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Chapter 3

A Narrative Beyond Symbols in *Bone*

Fae Myenne Ng's fictional autobiography *Bone*, published in 1993, narrates a story placed in San Francisco's Chinatown. The story centers on the life of a Chinese family consisting of immigrant parents, Leon and Mah,¹ and their three daughters, Leila, Ona, and Nina. After the middle daughter's suicide, the narrator Leila tells about the conflicts that arose before and after the suicide. These conflicts evolve from various domains, like the family, Chinatown, and a larger context of Chinese American culture and history. Although *Bone* addresses contemporary conventional motifs of displacement after migration, search for identity, and cultural conflicts, the writer's intensive use of symbolism makes her text different from her predecessors' works. The pervasive use of symbols is one of the most distinct characteristics of the narration.

Bone is praised abundantly for its simplicity in language and style. As *Publishers Weekly* comments, the writer Ng "summons a quiet urgency from simple language, both in her physical descriptions [...] and in her depictions of the characters' seesawing thoughts and feelings as they move between the Chinese- and English-speaking cultures" ("Rev. of *Bone*"). When I read *Bone* the first time, I had the intuition there was something complex beneath its apparently simple narration. The later close readings presented me with a symbolic line of greater significance carried beyond its immediate impression of simplicity. The novel reveals complex patterns of the writer's narration, which convey at least two levels of meaning (literal and symbolic). My experience resembles the experience literary critic William York Tindall describes in respect to reading a symbolic text: "Each rereading adds fresh discoveries,

¹ "Mah" is the Chinese expression for "mother."

changing [my] idea of the whole until [I] despair of reaching the end of that suggestive complexity” (71).

Defining “Symbolism”

Symbol, as a literary term, refers to “anything that stands for or represents something else beyond it” (“Symbol”). In this sense, symbols are present in every literary text because words and phrases always evoke associated meanings and feelings beyond their literal sense. Symbolism, or the use of symbols, “presents the concrete material world [...], and through [it] reveals an otherwise invisible world” (Barnet, Berman, and Burto 138). That is to say symbolism uses concrete, real images to evoke abstract, hidden ideas; or in Eliot’s words, it finds “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, which shall be the formula of that particular emotion” (qtd. in Cuddon 940). Tindall regards symbolism as the necessary condition of literature. In this sense, all novels are symbolic (68). As Tindall says:

all perception, all our fanatical pursuits, and all our arts may be symbolic in some fundamental sense at all times, but at certain times symbolism has become conscious and deliberate. (5)

These “certain times” are what scholars of symbolism are concerned with. The symbolist novel distinguishes itself by the deliberate exploitation of symbolic possibilities (68). This kind of novel tries to “present something beyond narrative and discourse” (68). That is to say, a symbolist novel gives the priority of associated meaning over literal meaning. Thus a symbolist uses the real world phenomena to “reveal a ‘higher,’ eternal world of which the symbol is a part” (Barnet, Berman, and Burto 139).

Tindall notes the double-function of a symbol: “it at once reveals and conceals” (12). When revealing, the symbol creates some symbolic forms through which the artist puts innermost ideology. When concealing, it avoids detailed explanation by not representing itself but something else other than its reference and discourse. Thus the symbol both calls for and resists explanation (11). Tindall explains the interaction between revealing and concealing:

Though definite in itself and generally containing a sign that may be identified, the symbol carries something indeterminate and, however we try, there is a residual mystery that escapes our intellects. (11)

The “residual mystery” that Tindall notes is the sense evoked by the referent as being objective or concrete. Therefore, symbolism cannot be separated from what it conceals because it is the very thing the symbol represents or the part which expresses a hidden feeling and thought about our conditions. This part, in Tindall’s words, is the “greater part” (17). Though not so clear as the expressed, it is where “communication is uncertain or partial at best” (17). It constitutes what Keats called the “Negative Capability” of symbolic literature: “being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason,” and “remaining content with half-knowledge” (qtd. in Tindall 20). The purpose of using symbols is thus to engage concealed meanings and feelings.

In my opinion, the attraction of symbolism lies in its concealing. The concealed part, “going beyond reference and the limits of discourse, embodies and offers a complex of feeling and thought” (Tindall 12-13). It is the part which remains unstated and thus indefinite to the reader. The unstated discourse offers profound suggestion and evocation. The seemingly unimportant objects and events have the capacity to call to mind a wide range of abstract associations and references. The abstract associations and references transcend the symbol itself and extend to meanings beyond its concrete connotations. Together with the effect of revealing, the concealing of a symbolic text carries with it perceptions, insights, and visions. Thus, symbolism is a strategy for representation of something deeper and more meaningful than the immediate associations of words and expressions. In a symbolic narrative, the associations are often playing, combining, and fusing with one another. The result is addition and creation of more significance and of layers of profound meanings. This evokes special feeling and thought. When symbols structure the text, the creation of symbolic meaning constitutes a process for the reader to explore and enjoy its aesthetic effects beyond the text itself. The text leads its readers to knowledge and understanding of a discourse beyond its apparent meaning.

Symbolism in *Bone*

Bone abounds with symbolic associations, which creates a richness of meaning. The text's extensive manipulation of symbolism draws from the writer's witnessing immigrant life in Chinatown. Ng herself has the experience of living in San Francisco's Chinatown. As an immigrant descendent, Ng lives and writes across the margins of another tradition and culture. The symbolism of the text is connected to the writer's double-consciousness of being bilingual and bicultural. Symbolism serves as an effective device for the depiction of the complex world around her. When simple language cannot address the complexity of the phenomena, Ng explores symbolism. The symbolic meanings unite, and reveal aspects of the writer's vision. It is a double-visioned, two-cultured genre that Ng adopts for her exploration of Chinese American culture and identity. The total structure of the work is formed by an interwoven structure of symbols, yet the complexity of the narration is masked by simplicity and clarity on the surface. Concentrating on an ordinary family, Ng uncovers the intricacies hidden beneath. The double function of concealing and revealing of symbolism yields a story that displaces the official narrative.

The symbolic meanings the writer creates stem from the protagonists' life. These meanings are either associated with Chinese immigrant history or with the protagonists' cultural reality. The historical and cultural dimensions embedded in the symbols powerfully articulate a displaced history and marginalized culture of an ethnic minority. The text uses names, objects, and physical surroundings to symbolize lifestyles, social standing, and old and new forms of social patterns. Thus, the text gives the reader a "double vision." In this vision, characters, objects, and events are at once themselves and suggestions or embodiments of a historical account beyond themselves. The narration explores the individual elements, infuses them with specific meanings, and makes up a whole symbolic presentation of a complex immigrant world. Studying these symbols and the symbolized attitudes and points of view gives the reader further understanding of the way the novel develops themes of immigration.

The symbols in *Bone* include bones, papers, and a few "Chinglish" words. All of them are characterized by ordinariness, and are expressed in ordinary terms and vocabulary. But they are precisely exploited to

express the writer's fresh insight and new perspective into reading history and cultural reality. The ordinariness of the symbolic terms fits with the narrative of ordinary people in their everyday life. However, it is through this everydayness the text carries meanings unfamiliar and even contradictory to everyday use. The narration of symbolism explores a great question of conflict and solution, and life and death in the twentieth century. The juxtaposition of ordinariness and greatness makes the reader feel the profoundness of the narration.

The mixture of ordinary symbols and their powerful symbolic meaning conveys a mixed meaning in terms of characters, plot development, and conflict solution. The protagonists in the novel show strength and weakness, individuality, and collectivity. They display different ways of dealing with their cultural dilemmas and family conflicts. The text blends quarrels, struggles, sadness and happiness, and everyday experience. This blending is both a construction of an immigrant cultural identity, a confrontation with American marginalization, and a deconstruction of a dominant discourse that puts Chinese immigrants in the position of being "other."

