



“Filling the empty spaces with silhouettes”: Trans Women’s Friendship and Healing in jia qing wilson-yang’s *Small Beauty*

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Abstract

This paper explores how wilson-yang’s main character, Mei, who is Chinese-Canadian and a trans woman, deals with trauma from physical and sexual assault as well as grief from the loss of family. Through visits from the ghosts of her family—blood relatives and chosen family alike—Mei is able to begin to accept the loss she has experienced. I argue that *Small Beauty* blends elements of the Chinese ghost story, the homing narrative, and trans literary genres, creating a space where both generic storytelling elements and trauma are intersectional. This chapter examines how women’s healing is promoted by Mei’s trans women friends, Annette and Connie, who fashion a community in which Mei can belong in the city. Like other texts in the feminist healing narrative, *Small Beauty* initiates the healing process when Mei returns to tradition in the forms of food, spirituality, and ancestry, rediscovering her roots.

Keywords

Chinese Canadian, communal healing, women’s trauma, chosen family, LGBTQ stories

Although typically stereotyped as quiet and well-behaved, Asian American women share with other ethnic American women a story of racist, sexist, and imperialist systems and the ways in which women resist, overcome, and, sometimes, succumb to those systems (Shah, "Introduction" xii-xiii). Unlike stereotypes of loud or angry Black women, however, Asian women are often seen as apolitical, oppressed, angry, or motivated by their histories (Yamada, "Asian" 68). As Mitsuye Yamada reminds us, "We must remember that one of the most insidious ways of keeping women and minorities powerless is to let them only talk about harmless and inconsequential subjects, or let them speak freely and not listen to them with intent" ("Invisibility" 35). The systemic oppression and subjugation that Chinese women face in North America is unique to them; however, they, like other women of Color, run the risk of being considered/perceived as too bold if they discuss their oppression. As Nelle Wong affirms: "If you sing too often of woe, yours or your sisters', you may be charged with being 'too personal,' 'too autobiographical,' too much a woman who cries out, who acknowledges openly, shamelessly, the pain of living and the joy of becoming free" (177). Merle Woo argues that Asian North American lives fit within a larger framework: "The outlines for us are time and blood, but today there is breadth possible through making connections with others involved in community struggle" (145). Regardless of their systematic oppression, Asian North American women challenge the plot of women as victims with their work (Lim 813-14). An emphasis on the hyphenated lives that they lead is often a marker of Asian American literature. As Shirley Geok-Lin Lim states, an "insistence on past narratives, whether as Old World culture and values, immigration history, race suffering, communal traditions, or earlier other language traces, is a marked feature of much Asian American literature and criticism," a set of moves that mirror the development of the larger field of women's literature and criticism (809).¹

Specifically, the genre of ghost stories in Chinese literature has attracted a great deal of attention because ghosts are an important feature of the traditional belief system within Chinese culture (Eberhard 1). They are neither automatically fictional nor mythological. Emily Mark asserts that the ghost story is the oldest genre of literature in China, which was heavily influenced by the oral storytelling tradition of the ghost story before writing was developed. According to David Edelstein, in Chinese ghost stories, it is not uncommon for protagonists to feel more at home among ghosts than the living (48). Not only are ghosts a part of the traditional folktales and mythology of the Chinese, they are an on-going feature of their contemporary celebrations and religious practices. Christina Jochim explains that while common in stories, ghosts of dead ancestors typically only remain in the world of the living if their death rites are not properly performed. As such, ghosts demonstrate the ways the living have failed them.²

¹ For more information on the migration of Chinese immigrants to Canada, see William Ging Wee Dere's *Being Chinese in Canada: The Struggle for Identity, Redress and Belonging*, Peter S. Li's *The Chinese in Canada*, and David Chuenyan Lai's *Chinese Community Leadership: Case Study of Victoria In Canada*.

