

TRANSGRESSIVE NARRATIVES: GENDER AND REVOLT IN TWO  
QUÉBÉCOIS NOVELS BY YING CHEN

By

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by

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To the memory of my grandmothers

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This thesis focuses on Ying Chen, a Québécois novelist who immigrated to Québec from China in 1989. To work through the painful transition associated with immigration and exile, Chen wrote several novels, in French, and published them in quick succession, starting only three years after her arrival in Montréal. The following chapters explore connections in two successive novels, *L'Ingratitude* and *Immobile*. The most important connection is the conflict of gender identity and oppressive sociocultural dilemmas that culminates in transgressive acts of revolt by the female narrators. The narrators' voices and actions raise questions about origin and priority in history and culture. The thesis considers connections to Chen's unique social position as a woman and immigrant, writing in a foreign language and living in a foreign culture, merging her past Chinese culture and history with that of Québec. The thesis will argue that certain aspects of the two novels refer also to elements indicative of the Québec national text and its celebrated,

minority, francophone voice. This thesis considers Western critical movements toward minority and francophone literatures as well as notions of diaspora, alienation and exile.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The richness of Québécois literature and culture is partially dependent upon the voices of its immigrant and women writers. Both groups have been gaining recognition for the past thirty years, while the latter has enjoyed critical attention for feminist writing, the most important development in Québec literature in the 1970s (Lequin 2000, Shek 1991). Immigrant writing is increasing in popularity, in best-seller markets, in the education curriculum, and as a focus for literary critics. This recent movement toward cultural plurality also comes in the form of prestigious literary prizes offered to “les écrivains migrants”—the Goncourt and the Médicis in France and the Québec-Paris in Québec all having been offered since the 1990s to these new voices of French (Robitaille 1997, 78). The movement throughout history of massive numbers of people between continents is now culminating in a Western regard for multicultural discourse. Placing the immigrant writer at the focus of a literary scene can occur as a result of recent trends, movements, marketing interests, and a growing sense of a new population that must be somehow regarded, be it in a good or bad light. Canada’s most significant immigration population, the Chinese-Canadian, is making its voices heard. “Both the landing records and the 2001 census confirm that the Chinese have become the largest group of immigrants in Canada. Between 1980 and 2000, nearly 800,000 Chinese immigrants landed in Canada” and “the Chinese language has become the third-most-spoken language in Canada (after English and French)” (Wang and Lo 2003, 1).

Despite this explosion in the Chinese-Canadian population, most of the writers in Québec receiving critical attention are not of Chinese backgrounds. “For various linguistic, historical, and geopolitical reasons, there are many more Québec writers of Haitian, Italian, Middle Eastern, North African and Central or South American background” (Saint-Martin 2001, 62). The first Sino-Québécois writer to gain notable literary popularity is Ying Chen, who came to Montréal from Shanghai in 1989 and was published three years later. This thesis examines certain culture and gender discourses that result in acts of transgression by the female protagonists in two of her six novels. Chen uses metaphors of displacement to thematize haunting aspects of alienation and exile—particularly from a gender perspective—and to put into relief the anger and sadness that these uncertain states produce.

As the first and most recognized Sino-Québécois writer in North America, Chen’s work contributes to the developing interest in cross-cultural narratives and gender studies. Entering the literary scene at the age of 31, Chen has written on the cusp of two millenniums, publishing four of her six novels in the 1990s and the most recent two in 2002 and 2003. In the formation of a national canon, Chen is considered a significant contributor as a woman’s voice, as an immigrant’s voice, and as a writer of novels that raise international questions about heritage, culture, gender, and humanity. With narratives that centralize the minority or marginalized positions of women and immigrants, Chen’s novels approach different themes, structures, and story lines; all maintain a voice that is powerfully unique, influenced by the combined components of her Chinese culture, her difficult move to the region of Québec, and the modern dilemmas about which she writes.

What makes Chen so interesting is that she left her family, an established career, and her familiar language and surroundings to live in Québec and to write in French, when she could have chosen to live among the more sizeable Chinese immigrant populations of Vancouver, Toronto, or New York, with thousands of new Chinese immigrating yearly. Gifted for language, Chen worked as a translator with Mandarin, Russian, Italian, English and French before leaving China to pursue her goal to become a writer. She chose to specialize in French literature at the University of Fudan (Shanghai), and her move from China to Montréal began with her studying creative writing and French at McGill University, where she earned a Master's degree.

The province of Québec boasts a formidable group of critically acclaimed writers and works that are, as members of a minority francophone literature, attracting worldwide interest in its culture and discourses on nationality. Ying Chen's work, grounded in her Chinese culture and still-forming Québécois roots, is a component both of this francophone literature and the immigrant minority voice within it. Her unique position is that of a member representative of these groups, as well as of the cultures and languages that embody them. Chen does not easily fit into any one category. Her narratives that are set in China were written in Montréal. Her narratives center on the harsh treatment of women that can result from cultural constructs, yet she avoids the political: "elle s'impatiente si on conclut qu'elle a dénoncé la condition féminine en Chine. Elle est écrivain, pas polemiste" (Roy 1998, 26). She cannot necessarily be called a migrant author because she does not move back and forth between countries; she is also not in total exile because she was not expelled unwillingly from her country, and she visited China in 1998 with no political ramifications. The terms "migrant" and "exile" are

slippery categories anyway. Chen is also one of the few immigrant writers who does not necessarily make her immigration and its problematics the central subject matter of her works. Some novels center on the transition in journeying to a new country and culture; most focus on difficulties that have been endured in the already-learned culture. Chen's female characters reveal a good deal of anger in confronting their male counterparts. I would refer to Chen as an exiled writer who left post-communist China in a voluntary search for improved life conditions. What can be said with certainty about Ying Chen is that she is an author, and within her novels, she works out difficulties of alienation and differences in gender status.

There are many reasons for Chen's acceptance as a contributor to the national literature of Québec, as well as for the way in which the literary scene in Québec has embraced her novels. It might begin with her significant choice of residence. She was born in China but chose Québec. She accepted graduate work at McGill University, located in a bilingual metropolitan, and chose French for her language of study and writing. She said that it would have made little difference if she had moved to France, Toronto, Montréal or New York. Her writing itself echoes themes, a certain darkness of mood, and a serious voice common in critically acclaimed Québécois literature, as will be further illustrated below. Also, the struggles her heroines undergo reflect those of many unconventional but popular figures of modern Québécois literature. At the same time, they reflect the difficult position of immigrants and minorities in Québec who have to struggle for attention within the already minority population of Québécois Francophones, who struggle for respect in the larger, national sphere of Canada. The Québec narrative has been traditionally centered on the male or father figure, and particularly around the

Church and its ideals. Up until the past 30 years, female characters had been relegated to marginal positions to echo the patriarchal and church laws and values. Chen's female narrators contribute to a shift of woman in the Québec canon from margin to center, and reflect the shift from margin to center that occurred for the Québec province in the 1960s when its self-reference shifted from French-Canadian (marginal) to Québécois (center).

For Chen's literary achievements, the attention paid to her novels recognizes not just the strong influence of Chinese/Shanghai culture in her writing, but also the manner in which she approaches what may be considered elements of a universal human condition, including but not limited to love, death, marriage, family, exile, alienation, and suicide. The difficult transition into a multicultural identity is a source of conflict and creation for the richness of Chen's texts, and positions her and her novels within a recent literary preoccupation with identity and difference. The dilemma of being in-between surfaces in almost all of her works because it reflects the difficulty of living a double-identity, which immigrants face when they realize the differences between their native culture and language and the new one(s) they are adopting. Christian Dubois and Christian Hommel explain the alienation associated with this double identity: "l'immigrant soudainement plongé dans un monde nouveau vit une double alienation: il est étranger dans sa nouvelle société qui, inversement, lui est également étrangère," which results in an impossibility to stay as one was and a pressure to become other (Dubois and Hommel 1999, 38).