Each of the interrelated symbols in the text carries a particular sense of cultural specificity to the protagonists' immigrant background. They support one another to surface a meaningful representation of immigrant society different from the dominant discourse. The symbols incorporate particular histories traversing time and space, and communicate to the reader an alternate cultural memory and representation. The value of *Bone's* symbolism lies therefore in creating and shaping a vision of reality brought forward by the past of a people (Chinese immigrants) and a place (Chinatown). Symbolization in Ng's text accomplishes what a general symbolic discourse fails to. It not only points to something else, but also functions as forceful moments of empowerment from the history and culture that it depicts.

In the following analysis, I will demonstrate how the novel *Bone* achieves these two tasks. My analysis will proceed from bone, paper and neologism. It will continue to the question of how these symbols create the power of joining the two sides of the writer's "double vision" in the service of a full presentation of immigrant life. My elaboration of dominant symbolic patterns proceeds chronologically from "bone" to "neologism." Although in the narrative these symbols do not appear in strictly chronological order, my analysis of them will begin with

immigrant history of more than a century ago, and end in the present and future life of a younger generation. I set my analysis in a broad historical context which dates to the time of early Chinese immigration and offer an analysis of the symbols as well as of their relations with this historical discourse. The understanding of these symbols helps the reader to understand the text's depth and use of symbolism behind its simplistic façade.

Grandpa Leong's Lost Bones

"Bone," introduced in the title of the novel, figures as a major symbol throughout the narrative. The word "bone" literally means "any of the hard parts that form the skeleton of an animal's body" ("Bone"). Its connotation extends to the "essence, core, heart" of something, this which is the most deeply ingrained part. These references are scattered in the narration, and are metaphorically the skeleton of the novel. Hidden in the references are stories spanning three generations. I will start in chronological order with Grandpa Leong's lost bones in the oldest generation, then move to the "bare bones" of immigrant life of the middle generation, and finally end with Ona's broken bones of the latest generation.

The story of Grandpa Leong's bones narrates an immigrant history. It dates back to a period from the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. During that period, a series of American immigration and naturalization laws against Chinese people were enacted. These blocked the stream of incoming migrants. With papers proving one to be the child of an American citizen, however, one could automatically become a citizen even if he or she was born outside of the US. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake and the resulting fires destroyed these documents stored in the municipal town hall. Many young Chinese people purchased birth certificates from Chinese Americans and then claimed American citizenship (Lowe 125). Leong was an American citizen of Chinese origin who sold a birth certificate to a Chinese man called "Leon" at a price of five thousand dollars and a promise of sending Leong's bones back to China after his death. On paper Leong became Leon's father.

A lone man in the "bachelor society" of the US, Leong still thought only of China as his homeland and cherished the wish of having

his bones sent back to China even after his death. The practice of a resting place and proper burial in one's home village was prevalent among early Chinese immigrants. However, this particular promise is never fulfilled because when he died, Leon was away working at sea. Then the bones were forgotten and lost. The lost bones symbolize a loss of homeland and a lost history of early Chinese immigrants. These people came to the US as sojourners when they were young, but they were confined to Chinatown for the rest of their life. Their reunion with their families was either restricted or forbidden.² They constituted an isolated and gendered "bachelor society" from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1950s. This is a result of discriminatory immigration laws restricting returns home, as well as female immigration generally. The "bachelor society" is mostly a community of low-wage male laborers engaged in the agriculture, construction, hospitality, restaurant, and domestic services industries (Lowe 65). These jobs were of long hours, and required little skill. These working conditions did not appeal to American workers, but, even so, these laborers "are unwanted because they are perceived as 'strangers' and 'aliens'" (Lim, "Immigration" 293). Despite this, the "bachelors" helped to build the US. But from the narrator's American perspective, they compose a dangerous group of Chinatown drift-abouts, spitters, sitters, and flea men in the Square (*B* 13).

In an interview with Don Swaim, Ng mentions she witnessed a profound unease among first-generation immigrants in the US. She recalls her motivation for recording their life: because of the exclusion and segregation laws, many of these immigrants ended up living in the US alone for years, and dying there without ever meeting their children or having their wives comfort them. Ng is very much moved by this kind of life. It inspires her to really think about what type of characters might live a life as a laborer. The title "Bone" honors the tradition for a resting place after the death of the older generation. For those who fail to have their bones sent back, Ng's writing of their story offers them a resting place in the English language.

² The Scott Act of 1888 restricted Chinese immigrants' return to the US if they left for China for a short visit, and the Page Law of 1875 forbade them to send for their wives from China. See also the Introduction for more historical chronology.

Mah's "Bare Bones"

A childhood experience of the narrator reveals another important symbolic meaning of bone. Her mother, Mah saves the meaty parts of a cooked pigeon for the daughters, but eats the bones of it herself:

She filled our bowls high with little pigeon parts: legs, breasts, and wings. [...]

But Mah always sat alone in the kitchen sucking out the sweetness of the lesser parts: the neck, the back, and the head. "Bones are sweeter than you know," she always said. (*B* 30-31)

In *Bone*, the kitchen is a place presented as specifically Mah's space. The description connotes notions of the importance of nurturing the family in times of meager wages. This little episode embodies the possibilities of enjoyment and extravagance in time of necessity: sucking out sweetness from the bare bones. This symbolizes getting pleasure from hard life and harsh reality. Small joys add sweetness to the mundane day-to-day living. From the mother's act of filling the daughters' bowls with meaty parts, the reader sees women's love for their children. This act shows their tolerance, strength and perseverance of keeping life going. These qualities are the indestructible part of the immigrants, like hard bones.

Except for the small joy of sucking left-over bones, Mah is observed as either working in the kitchen preparing food or sewing on the Singer machine. These descriptions are meant to conjure women's perseverance. Mah and other immigrant women from third world countries and regions work hard at the sweatshops of the garment industry in Chinatown. They constitute what Lisa Lowe calls "a racialized, flexible work force" working at home and/or in the workshop (160). Apparently, the labor force consists of low-paid women with little technical skill, settling with the work of high pressure and low wages. Leila witnesses the intense "running" of the women and machines in the sweatshop:

Walking into the factory felt like walking into the cable-car barn. Every machine was running at high speed: the Singers zoomed, the button machines clicked. The shop vibrated like a big engine. Everything blended: oil and metal and the eye-stinging heat of the presses. The ladies pushed their endurance, long hours and then longer

nights, as they strained to slip one more seam under the stamping needle. (*B* 176-77)

The monotonous sound of zooming and clicking in the sweatshop reminds the reader of the monotonous life Mah and other women seamstresses experience. Third world women as cheap labor force are portrayed running as fast and intensely as working machines. The scene shows how the highest productivity is sought to extract the largest surplus value. Machines are running at high speed producing a sound of zooming and clicking. Women seamstresses are working at the edge of collapse. The physical working conditions in the workshop are uneasy, unhealthy, and fatiguing (Lowe 155). More importantly, the surplus value is extracted from running machines which exploit and manipulate their bodies: from stung eyes to blended oil, metal and heat, and the endless incentive to produce as many pieces as possible under the stamping needle. Within the discourse of legal equality, the female workers continue to work under conditions of racialization, exploitation, and gender subordination (156).

However, their hard work only brings meager wages and these do not suffice for the family's necessities. Driven by the policy of getting payment by piece, Mah often has bundles of textile delivered home to do the sewing:

Mah sat down at her Singer with dinner rice still in her mouth. When we pulled down the Murphy bed, she was still there, sewing. The hot lamp made all the stitches blur together; the street noises stopped long before she did. And in the morning, long before any of us awoke, she was already there, at work. (*B* 34)

Mah was too busy even to look up when I offered her her lunch. She said she didn't have an appetite, so I put the aluminum packet of food on the water pipe, where it'd stay warm, and her thermos on the already-filled communal eating table. (178)

With focused depictions of her softened neck and heavy shoulders, the reader understands how this overwork changes Mah's physical body (163). She bears the signs of an unbearable life. The narrator Leila, the eldest daughter in the family, pities her mother. Mah's hard yet cheap labor seems to project a negative prospect of Leila's future life. It motivates her to be different. Sewing for Mah is the backbone of her life: "Mah knew all the seams of a dress the way a doctor knows bones"

(178). Mah, though sometimes weak and dependent, supports the family and manages the household.

