

**”Like Most Americans”? Family Relations and the Chinese American
Male in David Wong Louie’s *Pangs of Love***

Hanna Ristola
University of Tampere
School of Language, Translation and Literary Studies
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Sivuainetutkielmani tavoitteena on eritellä amerikkalaisuutta, kiinalais-amerikkalaisen miehen rooleja ja maskuliinisuutta perheen kontekstissa David Wong Louien novellikokoelmassa *Pangs of Love*, joka on julkaistu vuonna 1991.

Keskityn analyysissäni kahteen kokelman novelliin: ”Birthday” ja ”Pangs of Love”. Molemmissa novelleissa esiintyy toisen polven kiinalais-amerikkalainen mies minäkertojana. Ulkopuolisen silmin kertojat ovat onnistuneet assimiloitumaan amerikkalaiseen yhteiskuntaan: he ovat kouluttautuneita, heillä on työpaikat ja he tulevat toimeen taloudellisesti. Syvempi tarkastelu kuitenkin osoittaa näillä miehillä olevan ongelmia yksityiselämässään: he eivät ole kyenneet perustamaan perhettä tai onnistuneet pitämään parisuhdetta, eivätkä heidän näkemyksensä kohtaa heidän kiinalaisten vanhempiensa kanssa. Yksityiselämässään kertojat ovat siis ulkopuolisia ja vieraantuneita amerikkalaisesta yhteiskunnasta. He eivät vanhempiensa suostutteluista huolimatta halua mennä naimisiin kiinalaisten naisten kanssa, vaan haluavat parikseen amerikkalaisen naisen – tässä kuitenkin onnistumatta.

Tutkimukseni teorialuvuissa johdetaan lukijan ensin kiinalaistaustaisten maahanmuuttajien historiaan Yhdysvalloissa, jonka jälkeen esittelen tutkimukseni teoreettisen viitekehyksen. Käsittelem toisessa teorialuvussa lyhyesti gender-tutkimusta, kriittistä miestutkimusta ja miestutkimusta sen kiinalais-amerikkalaisessa kontekstissa. Tässä luvussa esitellään lyhyesti myös sosiologista perhetutkimusta ja etnistä näkökulmaa siihen.

Analyysiosiossa tutkin novellien mieskertojien perhesuhteita kahdesta näkökulmasta: ensinäkin tarkastelen kertojia kiinalaisten vanhempien lapsina ja toiseksi tarkastelen heitä isinä sekä parisuhdekumppaneina. Analyysin ensimmäisessä alaluvussa keskeiseksi teemaksi nousee esimerkiksi sukupolvien välinen kulttuurinen kuilu, joka kertojien ja heidän vanhempiensa välillä vallitsee ja jonka konkreettisena manifestoitumana voidaan pitää näiden kahden välistä kielimuuria. Paneudun tässä alaluvussa myös amerikkalaisuuden ideaan: minkälaiseksi amerikkalaisuus novelleissa kuvataan ja onko kokonaisvaltainen amerikkalaistuminen kertojien näkökulmasta toivottavaa. Analyysin toisen alaluvun teemoihin lukeutuvat kiinalaistaustaisia ihmisiä uhkaava sukupuutto Yhdysvalloissa sekä etnisyyksien väliset seksuaalihierarkiat. Edellämainittuun viittaa kertojien kykenemättömyys solmia parisuhteita haluamiensa valkoisten naisten kanssa, jonka seurauksena he eivät myöskään voi lisääntyä. Jälkimmäisen teeman tiimoilta käsitellään sekä kertojien ja valkoisten naisten välisiä suhteita, joissa kertojia jatkuvasti emaskuloidaan, että kertojien ja novellien muiden miesten – valkoisten ja japanilaisten – välistä kilpailuasetelmaa.