In relocating to Québec, Ying Chen becomes a part of this group of Chinese immigrants and inherits its history of alienation and refusal of citizen's rights by the government. The story of racism against Chinese immigrants in Canada is dark and

familiar. It includes several riots, the major ones occurring in 1887 and 1907 (by the Asiatic Exclusion League), that drove the established immigrants out of Chinatowns across Canada. Because they were considered cultural and economic threats, “Asian immigrants were targeted as an alien population that was not entitled to equality of opportunity nor to services open to other immigrants or Canadians” (Canada 2002). In 1903 a \$500 head tax was imposed on every Chinese immigrant in an effort by the government and racist groups to limit immigration of foreign cultures. In 1923, the Chinese Exclusion Law stopped Chinese immigration, and during the depression of the 1930s the government used sections 40 and 41 of the Immigration Act to deport non-Canadian citizens on relief. Racial and ethnic bias began to decline with the government granting Chinese-Canadians citizenship in 1947, with revisions of the Immigration Act in 1962 and 1967, and with the 1970 Bilingualism and Biculturalism Commission Report that proposed a focus on new citizens and a multicultural society. Today, this negative attention is being refigured through efforts to encourage rather than squash cultural plurality. Chen’s works, at least through the anxiety her female characters experience, connote the frustration of alienated peoples who want to improve their positions or question their society, and yet find themselves unable to move in a desired direction.

In one way, Chen’s unique position as a successful, immigrant, feminist writer addresses problematics of globalization and the ballooning of North American culture at the loss of “other” cultures. She wanted to leave China, like many of her peers. She has been collecting and depositing her own creativity and culture shock, in the shape of narratives that pass from China to Montréal, into Québec’s literary belly. With writing, she imprints her narratives and cultural questions on Québec culture. As the voice of an

outsider who has been accepted inside, her narratives are carefully explored by members of Québec culture, while she has been carefully exploring this same culture that quickly accepted these narratives.

Chen confronts Chinese culture and history with a western perspective, but crucial to understanding her work is the fact that she chose to revolve some of her novels around themes she considers universal, so that whether a work is set in the East or the West, the content and focus of the work are not particular to one nation but rather cross oceans, borders, time periods, and doorways to transcend a specific culture or history. At the same time, Chen's works fit into the questioning darkness particular to a prominent genre of twentieth-century Québécois novels. Many of her tropes are also common in what are considered "classics" of Québécois novels. A dusty atmosphere echoes André Langevin's *Poussière sur la ville* (1953). The themes of suicide or violence resound in *Poussière sur la ville*, in Yves Thériault's *Contes pour un homme seul* (1944), and in several works by Anne Hébert and Marie-Claire Blais. The popular (on best-seller lists and in academia) themes of alienation, exile, and dehumanization can be traced back to Ringuet's *Trente arpents* (1938), and since then have recurred as staple themes throughout the modern Québécois novel and the feminist novel of the 1970s, as with the novels of Gabrielle Roy, Anne Hébert, Madeleine Gagnon, Marie-Claire Blais, Nicole Brossard, and Régine Robin. As with Nicole Brossard's texts, Chen's novels include a "clear distancing of the confused narrative voice from history, society, the outer world, representation," particularly in the use of a female voice that questions patriarchy. (Shek 1991, 88). Narratives that focus on feminist identities and culture are considered "an important site in which to study the personal, cultural, and political transformations that

are the legacy both of the colonial encounter and of the postcolonial ‘arts of resistance’ it produces” (Lionnet 1995, 3).

Chen’s work reflects modes of resistance already present in Québécois literature prior to her arrival in Montreal in 1989, yet she represents a shift in voice, having carved out her own place as a newcomer to the corpus of francophone women writers. Written twenty years after Québec’s active feminist movement, Chen’s novels approach perspectives that interpret a world still largely formulated and governed by patriarchal maneuvers. Her novels, most written and published in swift succession in the final decade of the twentieth century, mark the rise of the immigrant voice and the continuation of questions centered around feminine identity, creating a point of intersection in francophone literature that appeals to trends and movements in literature. Further critical study is needed in the future to continue with Chen’s most recent novels. Because *L’Ingratitude* won international acclaim, it received the most attention from scholars and magazine publishers of any of her works. Fewer articles were published on *Immobile*, yet the two texts mirror each other in their first-person narrative styles, brief and dense chapters, poetic language, and themes discussed throughout this introduction. The next step will be to examine her canon as a continuous body of work that changes as this author resolves the memories and knowledge of her past with present Western life.

Born in 1961 in Shanghai during the Mao regime, Ying Chen took part in a youth movement/diaspora that saw many young Chinese intellectuals decide to re-direct their lives by turning toward Western countries. After earning a university diploma, she worked for six years as a technical and commercial translator in Shanghai. Her self-imposed exile at the age of 28 came moments before the violent clashes at Tiananmen

Square, which caused her a great deal of anxiety and nostalgia for a country and family that she had just left and was already missing. Her voyage from China included a self-imposed exile from her parents, family, culture, language, and familiar surroundings. Though she already knew French, her bilingualism was not enough to balm the painful recovery from displacement. She admits that given the chance, she is unsure whether she would go through this exile experience a second time. Writing was a means of recovery from her voyage, her memory, and of turning away from an old tradition toward a future.

The first novel considered in this thesis is *L'Ingratitude*. In this work, Chen created a Chinese narrative and situated it in a francophone context. The novel, set in Shanghai, is written in French and published in Montréal for a readership in Québec (though it has since been translated into several languages) and is thus set in motion in a continual international context. The names and places are Chinese, but Chen's exploration of consciousness, tradition, love, death and family crosses political borders. The result is a narrative that does not rely on nation or history, as is the case with many Québécois writers who center their texts on contemporary political movements. Chen's female protagonist, Yan-Zi, tries to release herself from the confines of such borders. Her problems are familial and cultural, but these problems are also explored by writers whose textual settings are in Québec. *L'Ingratitude*, set in Shanghai, travels through its francophone address to highlight Eastern and Western problems. The themes proposed in this thesis constitute a dilemma Chen uses to address questions of origin and priority through her characters' methods of denial or refusal. Through these two modes of revolt, the female narrator succeeds in dismantling the connections that maintain an insensibility and inhumanity of her relationship with her mother. The mother character begins the

cycle of denial and refusal in her family, positioning her daughter at its harsh epicenter and fixing her there. The pattern of disconnection and exile in this novel reflects the desire of Chen's narrator to annihilate tradition and culture, to highlight the ways myths fail, and to demonstrate the negative impact of this failure on the individual.

The last part of my thesis will focus on the significance of threshold spaces in *Immobile*, the novel published in the wake of *L'Ingratitude*'s success. These spaces reflect or recall moments of alienation and exile for the female narrator/protagonist, who does not name herself. She is repeatedly reincarnated and so transcends the ancient and the modern, living several lives, both to punish herself for betraying her lover of ancient times, S..., and to try to find him again. Because she is female and of low social class, the narrator exists inside a culture and outside its privilege. She seldom arrives at moments of privilege beyond her privileged position as "je," the storyteller. Through her ability to tell her own story and appear at the center of the narrative, the reader discovers crucial movements of regression or transgression on her part. These movements and the crucial border spaces in which they appear are a reaction to her husband's oppressive notions of forcing her to progress into modernity, despite her warnings that the modern does not mesh with her identity or her memory. Within the narrative, Chen uses several tropes and themes that recall *L'Ingratitude* and effectively fuse the two narrators' voices into central parts of a network of voices that question the origin and priority of constructed ideologies.

CHAPTER 2  
REFUSAL AND DENIAL IN YING CHEN'S *L'INGRATITUDE*

Men and women set themselves goals that they are never certain will not destroy them, while they are precisely struggling against annihilation.