Ona's Broken Bones

Ona, the second daughter of the family, commits suicide. She jumped from the M floor, the thirteenth floor, of a construction site called Nam Ping Yuen, and this breaks her bones. The occurrence is rich in its symbolic associations: "M" suggests middle, for it symbolizes Ona's position as the middle daughter, and the conditions of being caught in-between. "Thirteen," in American culture is an unlucky number, a symbol of bad luck, betrayal, and misfortune, but in the protagonists' dialect, it means "to live" (*B* 123), a symbol of rebirth and luckiness. The opposition of the two meanings immediately situates Ona between opposing forces of two cultures. "Nam" in Chinese means "south." It has the same pronunciation as "difficult." In Chinese culture, "the Nam is a bad-luck place, a spooked spot" (14). "Ping Yuen" literally means "peaceful gardens" (14). The combination of Nam and Ping Yuen symbolizes Ona's reality: it is difficult to live a peaceful life. At the construction site at the time of her suicide a new building is being completed. It can be read symbolically that Ona wants the stress of in-betweenness to end in completion. The place symbolizes how peace is tethered with death, and that the horrible act of suicide is a beginning of a new life, the rebirth of self. The symbolic associations are full of contradictions, which symbolically are the conditions of Ona's in-between situation.

However, Ng structures Leila's narration of Ona's death to encourage a reading that honors her decision to face outward and step into a larger world. Ona has the capacity to free herself from the pressure and dullness of life. The suicidal motion is seen as flying and falling: "Her legs pushing off, her arms flying through the air. Ona was falling and falling" (*B* 106). She takes a courageous step, climbs the stairs, flies and falls. Symbolically, Ona receives in death the essence of life which she has been seeking in vain. Ona's death seems to say that the best she can do is to free herself from the conflicts. It is a statement of existential freedom and significance of an individual. This significance is more than once hinted at in the narrative.

The narrator Leila mediates the meaning of Ona's suicide. In contrast to viewing Ona's broken bones as a collapse of the ego, she believes it is Ona's choice (*B* 15). Ona chooses to be elsewhere where she is out of the in-betweenness, embracing a larger and more free place. The narrator sees Ona's suicide as an affirmation of an anxious and desperate choice at a time when Ona is unable to engage any meaningful interaction with her dilemma. This understanding reflects an orientation of renewal and revival. It turns destruction into life, and the broken bones into resurrection. Thus Ona's suicide has a meaning of leave-taking, and life-giving, or even a successful settlement on her current problems.

In honoring Ona's suicide, the novel turns a tragic loss into a particular kind of aesthetic triumph over reality. The ambivalent, good-evil symbol, fits in with the writer's part to use life and death to symbolize self-assertion. Suffering is a "normal" state in immigrant life. Ng's narration looks at death as two-sided: tragedy or fulfillment. The suicide stands as a symbol of a free act in conditions lacking freedom. The symbolic meaning of Ona's suicide is, therefore, an embodiment of Ng's attitude toward life and death. By infusing new meanings to Ona's death, the narration recognizes it as a way of alighting the future for the confined protagonists. Ona's death gradually opens a gate of knowledge to the other protagonists, finally freeing them from their own confinement.

Apart from some symbolic acts, more generally, Ng adds emphasis and extra dimensions to her narrative with a variety of leitmotifs. She experiments with sound, light, smell, and taste. When Ona was born, her father Leon was out at sea. Her mother used part of Leon's name (the *on* part) and named her "Ona," because *on* means "peace" in their dialect (*B* 131). Ironically, the peaceful, respectful and hopeful name does not bring the corresponding peace, respect, or hope to the family. In the eyes of Chinatown residents, it is a "failed family" of three daughters, "one unmarried, another who-cares-where, one dead" (24). However, the narrator's search for "peace" persistently resonates in names of *Leon*, *Leong*, *Ong*, *Mason*, *Salmon Alley*, and *Mission*. In the turbulent narration, the recurrent sound *on* resonates peacefulness.

The time of Ona's suicide is also highly symbolic. It is three days before the Chinese New Year, the most important time of celebration in Chinese culture. New Year is a new beginning. It coincides with the

symbolic meaning of the number “thirteen” in the narrator’s dialect. According to Chinese superstition, a dead person’s spirit will return three days after his or her death. So the day when Ona’s spirit will return falls on the New Year’s Day. It is a day for beginning, and a day to start a new life. Symbolically, Ona wants to finish all trouble and to start anew.

When she learns about Ona’s death, Leila is ridden with grief. She has to face Ona’s death:

Outside, the light was aggressive. Every shining surface caught the sun: the chainlink fence, are mirrors, windows, street signs, a man’s watch, parking meters, water running in the gutter, the flash of a woman’s glasses. I felt chased by it; the light hurt my eyes and I kept blinking. (B 137)

The light sends out a strong symbolic glow in revealing Leila’s feelings. It symbolizes the effect of Ona’s death: unexpected, aggressive, pervasive, eye-pinching, and inescapable.

The effect of Ona’s death imposes bitterness on the family. It is symbolically tasted when Leila drinks the ginseng brew Mah cooks:

The ginseng brew was as dark as two-day-old tea. [...] I sipped. My shoulders felt tight, tense. I tried to relax them, but when I turned my head, it felt like someone was stabbing me in the back. (B 49)
I sipped again: a long bitter taste. And it was Ona. [...] Everything went back to Ona. (50)
I finished the brew in one long swallow. [...] The biting taste lingered; I smacked my lips. A cigarette, a jelly bean, that’s what I wanted, something to take the taste away [...], but the ginseng flavor seemed to explode, and the bitter taste filled my mouth again. (52)

I read each one of Leila’s three sips as effects of Ona’s death on the family. First it is a sudden stab, then a long bitterness perniciously lingering and filling, and finally it requires something else to take it away. The bitterness of the ginseng smell, which symbolizes a bitter life, permeates and persists in Leila’s Chinatown home.

Three Bones: A Continuity of History

Leon blames himself for forgetting Grandpa Leong's bones. In his mind, he gives those bones power. He attributes Ona's death and other losses to the misplaced grave and the forgotten bones. In his belief, it is these bones that have brought bad luck to the family (*B* 88). With the loss of the bones, Leon feels his own losses—his frequent loss of employment, the loss of his original identity, of his beloved daughter, and of his wife to a love affair with her boss. Searching for lost bones is a symbolic act: "Leon was looking for a part of his own lost life, but more than that, he was looking for Ona" (88). The connection links the present with an almost-forgotten past. Leon's search for the lost bones is an act of retrieving the past. This search can be interpreted as tracing an early Chinese immigrant life. The search for that period of history gradually integrates into the present immigrant life. "Bone" or *Bone*, a fictionalized record of a historical process, depicts the social and cultural struggle implicit in American society. The historical narrative of Chinese immigration is made visible by establishing congruence with a realist representation.

In the end, Leon's restlessness about the bones is settled. He feels relieved when he learns that Grandpa Leong's bones have been grouped by family surnames and then reburied with the bones of those who were all old friends. Leon settles Ona's bones in an altar, a place where he can live his grief. The treatment of the bones not only settles a long-cherished wish in the past but also miraculously unties Leon from shackles of self-blame and guilt. It symbolically creates an escape route from self-blame into acceptance of tragedy. Symbolic meanings of the bones interrelate. The restless bones make Leon restless, and the settled bones reassure him. The oldtimers in *Bone* believe a person's blood comes from the mother and bones from the father (*B* 104), and that "our fates can be divined by the weighing of our bones" (153). If so, Leon on "paper" inherits bones from Grandpa Leong and biologically passes them onto Ona. The settlement of their bones symbolizes the peace Leon finds within himself. Life is to continue, in Leon's words, "Side by side, the sad with the happy" (102).

Leon's connection of the two bones can be extended beyond the boundary of the textual narrative. Thus, these two bones, together with Mah's bare bones, tell a history of early immigrants and the aftermaths

of hard life of later generations in the migrated land. Though the three generations live in different periods spanning almost a century, their experiences are commonly characterized by loss, breach, and displacement.

