plural forms for ‘leaves’ and ‘roots’ (*Falling leaves return to their roots*) in the very last lines of her autobiography, the forms probably signify her acceptance of her plural self. The author uses ‘leaves’ and ‘roots’ as metaphors for the self who was engaged in different social milieus. Like a tree growing and expanding its branches and leaves far from its ground, she lived in her home country and moved to Western countries. Constructed over time in social diversity, her multiple identities were

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seventeenth century (cited in Amporn Srisermbhok 2003: 13).

varied and contradictory. In addition, returning to her 'roots' could mean that Adeline did not abandon her roots, such as her hometown, and still remained attached to people who had supported her in the past. Adeline saw her sense of a plural self incorporating her hometown—Shanghai—and her connection with Aunt Baba.

Her multiple identities are also reflected in her bilingual writing. Featuring the textual hybridity of the English and Chinese languages, her autobiography makes evident Adeline's construction of multiple identities. Dennis Baron asserts that language takes on symbolic value as the embodiment of a culture (1992: 31). It represents the most potent symbol of group identity and local or nationalistic pride. It also concerns group cohesion. In this story, Adeline who saturated herself in social diversity—in China and Western countries, possessed a good command of both English and Chinese. Exposed to the world at large and imposed on by Western colonialism, she acquired English as her second language. Like the majority of literary works by writers from former British colonies, this autobiography is written mainly in English to reveal her experience as a Chinese woman under Western colonialism. She also maintained the spirit of her country of origin by imbuing her biographical writing with the Chinese philosophy, as seen in her use of Chinese characters, transliteration and literal meanings. In other words, she is a bilingual person who perceived realities through English and Chinese languages, and her bilingual ability reflects her construction of her multiple identities.

In addition to representing her construction of multiple identities, Adeline's bilingual writing can be interpreted as her resistance

to Chinese patriarchy and Western colonialism. Not only does her Chinese writing include traditional Chinese sayings, parts of it present aspects of women's subordination in Chinese culture. For example, she writes 嫁雞隨雞 *jia li shui ji*, 'Marry a chicken, follow a chicken' (Mah 1997: 157). This practice makes readers hear the evidence provided by a Chinese voice which maintains that a woman's value is measured by that of her husband. As to her resistance to Western colonialism, her writing defends the author's Chinese cultural identity within the context of Western colonialism. Her bilingual text might be seen as an instance of Bhabha's concept of mimicry, a process of constructing a colonial subject as "almost the same but not quite" that is undermined by its own contradictions. Alastair Pennycook also suggests that English can be viewed as a language of protest (1994: 262). He points to famous writers of ex-colonized countries such as Chinua Achebe and Catherine Lim, whose works have had an impact not only on readers in their homeland but on an international audience. In this respect, making her voice heard through Chinese writing, and making use of English as a language to resist Western colonialism, was deemed appropriate, for this bilingual writing was a strategy to avoid the dilemma of being indicted as either a colonized subject or unheard by the world.

## **Conclusion**

On the whole, this author can be seen as empowering women who are widely assumed to have a lower status than men. She implies that materialism and imitation of Western culture are not the paths to Chinese women's emancipation. In fact, women should have personal self-

determination, education and alliances among themselves. Women need to be strong-willed enough to achieve success, like Adeline Yen Mah, who was determined to be occupationally successful, in order to financially support herself and live her life with dignity. Furthermore, education is important because it equips women with what is needed to make their dreams come true. Education opens doors to brilliant career opportunities. With her medical education, Adeline established her niche in the male occupational sphere of medicine. Furthermore, real-life lessons are worth learning for they pave the path that avoids disillusionment. Adeline learned from her experience of upside-down realities. Moreover, alliances among women empower the movement towards independence. Their relationships provide women with a sense of security, which is most helpful in eventually enabling them to launch themselves into the world at large. Adeline established a relationship with Aunt Baba who gave her moral support. Her belief in Adeline sustained Adeline throughout difficult passages of her life. Although multiple identities were not initially Adeline's goal, her resistance to Chinese patriarchy and Western colonialism made her construct multiple identities to preserve the grounds of her integrity.

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