–Étienne Balibar

Ying Chen's 1995 novel *L'Ingratitude* follows the postmortem narrative of a 25-year-old female character who has apparently committed suicide as an act of revenge on her oppressive and abusive mother. Her violent death marks the significance of the question of potential and the individual consciousness. Can a family or a nation—a history—recover from a loss of potential? The female protagonist, also the narrator, addresses her own potential, as seen by her parents and by other representatives of her culture, and puts into question the loss of rights in the name of preserving tradition in a patriarchal culture. The protagonist wants to know about life and love, but her upbringing in an oppressive, patriarchal household (though her mother exercises the most power, she works to inscribe patriarchal laws on her daughter and is thus a representative of male domination) provides a barrier to the exploration of this knowledge and to any exploration of life. Her death challenges a culture that disseminates notions of family, tradition, and the past as embedded with the highest values and priority. It also challenges the view of woman as *mater dolorosa*. Consequently, she is resigned to explore death as a viable alternative and a more inviting space. In this narrative where self-possession is in conflict with being controlled by society and family, the mother plays the role of the tyrant, and the daughter, the role of the revolutionary who must find the courage to cross the border of death and escape the denial of her self.

The protagonist, Yan-Zi, takes advantage of her 'deathbed privilege', which can work to grant the narrator potential authority through the final say (she is the last one to "speak" to the reader), to recount the sequence of events leading up to her (un)timely death. Also particular to this narrative is the unique and singular perspective of the double registre, the observer of oneself as well as the observer of others, which works as a tool because of the absence of other voices, only their traces found at moments while reflecting on her past life, repeated as prior conversations. Yan-Zi's voice works to put into relief the theme of silence, which works as a border, found in several sites throughout the text. Her distance from the events she describes, in addition to her desires and motivation, affect her representation of the past. This element of representation can put into question Yan-Zi's memory or the exact events themselves, but it does not compromise her need for rebellion and the circumstances under which she and other female characters find themselves unable to act.

The continuity and direction of this narrative hint at the possibility that it will be shown in retrospect, to grant the reader a sense of now and then, of a present coming to terms with its past. Through the psychological complexities of denial and refusal, Chen's character deprives the reader of this privilege, aborting the appeasement of retrospect and of its literary functioning. There is a rejection of the sentimental, and with it, an attention to the inhumanity of Yan-Zi's situation. One could argue that Yan-Zi is sentimental about her suffering, and at times she romanticizes aspects of it, but finally she rejects the life she left behind, watches her mother take care of the pet bird that is her postmortem replacement, and proclaims: "Elle continue à aimer à sa façon. Elle se met à éduquer et à discipliner son oiseau, pour se reconforter de son échec intérieur, se préparer un avenir

quelconque, léguer son patrimoine et assurer une continuité à sa vie” (132). This may or may not be her mother she watches; her sight is weakening with her memory, and any resolution is unclear. That a bird replaces her daughter is both a revolution (she conceives Yan-Zi only after she is no longer satisfied with the results of raising birds) and an end to her control over bloodlines, tradition, and values.

In my estimation, the protagonist did not misrepresent her past situation, therefore a reading of this character’s removal from her own life and the sources and elements that led to it is viable. The alienation or marginalization Yan-Zi undergoes is a rupture—any moment where a connection is absent that would have rerouted, in its presence, the potential of the protagonist and caused her to have found a place in her familial and social structures. Yan-Zi’s location outside her family and society is represented by moments of refusal and denial, to be examined below, the sources of which include the indelible marks left behind from alienation, exile, imprisonment, violence, and the use of borders to alienate.

The tension between mother and daughter is the primary source of disconnection in this work; it frames the problematic of a changing female identity in the modern societies of the East and the West. The underlying struggle here is Yan-Zi’s desire for self-possession at the same time that she is being controlled by society through her mother’s adherence to its rules and her father’s inability to act. This society and its consecrated traditions are alien to her consciousness, causing her to be alien to the culture: “Qu’il serait donc merveilleux de ne pas avoir de parents, de vivre loin des obligations imposées par le lien du sang” (89).

Her death disrupts the order of priority, sending her where her grandparents should go first. Her grandmother says, “J’aurais préféré la remplacer, m’en aller avant elle” (10). This tragic tone is continued by the narrator to describe both the trauma of her death and the trauma of her life. She describes her life in terms of functioning through her mother’s commands and wishes, and she is trapped in a triumvirate that operates through marital, filial, and cultural obligations.

Yan-Zi recounts her story, demonstrating the effects of this denial on her own humanity. The patriarchal culture and this culture’s representatives fail to recognize the potential of a female to move beyond the roles of wife and mother. Yan-Zi is alienated from her family and culture because she does not want to be married, have children, or adhere to the codes of virtue imposed on women. She desires to be old, a desire contradictory to others in the community who fear age and dying, thus avoid signs of it. She describes the world in which she lived as ‘their’ world and her mother’s world, focusing on those who are in control of the rules and codes. She understands that these codes silence women and force them into inferior positions. Reflecting on her relationship with her mother, Yan-Zi notes, “Quelquefois, dans les bains publics, nous nous épiions en silence” (20). This silence, also framing her relationship with her father, suffocates her. Her father’s silence, she complains, empowers her mother to control every aspect of her life and fostered the spiteful environment in which she grew up.

She describes how her mother practices espionage to control her daughter’s actions. To lend credibility to her complaints, she also gives the example of the humiliation of her woman friend, Hua, in attempting to express herself: “Son père décachetait ses lettres. Son frère lisait à haute voix son journal intime à table. Lorsqu’elle avait eu son premier

rendez-vous avec Bi, sa mère les avait suivis jusqu'au parc pour voir si ce dernier était assez beau pour sa fille” (89).

Within this patriarchal culture, Yan-Zi's most valuable characteristic is her intact virginity, and the peddler of this virginity is her mother. The father, an impotent and ineffective perpetuator of patriarchal culture (he is an intellectual, and Yan-Zi recounts that during the Mao regime, this profession was not so much shameful as it was useless), is removed from the process of choosing a husband for his daughter. His character is only half-alive, always sleeping or sitting restlessly at his desk, producing no words. When Yan-Zi has sex for the first time, she comes home late, setting off aggression in both her parents. Her mother scolds her absence from the house, and Yan-Zi reveals the *fait accompli*. Upon hearing this news, the father delivers a punishment but is unable to assemble a complete, unruptured sentence—“C'est une i...idiote! (85)—and never touches his daughter; he throws his glass of water at her head and misses, hitting the wall behind her and only splashing drops of water on her.

The mother, on the other hand, delivers the judgement: “Aucun homme digne ne t'épousera, tu vas voir. Ton bonheur a chuté avec ta morale. Tu passeras le reste de ta vie sans mari, sans enfant, sans famille, donc sans destinée... Ta mort est faite, ma pauvre. Tu vivras comme une morte” (88). This is the fate Yan-Zi would have chosen for herself anyway – to reject life and exist without a community. The operations of this community as is bring her only silence and suffering. She explains that, through witnessing the silent relationship of her parents, she sees no advantage in being married. Furthermore, marriage will create an additional connection to her mother that she wants to avoid. Also, she understands her own useless role in marriage while her future husband, Chun,

and her mother are chatting after dinner. “Mais ils n’avaient plus besoin de moi;” she was not instrumental in selecting a husband because her mother was not pleased if she herself was pleased (if she desired the man). The mother’s main criteria are race, blood and honor. Later she reveals the reason for working in an office: to accumulate a dowry that her mother collects in a bank account. “Cette dot m’avait enchaînée à maman d’une manière presque humiliante” (114). It marks her inability to control her life and highlights the aspect of neglect she feels her mother is guilty of when it comes to food and clothing. She is unable to control her own money, which she would like to spend on the delicacy of meat.

Yan-Zi’s mother (who, like her father, is not named) always gives advice, indicating her level of attachment to her daughter as well as her inability to live her own life, an attachment and inability reflected in Yan-Zi’s perception of her mother. The characters’ situations face and reflect each other. The mother is aware of her own hardness, but refuses submission or softening. If she is laughing and catches sight of her daughter, she stops laughing and repositions her face to appear severe and serious. She does not trust Yan-Zi to make good decisions and thus feels she must make the decisions herself, leaving Yan-Zi to remain, throughout her life, a shell of a human—body only and no spirit, no liberty, no choice (except death). The mother refuses Yan-Zi’s humanity and most of all, her sexuality, which she perceives as dangerous to the family honor and to Yan-Zi’s collateral for marriage proposals. Her perception ignores her daughter’s humanity and is thus a source of her alienation. In return, Yan-Zi wishes to refuse her mother a sense of legacy and permanency, a rebellion that would abort the cycles of culture, tradition, and genealogy.