Paper Identity

Like “bone,” paper is also an ordinary object that is used to symbolize uncommon historical events in Ng’s story. Contrary to the hard texture of bone, paper is associated with frailty and transience. However, the symbolic representation of paper in Ng’s narration replaces the fragility with durability. In the following, I will demonstrate this by discussing two forces of paper: paper identity and paper archive.

The symbolic meaning of paper as an identity is closely related to that of bones. Together they reveal a history of discriminatory immigrant policies against Chinese people. The appearance of paper identity in American immigration history resulted from anti-ethnic legislation and unfavorable immigration policies. Under the critical negation of the American authority, many Chinese immigrants resorted to other alternatives, like forging “paper” identities to legalize their American status. In *Bone*, Leon, like many other immigrants, moved to the US with forged papers. The narrator tells how Leon and another paper son, You Thin, coached each other on their paper histories on the voyage to the US:

Leon was the fourth son of a farm worker in the Sacramento valley, his mother had bound feet, her family was from Hoiping. You Thin was the second son of a shoe cobbler in San Francisco, the family compound had ten rooms, the livestock consisted of an ox, two pigs, and many chickens. (B 9)

Purchasing an identity paper enables Leon to verify his identity to the American authorities and thus gain American citizenship. Tina Chen terms this practice “impersonation,” which is “a strategic response for the articulation of subjectivity” (21). By legalizing one’s citizenship with illegal document, it defies American immigrant policy.

However, the false identity paper becomes stronger over time. It proves to be even more real than blood relationship. Leon and You Thin become paper brothers, or “cousins,” a word they picked up on their

voyage at sea to describe their “blood brotherness” with no blood relations (*B* 9). Leila’s biological father deserted her and her mother before she was born, and went to Australia to seek fortune. She never met him, and from him no tickets came in the mail for sending her and her mother to Australia as he had promised (187). In contrast, Leon, her stepfather, or the “paper father,” is “the one who’s been there for [her]” (3). He is the first person Leila wants to tell the news of her marriage. His lone life at the San Fran (an old-man hotel in Chinatown) is what Leila always worries about. Leon, the paper son of Grandpa Leong, is concerned about the lost bones years after Leong’s death. Leon’s paper identity establishes him as a real son of Grandpa Leong and as real father of Leila. For Leon, a paper son and father, “paper is blood” (61). This paper relationship is even stronger than a blood relationship. It comes as no surprise when Leon says, “In this country, paper is more precious than blood” (9). “Paper” derives its strength from a particular history and politics. Therefore, Leon’s subversion of the common belief is only valid “in this country.” By running counter to the common belief, Leon subtly lets out a voice against the American immigrant policy.

Unlike those who changed back to their real names as soon as they could after claiming American citizenship, Leon willingly discards his old name and takes on the new one. For Leon who believes in the force of paper, naturally his “paperized” name weighs more than his real name. Given that names are central to a person’s sense of identity, Leon’s identity is defined by his paper name rather than his original Chinese name. This paper name emphasizes that he is not Chinese anymore, but “Leon,” a Chinese American. Throughout the narrative, no evidence of Leon’s biological family background is revealed. This purposeful ignorance underscores Leon’s paper identity and strengthens the force of paper relations.

In a traditional Chinese sense, blood relations unite a family. However, the novel subverts this arc with a story of a paper-related family. Leon has the right answer to the question of what makes a family endure. He says, “it’s time that makes a family, not just blood” (*B* 3). This view echoes what Rosemary George has noted in *The Politics of Home* (1996): “Perhaps it is co-residence rather than blood that determines family” (180). The long time of living together strengthens the non-blood ties in Leon’s family. The family members are caring and

cared for. They set up a real and tangible family network of obligation and responsibility.

In other cases in the narrative, emphasizing paper's quality of endurance frequently reinforces its central symbolic meaning. Leon's Ong & Leong laundry business goes bankrupt because, "[t]here was no contract, no legal partnership" (*B* 170). Thus a paper contract has stronger binding force than the old-world Chinatown way of trust in doing business. Leon thinks his paper (i.e. green card) has some magic power and is "good forever" (182). This is an important reason why Mah marries Leon: "he's got his papers" (184).

The symbolic meaning of "paper" in the novel subverts a traditional view of "paper" relationships suggesting instability or precariousness. The narration is not confined to the meaning given to "paper" largely circulated by most people and cultures. The frequent emphasis on its importance consolidates the firmness of paper. If the trouble with a symbol is that "it is indefinite in what it presents" (Tindall 16), the novel further "troubles" the symbol with a meaning contradictory to its conventional symbolic sense. Opposite to the traditional association, "paper," in Ng's text, symbolizes a strong and enduring tie that relates members without blood relation as a family. This tie reveals the solid quality of this relation. In this sense, a symbol acquires its new dimensions of suggestiveness and significance from the specific context in which it is used. This specific context is culturally and historically defined. In the Chinese American immigrant experience depicted in *Bone*, "paper" gains its symbolic significance specific to this historical and political context. In this situation, the value of the symbol lies in "creating a vision of reality and submitting it to our apprehension" (18). Thus, as Tindall concludes, this kind of symbol is "[n]ot only creative but heuristic, [and] it serves to discover the reality it shapes" (18).

Paper Archive

Leon builds his identity as a Chinese American on his fake papers. This process cannot be witnessed in his real American life, but, ironically, only in the papers he preserved. In Leon's room, Leila frantically searches for his documents of identification in order to apply for social security for him. She is sure the right answer is to be found among the

papers. However, before she gets that “right answer,” she is surprised to find another “right answer.” As Leila opens the suitcase,

The past came up: a moldy, water-damaged paper smell and a parchment texture. The letters were stacked by year and rubberbanded into decades. I only had to open the first few to know the story: “We Don’t Want You.”

A rejection from the army: unfit.

A job rejection: unskilled.

An apartment: unavailable. (*B* 57)

Underlying the narrative is the living and working experience of a Chinese American in the twentieth century. This experience is marked by racial discrimination and exclusion in the US. Early Chinese immigrants have gone through the struggle against the hostile environment, the frustration over job-hunting, the continuous racialization, and exclusion from government welfare. The letters evoke the whole process of harsh survival undergone by Chinese immigrants to establish themselves in an alien country. It is a microcosm of how the American authority rejected Chinese immigrants in army enlistments, employment, and housing.

Racialization distanced Chinese immigrants as citizens from mainstream US culture. Chinese people continued to be exploited even after the repeal act of 1965. They constituted a group “determined by [...] the racialization of working populations of color in the United States” (Lowe 103). Though on these papers Leon does not appear to be a hero (*B* 58), they confirm Leon’s place in the US. There, he has lived, worked, and dreamed. Without these papers, his story would have been ignored or forgotten by Leila. As said,

All the letters addressed to Leon should prove to the people at the social security office that this country was his place, too. Leon had paid; Leon had earned his rights. American dollars. American time. These letters marked his time and they marked his endurance. Leon was a paper son. (58)

The letters are proof of Leon’s American experience. They are not only shown to the social security clerks, as is the case in the narration, but they also are kept as historical documents of exclusion and unequal treatment. Leon’s “paper luggage” is a written record, which “marked

his time and [...] his endurance” (58). It is also an autobiography, which also gives form to the immigrant:

Leon the family man. Airmail letters from China, aerograms from Mah to Leon at different ports, a newsprint picture of Ona graduating from the Chinese Center’s nursery school, of Nina in her “boy” haircut and an awful one of me and Mason.

Leon the working man: in front of the laundry presser, the extractor; sharpening knives in the kitchen; making beds in the captain’s room. Leon with the chief steward. [...]

Leon, the business schemer: several signed and dated IOUs from You Thin Toy. Check stubs from Bethlehem Steel. A detailed diary of his overtime pay from Wa-jin Restaurant. Money-sent-back-to-China receipts. A pawn ticket from Cash-in-a-Flash on Fourth Street. (59; emphasis added)

Each of the three paralleled, emphasized statements are documented with greater details than I can present here. These papers reflect a different image of Leon, an image that hardly matches with his appearance elsewhere in the book.