Avainsanat: maskuliinisuus, emaskulaatio, kiinalais-amerikkalaisuus, perhe, Louie

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1. Introduction

In this pro gradu thesis, I will examine family relations and the Chinese American male in two short stories, “Pangs of Love” and “Birthday”, from the short story collection *Pangs of Love* (1991) by Chinese American author David Wong Louie. The aim is to determine how these short stories depict “Americanness” and this will be examined through the Chinese American male narrators and their family relations. The narrators of the short stories are Chinese American men who experience feelings of “outsiderness” and although, on the outside, they seem well “Americanized”, they still feel alienated and even emasculated in different situations of their lives, mainly concerning family life and romantic relationships – a theme that emerges from most other stories in *Pangs of Love*. Given the history of racial discrimination, feminization, and, in the past, obstructed filiation of the Chinese American male in the U.S., my goal is to examine this alienation of the Chinese American male in terms of his familial role(s) in the short stories. Therein, my focus will lie, on the one hand, on child-parent relationships and, on the other hand, on romantic relationships and fathering. In the short stories, family relations demonstrate the Chinese American man’s inability to experience fulfilment in the American society.

In the field of Chinese American literature, David Wong Louie is a representative of the so called “third generation” Chinese American authors, who discusses complex and postmodern racial themes in his work. The atmosphere in his *Pangs of Love* (1991) can be described as quite grim and desperate. The short story collection represents the Chinese experience in America as to this day very complicated and in parts hopeless: it includes a number of Chinese American characters who feel disconnected from their ethnic/parental inheritance and from the culture of their “new” homeland. The two short stories chosen for my analysis, “Birthday” and the title story of the collection “Pangs of Love”, both have a Chinese American male as the first-person narrator and protagonist. These characters are by legal and social grounds doing well for themselves; they are

middle-class people, well educated, have a job and have no problems coping financially. Family is a central element in these stories, as well as most of the other stories in the collection. The stories depict these men coping in American society, but, ultimately, unable to achieve what they desire: to be accepted as real Americans. These male characters seem to believe that they would be allowed to gain access to America and become accepted as real Americans through forming a family and having children with a white woman. At the same time, both in “Birthday” and “Pangs of Love”, the narrators have problems with their Chinese parents and do not seem to know how to deal with their Chinese origins. Therefore, the main questions here are the following: in these stories, how is “Americanness” discussed through family relations and is ignoring one’s inheritance through attaining Americanness seen as desirable for the Chinese American male?

As in the short stories discussed in this thesis, two recurrent themes in Asian American literature in general have been, as noted by Kim (quoted in Wong and Santa Ana, 173-174), Asian American men’s preoccupation with white women as a symbol of American promise and their metaphoric association of Asian woman with the homeland. Claiming one’s masculinity was a common theme in Asian American men’s writing in the 1960s and 70s, during what Wong and Santa Ana call the second period of Asian American writing; also, it was during this era that white women appeared in Asian American men’s writing for the first time. Wong and Santa Ana describe white women as “fetishized object[s] for the construction of a heteronormative Asian American masculine subject” (192). In the third period, from the 1980’s onwards, – and this applies to David Wong Louie – postmodern issues have become typical of Asian American writing, and in the context of men’s writing this has meant the re-examination of familiar concerns about masculinity of the earlier periods’, but they are now placed in a new frame of reference (Wong and Santa Ana, 197).

The topic of this pro gradu thesis derives from my own interest in minority literatures as well as matters of gender and family. The United States of America has throughout its history presented

many obstacles for Chinese Americans, when it comes to family formation or becoming naturalized citizens and rightful members of American society. During the 19th and 20th centuries, several different Chinese Exclusion Laws were established by the government for the purpose of controlling the number and the kind of immigrants accepted into the U.S. As a result of racial views, these laws and other socio-economical policies designed to exclude the Chinese from American societal living, the Chinese people began to be seen as inferior people. Lee maintains that Chinese Americans were subjected to discriminatory attitudes and actions by the white majority of Americans, because, as an ethnic minority, they were considered “aliens” in a new environment, where they “create[d] a sense of disorder and anomaly in the symbolic structure of society” (2). After having previously, upon their arrival in America, often worked as laborers on the railroads and in the mines, the male immigrants were allowed to only work at jobs that by traditional American standards were considered “feminine” – for example, as launderers and cooks. In this way, the Chinese males were *emasculated* by the society, which means that they were being deprived of force, vigour and manliness, in other words, made weak and effeminate both literally and figuratively (the *OED*). This “social atmosphere” of emasculation, which began to emerge soon after the arrival of the first Chinese immigrants, can be seen to this day in the texts of Chinese American male authors.