² As Emily Mark explains, if there were complications with one's death, burial, or funeral rites, the deceased may become a ghost who would haunt their living relatives and friends. Proper funeral rites in China include honoring the deceased with paper representations of their favorite goods and services. Food, money, property, electronics, and animal companions are often gifted to the deceased in order to

A contemporary Chinese Canadian ghost story, *Small Beauty* (2016) by jia qing wilson-yang, breaks with the tradition of stereotypes about Chinese women and literature through the character of Mei. As a biracial Asian trans woman living in urban Ontario she experiences gendered transphobic trauma in the form of harassment and sexual assault, which she relives in the novel through a series of flashbacks. Not surprisingly, Mei finds herself in need of healing. After a terribly violent sexual assault leaves Mei frightened and injured, she seeks help from her friend, Connie, another Asian trans woman. When she discovers her cousin, Sandy, has died Mei seeks healing in his home in Herbertsville, the rural town where she previously explored her gender expression. Mei spirals deeper into depression when she learns of the death of Connie. Though Mei begins to reconnect with her family, her queer and anti-patriarchal actions challenge the heteronormativity of first-generation Asian households in North America, especially that of first-generation Asians. Stuck between identities as a hyphenated person, Mei experiences fluctuating acceptance into social and cultural communities. Suffering from a disconnection to people she can trust, Mei's return to Sandy's home excuses her from participating in social interactions, both positive and negative. After Connie's death, Mei retreats further from society, finding a campsite, stealing a boat, and rowing into an open lake at night. That night she is visited by the ghosts of loved ones—her grandmother Nai Nai and Sandy—who encourage Mei to heal from her trauma and reconnect with the living despite her loss. Yet, it is the presence of Connie that puts into motion Mei's healing. The stereotype of the Asian woman as quiet and submissive combined with the need to conform to the cultural demand can prevent Asian women from speaking out. Speaking out and seeking healing is even more complicated for trans Asian women who do not have a secure position in their home communities from which to speak. This novel, however, reappropriates traditional Chinese concepts, such as balance, and traditional Chinese story devices, such as the ancestor ghost, in such a way as to provide a safe space for trans women to heal from multiple forms of trauma such as physical and sexual assault as well as nonacceptance within their cultural communities.³

With no mother or sister present in her life, Mei is forced to discover women outside of her family for friendship, examples of womanhood, and help with healing from gendered trauma. This chapter examines how Mei's healing is promoted by the women

honor them. If a loved one is satisfied and well respected by their living friends and family, they will have no reason to punish the living.

³ For more on Trans Studies and the struggles of trans visibility and acceptance within the queer community, see Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle's *The Transgender Studies Reader*, Reina Gossett, et al.'s *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Jen Manion's "Transgender Representations, Identities, and Communities," and Laura Horak's "Trans Studies." See also *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* by C. Riley Snorton, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* by Roderick Ferguson, and *Coming out Together: An Ethnohistory of the Asian and Pacific Islander Queer Women's and Transgendered People's Movement of San Francisco* by Trinity Ordana for information on the intersection of trans history, culture, and race.

Trans and gender non-conforming identities have been marginalized and erased within the LGBTQ community for decades, especially when those individuals are people of Color (Manion 325). In order to restore the voices, experiences, and identities of trans people of Color, their stories, whether fact or fiction, must be shared by them, not just well-intending allies, which is why the genre of Trans Literature and the field of Trans Studies are both so important to furthering the understanding of trans people.

she creates friendships with. Mei's trans friends, Annette and Connie, create a community in which Mei can belong in the city. While Mei mourns the loss of her cousin, she is visited by the ghosts of loved ones who have accepted her as a Chinese Canadian trans woman. Through the ghosts of her loved ones, Mei is reminded of the larger communities to which she belongs, and how these communities have attempted to live authentically in a new Canadian home. Likewise, by being a trans and an Asian woman, Connie—even as a ghost—helps Mei simultaneously reconnect and reconfigure her ideas of culture—balancing her yin and yang—finding a space where she belongs.

Before she suffers the loss of her family, Mei suffers an attack—one that she was even prepared for because, as a trans woman of Color, it is not a question of if Mei will experience violence, but when she will experience it and how severe the experience will be. Annette, Mei's close friend and a fellow trans Asian woman, tells Mei: "I got a brick and mace in my purse" (63), knowing that she is likely to suffer from violence as a trans woman of Color. Violence, abuse, and harassment are daily experiences for trans people of Color (TransJustice 230; Rose). Mei, too, carries a brick in her purse, but it does not save her from physical and sexual assault.