The papers and reality set two portraits side-by-side. They reflect two opposing views of a person’s life. On paper, Leon is a persistent little man trying to be decisive and ambitious. He is in a constant search for better opportunities and for moving forward in life. In reality, Leon is a defeated “drifter,” aimlessly idling around and refusing to shoulder family responsibilities or make decisions. The juxtaposition symbolizes a sense of irony of life. Though he tries to manage and conquer life, he never succeeds. The only way of resolving the problem, after some struggle and failures, seems to accept that fact with time passing.

Lost in Leon’s junk, these chronicled papers bring up a personal history of hard struggle in the US. The papers retrieve a private history of a person. They are Leon’s life narrative written from the moment he was on the way to the US to the end when he returns home from a work trip. They signify both the connection with and the displacement from the land. From the fragmented papers, the reader finds part of Leon, part of many more Leons, and then the whole story of this group of people. Leon’s story on the papers is a historiographic account of a disadvantaged immigrant experience. This account is an interplay of resistance, recognition, re-identification, and de-marginalization of early Chinese American immigrants. So the papers Leon kept intact in the

ethnic American context should symbolically be read as signifiers of marginality and racial exploitation.

Leon preserves memories of his past life in the US in tangible form. They actually become a statement for the present. If paper is as important as, or even more important, than blood (as is repeatedly emphasized in the narration), these papers subvert a first reading of Leon. They remind the reader Leon is different from the image defined by Mah or elsewhere in the narrative. He is consistently blamed for never completing anything he starts, and is described as “a do-nothing bum” (*B* 124), who is dreamy, lost, and irresponsible. In Mah’s words, he is “a useless thing, a stinking corpse” (31). In this paperized space, the reader comes to recognize a more accurate Leon. These papers rebuild Leon’s past, and help the reader to form another authentic picture of Leon from a new perspective. He is “the family man,” “the working man,” and “the business schemer” (59). He is ambitious and hopeful, but marginalized and defeated time and again, and finally frustrated.

Like other immigrants, Leon comes to the US full of great expectations. He has plans for a Chinese takeout noodle factory (*B* 34). However, under the unfavorable social environment, he has no means to transform those plans into a real-life success. Leon works hard: “Out at sea, on the ships, Leon worked every room” (34); “Two jobs, three. Day and night. Overtime. Assistant laundry presser. Prep cook. Busboy. Waiter. Porter” (103). Yet years of hard work do not bring much fortune, and it only produces “a bowl of bitterness to show for his life as a coolie” (148). His failed ambition is driven into anger. He “blamed all of America for making big promises and breaking every one” (103), and asks,

Where was the good job he’d heard about as a young man? Where was the successful business? [...] But where was his happiness? “America,” he ranted, “this lie of a country!” (103)

Leon’s experience is one of disappointment and failure under the American “lie” of success and happiness. The alien country denies his existence, and he does not identify it as home. Though he legally claims citizenship, his preserved papers evidence facts that he is treated in a different way than other citizens. His citizenship is accompanied by economic and racial inequalities. Extending to the political domain, “this lie of a country” Leon condemns is America’s institutionalization of “the

disavowal of the history of racialized labor exploitation and disenfranchisement through the promise of freedom in the political sphere” (Lowe 10).

An Alternative to History

Concerning the problem of representing the past, Linda Hutcheon notes the different modes produced by the ex-centric “other.” The different way of representing the past, Hutcheon argues, “contests mastery and totalization, often by unmasking both their powers and their limitations” (*Politics* 35). This way of representation questions both the notion of center and the idea of “centered” subjectivity (36). Thus, the “other” representation of the past disturbs the official history recorded in the dominant discourse. More importantly, it also questions the power and politics of the “center.” In the following, I will demonstrate how Leon’s papers constitute an ex-centric mode of representing his immigrant past.

Leon arranges the letters tidily in chronological order. This arrangement contrasts with Leon’s junk-inventor-and-collector life at the San Fran, where he lives with,

junk all over. [...] Very weird stuff. An electric sink. Cookie-tin clocks. Clock lamps. An intercom hooked up to a cash register hooked up to the alarm system. [...] Stacks of takeout containers, a pile of aluminum tins. Plastic bags filled with packs of ketchup and sugar. (*B* 5)

How the papers are kept presents an alternative way of preserving and retrieving history. The role of the letters as a personal “unofficial” record interrupts and displaces the official representation. A well-documented official account might not record a marginalized people’s history the way it was. From this perspective, the function of these well-kept papers is similar to that of Grandpa Leong’s lost bones, because they are, as Lisa Lowe notes, both “figured as the material trace of early Chinese immigrant life: a trace that [...] testifies to a loss of history” (126).

Lowe elaborates the double function of *Bone* as a project of writing in the follow way:

[It] is not exclusively a matter of finding better modes of representing or renarrating those “histories” of colonialism, modernization, underdevelopment, and immigrant displacement from a posterior point. [...] It is [...] to rearticulate them in culture in ways that permit the

practices of subject and community not strictly governed by official modes. (127)

Specifically, the double function Lowe asserts can be applied to Leon's papers. Thus the papers are "alternative" in two ways. On the one hand, they themselves are a presentation of an alternative history of marginalization submerged in the dominant account. A history of the racialized exclusion of Chinese immigrants in the political and cultural spheres of the US, and of a cultural identity developed in such a context is written on the papers. These papers transform the "authoritative" historical understanding and reevaluate what is considered to be significant. They demonstrate the repressive and exclusive racial policy of the US. They are important to unravel the histories of American immigration policies against Chinese people. Registered on these papers are precisely the memories of racialization and discrimination the US wants to forget.

On the other hand, the papers, as an alternative form of representing that history, constitute what Hutcheon calls an ex-centric other's representation. They are record of the past, and can be used as concrete proof to review and understand the past. They represent history in a way which defies the dominant representation and official record. These papers come from a junk-inventor's collection of documents, but they ironically recompose a history. This paper collection is a place to retrieve a lost history of aliens, and to recollect memories of "others" in foreign land. This history is articulated from a voice of the suppressed or the forgotten. For this reason, I conclude the text not merely articulates a history telling immigrants' hard life and marginality in the US, for it also exploits the paper archive as an alternative means of historical representation.

The papers recover the first generation immigrants' little-known history. They convince the narrator Leila that Leon's seemingly lost life contains a lot of significance, some interest, and some challenge. These papers make Leila recognize Leon's identity as a paper son. She acknowledges her identity as well: "I'm the stepdaughter of a paper son and I've inherited this whole suitcase of lies" (*B* 61). Leila's recognition signifies the real filiality related by paper. Carl Jung says, "The less we understand of what our fathers and forefathers sought, the less we understand ourselves" (*Memories* 263). If so, in the process of

“culturally recalling” what her fathers and forefathers sought, Leila actually extends what they accomplished with continuous modification to shape her present and future social position.

Leon's Broken English

In immigrant literature, the use of language invariably brings up identity issues. Ng's writing incorporates a difference of narration by introducing a few “new” English words. Leon and Leila (un)consciously invent some English terms. These words signify cultural difference. They carry the weight of the protagonists' ethnic experience and cultural outlook. The process of coinage and the new usage of these words add new cultural and historical aspects to their identity construction. In the following, I will use these two protagonists as examples to demonstrate how the text symbolically incorporates these new terms into the process of their identity development.

In *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o explores the interconnectedness of language and culture. He points out the dual character of language as a means of communication and as a carrier of culture (13). He notes that “a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history” (15). He explains this argument in detail as follows:

Language carries culture, and culture carries [...] the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other human beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (16)

Thiong'o notes the inseparable relationship between language and culture especially when one's native language is colonized and threatened to be replaced by another language in postcolonial African societies. Language carries with it cultural values. People get to know the world and to understand themselves through language. Or to put it another way, from a person's use of language, we can perceive his or her

attitude toward the culture that the language carries. So language expresses, embodies, and symbolizes cultural reality (Kramsch 3). This inseparable relationship can also be applied to immigrants when their language and culture are marginalized to an “other” position. Beyond that, in the case of Leon, his language also expresses, embodies, and contests a collective history of early Chinese immigrants.