In terms of theoretical framework, this thesis relates to the by now well established study of Chinese American masculinity in the field of Asian American Studies. In the theory chapter, which is divided into two subchapters, I intend to concentrate on the structures of masculinity, family and male roles and explain how the category of the Chinese American male serves as disrupting the ideal masculinity in the American context. In the first subchapter, I will concentrate on the socio-historical aspects concerning Chinese American men and families. In other words, 2.1 gives an introductory historical description of Chinese family formations in the U.S., with an emphasis on male roles. It is important to contextualize the world of David Wong Louie’s *Pangs of Love*, since it

discusses Chinese Americanness from the point of view of several generations of people of Chinese descent in America; in a way, the past is always present in the short stories.

In 2.2, I will examine family from the point of view of gender and masculinity and introduce the notion of emasculation in the Chinese American context. I will begin by discussing gender in general, after which I move on to viewing hegemonic masculinity as well as the ethnic context of masculinity and emasculation. Finally, I will examine traditional Western conceptions of family and the role of man in the family. The focus of this subchapter also lies on matters relating to different ideals and challenges concerning the notion of family that the first-generation Chinese in America and the modern day Chinese Americans of later generations have been faced with in America. Family life in general has met many changes during the past century and I will discuss how these changes are reflected in the Chinese Americans as a large minority group in the United States.

Thus, the theoretical framework for this thesis includes a number of study fields. Chinese American literary studies represent a narrower field of study under the umbrella term Asian American Studies and it is an interdisciplinary field: it draws from, for example, social sciences, cultural studies and postmodern theories of culture and literature. The study of masculinity and ethnicity, in a wider frame of reference, represents a field of study that is a part of the study of masculinity and critical men's studies. Critical men's studies originally derive from feminist theories and started to become an independent field of study around the 1970s; however, it is still greatly connected to gender and feminist studies. The study of family as a field of social studies is also closely linked to gender studies, since its study subject heavily concentrates on gender roles inside the family as a social unit. In this thesis, family will be discussed in the context of Asian and Chinese American studies.

In this thesis, I will employ such major scholars in the field of Asian American studies of gender, masculinity and sexuality as David Eng, King-Kok Cheung, Sau-ling Wong and Jachinson Chan. Elaine Kim can be awarded for having linked many socio-historical phenomena that can be

considered key matters for this thesis, such as male-labor immigration, bachelorhood, family separation, Chinese Exclusion Laws and emasculation of men, to portrayals of gender and sexuality (Wong and Santa Ana, 173). Wong and Santa Ana (173) note that even though these matters were already apparent during the Asian American movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was Kim who focused on them particularly from a literary perspective in her book *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (1982).

David Wong Louie's *Pangs of Love* was of interest to scholars of gender and sexuality, when it first appeared in 1991. However, as is proven by for example the study by Eng (2001), the stories continue to interest scholars in the 21st century as well. In Eng's (167-203) work, *Pangs of Love* is studied in terms of masculinity, emasculation and "male hysteria", which are seen as relating to alienation and displacement. However, none of the studies I have examined for this thesis explicitly focus on familial relations and Americanness, which represent the key interests in this thesis.

The analysis chapter is divided into two subchapters. In the first subchapter, I will consider the child-parent relations in the short stories "Pangs of Love" and "Birthday" focusing on the male narrators as sons and the relationship between them and their Chinese parents. The narrators are in-between two cultures, the Chinese and the American, and feel alienated. I will examine this alienation and determine what the texts say about "Americanness" and/or about "Chineseness". In the second subchapter of the analysis section, I will examine the Chinese American male as a romantic partner and father. The male narrators seem to consider interracial romance as the key to access to America, and I will claim that there is a kind of "Chinese extinction" emerging from the short stories. The male characters' inability to sustain relationships with white American women means that they will not reproduce, which will ultimately lead to Chinese extinction in America. Here, I will also discuss interethnic masculine relationships and how they are portrayed in the stories.