Women, like Annette and Mei, develop tactics to avoid men who might harass or assault them. As this violent behavior becomes normalized, women adapt their behavior, clothing, and lifestyles to avoid becoming a target (Salaam 326-27). Haunani-Kay Trask argues that the "color of violence" that Asian women face is not binary, but it is "white over yellow" domination (82). There is overt and covert violence against people of Color; however, both lead to trauma and even death for those who are marginalized and suppressed (Trask 82-83). Harassment, assault, and abuse threaten women's power and autonomy, as men gain power over women asserting their dominance and menacing them with additional repercussions and new forms of precarity (Salaam 328-30). As Hurdis observes, white men sexually abuse women of Color, believing they have a right to their bodies because women of Color are beneath them (282). As Lynn Lu explains, some white European men are particularly preoccupied with the stereotypes and exoticism of Asian women, wherein women's bodies become the spoils of whatever has been conquered, explored, and domesticated/converted in representations. This notion of women's bodies becoming the spoils of imperialism leads to the commodification of features, qualities, and cultures, making Asian women, in particular, subject to sexual objectification in the eyes of white men (Lu 17-18).

While the violence Mei experiences is statistically likely in North America, stories like hers are not often shared. As V. Jo Hsu explains, the stereotypes of Asian people create complications in regard to their storytelling⁴:

Within this narrative where minorities succeed by studying hard, getting married, and becoming good consumers and producers in the national economy, queer configurations of intimacy and gender are necessarily erased. The lives of queer and trans Asian Americans, then—our

⁴ According to the Human Rights Campaign and the Trans People of Color Coalition, in 2016, there were at least 21 trans people murdered in the United States. "Almost least percent of them were people of Color, and 85 percent of them were women" (5). However, the numbers of assault and hate crimes are much larger (32).

experiences of survival and defiance—become sites of counterhegemonic practice.

Because of the dominant narrative of North America—especially the myths of equal rights and that a post-racial society exists—the stories that identify the ways in which minorities—especially queer and trans People of Color—experience oppression are erased.

The violence and harassment Mei suffers is not surprising due to the ways trans women of color are treated; however, her roots as a Chinese woman also create tension between her gender and ethnicity. Yin and yang, a popular philosophy in China, is based on the idea of balance between the elements, genders, and emotions. The universe is full of inseparable dualities—represented by yin and yang—and health is dependent on the balance of these dual concepts. Without balance, individuals are prone to illness, whether it be physical or psychological (Cartwright). Just as an imbalance of yin and yang may cause natural disasters in the geographical world, an imbalance on the personal level can be catastrophic for an individual. Because the concept of yin and yang is based on dualisms that include gender, it is sometimes considered to be misogynist in nature.

The way yin and yang are interpreted depends on whether they are viewed through the lens of Taoism or Confucianism, the two popular religious movements in China. Juliana Batista argues that modern Confucianism may turn away from the misogynist belief system in which it has been rooted; however, Confucian principles have led to the deaths and physical harm of girls and women in Chinese society (Batista). By ignoring women in texts, Confucian scholars have encouraged the suppression of women. Yet, modern Confucian philosophers may integrate feminist philosophies with Confucianism. Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee argues that the misogyny attached to Confucian principles stems from patriarchal powers that controlled the belief systems; therefore, Confucianism in its original meaning supports and celebrates women as much as it does men. Traditionally, Chinese families are patrilineal. Yet the gender of children was not considered to be as important until Confucius's follower Mencius declared that male heirs were the goal of procreation, which, in turn, devalued any child who was not male. Still, gender roles were understood as part of the yin and yang. There are two interpretations of the philosophy: in one interpretation, the difference between men and women creates a balance that is necessary in a family, relationship, and even the universe; in the other, because the more dominant qualities are associated with the male yang, women—represented by the yin—are considered submissive, their purpose simply to support men in their endeavors (Ebrey). Thus, Mei's status as a trans woman is confusing according to the traditional beliefs of the Chinese and the way(s) in which they interpret gender roles according to the philosophy of yin and yang.