Leon comes from a non-English-speaking country. His English inevitably sets up distance with mainstream discourse. Though he has lived in the US for over fifty years, he does not use the English language properly. He often speaks half English, and half Chinese, like “People be the tell me. I never talk English good. Them tell me” (B 56). In the long time of working at sea, he picked up some English words from shipmates. When Leon is angry, he speaks “like a string of firecrackers popping” (56). Nobody can understand his words. Often, they are a replay of how he was cursed on ships: “Iiiinamahnagahgoddammcock-sucksonnahvabitch!” (56). Leon is a chronic cultural outsider in the US. His fractured English speech remains outside the dominant discourse. His English confines his social interactions and communication in Chinatown with Chinese Americans only. This also lowers his prospective of employment. Lack of language aptitude, coupled with little technical skill, makes him either under-employed or forced to take up low-wage service jobs.

In American society Leon is in a disadvantaged position of “otherness,” and cannot identify with the US. He often claims to go back to China with his “Going-Back-to-China fund” (B 6). In his subconsciousness, he refuses to assimilate into the dominant discourse of integration. From Leila’s American perspective, Leon’s pidgin English is an alien discourse. It makes the reader feel strange, bitter and nervous (148-49). Sometimes, Leila even “couldn’t make out what he was saying in his half-English, half-Chinese speech” (149). Much about his presence in the US is mirrored in Leila’s feelings toward Leon’s use of English. He appears as a strange, bitter and nervous figure that signifies underdevelopment and abnormality. This image is not acknowledged in American discourse. His linguistic foreignness expels him culturally and racially from the national polity.

However, Leon’s fractured English has its glowing symbolic significance. His broken life is very much symbolically delineated through his broken English. English is not Leon’s and vice versa. This

symbolically suggests a mutual repellent relationship between Leon and American culture since language is a carrier of culture. His apparent distance from standard English functions as a symbol of distance from American discourse. The distance is unbridgeable and disconnected, impossible to span. For English readers, the presence of the “unreadable” language with its negative qualities of fracture places its speaker in an “other” position. To go one step further, the distances are impossible to be mediated between the protagonist and the reader, between the US and Leon, between English speakers and their “others.”

The cracked English obstructs the flow of language, and disrupts language fluency. It draws the reader’s attention to the presence of an “other” voice, and a different culture in the binary relation between center and periphery. It raises the problem of a marginalized subject in relation to the dominant discourse. Though symbolizing a failure of assimilation into American culture, Leon’s fractured English simultaneously retains Chinese American culture as a sphere of difference and heterogeneity.

Leon’s Adapted Word

If the loss of language results in a loss of culture as Thiong’o has argued, how a person picks up another language reflects the way he or she deals with the new culture. For Leon, English is an adopted, foreign language. His “special” way of using the language does not always come as a negative source of cultural barriers and hindrance. Sometimes, it transforms the dominant language, and symbolically, the dominant culture, in a Chinese way, in Leon’s “special” way. Thus, the distance with the dominant discourse changes into a realm of transcendence of subjectivity. The result bears the traces of cultural specificities and even superiority of this group of people. The superiority is ironically articulated as inferior language:

There was a time when Salmon Alley was our whole world and we all got along. Leon pronounced it “*get long*,” and there was something about the way the English words came out—slow and solid—almost like his voice was building something. It was as if he were talking about one of the Confucian virtues: loyalty or filial piety or sacred ceremony. “*To get long*” meant to make do, to make well of whatever we had; it was about having a long view, which was endurance, and a

long heart, which was hope. Mah and Leon, Nina and Ona and I, we all had a lot of hope, those early years on Salmon Alley. (*B* 176)

Leon's incidental adaptation to the English phrase from "get along" to "get long" informs Chinese perspective of interpretation. It symbolizes the way he interprets his American life. The change bears the traces of his experience of hard survival on the land where he is denied or subordinated as "other." When Claire Kramsch asserts that a person creates experience through language (3), I want to add that one can also create language through one's experience. Thus language provides a cultural lens through which to view a person's life. By comparing Leon's pronunciation to his way of talking about Confucianism, the narration sets up a link between the "new" English expression and traditional Chinese cultural heritage.

In the novel, Leon seems to be the most pitiful person. He suffers a series of losses in the US. In his mind, he tries to "get long" by balancing the losses in a condition of being alienated into "otherness." This becomes his way of life. The family's building unhappiness and misfortune, and eventually the tragedy of Ona's death, seem to convey an idea that life is composed of nothing but a series of disappointments. It tests a person's power of endurance. A person without the spirit of "getting long" could hardly survive. However, as life goes on, Leon accepts the harsh reality. He makes survival possible in spite of all odds and obstacles. This hard survival is symbolically reflected by his unconscious adaptation of "getting long." Fifty years later, he is still there. This is exactly what his "get long" literally connotes. No matter how difficult it is for him to adapt to the changed situation, he lives on the ninth floor of the San Fran as he did half a century ago. Coincidentally, the number "nine" has the same pronunciation as "forever" in Chinese. This again symbolically reinforces Leon's idea of "getting long."

The narrative constantly reminds the reader of immigrants' hard life: a series of losses, unsteady income, family conflicts, and cross-cultural confrontation. However, the protagonists face the difficulties with a sense of negotiation with the harsh conditions in their day-to-day living. Leon's "get-long" idea can be seen as representative of the American experience of his generation. These people develop a distinctive culture and history by "getting long" in an alien land. They

set up alternative cultural sites (like Chinatown) and forms unique to themselves. As Thiong'o says, language as culture "is a product of the history which it in turn reflects" (15). The reflection from Leon's adapted phrase comes from his real-life experience of struggling to "get long." American discriminatory acts toward Chinese immigrants, whether exclusion, segregation, or racialization, cannot weaken their "get-long" mind, but make them "solid" and "settled" in the "free" and "democratic" society. The presence of Chinese people, and of culturally specific Chinatown, in the alien land is the proof of their "getting long" strategy.

Instead of muting or ignoring the difference between Leon's broken English and standard English, the narration plays it out. It integrates the difference into Chinese traditional virtues of endurance and hope. The coinage of a "new" term is a cultural adaptation setting out from Chinese traditions presented in an English term, and it is further used as a survival strategy. This process symbolizes a diversified mutual enrichment between cultures. Ironically, the enrichment is produced by Leon, a person who once negated American culture. The writing transforms Leon's unconscious appropriation into a means through which the marginalized people have altered themselves to suit new American conditions and to "get long" with that reality. This is a most vivid and realistic representation of how immigrants exploit their cultural heritage.

The Significance of Leon's English

Thiong'o emphasizes the relationship between a person's use of language and the way that person defines himself or herself. As he says, "The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe" (4). If the language he or she speaks defines a person's cultural identity, Leon's abridged speech reflects back onto his identity. His mixed language determines his mixed subjectivity. He is an American citizen with Chinese traditions. The original voice of speaking redeems a marginalized people and gives them a certain value. Even though the narrator Leila constantly complains that Leon's bad English makes her feel uneasy, she never corrects it. By keeping it broken with Chinese

traces, the narration gives the opportunity to the marginalized immigrants to speak in their true voices. On the one hand, Leon lets out another voice among heterogeneous accents. This voice suggests a subversive pretext. The presence of Leon's English sets a contrast to standard English, and underscores class and racial differences. If language is fundamental to cultural identity, Leon's broken English symbolically shows his fractured identity.