2. Family and the Male

In this chapter, I will introduce the theoretical background for my thesis. In the first subchapter, I recount some of the history of Chinese male immigrants in the United States in order to illustrate the social background and various kinds of hardships that have played a part in affecting the formation of Chinese American masculinity. Also, notions about the history of Chinese American families and male experience in the U.S. will be given here. As Wong and Santa Ana note: “A view shared by most ... critics is that gender and sexuality in Asian American literature cannot be understood apart from Asian American history” (175). Therefore, in order to analyse short stories from David Wong Louie from the point of view of masculinity, male roles and sexual hierarchies, it is important to be acquainted with some historical background on Chinese Americans.

In 2.2, I will concentrate on the theory of masculinity as well as family as a gendered site. For my analysis on masculinity and male roles in the family, the setting (i.e., America) and the ideals linked to it (i.e., Western masculinity) are of crucial importance, since I discuss a minority group that still encounters racism and fictional characters who are not able to lead fulfilling lives in the U.S. For this reason, the notion of hegemonic masculinity needs to be introduced, before moving on to Chinese American masculinity and emasculation. Family represents an important site where gender relations are performed and sustained – in society as well as David Wong Louie’s short stories. Hence, I will discuss family in the context of masculinity and male roles – what kind of ideals there are, what the traditional conceptions of gender, family and male roles are and how they affect members of a minority group.

2.1 From Bachelor Societies to Model Minority: Chinese American Family Formations in the United States

A recorded history of early Chinese immigrants in the United States begins from the middle of the 19th century, when the first great wave of immigrants arrived in pursuit of California gold. After the gold rush, Chinese people continued to immigrate to the U.S., since more workers were needed on the railroads and in the mines. These male workers had often left their families back in China and some returned there after earning wages from their American jobs, while others strived for a new life in the new country. (Hoobler, 10-11.) The early Chinese settlements, the “Chinatowns”, were largely male-dominated and excluded from their surroundings, since upon arrival only few immigrants spoke the English language.

At the middle of 19th century, there existed no laws to restrict the immigration of Chinese people to the U.S. Nevertheless, Chinese immigrants were soon treated differently from those arriving from Europe, and, as members of a non-white minority group, they were legally denied citizenship; only those born on American soil were allowed to become citizens. This ethnic differentiation manifested itself in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that virtually stopped all immigration from China for many years. The Chinese Exclusion Act was not repealed until 1943, and during this time it was very difficult for the Chinese men to bring their wives and children to the country – even if they had themselves become naturalized. Those arriving had to first pass agonizing questionings at the immigration station established solely for Asian immigrants on Angel Island, San Francisco. (Hoobler, 35-37.) After the Second World War, quotas were established, and they allowed small groups of Chinese immigrants, including wives of Chinese American citizens and Chinese students, to arrive. 1965 set the year for a new immigration law that permitted a more generous flow of immigrants from China and other Asian countries. (Hoobler, 37.)

In addition to the Chinese Exclusion Laws, resulting from the fear of miscegenation, there were also other laws passed in the United States to affect the Chinese American male immigrants.

For instance, the Chinese were not allowed to marry white people, since interracial marriage was at times forbidden, and neither had they the right to own land. By marrying a Chinese man, a white woman would face losing her citizenship (Hoobler, 51), as, at the end of the 19th century, miscegenation was considered a threat to the nation. Teng maintains that “the public concern over ‘miscegenation’ was motivated to a large degree by *Yellow Perilist* fears” (96, emphasis added). According to the stereotypical Yellow Perilist view, the Chinese male immigrants threatened both American free labor as well as the sanctity of white womanhood (Teng, 96). Although many Chinese men working in the U.S. were saving money to return to their families back in China, many of them never went back, and since, as already mentioned, legal restrictions prevented them from bringing their wives and children to America, the male immigrants lived together in small and crowded apartments. These settlements were called *bachelor societies*. (Hoobler, 78-79.) Conclusively, as Wong and Santa Ana point out, this early period of Chinese (predominantly male) immigration was marked by “a small population of women, few conjugal families and American born offspring, the overt use of racial categories to oppress Asians, and strong assimilationist pressures from the dominant society” (177).