While her cousin, Sandy, reacts to Mei's attack with violence towards the man he believes is responsible, her friend Connie—who, while older than Mei, is also a Chinese trans woman—creates a space of healing, insisting Mei sleep in her apartment, cleaning and caring for her physical wounds, and giving her chrysanthemum tea and congee in order to promote healing and balance in Mei's damaged body. This assault not only hurts Mei physically, but causes her to experience anxiety and sleeplessness as well: "The first night . . . she cannot sleep. Mei sits with Hazel's head on her lap, running her hands

through the dog's fur. She is awake. . . It is the time of night that feels endless. The time between" (77). Sandy chooses violence because he is the only man in the family and, therefore, is expected to keep Mei safe from others. However, Sandy's methods of healing only begin to help Mei when they encourage her to return to tradition: "They eat in silence, breathing in each other's presence, eating one of the few meals they remember Nai Nai cooking" (80). Returning to traditional food and the comfort of their roots, Mei and Sandy may heal from the violence and abuse to which they were subjected. Furthermore, Mei views Connie and Sandy as her "pair of unlikely guardian angels" because of their help after her attack (72). This help is physical, initially, as Connie and Sandy are helpful when they are living; however, their help lasts beyond their deaths, as their ghosts continue to help Mei. This version of the helpful ghost is a revision of traditional Chinese ghost stories, especially ones that haunt because they have not been treated properly in their death rites. For the ghosts to focus their attention on helping an individual who has experienced trauma—as opposed to someone who has done them wrong—is atypical for the genre.

The silence Mei shares with Sandy after her trauma is not atypical for a woman in her situation. While she closes herself off to other people while recovering, she is able to connect to the ghosts, memories, and voices of the ones she cares for in order to help the healing process. In this way Mei's silence regarding her trauma does not prevent her from healing. The two months Mei spends hiding away in Sandy's home following his death keeps her isolated, preventing any physically proximate person from helping her until she is visited by the ghosts of her family.

Mei attempts to heal when she, unknowingly, meets a false ally. Diane, (the ex-girlfriend of her aunt Bernadette—Sandy's mother) knows the secrets and histories of Mei's family makes Mei feel close to her very quickly. She feels kinship with her, describing her over the phone to her friend Annette as a "woody dyke" (47). This connection only grows as the two women have dinner together and reminisce about Mei's family: "Mei is surprised to find herself talking openly with Diane. She feels like family, the good kind of family" (51). Sia Nowrojee and Jael Silliman argue that it is difficult for LGBTQ Asian women to find supportive spaces within their cultural communities (77); nevertheless, Diane and Mei find themselves to be fast friends. However, Mei is shocked to discover that Diane does not accept her gender identity as valid. Diane goes so far as to suggest that she is confused: "I like ya . . . But you have no idea what you're talking about. You can't just go ahead and make a woman" (55). Diane even asks Mei about whether she takes hormones or has undergone surgery, not only policing but attempting to define Mei's gender. In Diane's view identities are created for individuals who cannot pass as white, straight, or cis, instead of by them (Hurdis 280). While Mei defends herself to Diane, insisting that she is, in fact, a woman, Diane dismisses her: "You think you're a girl?" (53). Gender policing further dehumanizes and marginalizes trans people of Color (TransJustice 228).

Mei finds herself unable to connect with others or properly express her grief after the death of Sandy. She secludes herself in Sandy's house, not engaging in conversation with anyone in person for two months. Instead, she talks to Annette on the phone:

Since Sandy died, she is rarely out of her head long enough to maintain an in-person conversation. Phone calls are different. The physical absence of the other person creates a feeling of safety. No eyes to scan for reactions, no revealing hand movements. Just a sound. (61)

As Kaley Kiermayr explains, “It’s this exhausting state of liminality that sometimes drives us to leave everything behind . . . but Mei’s attempt to retreat to her cousin’s house—only to be followed by inexorable histories and memories—clues us into the fact that this concept of simplicity may be impossible.” As Kiermayr suggests, Mei’s histories and memories are exceptionally complex because of her identity as a Chinese Canadian trans woman, as well as the friendship that Mei maintains with Annette, despite their distance. As Yamada explains, “Third World Women” are expected to present themselves as the best versions of their race, not educate those around them by discussing their experiences with, or knowledge of, violence within the members of their communities (“Asian” 68). While Mei physically isolates herself in order to avoid behaving in a manner that is unbecoming of her culture or gender, she is not able to emotionally isolate herself from the pain of the loss and trauma she has experienced.