On the other hand, Leon has articulated a new composite, hybrid voice. His positive appropriation of both language and way of life produces more cultural complexity instead of just accepting what is offered. I see this adaptation as an extended creation of Leon's cultural identity built on his "adapted" papers (paper identity and paper archive). Beneath the simplistic appropriation of the term "get long," its symbolic meaning transcends its literal sense. The term conveys the power of recalling and connoting a subjective way of existence and articulation in an alien culture. The immigrants adapt the "standard" American doctrines to their conditions, as Leon does with "get long." The variation symbolizes another way of life. It is different from Americans, but it is there and should be acknowledged. Instead of foregrounding a sense of resistance or contradiction, the adaptation suggests a possibility of meaningful acceptance and then appropriation within the dominant discourse. It allows the minority people to adjust, change and live their American life in their own way rather than being totally integrated or assimilated into the American track. In this sense, this "other" voice destabilizes the model minority myth that constructs Chinese Americans as a homogeneous group.³

I propose the linguistic term "contact language" to name Leon's language.⁴ This kind of language is produced when different languages come into contact with each other and result in a new form of language. The new language form is different from, but still linked, to the original languages. The linkage to the Chinese side resides more in ideological

³ Model minority myth is a racialist construction of Asian Americans homogenizing them as the most successfully assimilated minority group (Lowe 68). I discussed it in the Introduction.

⁴ Mary Pratt coins the term "contact zones" by borrowing the term "contact" used in linguistics, "where the term contact language refers to improvised languages that develop among speakers of different native languages who need to communicate with each other consistently" (6).

aspects than in linguistic aspects. Leon's Chinese specificity adds his home cultural and historical aspects to American culture. His way of using English symbolizes the way disadvantaged, under-privileged people adapt themselves in a dominant culture. Though they are in a position of subordination and marginalization, they still show their individuality. Joined by other symbols of bone and paper set in the Chinatown background, the symbolic expression "get long" brings into light a people of specificity. These people "get long" at an "other" place that denies or restricts their "getting along."

Leila's (In)Translation

In their introduction to *The Craft of Translation* (1989), John Biguenet and Rainer Schulte note that translation is a process of reconstruction of both linguistic and cultural implications (xi). The meaning of a word used in a certain context may transcend its literal definition. In this case, Biguenet and Schulte argue, "translators must develop modes of thinking" (xi). These modes of thinking, they continue, "reconnect them with the dynamic fields of words, [...] and] will allow them to explore meaning associations within a word and meaning connections created by words in a specific context" (xi). For Biguenet and Schulte, the development of modes of thinking is essential in translation practice. In my opinion, these modes can only be developed out of the cultural experiences that a person is subject to. That is to say, a successful translation, as Talal Asad asserts, "is premised on the fact that it is addressed within a specific language, and therefore also to a specific set of practices, a specific form of life" (156). Thus cultural experience is a crucial factor to ensure that a translation can be the greatest approximation of meaning to the source both in terms of language and of culture. That is what translation theorists call the "cultural turn" in translation studies.⁵ In André Lefevere's words, "The way they [translators] understand themselves and their culture is one of the factors

⁵ For example, Lefevere notes, "Translation needs to be studied in connection with power and patronage, ideology and poetics, with emphasis on the various attempts to shore up or undermine an existing ideology or an existing poetics" (10). Susan Bassnett-McGuire expresses a similar idea. She argues that translation studies is "not merely a minor branch of comparative literary study, nor yet a specific area of linguistics, but a vastly complex field with many far-reaching ramifications" (1).

that may influence the way in which they translate” (14). When a person fails to develop these modes of thinking specific to a certain culture, intranslation takes place. This type of intranslation happens on a cultural level rather than on a linguistic level. In the following, I will demonstrate how Leila’s (in)translation takes place as a result of her cultural (in)competence.

In *Bone*, the narrator Leila is competent in both English and Chinese. Her problems with, and adaptation of, language are closely connected to her cultural dilemma of being born and raised in the US, where her way of life is very Americanized. Her means of transportation depends as much on cars as it does for other young Americans. She prefers to have western food in a quiet environment, to enjoy not only the food itself but also the service and atmosphere. She accepts American values such as freedom of choice in personal matters like marriage. However, this “American” young girl lives and works in an utterly Chinese environment. Leila lives in a Chinatown home with her Chinese parents. She works as a community relations specialist of a Chinese school. Her job is to set up a bridge between the classroom teacher and the Chinese parents.

Linguistically, Leila is in-between two languages. She often feels “all worn-out [...] in two languages” (*B* 15). In an all-Chinese environment of her work, her “enough” Chinese language and “pretty good” attitude with the Chinese parents are unable to communicate her American mind. She wants to get the parents involved in dealing with student affairs, but her argument that “We’re in America” is retorted with a “we-are-Chinese-first” theory from parents (16). The gap between the Chinese language and American culture makes Leila incapable of talking back in Chinese with those Chinese parents. Wordless, Leila feels “I can’t win an argument in Chinese” (16-17).

This apparent linguistic deficiency emanates from a deeper sense of cultural void in which Leila finds herself. The Chinese language those parents speak carries the meaning of a cultural trait specific to Chinese culture. Leila does not have Chinese cultural soil to grow her Chinese language. That is why she cannot find a corresponding equivalent in her Chinese vocabulary. Or to put it in another way, her “American” meanings and ideas falter in Chinese. This failure should not be regarded as a linguistic incompetence to find a lexical or syntactical substitute, for the disconnection between language and culture causes it. Her cultural

deficiency in Chinese hinders her ability to speak back in a Chinese track of thought. The incommunicability Leila feels is a projection of immense cultural distance. In Bassnett-McGuire's words, it is because a relevant situational feature for the source culture is absent in the target culture (32). This absence renders Leila's linguistic competence impotent.

This kind of language failure can also be found in Leila's communication with her parents. She complains about "the talking for Mah and Leon, the whole translation number" (B 17). In a quarrel with Mah, Leila once again feels helpless in language. She says, "Using Chinese was my undoing" (22), and "I have a whole different vocabulary of feeling in English than in Chinese, and not everything can be translated" (18). The incommunicability in language is symbolically a reflection of cultural gap experienced by second-generation immigrants. The different vocabulary of feeling in English Leila has is, in fact, a different set of doctrines defined by American culture and her American experience. This feeling can only be conveyed in American English. Similarly, the Chinese language is privileged to express Chinese ideas. When Leila says, "She [Mah] had a world of words that were beyond me" (22), what is actually beyond her is not Chinese words; it is Mah's traditional Chinese beliefs and doctrines.

However, sometimes Mah's apparently untranslatable sound can be transmitted to Leila with clear meaning. When Leila tells Mah about her marriage with Mason, Mah gets angry. As said,

Mah grunted, a humph sound that came out like a curse. My translation was: Disgust, anger. There's power behind her sounds. Over the years I've listened and rendered her Chinese grunts into English words. (B 22)

Again, Leila's translation from untranslatable sounds into words of feeling is not because of her linguistic competence. It is out of a deeper understanding from the long time living together, and from years of sharing happiness and sadness.

Translation is generally understood as the rendering of a source language text into the target language so the meaning of the target text will be as close as possible to the source.⁶ That is to say, translation

⁶ From a linguistic perspective, a lot of translation theorists express a similar idea using different terms. For example, Peter Newmark defines translation as "rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author

involves the replacement of one language with another. Leila's translation is not a linguistic "rendering" of one text into another as is commonly involved in the process of translation. It becomes a more complex negotiation between two cultures which carry languages. So, both Leila's ability and inability to translate signify further cultural reasons more than the fact itself. On the one hand, by way of cultural understanding, the language barrier can be lessened to open up a communication line. On the other hand, lack of understanding builds up new barriers that hinder communication.

Leila's Acceptance of a Misspelled Word

Leila stays with the family to relieve her parents' grief after Ona commits suicide. Her stay serves as a steady and reliable presence of always being there in times of crisis. She takes responsibility being the eldest daughter in the family. Symbolically, she is the backbone of the family. Leila respects everyone's choices and decisions, be it Ona's suicide, Nina's escape, Leon's idleness, or Mah's extramarital affair. This acceptance is not a passive take-in. But she views others' irresponsible behavior with a sense of optimism and generosity. In other words, she does not perceive them as victims of cultural conflicts. Instead, they are individuals who exercise their individuality to break the control from family and/or culture and to fight against their oppressive fate.