After the Chinese Exclusion Acts were repealed, the immigrants arriving in the U.S. after the Second World War were mostly women. This changed the demography of the Chinatowns; more and more families now inhabited the bachelor societies. Suburban living became common in the U.S. during the postwar social and economic developments, and those Chinese American families who were financially secured moved to the suburbs. However, this did not always mean communal acceptance for them as some areas became stigmatized, as for example Monterey Park near Los Angeles, which has been referred to as “America’s first suburban Chinatown”. (Hoobler, 103-104.)

Besides sustaining the customs and habits of their native country in the new land, it was also of importance for the early Chinese Americans to maintain contacts to China – for the sake of both familial and political ties. Since ancient times, it has been a Chinese ideal to have a large family,

where several generations share a house together. Confucian values such as respect for elders and worship of ancestors determined Chinese family life upon arrival in America. The most important Confucian ideal was filial piety, and Chinese children were raised so they would respect and revere their parents before anything else. (Hoobler, 10.) The second- and third-generation Chinese Americans have, nevertheless, grown up to attitudes and customs that have differed from the views of their parents and grandparents; they have become Americanized (Hoobler, 89).

The image of the hardworking, subjected and feminized Chinese male has sustained in the minds of the white majority and the Chinese have had to seek acceptance to comprehensive cultural and social membership ever since they first immigrated in the 19th century. Lee (referring to Edward Said's renowned *Orientalism*) argues that the very fact that the Chinese, as racial Others and in relatively large numbers, were present in the U.S. made them seem "alien and threatening" (28) to the white population – as opposed to them residing in some distant country in the exotic East. Thus, although in 1952 Chinese Americans were given the right to attain U.S. citizenship, Lee (4) notes that they still carry the stigma of being aliens and outsiders no matter how assimilated they are.

As noted earlier, the Chinese have throughout their history in the U.S. been seen as threats to the national cultural order and, accordingly, there have emerged many stereotypical images of the Chinese American male. As already mentioned, there is the stereotype of the Yellow Peril that stems from the 19th century and represents the Chinese as threats to different national foundations like race and family. (Lee, 9-10.) There is also for example the *coolie*, i.e. the practically enslaved immigrant worker, which derives from the 1870's. Both of these stereotypical images of the Chinese American male are essentially negative in nature. The 1950's and the political climate of the Cold War brought about the stereotype of Chinese Americans as a *model minority*, and Chinese families were now represented as successful cases of ethnic assimilation in the face of what Lee calls "the three spectres" (10) threatening the nation: communism, racial integration and

homosexuality. The image of Chinese American assimilation now presented a model for other minorities, for example African Americans and Latin Americans, on how to be “nonmilitant” and “nonpolitical” (Lee, 10). By the 1970s, changes in the national and global economies brought about new crises relating to class, race and identity, and, in this context, the Chinese American family provided an example for other ethnicities, including the white middle class, for its productivity, savings and mobility (ibid.). The difference between a “positive” and a “negative” stereotype is, nevertheless, merely superficial for neither is based on the actual life of Chinese American people. As Lee points out, “[w]hat produces these stereotypes is not just individual acts of representation, but a historical discourse of race that is embedded in the history of American social crises” (12).

2.2 Masculinity, Emasculation and the Role of the Chinese American Man in the Family

As was noted in the previous subchapter, family formations and being excluded from the society have affected Chinese American males’ identity formation. In this subchapter, I will have a closer look at gender, masculinity and family as is relevant for this thesis. Kim (127) accounts some of the most notable critical claims about Asian Americans relating to gender, masculinity and sexuality as being the legacy of Frank Chin, a cultural nationalist Asian American writer first active in the 1970s. According to Kim (127), Chin’s claims have had a significant impact on the shaping of the critical lexicon of Asian American studies. The established claims include that anti-Asian racism is by nature gendered and feminizing, whereupon Asian Americans are ascribed with positive characteristics – for example that they are obedient, hard-working and modest – that depict them as members of a model minority. Also, U.S. popular culture is seen by Chin “as the preeminent site for the dissemination of injurious Asian stereotypes” (Kim, 127). These claims serve as the premise of this thesis.