The title Chen chose for this novel refers to estrangement between family and child. It locates the rupture in tradition and filial piety as Yan-Zi is disconnected from feelings of responsibility or gratitude for the life her parents “give” her. “J’étais ingrate envers eux, car je l’étais envers la vie qu’ils m’avaient donnée” (24). She questions the attention a mother and a father gain for their role in the outcome of their children’s lives at the same time that she wants her mother to take responsibility for her unhappiness and even her death. Yan-Zi describes her participation in a family as ill-fated, like a prison sentence or an exile: “Je me savais condamnée à avoir une mère et un père... Quand j’allais à l’école, j’enviais les orphelins, leur liberté” (15). This refusal of priority and origin complicates the notions of family and culture; it puts into question the origin of role-making and role-playing, while also questioning the origin and dissemination of culture. Will a culture’s priority be work or family? Slavery or liberty? Chen demonstrates through Yan-Zi’s distress that these are decisive movements generated by individuals in communities who follow their beliefs, with or against the flow.

Yan-Zi’s heart is a crucial component of her tragic universe and a site of her inability to become a part of her surroundings. The heart guards sentiments that language cannot convey: fear, desperation, suffering, longing, etc. She cannot understand the sentiments of others because she is trapped between her own complex story and her mother’s version of the same story, which offers a one-word description of her daughter’s behavior: ingratitude. She cannot understand herself because she is trapped within and between her own stories of her mother’s selfishness and her father’s impotence. Her heart, a central part of her body, signifies the void, fear, denial, and pain of her character, because through guilt, her mother refuses her to feel any emotions.

Yan-Zi's body is perhaps the most important site of alienation between woman and family. The violence with which she has been treated culminates in an ultimate marginalization—her violent death—with some self-created confusion around its causes. She only reveals the action leading up to her death near the end of the narrative, having promoted the notion of suicide up until the moment when she reveals that she was not actually in control of her body, the arrangement of her own termination, when she was hit by a truck.

Yan-Zi plans to kill herself in a specific manner, in a predetermined location and with designed results. At a crucial scene in the narrative, her will is usurped by the presence of Chun, the man she is supposed to marry and a character who represents and reflects her mother. Chun appears on the outside of the restaurant window, looking in on Yan-Zi (a repetition of the espionage leitmotiv). He is neither with her nor without her, but touches and indicates the window that is the border between her chosen location to finally act, the Bonheur restaurant, and the traffic in the urban landscape that will ultimately kill her. His presence on the border resembles Yan-Zi's mother, in his gaze or look, as well as in his role of preserving cultural tradition and the interests of the state, which promoted the priority of marriage. He is unable to protect Yan-Zi's body in two ways: he was unaware and consequently unable to stop her from having sex (preserving her virginity), and his action of chasing her causes her to move into the street, destroying her body.

Yan-Zi relates traces of violence on her body to her mother's influence: "*Elle se souvient sans doute encore de mes regards craintifs et de mon dos courbé en sa présence*" (13). Her mother will not claim this violence, but will relocate it into signs of ingratitude

in order to be absolved from responsibility. Nor will her mother allow the possibility of suicide to enter into her family's story. Yan-Zi declares the event of death "un accident peut-être volontaire" (13). The circumstances of the violent moment perpetuate the dynamic of refusal and denial. Yan-Zi refuses the value of life, and her mother denies the reasons for her refusal. The *fait accompli* Yan-Zi so desires becomes the reckless violence of the urban landscape, and a prior accident in the family (when the father was hit by a truck; the mother theorized conspiracy against intellectuals) allows the mother an alternative to reality, the reinvention of conspiracy, and a consequent escape from both guilt and from satisfying Yan-Zi's desire that she suffer. Her mother refuses to be devastated by the death of an "ungrateful" daughter.

Yan-Zi's death is complicated because of the unexpected collision that replaces her own will and desire. She deliberately organizes a method of collecting sleeping pills, and at a determined moment, when she feels she can, she will swallow the pills and change herself (a trope used also with the mother to want to swallow her and change her personality), perhaps at the restaurant *Bonheur*. She is unable to abort herself in the womb, as she reflects that she would have liked. She is intent on the necessity of a decision on her part about living: "On ne m'avait pas demandé mon avis avant de me jeter au monde. Alors j'espérais qu'au moins on me laisserait choisir le moment de mon départ" (23). Her death is contrary to her plan; it is the final moment of dissolution of her control in this life. She becomes frightened by Chun's interactions with the owner at *Bonheur*, and nervous at the prospect of being caught in the act of committing suicide and ending in a mental hospital where her mother could have total control over her life. She frantically tries to register the purpose of Chun's visit, then dashes into the crowd on the

sidewalks. Chun chases her and in this pursuit, she moves in front of a truck that crushes her. Chun's presence transforms Yan-Zi's action. She plans to annihilate her mother's control and instead, she is prematurely annihilated, affording her mother an easy path to denial. In a previous scene, when Yan-Zi is at the restaurant with friends, she becomes part of a listening audience for a spectacle in the street: a man on a bicycle is run over and killed. The event of her death, with this prolepsis, serves merely as an effect for the society in which she lives and is alienated. It is a spectacle, the visual impact of which is more valuable than the event itself. Chen dramatizes the time and events swirling around Yan-Zi's death, weaving a graphic narrative to support her character's perspective, credibility and humanity.

Another important aspect of Yan-Zi's desire to annihilate her own life is the desire to destroy the two-part focus on genes and genealogy. This desire approaches questions of both origin and priority. "The gene is fetishized when it seems to be itself the source of value, and those kinds of fetish-objects are the stuff of complex mistakes, denials, and disavowals" (Haraway 1997, 144). The science of genes and the study of genealogy, as well as the parents' attention to bloodlines, focus on imprints from the past—marks from ancestors and relatives that situate the female protagonist in her uncomfortable position of daughter and woman. Her violent suicide will not only kill her body, it will effectively terminate her mother's and father's genes, "une douleur inconsolable" (18), as they are both too old to reproduce or continue their name, heritage, traditions, and bloodline without Yan-Zi. The fact that Yan-Zi will not be able to carry the family name past the wedding day does not problematize the relevance of these elements for the mother's character. Yan-Zi wants to kill the traditions, wants to refuse filial responsibility and

marriage, while inscribing these points of conflict in a narrative that continues to explore and be explored. Her body, which previously reveals traces of violence, now is the means by which Yan-Zi refuses the circulation of life and her mother's genetic legacy. "Mon corps commençant à pourrir par ces journées chaudes, ses gènes cesseraient de circuler dans mes veines, se perdraient au fond de la terre uniforme" (18). The genes, the name, and the traditions all represent each other, inscribe each other, and rely on each other.

The actions Yan-Zi takes to commit suicide link her desires in life to a desire to annihilate myths of the power of life, the importance of life, and the relevance of tradition in holding a culture together. For this character, life is not a necessity. This suicide is a woman's refusal to assume a role; it is a reaction to her society's refusal to allow her a choice. It is directly linked to abandoning essentialist notions that certain biological or traditional stages presuppose a necessity to act out certain "impulses" such as getting married, giving birth, or nurturing a baby. This narrative problematizes the notion of impulse and replaces the "natural" impulse to be one of two, part of a couple, part of a love-marriage-parent narrative, with the impulse to be removed from such a movement. The movement is perpetuated by invested members of a culture that respond to the direction of the movement and punish or reward other members according to their participation in it.