Asian women are connected to family and community in ways other American women are not, which is why ghosts of family members are very present in Mei’s life. There is an important focus on the whole over the individual within Asian cultures: “Individualism is a core Western value that neither class nor race appears amply capable of mitigating” (Aguilar 158). One’s life does not belong to one’s self in Chinese culture as it does in the West. In fact, the family members of an individual help carry the burden of their emotional and psychological well-being.⁵ As Karin Aguilar-San Juan explains, while solidarity among Asian people may seem like an effective way of supporting one another, this unity leads to silence around misogyny, homophobia, and other marginalized identity hierarchies (x). As Morgan M. Page states, “Specters of the past, both figurative and supernatural, haunt Mei’s months in Sandy’s house—prompting Mei to wrestle with the deepest questions of who she is and where she belongs in the world.” Without the ghosts of her family, Mei would be unable to begin the healing process.⁶

As a Chinese Canadian woman, Mei feels disconnected from her roots in China: “China is a myth. . . . Something they only see in evidence of their skin, their eyes. Their family. Each other. They have never been. . . . China is stories from Nai Nai, a mix of exaggeration and truth, information decades out of date” (81). It is not the land or government of China to which Mei wishes to reconnect, but the history of her ancestors, the roots of her family in the historic and mythic place of China. Sandy tells Mei that Nai Nai did not approve of the way Canadians dealt with their ancestors: “She was always talking to dead relatives. She used to say Canadians treated their dead like they treated their elderly. They send them to a graveyard or a nursing home and forget them. . . . She lived with the dead” (79). Stories of ghosts and spirits are a central part of Chinese culture (Tan 203). Chinese people believe that

⁵ For more on the burden of the individual and the family, see “What You Don’t Know” by Lulu Wang and the movie adaptation *The Farewell* (2019). Wang’s work also discusses appropriate ways to mourn within the Chinese culture in China, as compared to Chinese-North American culture.

⁶ Ghosts represent the space in between identities for Chinese North American women authors (Lee 106).

the spirits of ancestors who have passed away are still very present in the lives of the living family. Proper homage, prayer, and offerings to deceased ancestors would bring blessings. On the other hand, failure to attend properly to deceased ancestors could incur their wrath, resulting in illness among family members, or misfortune. (Tan 203)

Yamada argues that Asian women in North America are tied to the histories of their immigrant ancestors (“Asian” 71). This connection is demonstrated through the ghosts of Mei’s family transcending time and space to be with her: “Ghosts of blood family somehow made sense, but Connie wasn’t blood and besides, she had abandoned her ‘People are connected through more than blood, you know this’” (142). Thus, the connection Mei and Connie experience—just as the connection Mei and Annette experience—transcends traditional familial ties. As chosen family, the connection Mei feels to these women is as strong as those of blood relation, a revision of the traditional Chinese ghost story that draws on family-making community experiences among LGBTQ peoples.

Even as a ghost, Connie uses storytelling to help Mei overcome her rage, an emotional state that prevents her from beginning the healing process and living a full life. As ghosts, Mei’s family remind her of her value and their ancestry. The first major wave of Chinese migrants came to the west coast of Canada in 1858; however, Chinese immigrants were almost completely banned until 1947 (Lai 312). This new wave of immigration created a young, thriving community of Chinese within Canada (Canada.ca “Early”). While their elders still felt connection to their homeland and communities, young Chinese Canadians felt less of a need to stay within their Chinese communities, often moving away and adapting to Canadian lifestyles (Canada.ca “History”). The ghosts of Connie and Nai Nai, while more connected to their Chinese heritage, do not try to change Mei’s identity or shame her for suffering from mental illnesses after her losses. Instead, the ghosts of her family members reinforce Mei’s importance and her connection to them by relying on traditional Chinese beliefs.