Before a discussion on Chinese American masculinity or even masculinity in general can be established, some basic considerations about gender studies need to be introduced. It is the core tenet of gender studies that sex roles and gender relations are culturally and socially constructed and not something essentially determined by biology. Since the academic feminist movement in the 1970's and until this day, feminist scholarship has examined power structures and sex/gender systems of societies. Western culture has traditionally constructed roles for both the female and the male by assigning different characteristics to each and representing them as essentially different from one another. Sweet, intuitive, dependent and self-pitying are attributes that have been linked with femininity, whereas strength, rationality, stoicism and self-reliance connote masculinity. Masculine and feminine, therefore, represent binary oppositions in our culture with masculine symbolizing positive and feminine its negative counterpart. (Bertens, 76-77.) This othering and dichotomous thinking takes many forms – cultural, racial (ethnic), sexual, gender and also, as is relevant for this thesis, in terms of masculinity (Seidler, 4-5).

Accordingly, it is now an accepted argument in the field of critical men's studies that there are multiple masculinities, which can be examined from a number of different perspectives, for example, according to ethnicity or class. R.W. Connell, a pioneering scholar in the field of masculinity studies, rests the connection between the construction of masculinity and the construction of racial and ethnic hierarchies on “[t]he movement of populations and the interaction of cultures under colonialism and post-colonial globalization” (xxii). Fung (339), along similar lines to Connell, dates the current dominant discourse on ethnicity (race) and sexuality in Western society back to colonial times and slavery. Connell explains that it is not enough to recognize diversity in masculinities, but it is important to “recognize the *relations* between the different kinds of masculinity: relations of alliance, dominance and subordination” (37, emphasis in the original). The *hegemonic*¹ idea of masculinity, Connell stresses, is not to be thought of as something fixed by

¹ *Hegemony*, as coined by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, signifies “the domination of a set of ruling beliefs and values through ‘consent’ rather than through ‘coercive power’” (Bertens, 68).

character or the same everywhere, but instead should be seen as occupying “the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable” (76). Hegemonic masculinity includes strategies that are currently accepted and culturally dominant, whereby it puts other masculinities in a hierarchically subordinate position (Connell, 77-79). As Ling points out, “[w]hen Asian American men are economically and politically subordinate, they are seen as feminine and incapable of living up to Western definitions of masculinity” (317). These relations between masculinities comprise the gender order, but through the integration of the categories of class and race into the analysis, further relationships and dynamic between masculinities become evident (Connell, 80). Connell uses the term *marginalization* to signify “the relations between the masculinities in dominant and subordinated classes or ethnic groups” (80).

As noted in the previous subchapter, the Exclusion Laws and other socio-economic practices designed to refuse jobs to the Chinese male immigrants placed them in an inferior position to white male citizens. The bachelor societies and Chinatowns served to separate the Chinese from the white majority not only literally but figuratively as well. The Chinese men became feminized in that they were only allowed to work at jobs deemed by the majority as feminine and not allowed to have a family. This social situation, therefore, emasculated the Chinese men. (Chan, 5-6.) Cheung (174) argues that the experience of emasculation in America has defined the Asian American male identity in a hurtful manner. According to the Confucian order, the Chinese society was male dominated, and women were restricted to the home and had to obey their husbands and parents. They had no say in marriage arrangements, which were carried out by parents. (Hoobler, 10.) Thus, the social positioning of the Chinese male in the U.S. differed significantly from that of their culture of origins. For this thesis, the marginalized category of Chinese American masculinity is of particular interest.

This marginal position is especially visible in American cultural representation of the Chinese American male, and, throughout his history in the U.S., the Chinese male has been the subject of

various kinds of stereotyping that often relate to the concept of masculinity. In American (popular) culture, the Chinese American male has commonly been portrayed as devoid of sexuality or as feminized. Many different stereotypical representations of Chinese American masculinity share this “de-sexualization”. The image of Dr. Fu Manchu, a fictional character created by Sax Rohmer in 1913, served as an embodiment of the Yellow Peril trying to conquer the Western civilization, but his physical body is de-sexualized. The famous detective figure of Charlie Chan, on the other hand, represents an early example of model minority, being portrayed as a sexually non-threatening father of eleven, as well as a meek lawman, who serves white people. Both of these characters suggest social hierarchies that degrade the Chinese and sustain the superiority of the whites. In the 1960’s and 70’s, Bruce Lee continued the marginalization of Chinese males in the American popular culture from the point of view of masculinity by creating the category of the asexual “Martial Arts Hero” (Chan 3-8). Despite the marginalizing effect that these representations have had on Asian American masculinity, Cheung (178) considers the Bruce Lee figure as a rather positive Asian American male image. It provides an image of Asian heroism and positions the Asian male in a leading role, both instances of which American popular culture had not yet seen.