Yan-Zi uses her mother's tone to simulate a reaction to suicide, reciting what the mother would say, which is like several other recitals Yan-Zi rejects in the narrative: "Les gens ordinaires ne s'achèvent pas. Ils s'accrochent à la vie, à n'importe quelle vie" (13). Her grandmother had conveyed this attachment to Yan-Zi, who recounts: "Ils [les

gens] collent à la vie comme les plumes à l’oiseau sans se rendre compte de l’insignifiance de leur poids. Ils haïssent ceux qui préfèrent débarquer, abandonner une vie qu’ils ne possèdent pas...Ils les accusent de lâcheté afin de prouver leur propre bravoure” (16). The attachment to life is therefore a tradition. The struggle to live has been called natural by Enlightenment science, which narrates the imperative to survive. Considering “to live” as a tradition, and a nation’s potential investment in this tradition, reveals why suicide would be considered taboo. Suicide is the ultimate, irreversible act of protest to attempt to throw light on the malfunctioning of a societal structure. Yan-Zi reveals the fabrication of taboo in explaining that for people in general, who like to judge the difference in others, “la mort est devenue une chose comme les autres auxquelles ils attribuent un prix qui varie selon leur humeur” (17).

Is her death a success? Yan-Zi tries to erase the essential states noted above and moves directly into a state of death where she reevaluates her life and actions, seeming to hesitate on the most important moments. From the limbo of death, she is approached by a state of rebirth—against her will or not. While in the state of death, she finds herself blinded and more encumbered by her release than empowered by it. She cannot influence the world she left behind, and her sole source of power over her mother’s grief, the suicide note, is misread and reinterpreted by the mother.

The character’s marginalized position places the character within life, bordered by its body and spirit, at the same time that the character is moving beyond it, as this life is a space of discomfort and violence. In addition to finding herself inside and outside herself, Yan-Zi is placed inside and outside of a family. There exist no alternate parents and no alternate family space. Her sole supporter is a grandmother who is not

empowered to act on her behalf while she is still alive. After she is dead, her grandmother prompts her to tell her story, to blame her mother if necessary, to blame even the world if it will help her on her journey in death.

Yan-Zi removes herself from the family map but remains preserved in writing. Her reasons for wanting to leave the tradition, the country, and the life will not be recognized by those who knew her because the mother's alienation from her daughter's consciousness, coupled with her fear of shame, will not allow her to accept a suicide, which is culturally taboo, to become a part of their family's story and tradition. This moment of denial brings to the surface a prominent issue in Quebec women's writing. In the introduction to *Doing Gender*, Paula Gilbert and Roseanna Dufault explain how "women are still very much concerned with recording their contributions that were formerly omitted from historical accounts and/or perceived through a misogynist lens, and with re-presenting cultural mythology in ways that validate the female experience instead of suppressing it" (20).

The small, condensed chapters open and close like the shutter on a lens, focusing only for a brief time before closing again, moving between past and present, and leaving the impression of snapshots scattered across the floor, disconnected, just as Yan-Zi's body is disconnected, fragmented, and confined to solitude. The chapters recollect the temporal restraint that the protagonist momentarily escapes. There is little talk of future, until the last line of the novel, when Yan-Zi's spirit is approached by the wailing of a child, crying "Mother!" and turning the ending of the story into a revolution that reaches forward.

The cycle of killing the parent to define oneself plays out in this work. Yan-Zi considers her body and its potential as mother the source of her parents' own continuation. Yan-Zi must destroy the culture, tradition, and history to move beyond it and find a location in which she can be connected to her environment. Her role in the culture of this narrative is stifling; it does not allow her to breathe or move freely, so she must destroy that which was the cause of her alienation. Her death annihilates these traditions, rules, and values, as well as her parent's genes, and reduces her mother's role to that of caretaker to a bird—an animal that will resist its cage.

I understand the social and moral dilemmas of Chen's characters to be speaking to a national priority of resolving cultural shifts in a colonialist legacy. A resolution in this narrative proves problematic because the cycles of violence, rejection, denial, and refusal are not broken. Yan-Zi will not relieve her parents with a note that explains her true feelings. She is resigned to lie, as her mother previously hides the "truths" of life; she wants her parents to suffer from grief. She desires that her mother be imprisoned by her daughter's death (not legally but emotionally) so that she will be destroyed by her daughter's rejection as her daughter is previously (and presently – if one reads that a narrative is continuous) destroyed by her mother's. At the end of the narrative, the reader finds that the mother and uncle had also been severely punished for table manners, revealing the imprints of the cycle of domestic violence. Is Yan-Zi's death a success? Does she find what she needed and recover from her past?

Yan-Zi is an outsider placed at the center of this text, making the outsider the most important character. The male characters are ineffective and weak, causing problems for Yan-Zi, as seen in her father's inability to protect her from her mother, in Bi's inability to

convince her to marry him after sex, and in Chun's clumsy pursuit of her, trying to keep her body intact for marriage. But she has found her voice, spoken to her mother with the determination of a person who has made up her mind and shifting all focus on herself, at the center: "je suis libre."

CHAPTER 3  
ON THE THRESHOLD OF MODERNITY: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE IN-  
BETWEEN IN YING CHEN'S IMMOBILE

Following her award-winning novel *L'Ingratitude* (1995), Ying Chen published an unconventional romance that continues several intertextual tropes and themes present in her work. Her 1998 novel, *Immobile*, follows a female protagonist's struggle to reconcile her present with her past from an previous life and its memories. The narrative begins with her estrangement from the mother's body and, like the character Yan-Zi in *L'Ingratitude*, the female protagonist in *Immobile* is cognizant of her displacement in the world and she protests through voice and action. She is an unwanted child, but her circumstances are different from Yan-Zi's. The narrator in *Immobile* is an orphan in both her past life and her present life, and from this initial estrangement the narrative follows her strained relationship with her present husband, A..., who is trying to make her fit in a modern world. She is clinging to the past and to memories in an effort to exonerate herself from the guilt of having betrayed her lover and slave, S..., in what the reader understands to be her first life, vaguely set at a hundred or a thousand years ago. Both characters are preoccupied with the past; Yan-Zi's memories are from her current life, whereas the narrator in *Immobile* is obsessed with her ancient past, for she has lived many lives and is reborn with her oldest memories. Chen uses tropes such as ashes, dust, shame, and regret to darken the characters' emotions. These characters' life

circumstances may not seem unconventional, but their attitudes and actions are outside of what is considered normal or acceptable behavior for the culture within these narratives.

For both characters, their moments of isolation, solitude and silence reflect the powerlessness of their female status in a patriarchal culture. Chen emphasizes the themes of rank, placement, and genealogy in these novels, using her female characters to demonstrate the limitations of womanhood in a society constructed around male power. Their individual actions toward this solitude differ greatly, in that while Yan-Zi moves toward suicide to punish her mother, the narrator in *Immobile* moves toward death to punish herself. Their voices are related but unique. The female narrator of *Immobile*, who does not reveal her name in the novel (or is nameless), is abandoned as an infant and found on the edge of a road by an opera troupe in the first life, and brought up in an orphanage in the second. She refers to herself as continually abandoned, an orphan in each of the lives she has lived.

Both female protagonists in these novels are in search of a reprieve from their alienation. The displacement of the protagonist in *Immobile* is not located within a home, whereas Yan-Zi struggles between and against her parents, within the walls where she grew up. The narrator in *Immobile* is wandering, searching throughout time and space for a home [foyer], for a resolution to her past, where she acquired the burden of guilt and of being born continuously. She is traveling the span of time in search of the possibility of ending and restarting. The word she uses is “recommencer.” It translates into “new beginning,” but her story is repetitive and ends with a gesture toward recycling rather than renewal. She will return to a point of origin, the mother’s birth canal, but does not appear to be able to exit the cycle. When she lives, she is only half-alive as a result of

weariness from her unresolved guilt. “J’essaye de regarder sans voir, d’écouter sans comprendre, de toucher sans rien sentir, de dormir sans rêver” (14). Chen uses tropes that work against each other to create a tension in language that reflects the tension between the characters, which results in their lack of resolution. Chen combines death and want, isolation and desire, darkness and happiness, silence and voice. She uses walls and water, ocean and tide to lend the impression that the narrator is of all time, without nation, and without placement by nature, all of which contribute to her location in-between. Her difficult position as an in-between is a transitional space between “traditional values and rhythms” and “the relatively new way of life associated with industry and large urban centers” (Purdy 1990, 49).