Similar to Chinese North American writer Maxine Hong Kingston’s character Wilson-Yang, Mei finds herself surrounded by the ghosts of her ancestors and subject to patriarchal control in her life. Like Kingston in *The Woman Warrior*, Mei attempts to understand herself through her family, which is difficult due to internalized racist, homophobic, transphobic, and misogynist beliefs from white, Euro-American society.⁷ Unlike the message of Kingston’s mother in “No Name Woman,” Mei’s family’s message is not traditional in regard to gender roles; they suggest forgiveness and love, as opposed to erasing the identities of anyone who does not conform to tradition. Both Kingston and Wilson-Yang synthesize Chinese customs, American literature, and pop culture with their Chinese-North American women protagonists.⁸ However, it should be noted that traditional Chinese culture is not misogynist by nature; in fact, the word ‘misogyny’ has no parallel in Chinese (Wang 23).

⁷ See Sidone Smith’s “Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*: Filiality and Woman’s Autobiographical Storytelling.”

⁸ See Sue Ann Johnston’s “Empowerment Through Mythological Imaginings in ‘Woman Warrior.’”

Connie uses traditional methods to cure Mei's illness that she determines is caused by rage. Connie determines that this anger prevents Mei from understanding those who are trying to help her (145-46). However, this imbalance of emotions is a particular illness that can only be healed with the use of traditional medicine. *Zhuyou*, a method of using ritualistic incantations and prayers to heal causes of illness that were not necessarily physical, deals "with the realm of the hidden and unknown" that cause illnesses (Cho 72). Such ceremonies are considered particularly important to maintaining women's health and balance from their yin and yang (Nowrojee 76). *Zhuyou* implements talismans, gestures, and drugs to treat the "root of disorder ranging from a blockage of qi, spirit possession, emotional imbalance, or loss of virtue" (Cho 71). Emotional imbalances are also considered to be treatable illnesses (Cho 74). In this line of thinking illness may also be caused by ghosts and spirits, which generate unharmonious lifestyles.

Yet, it is the ghosts of Mei's family who save her. A week after Sandy's death, Mei attempts to kill herself; but, she is saved by the ghost of her grandmother, who knows how to help: "You depressed! . . . You not healthy, Mei. You need to change the scene" (33). Overwhelmed by the trauma of her confidant's death and revisiting the emotions of her attack, Mei cannot see a way through her depression without the help of her ghosts. Initiating the healing ritual, Mei decides to return to Herbertsville with the blessing of her ghosts: "Sandy is dead. . . And now she is talking to ghosts in a dirty bathroom. Clearly this reaction is not about Sandy entirely. *No matter how you frame it, talking to ghosts makes you sound crazy*, Mei thinks" (33). While her North American sensibilities may tell her that talking to ghosts is a sign of mental instability, there is a rich history of the Chinese speaking to their ancestors as ghosts. Furthermore, Mei's return to Herbertsville signifies a return to herself and her family:

Up in Herbertsville, Mei could wear what she wanted; she could let herself be a girl, not the cagey teenage boy she loathed to be in the city. Bernadette seemed to love the visits, using Mei's chosen name. . . Now, driving through Herbertsville—past the stores, out onto the concession—Mei feels like she is coming home. (16)

Only through returning home is Mei able to address her family's ghosts and reconnect to her cultural traditions.

Burning incense, Mei attempts to reconnect to the traditions of her childhood by surrounding herself with the safe, familiar scents of her grandmothers:

The fragrant smoke fills the house, awakening ghosts and calming her mind. She stands, unmoving, watching the smoke curl from the small glowing ember. She raises the incense to her face and, holding it in front of her with arms outstretched, she bows from the waist three times. Nai Nai taught her this. One bow to the heavens. One bow to the earth. One bow for the ancestors. (27)

Showing reverence for her ancestors and their traditions, Mei begins to accept her ghosts as a necessary part of healing. Burning incense is a common ritual to demonstrate reverence for ancestors by making the air welcoming (Mark). The ritual of *zhuyou* specifically targets ghosts which prevent an individual from living a full, healthy life. Unlike typical *zhuyou* healing rituals, Mei's solution to her healing is not getting rid of

her ghosts but accepting her ghosts and forgiving herself. The ghost of Nai Nai suggests the return to Herbertsville is good for Mei's healing process: "Xiao Mei, good you came here. This is a good place to remember who you are" (20).