In her acceptance of her parents' and her sisters' doings, Leila exhibits her tolerance. In this process, she forms her own cultural identity. Her outlook undergoes changes before and after Ona's suicide. As Leila says before she moves out of her Chinatown home:

The last thing I saw as Mason backed out of the alley was the old blue sign, #2-4-6 UPDAIRE. No one has ever corrected it; someone repaints it every year. Like the oldtimer's photos, Leon's papers, and Grandpa Leong's lost bones, it reminded me to look back, to remember.
(B 193-94)

intended the text" (5). J.C. Catford defines translation as "*the replacement of textual material in one language (SL [source language]) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL [target language])*" (20). Petrus Huetius defines it as "a text written in a well-known language which refers to and represents a text in a language which is not as well known" (qtd. in Lefevere 1).

The comparison of the old blue sign “updaire” with Leon’s papers and with Grandpa Leong’s lost bones again reinforces Leon’s belief that time matters, and old makes good (58). The sign is kept in the same way as the papers and the bones are kept. “Updaire” is a misspelled word “upstairs,” but no one bothers to correct it. Leon’s paper identity is forged, but it becomes an accepted fact that Leon is Leon, Grandpa Leong’s son. Grandpa Leong’s bones were lost, but they were settled by mixing with others of the Leong family name.

The previously unnoticed difference, or the mistake in “updaire,” together with other mistakes in Leon’s papers and Grandpa Leong’s bones, functions as a reminder of a family’s and a people’s different past. The “mistakes,” reminding the narrator to look back, to remember (*B* 194), become keepers of memory. These mistakes do not expect to be corrected. The people’s history and destiny have already been built upon them. The re-visitation to the past recalls the old generation. As the narrator says:

Remembering the past gives power to the present. Memories do add up. Our memories can’t bring Grandpa Leong or Ona back, but they count to keep them from becoming strangers. (88-89)

The narrator frees herself from the burden of her family past. She embraces the past, including the destructive and untruthful part, such as Ona’s death and her paper grandpa. Her memories transcend the irreversible time, and thus “set up the positive from within the ‘world of yesterday’ as a model for creative inspiration [...] within the ‘world of the here-and-now’” (Spitzer 92). In other words, her memories enable a “pleasantly sad dialogue” between the past and the present (Vromen qtd. in Spitzer 92). In contradiction to the statement of “[a] failed family” with “[n]othing but daughters” (*B* 3) in the opening page of the narrative, Leila later feels they are lucky. Leila’s changed attitude symbolically strengthens her sense of cultural and historical continuity.

Leila’s Transcendence in Neologism

Leila recognizes cultural differences, and integrates the differences into a new orientation of life. She builds her life on cultural adaptation by bridging these differences, which is symbolically reflected in her

creation of a new word. When Leila moves out of her home in Chinatown to live with her husband, she thinks:

I was reassured. I knew what I held in my heart would guide me. So I wasn't worried when I turned that corner, leaving the old blue sign, Salmon Alley, Mah and Leon—everything—backdaire. (*B* 194)

The narration ends with the coinage of “backdaire” out of “updaire.” The accidentally misspelled word “updaire,” which is untranslatable, is translated into another “wrong” word “backdaire.” The translation symbolizes a wide range of references. If “updaire” reminds people to look back into history with an acceptance of the way it was, its translation to “backdaire” transcends this acceptance of a past to a new level.

By “transcend,” I refer to the fact that Leila goes beyond the limits of her ethnic past. Despite the incompatibility of the two forces of her home culture and the American mainstream culture, Leila develops a way of integrating them. The new word “backdaire” symbolizes her American way of life. In this life, something new is created (symbolized by the part “back” translated from “up”) while the difference or the “mistake” is retained (symbolized by the “daire” part) with both as integral parts of life. From this perspective, the word “backdaire” symbolizes that Leila takes in elements from both cultures to define her life. Thus, Leila’s Chinese background is symbolically translated into the English language and further into American culture. The acceptance of “updaire” and the translation to “backdaire” also symbolize a process of self-construction. She inherits cultural heritage, modifies it in an American way and invents new Chinese American cultural practices in the mainstream culture. In the narration, Leila constantly travels inside and outside of Chinatown, which symbolizes her position of being inside and outside of both cultures. The neologism unexpectedly changes Leila’s relation with the two cultures. Her borderland position in the previous narration is subverted into a new state of integration of Americanized Chinese heritage.

Apparently, the narrative ends with the neologism, but in my opinion the neologism at the very end does not signify the ending of a story. It symbolically starts a new phase of life as is indicated by “neo-.” Leila’s way of understanding reality is symbolically articulated in the way she adapts the new term: accept the difference and adapt it

according to her own cultural specificity. The formation of the word reflects Leila's choice of acceptance and adaptation. This new word constitutes a discourse to ignore the wrong part, the difference in a person's ethnic past. It erases her worries—Mah's grief, Leon's lonely life, Mason's wait for her, and her new job.

Significance of the Neologism

As already mentioned, despite the fact that the sign “updaire” is repainted every year, no one corrects it (*B* 193). It is still there. It reminds the narrator as well as the reader of a particular past. The more incoherent conclusion “backdaire” follows the incoherent “updaire.” This further problematizes the already unsettled notion of an immigrant life. Thus, the narrative does not develop identification with uniformity. It relates the subject's creation out of cacophony. If language carries culture, the fluidity in the language reflects the fluidity of the narrator's Chinese American culture. It is never static, but is constantly moving and evolving.

Therefore, the value of the neologism does not lie in its invention of a new term enriching the English language, nor does its linguistic profoundness lie in its establishment of “a medium which fractures the concept of a standard language and installs the ‘marginal’ variations of language use” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial* 262). The value of the new word goes beyond the sphere of language. It enriches the American indoctrination system by offering a view of the immigrant minority, and a perspective that results from a particular experience. Furthermore, it draws the reader's attention to the narrator's dilemma of cultural identity. It is difficult to make a choice between Chinese and American cultures. The only way for the narrator to locate her cultural identity is to recognize both: Chinese past and American present. Thus, the adapted word “backdaire” symbolizes a successful negotiation of the contradiction between keeping an ethnic minority's cultural heritage and embracing a new culture. It affirms a double or multifaceted identity of an ethnic minority and a marginalized culture in the US.

Though different in their origin and symbolic meaning, Leon's “get long” and Leila's “backdaire” are both appropriated from their specific cultural experiences. The terms of their creation shed light on the protagonists' respective cultural perspective. Their language

adaptations echo what Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out, that “[l]anguage is adopted as a tool and utilized in various ways to express widely differing cultural experiences” (*Empire* 39). Both adaptations carry these people’s experience and expectation. The new words let the reader think about the dilemmas, contradictions and polarities in immigrant life. They are an articulation of the immigrants’ true voice in relation to the dominant discourse.

Conclusion

The symbols of bone and paper and the different neologisms recur in the text many times. Together they reaffirm a deeper cultural and historical implication. This implication develops from the representation of a family without biological bonds. The narration further reveals an American immigration history meta-graphized with a theme of cultural repulsion, negotiation, and adaptation. Through the abundant use of symbols, the narrative retrieves Chinese immigrant history and reality with the symbolic performance of everyday objects. It dramatizes the immigrant life as tragic as well as evoking and promising. The images of bone, paper, and “Chinglish” are related to each other. They acquire fresh meanings in the protagonists’ immigrant context of Chinatown. Instead of adding symbolic acts or leitmotifs to the plot and characterization of the novel, the narrative of *Bone* makes the symbols carry the weight of Chinese immigration history and immigrant life in the US. The feelings and ideas the symbols carry are unique because they are at once defined and limited by the meanings of the historical and geographical context. The significance of the prevailing symbols embodies the protagonists’ transcultural experiences which deal with bicultural complexities. Thus symbolism, a literary device, takes on another function as a real-life strategy for the reader which helps to understand and explain these complexities.