In this section of my thesis, I will examine the effects that living in a state of in-between produces on the direction of movement of the female narrator in *Immobile*. Her archaeologist husband, who represents the voice of science, tries to move her in a direction he calls progress, while she limits herself to movements of regression or transgression. I will argue that she is immobilized because she is between states, on the cusp of different identities and eras, and is unable to reconcile her past with her present or her femininity with a culture of masculine domination. Chen creates this on-the-cusp position with images of doorways, thresholds, border spaces, and also through differences in language. Her state of in-between is unacceptable to the other characters in the narrative, and they reject her, reinforcing her social marginalization and alienation. Her position in the text is central because the novel is written from her perspective, in the first person. She focuses, however, somewhere between her reflection as it is mirrored in the other characters’ perception of her, and her confidence in her own story. They represent

the cultural ideals of familial unity, rank, progress, and modernity that she, in turn, questions, rejects, and revolts against.

Chen opens the novel with the narrator explaining her nameless and continuous origin and her abandonment by her mother, but there is no mention of a father, as if she is of half a biological origin. Later she explains, “j’aurais acquis un penchant pour tout ce qui était demi, imparfait, irréparable,” (8) which is an identity that she experiences in both lives. Her identity is complicated because it is split between her own will and the prescribed roles of females in the society that surrounds her. Because she can never reconcile the two, she does not become a part of any society. Even after becoming the wife of a prince, she is alienated within his palace walls as a result of expressing her own wants. Furthermore, she is the wife of an exiled prince, whose brother, the king, removed him from court and disallowed his traveling. This circumstance places her in the interior of the interior, exiled in exile. Her historical significance could be considered divided with each new circumstance. For instance, she is half as important as a man in the culture, then half as important as this because her prince is exiled, then further halved because he rejects her.

Her marginalized existence is reflected in the trope of doorways and thresholds in the palace. In a doorway, one is neither coming nor going, but remains undecidedly in-between two spaces. Just after their marriage, she is walked through the palace to be greeted by all, and the two other wives remain “sur le seuil de leurs appartements” (29), never crossing through their doorways, demonstrating to this new bride the distance they will always assume when she is around. For a while after the wedding, the prince is so pleased with her that he never crosses her doorway because he desires to remain on its

interior. Just after she uses her voice to express her own desire, he is dissatisfied and punishes her by choosing to not pass through her doorway. Her voice, when used unrehearsed (as opposed to during her performances in the opera where the prince saw her sing), becomes a barrier to the prince's attention. This rejection on the part of the prince underlines her feminine condition to please or to be abandoned.

She understands her situation: "Je ne m'appartiens pas" (23). In this setting, as well as with her present husband, A..., she is only allowed to speak and behave in a way that is appropriate to the social status she has been assigned as a woman. She complains of restrictions imposed on her body by an unnamed society. "Il me faut surtout manger modérément, parler avec retenue, porter des jupes courtes, faire attention à ma coiffure, en un mot, vivre avec élégance" (11). Her ability to make a distinction between her world and the world men occupy causes her distress. She tells her husband, A..., about her "envie de devenir moins femme, de m'élever un peu sur cette échelle infiniment longue qui mène au paradis des hommes" (11). This plea falls on deaf ears because A... is a scientist and follows the ideology that constructs rank, marriage, history, and distinction. She, on the other hand, is unable to cross over into his beliefs and remains stuck in-between her obligations and desires as his wife and her obligations to herself and her consciousness.

The notions of progress and the modern context are also problematic for the narrator. Her memory begins in an ancient context and the reader finds her in a present/modern context, yet both are timeless, as that which is ancient will find ways to continue, and that which is modern will later become ancient. The narrator has trouble separating her memory from her present day life. This weak border between past and

present signals her not moving fully into one story or another. This becomes the source of strife between her and her husband. At times, she cannot distinguish between her husband and the three men who dominated her ancient life: the prince, the general, and her slave/lover, S....

The narrator exists on the cusp of a past world and a modern world. Through her, the reader finds the intersection of science and mysticism, of what is antiquated and what is modern. She wears pants for comfort, chooses outdated styles, and communicates in a way that her husband finds slow [retardé]. He wants to educate her, because he is a professor, to live in the present and she makes an effort to learn. Because her identity brings the narrative to this intersection of ancient and modern, it is through her memory that the intersection can be revealed. She is at a state of in-between, not fully in the past or present, and not fully in the present or future. “On ne me trouve jamais dans un endroit précis” (96). Her in-between state is indicated both by her movement, with “un pas en avant et un autre en arrière,” and her immobility (88). Any movement is cyclical and repetitive, but not in the direction of time that is perceived as progressive, or forward. This repetition, this un-budging, culminates in her regression or transgression, and disallows her progression in each life she lives, including the particular life that unfolds in the narrative.

Her in-between state collides with the progressive desires of her modern husband. “Sa conversation déborde de sa région. Il commence à vanter le monde moderne. Un monde qui a miraculeusement évolué depuis quelques siècles, et tolère donc mal l’esprit primitif” (12). A... is focused on the future and attempts to impress on his wife the importance of concentrating on his time, instead of on the past. “Il s’empresse d’abord

de me moderniser” (55). The narrator notes the fervor with which her husband is approaching the task: “Sûr de son pouvoir, il ne me lâche pas. Il veut une femme moderne et il l’aura” (13). Their differences compel her to regress to a more comfortable scene, located in the past, where she was sure of the story because she had repeated it to herself and because it seemed to be the origin of her nature. “Il m’oblige en quelque sorte à reculer sur la piste qui m’a amenée jusqu’ici, presque à regretter le chemin parcouru” (13). She experiences difficulty releasing the past and moving in A...’s progressive direction. “Le passé continue à me posséder, à me tirer du haut de la précieuse certitude à laquelle j’ai cru atteindre le jour de ma renaissance” (14). At times, she longs for the simplicity of being an insect or an unevolved animal. At other times, she follows behind A... and assumes the mannerisms or footsteps of a child. A... perpetuates this behavior by addressing her in a pejorative tone. To find her situated behind himself gives A... the satisfaction that he is both progressing and that she is assuming a subordinate role.

In remarkable ways, the narrator moves beyond regression into transgression. When she is desperately unable to resolve official ideologies in marriage, history, rank and the injustice of the master-slave condition, she refuses to abide by the rules for her feminine role and she revolts. In her life with A..., she begins by erasing his name from her memory and calling him A.... This defies his tireless efforts to maintain his family’s genealogy book to prove his “ascendance immaculée” (129). “Il se sert de son livret généalogique comme d’un solide objet de référence, d’un point de repère indispensable, sur lequel semblent reposer tout son orgueil et sa raison d’être” (10). The narrator will not appear in this family tree because, by custom, only the men’s names are recorded,

“pour simplifier les choses” (9). By renaming him A... (Archaeologist?) in her own story, she retaliates against a history without women’s names, calling into question such a history’s accuracy. She laments that an entire drawer in his apartment is reserved for this family tree and that there is no room in the apartment for her things. She argues with A... that origin is the product of chance and not of respectable bloodlines. This argument, which forces A... to consider his own obsession with the past, eventually makes him weary and causes him to spend less time with his peers and in his work for science, a change that is disapproved of by his colleagues.

The narrator also erases the name of her slave and lover, S.... Her decision to have sex with him is a transgression against the laws of the monarchy in which she lives. “Le mal était fait, si vite et si facilement. Contre le prince, contre toutes ses épouses, les précédents comme les suivantes” (67). She is liberated by her action, “délivrée du respect, de la vertu et de la crainte. Je m’étais rachetée de la main du prince et revendue à la joie” (67). In this transgression, she reclaims herself and annihilates herself concurrently, causing instability in the ideal of the monarchy.