Completing the healing ritual, Mei seeks out solitude, driving to a lake, stealing a canoe, and rowing to be alone on the water at night.⁹ It is only when Mei faces the ghosts of her family and lets go of her anger that she is able to remember who she is, returning to her surviving chosen family, Annette. Page posits that *Small Beauty* eschews the tired gender novel stereotypes, placing Mei's connections to her trans sisters and discovery of hidden trans history within rural Ontario near the center of Mei's emotional landscape. In this way, *Small Beauty* joins the small but growing numbers of trans-genre novels written by transgender women that are revolutionizing our ideas of how trans people can exist within fiction.

Books within the trans literary genre often focus on characters as they begin to intentionally live as the gender—or non-binary—identity with which they identify. This bildungsroman style of genre often limits the development of the characters to that of acceptance of self or acceptance within a larger community;¹⁰ however, *Small Beauty's* Mei already has accepted herself and found a community of people who accept her gender and understand the trauma she experiences. It is important to recognize that while different literary narratives have their own specific focuses, the literary narratives of trans Women of Color often emphasize the trauma and healing experiences that are specific to them. This emphasis is due to the intersectional nature of their social identities; still, the intersectional experience is accessible to a variety of readers. As Peter Haldeman explains, the field of trans literature has now moved beyond the informative memoir and thinly-veiled metaphor of science fiction, allowing the writers to play with style and genre without concerning themselves with basic concepts of gender identity and human dignity. *Small Beauty* does not conform to the bildungsroman, female or otherwise, as Mei's "progress" might be read as regression—not unlike the Native American homing narrative—where she returns to the traditions of her family, recognizing the ways in which her identity fits into her family's history, as opposed to reacting against it—a common trope among the younger generation of Chinese-North Americans who identify

⁹ Water is often a part of *zhuyou* rituals (Cho 81, 94-95). Water also represents transformation in the yin-yang philosophy (Cartwright).

The open water is a dangerous space for a Chinese woman in a ghost story to try and find peace, as the *shui gui* (water ghost) is a particularly feared ghost, where someone drowned and their purpose as a ghost is to trick the living into drowning as well (Mark). Water is also a vulnerable space where people are taught to be on guard in order to protect themselves, yet Mei does not fear the water or, indeed, her own death. See "No Name Woman" by Maxine Hong Kingston for more on the *shui gui* in Chinese culture.

¹⁰ As Jaqueline Rose explains, the literary genre of trans literature is a particularly complicated one: "Transsexual people are brilliant at telling their stories. That has been a central part of their increasingly successful struggle for acceptance. But it is one of the ironies of their situation that attention sought and gained is not always in their best interest, since the most engaged, enthusiastic audience may have a prurient, or brutal, agenda of its own. Being seen is, however, key. Whatever stage of the trans journey or form of transition, the crucial question is whether you will be recognised as the other sex, the sex which, contrary to your birth assignment, you wish and believe yourself to be. Even if, as can also be the case, transition does not so much mean crossing from one side to the other as hovering in the space in between, something has to be acknowledged by the watching world."

with their family's struggles, recognizing the intersectional nature of their family's past and future (Betts). Furthermore, Mei's healing is dependent on her connection to her ancestors, who pass on traditional knowledge regarding healing: "Where other books often feature protagonists whose key relationships are with those of a similar age range, Wilson-Yang [sic] consciously spun a web of important and complicated intergenerational relationships around her narrative" (Rollmann). Mei repairs her relationships with her ancestors and her lost family members by eventually forgiving herself for not being available when either Sandy or Connie died. The intergenerational relationships Mei preserves not only lay bare her inability to be alone—especially when surrounded by the ghosts of her loved ones—but display the ways in which Mei's trauma has been experienced, carried, and shared by her ancestors and relatives. When family carries burdens together, they can also heal together. The journey to healing is a methodical family-wide effort of changing the various ways that wounds may impact the individual.

The intergenerational relationships within the narrative are rooted in the filial piety belief system within the Chinese familial structure. While modern Chinese and Chinese-North American family structures rely on patrilineal descent and reductive gender roles, the traditional filial piety—honoring and caring for one's elders—is not based in patriarchal gender roles, instead celebrating the elders of the family regardless of gender (Betts). Just as depicted in Sandy's childhood household, multiple generations often cohabitate, as they respect and admire their elders. Grandparents also often play an important role in raising the younger generations. This focus on the family over the individual often results in decisions and lifestyle choices of the younger generations being linked to the way they were raised by their elders (Betts). Prioritizing the good of the individual is often viewed as being selfish by the family, especially when individualistic choices are made by women. However, *Small Beauty* breaks with traditional expectations as Mei's identity as a trans woman is only ever questioned and criticized by her mother as being selfish or harmful for the family unit. Still, Mei's mother is not a character featured in the book. Instead, Mei is fully accepted by her chosen family, dead and living, who then pass on traditional knowledge regarding healing.

Mei's return home mirrors traditional mourning rites for family members in China. Her intentional disconnection from the world—aside from her phone calls with Annette—calls upon the Chinese traditions of giving up one's livelihood in order to mourn properly (Mark). Likewise, Mei chooses to pay respect to her dead loved ones by burning incense for them every day (118, 130). Even though she feels she has abandoned Sandy and Connie when they died, Mei goes into deep mourning, leaving the city and connections to the living behind, in order to be alone with her mourning (130). Mei's healing ceremony of returning to her roots and confronting her ghosts restores the balance between her yin and yang, resulting in her ability to accept her loss and the violence she has experienced; through it, she can begin the healing process. Without a balance, Mei can only feel her anger without processing it. However, when the ghost of Connie tells Mei that at the core of her being, she is angry; Mei addresses the ghosts and experiences that are connected with this feeling.

Small Beauty blends traditional Chinese stories and cultural knowledge—ghost stories, medical treatment, intergenerational relationships—with LGBTQ emphasis on chosen family. The ghosts of Sandy, Nai Nai, and Connie visiting Mei is an atypical representation of Chinese ghosts. Physical hauntings are associated with the yin, which attaches itself to the earth and remains attached unless proper funeral rites encourage the spirit of the deceased to let go of the physical world and the living (Mark). However, Sandy and Nai Nai have been properly mourned and, seemingly, do not have a reason to resent their burial rites. While Connie died quietly, unbeknownst to Mei, her ghost does not return to punish Mei for her distance during her last days. The spirits of the dead may also return to the physical world if a promise fails to be kept or if proper care is not taken to remember the dead (Mark). Yet, rather than demand her focus, respect, or demonstrations of love, the ghosts return to Mei to help her, Sandy, Nai Nai, and Connie return to Mei to care for her, helping Mei return to the world of the living, herself.

The relationships between ghosts and the living are especially important in *Small Beauty*, as they demonstrate the importance of chosen family as well as blood relatives among the LGBTQ community. Mei tries to explain the importance of Connie, her chosen family, to the ghost of Sandy; but even as a specter, Sandy has limited understanding of Mei's experiences as a trans woman:

It is a huge deal that I wasn't there for Connie! She took care of me. You wouldn't get it. How amazing it is to meet someone like you who's older, when you've been living with the idea that no one like you ever *gets* to be older. How incredible and terrifying that is. All at once. (158)

Once she heals, Mei sees herself as a link between the past and the present, an important part of her family: "She is a moment on a spontaneous trajectory, her ancestors and descendants surrounding her, like water. Connected by blood and intention" (160). Not only is this a demonstration of the healing that has begun, but a demonstration of the ways in which Mei finds herself repairing her connections to her family.

In the end, Mei's connections to Annette and Connie save her from self-destruction and loneliness. Connie uses traditional Chinese medicine and her ghost form to help Mei heal from her anger over her physical and sexual assault. Meanwhile, Annette keeps Mei connected to the physical world by calling her and reminding her of the world that she is avoiding by retreating to Sandy's home in the country. While Mei initiates her own healing ceremony, it is only with the support of her fellow trans Chinese sisters that she can follow through with the process. The book ends with Mei calling Annette, demonstrating that their bond is lasting through all the trauma and pain which Mei has experienced. This narrative moves trans literature beyond acceptance to healing, as well as from innovation to tradition. Acknowledging that modern gender traumas and challenges are responsive to traditional methods of healing, *Small Beauty* signifies the importance of discovering non-patriarchal spaces for women of Color to heal.

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