Her most impressive transgression occurs when she—the wife of a prince—escapes from the palace, disguised in her servant’s clothing, and returns to the opera to sing the part of the princess. She is an unconventional princess, rejected by the members of the palace. As is the case with her other transgressions, she does not improve her condition, but she reveals the construction of the ideologies of rank and priority. The reason she wants to escape from the palace is crucial to the scene: the prince has become more human than godly. He has smelly feet, is lazy, and his control is limited to dominating his wives and servants. “Mon maître me paraissait ordinaire, trop ordinaire. Je ne

daignais plus flatter son orgueil...Je savais comment devait se comporter un prince. Un prince se devait d'être le tonnerre" (45). In a brilliant scene of masquerade and theater, the narrator returns to her "origins", mounts the stage and sings the rehearsed songs that please the public; the princess plays the part of the princess, dressed in servant's clothes. The public reacts badly, hissing and throwing pebbles at her. "A cause des vêtements que je portais ce jour-là, le rôle de la princesse ne me convenait plus...Je hurlai...On tendit le poing vers moi" (48). She possesses a raised consciousness that allows her to understand their behavior. "Ils n'aimaient pas me voir jouer la princesse en tenue de domestique. Mon apparition gâchait leur rêverie et leur respect envers les nobles" (48). She is unable to play the role that she lives, either on the stage or in the palace. This scene shows the limits of consciousness in adopting a constructed culture. The public is willing to see an orphan sing the part of a princess, but is unwilling to allow a princess to lower herself to the stage. The first is an ideal and the latter destroys their ideal. The scene also demonstrates the illusory material of dress and voice manipulated in theater and in life. The narrator's trouble with appearances in this scene contributes to her ability to see beyond ideologies of rank, truth, and reason. "Malgré ses apparences parfois solides et fermes, la vérité était une chose fugitive et inconstante, tel un courant à la surface duquel tournoyaient à la fois des lumières et des ombres, qui d'un moment à l'autre échappaient à l'observation" (77).

Her own ancient observations put her in opposition with her husband's traditional scientific observations. A... tries to anchor her, to establish her in the modern moment where he finds himself. His way of looking back, through the lens of genealogy and science, underscores patrilineal progression. He equates science with progress and

progress with modernity. “Non seulement le monde tourne, dit-on, mais il avance” (123). His epistemology includes precise language and order that makes no room for his wife’s story or its ancient connotations. She explains that A... “a besoin de données précises pour comprendre mon histoire et pour y croire” (8), and believes in order: “chaque chose a sa place, les êtres sont ceci ou cela” (9). His observation is founded on the “impersonnel” and on a “détachement exquis” (23). For A..., “la vie est concrète, et bonne, il suffit de la prendre en mains, de savoir la gouverner” (13).

A... secures his identity and knowledge on the blood of his ancestors, on their names permanently inked into his genealogy booklet. The booklet traces his perception of origin, inside which is located “l’histoire de la famille et la pureté de son sang” (9)—a tool for his qualification of priority. He uses the presence/absence of his ancestors as a jumping board to “progress” in the modern state, leaving them behind yet taking their rank with him. It is through rank and control that A... is afforded potential placement in the annals of his personal and national histories. The narrator complains that scientists are perceived as the “maîtres de l’histoire” (127). She puts into question their unscrutinized prestige and rank, unable to connect their motivations for work to a helpful impact on humanity. For scientists, “les prix les attendent, les collègues les surveillent, l’humanité entière est à leur remorque, ils ne doivent pas hésiter” (117). A...’s determination to hurry his wife’s progress into modernity disengages him from her life/story and causes a rupture between them. He refers to her past life as a “fantasme malsain” (57), illusory, unclean and absurd. When she first arrives at his apartment, after she gets off the train to live in his world, he scrubs her clean in the bath to the point of hurting her. He also wants to scrub her mind [cerveau] and her memory clean. Later, he

takes her to several “specialists” trained in the language of science who demonstrate that she is sick and that he is not to blame. He finally takes her to the sea, to the site of her “original” story and the ruins of the palace. Here, the two characters approach understanding and unity, but her near-drowning experience causes her to remain silent. The silence will not allow A... to observe any progress or regression—it is the ultimate language barrier—and he loses patience with her.

The narrator, however, cannot be modernized, and perhaps A... understands this, which may explain why he leaves. “Or, sur la voie de la modernisation, j’ai en vain progressé. Inutiles ces efforts pour m’adoucir, m’abaisser...m’embellir le visage” (121). The modern landscape to her is unrecognizable and filled with the inorganic:

Les frustes villages que j’avais l’habitude de traverser du temps de la troupe d’opéra ont fait place à des villes prospères. Le triomphe du métal est irrévocable, de même que la défaite de la terre. Je vois les traces de destruction et l’évidence de la prospérité. (123)

The narrator problematizes A...’s belief in the positive influence of prosperity, progress, and a scientific structure as universal truths. She forces him to question the nature of origin, of roots, of the validity of observation and of turning up the earth to reveal ruins, of turning fossils over onto themselves to discover the past. She is from the past but he is unable to recognize her value because she hesitates to give him proof. Her husband is in need of proof to satisfy the requirements of his scientific education. Her memory is her own proof, but as it is untransferrable and cannot be observed, A... considers it the source of his own distress and fatigue, and of rupture in their relationship. “Les désaccords entre mon mari et moi sont surtout dus à ses tentatives pour me normaliser et pour remodeler ma mémoire” (83). After he leaves her, she replaces the modern story with the memory of the ancient story, making them inseparable and

conserving their trace in her mind. “Maintenant qu’il ne sera plus là, sa voix et son corps commenceront à me hanter, si bien que le souvenir de ce mari moderne se superposera peu à peu à celui de l’amant ancien” (153).

The narrator is on the threshold, often finding herself on the border of two rooms or spaces. Her double positioning in the past and present indicates the nature of several moments of hesitation about progressing into the present or future with her husband. Her hesitation is caused less by the instability of marriage itself or the nature of her husband, but more so by her own instability from dislocation in her marriage and in her society, which is evidenced in her indecisiveness and her physically teetering [chanceler] on the edge.

Her position between spaces is the representation of a female’s inability to move forward successfully in a culture that is still dominated by notions of patriarchy and a “masculine” science. She does not possess the voice or language to communicate her wants or needs to her husband. This void causes a rupture between them that results in several moments of approach and repulsion, a repetition that ensures the rupture is never resolved. The narrator admits that her husband’s work to bring her into his location and beliefs are futile. “Ses efforts, hélas, ne font que m’écarter davantage de lui. Ses exigences me rendent malgré moi nostalgique de mon ancienne vie” (13).

Her husband approaches the rupture, but he does not speak her language. His final approach is a movement toward her past in which he finds himself at the location of her ancient life, in a town by the sea, in a dusty, salty air that gives him headaches and nauseates him. The couple experience brief moments of happiness here, but another rupture occurs. After visiting with a fortune-teller, the narrator is convinced that her fate

is to continue to journey and to be recycled, but not into the future. While swimming in the ocean with A..., she experiences a crucial moment of physical loss of control to the water that surrounds her. She is able to see A... but cannot hear him or call for help. She is drowning in her own decision, in the possibility of progress, and unable to save herself, she remains fixed in the water in an immobile state.

The narrator's difficulty in communicating, and her inability to leave her past behind is not only a reflection of women's difficulty in placing themselves in a patriarchal society but also reflects the difficulties of language appropriation, either by an individual or by a region. The narrator is bilingual, speaking the ancient language, stories, and songs, and is also able to communicate to a certain extent (the couple somehow moved into a relationship and marriage together), but her husband speaks only the language of the present and future. He is the voice of science while hers remains the voice of mysticism that the science has worked to replace. This relationship echoes the difficulty Québec has experienced in trying to maintain its "native" French during periods of war and crisis with the English and English-speaking Canada. Québec has been embroiled in a long and bitter battle with English-Canadians over questions of language, culture, and nation. Even within the province itself, Québec writers have struggled, since the birth of Québécois literature, with the prescribed language of the church and its prescriptive focus on religion, family, and land. For modern novelists, disengaging the church prerogative meant fighting a battle about language and culture, which in turn signified a personal battle about one's identity and its reflection or absence in a larger regional or national identity.

At the end of her story in *Immobile*, the narrator's language and her structures will be lost to the modern. She is the embodiment of a time continuum rather than a precise moment in the past or present. Her ancient codes (dress, actions, knowledge, stories, spirituality, desires) and particular metaphors are sources of discontent between her and A..., rendering her incomprehensible and unrecognizable. In scenes where the narrator collides with scientists, Chen demonstrates the chasm that is created in social ranks to deliberately exclude members of society perceived as of lower standing. A... takes her to breathing meditation treatment, and she cannot understand the language of these scientists because they put themselves in a rank above her. "Nous ne sommes pas du même rang, nous ne parlons pas le même langage" (118). By slowing down his pace, helping her with chores in the house, and listening to her memories, her husband attempts to learn her language—a movement toward bilingualism—but he regresses and fails. The consequences of this attempt and failure result in a rupture in which he reverts back to the language of science and the masters, and, worse, he is confounded by and grows increasingly impatient with her—a movement that culminates in his final act of separation from her person and her story.

The tug-of-war between them, represented in the language of the narrative, is set in motion by her teetering position on the threshold of modernity. This imbalance is coupled with her indecision to enter the present era completely and leave her memory behind. Her location is central in the text and the husband moves toward her, speaking freely of present and future, pulling her toward both and destabilizing her story. Similar to the long history of war between bordering nations and its subsequent divisions of territory, the couple moves in spatial undulation, attaching and losing each other, re-

attaching and re-losing each other. They swap roles of master and servant, each trying to approach the other's ideal, but they fail to meet as equals. Their struggle changes the landscape, indicated in part by the way the narrator modifies her clothes, behavior, and language to appear more modern and subsequently to gain approval from the man who appropriated her. The landscape of the apartment is also changed during their own quiet revolutions; sometimes there is a husband moving through the scene, cleaning, cooking, arranging, and sometimes a wife. Also, the noise and bustle of intellectuals gathering for dinner in the apartment turned into the domestic confinement and isolation of both characters.

In the end, they lose each other. Her husband leaves her in solitude in the town by the sea. She sits on a rock, the smoothness of which mirrors the effects of time and the circulation of the tide, and decides to remain in the ruins of this ancient place rather than follow her husband (which she claims would have been a simple effort) to his academic and modern life. He turns again to his life of science, the life he led before her with the language he spoke comfortably, and leaves.

His departure from the scene, his turning his back on her, reveals a lack of strong male characters in this novel (a theme pursued by Chen in *L'Ingratitude* as well, the father being a professor who is unable to write). The male characters in *Immobile* are peripheral characters, moving toward or away from the central female protagonist in ways that cause her an undulation of happiness, pain, and regret. Their actions and dialogue appear in the narrative for the purpose of presenting the narrator's perspective, revealing the marginalization of these male characters within the narrative. They speak for a traditionally patriarchal culture—of masters, fathers, bloodlines, marriage, and

monarchy—but they are ineffective in bringing the female character to understand her role within that culture. In fact, the points of conflict between the male characters and the female narrator occur at moments when she is questioning or expressing her individuality. Furthermore, these male characters are unable to reconcile their own positions in society. A... cannot reconcile his loathing of his wife’s past life and his own fascination with roots, fossils, and ruins—markers of the past. S... (for servant?) cannot fully submit to authority and fulfill his obligations to his masters; he secretly hopes to change his destiny. They are also located in-between the ideals and myths taught to them and the realities they encounter. Their position in-between amplifies the narrator’s since they surround and work to define her.

The narrator in *Immobile* implies a departure similar to that of A..., her husband. “Le patron de l’auberge me dit que, demain, un camion viendra enlever les ordures du temps méconnaissable” (156). Turning toward the familiar past by situating herself near the ruins of the palace, the site of origin for her guilt and memory, she sits in the dust kicked up by the pace of hurried pedestrians and awaits the arrival of a truck that will carry her away (the truck recalls the death and modern dilemma of Yan-Zi in *L’Ingratitude*, whose planned suicide—and life—are wiped out by a truck that crushes her). As the narrator in *Immobile* faces the arrival of a truck—vehicle of modernity—she is located in-between the impossibility of escaping the modern condition completely and her desire to return to her ancient memories. She will become part of the ruins that have been singled out as irreconcilable with the modern landscape and mode of life.

The placement of the narrator on the threshold of space and time may refer back to the author’s present placement in Québec with roots in China. I would not suggest that

Chen regrets her decision to leave China, but the culture shock involved in transferring her life from east to west was difficult for her to endure and compelled her to write. I would argue for the simple connection between the author's life and the character's written experiences, and then for a movement beyond this connection, beyond the psychological analysis of the author to explain her work, to a greater one of language and culture in general, two social spheres that Chen has studied and experienced in depth, both in her native China and in her adopted Québec.

The narrator's double registre (the observer of herself as well as the observer of others) marks the unique vantage point of an immigrant in a new culture: suddenly hyper-conscious of the difference of oneself and the simultaneous difference of others, while recognizing the rejection of the one and the acceptance of the other socially, linguistically, legally, etc. Immigrants try to reconcile the differences between their native and still-foreign cultures into aspects of belonging to one or both, and at least being able to function in the new environment without being rejected. Chen's device of the self-conscious narrator lends a certain credibility to her story. Although she erases her own name, as well as those of her male characters, the narrator is literally placed at the center. Her story, in a way, replaces her name, the story being less simple and based on a personal narrative that counterbalances the authoritative voice of science.

The narrator has perhaps lost the battle to impose her antiquity on her modern husband, but she embodies a revolution, a cycle of life. In response to her powerlessness, she will revolt continuously as she lives continuously. "Tout sera alors fini. Tout recommencera" (156). She is perpetually located between ending and restarting. Her location in-between causes her to depart and return with no ties to life or death except for

that which she carries in her memory. Through this character and her cyclical act of dying, Chen forces an examination of notions and fears of death. Her character moves against the “eternal life” myth of Christianity to recreate it under new circumstances. This is a significant literary aspect for the Québec canon, which has problematized the Catholic narrative and the modern condition since the 1930s. The narrator in *Immobile* lives without end, but it is not the eternal life of Western dreams; she wanders in exile, unable to locate a reprieve from her ancient guilt of betraying her lover. “Que l’éternel devienne déjà un vulgaire réel, et que le commencement et la fin ne soient que de charmantes illusions?” (52). Regardless of past or present, she will continue to exist and to be herself. “J’existe, tout simplement. J’existe avant ma naissance et après ma mort” (51).

Ying Chen’s novels, like the very act of immigration, lead to questions about origin and priority. The two novels examined in this thesis reveal an anger and darkness in Chen’s oeuvre that was not yet present, or not as dark, in her first two novels, *La Mémoire de l’eau* (1992), and *Les Lettres chinoises* (1993). Some critics write that *L’Ingratitude* and *Immobile* are not immigrant novels, but I disagree. Chen’s experience in exile, albeit voluntary, shaped these narratives. She is now settled in Québec but continues to explore the path that led her here. The anger of her female narrators comes from Chen’s effort to retrace the history of social domination in China and in Québec that leads to violence and oppression against women. Through these novels, Chen explores revolt against male domination and the possibility or impossibility of escape. In an interview with *L’Actualité*, Chen reveals a strong connection to her female protagonists: “Moi, je me révolte. Je ne respecte pas beaucoup les règles” (LaChance 1995, 90).

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jaime Elizabeth O'Dell was born in Winter Park, Florida, in 1971. She graduated from high school in Orlando, Florida, in 1989 and moved to Gainesville for undergraduate coursework in French and journalism at the University of Florida. She started a career in newspaper in 1995 at the *Gainesville Sun* and in 1999 decided to shift her focus to education. In 2000, she earned an M.Ed. in foreign language education at UF. In 2001, she was offered an assistantship in the Romance Languages and Literatures Department at UF, where she taught French and worked as a research assistant while pursuing the M.A. in French literature. Her participation and work in this program was met with several scholarships, grants, awards, and a nomination for the UF Graduate Teaching Award. After graduation, her goals are to join the “UF in Provence” study-abroad program in France as an assistant for the summer, and to return to France in the fall to teach English. Upon returning to the states, she plans to teach French to high-school and community college students.