In addition to the discussion on gender, masculinity and the Chinese American male, for the purpose of this thesis, some theoretical background on the concept of family still needs to be introduced. As family presents a significant private site, where gender roles are both played out and contested, theories about family are closely linked to theories about gender. In my analysis of David Wong Louie’s short stories, I examine familial relations from two different viewpoints. Firstly, the male characters will be positioned in the role of a son, where the focus will be on their relationships to their parents and possible siblings. In the second instance, the male characters are examined as romantic partners and fathers. Therefore, the concept of family in this thesis is multidimensional.

Defining family as a concept is not a simple task. In her definition of postmodern family, Stacey draws attention to the “contested, ambivalent, and undecided character of our contemporary

family cultures” (7). Although this fragmentary state represents the reality of family life today, the traditional Western post-war ideal of the *modern family* as a mythical intact nuclear unit – with a male breadwinner, a woman as homemaker wife, and children dependent on their parents – has remained in the minds of Americans as a symbol of the American Dream. (Stacey, 6-7.) The nuclear family unit, in the U.S., is to this day considered an ideal worth aspiring for and it also functions as a symbol of social acceptance for members of ethnic minorities, sustained by social institutions and the media, most notably television, where alternate family formations, until very recently, have been rare.² From early on, because of the stereotypical negative images, the Chinese American male was distinguished from this set of norms that, according to Wong and Santa Ana, “upheld a patriarchal Euro-American nuclear family as the model for citizenship and national identity” (178). This means that although the Confucian model of Chinese family in its patriarchal dominance is actually quite similar to the Western nuclear family formation, the emasculation and feminization of the Chinese American male in the American culture served to refuse him the symbolically important achievement of the nuclear family. Also, as already mentioned, in the culture, as well as in literature, at the time of 19th-century early immigration, the idea of interracial romance between a Chinese American male and a white woman was a taboo, the effects of which have been long-lasting.

Lastly, what is yet typical of the Chinese experience in the U.S., has been the fact that there is a gap between the different generations, as the children have essentially become more Americanized than their parents. Relating to this, it has been typical of the Chinese American male experience – as is shown in literature as well as in popular culture – to reject one’s Chinese roots in order to be able to truly accept America(ness). Both of these themes also emerge from the short stories of David Wong Louie and they will be examined more closely in the context of the Chinese American male narrators of the stories in the analysis chapter that follows.

² On the impact of television on conceptions about family ideals in the U.S. see: William Douglas. *Television Families: Is Something Wrong in Suburbia?* (Manwah, New Jersey & London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003).

3. Chinese American Family Life at the End of the 20th century

In the short stories of David Wong Louie's *Pangs of Love*, the Chinese American male characters experience frustration and failure in their roles as sons, fathers and romantic partners. Not all the characters in the collection are explicitly defined as Chinese Americans, but the experience of 2nd-generation Chinese Americans in modern day America is a dominant theme emerging from most of the stories in the collection. Seemingly, in terms of education, work, consumeristic behavior and other social measures, the characters have been able to integrate into American society, and yet they feel alienated. In this chapter, I will examine two stories in *Pangs of Love*, "Birthday" and "Pangs of Love", in terms of male roles and family relations. These stories both depict a narrator coping in American society, ultimately unhappy with his situation and unable to achieve what he wants; therefore, in my examination of male roles and family relations, my interest lies on two themes in particular: alienation and Americanness.

In the following subchapters, I will analyse the narrators' male roles and familial relations, beginning, in 3.1, with a focus on the narrators as sons of Chinese parents. Here I will examine the generational and cultural gap that exists between the parents and their sons, which can be considered both figurative and, through a language barrier, quite concrete as well. The characters are in-between two worlds, the Chinese and the American, and I will examine how this affects their roles as sons. Finally, in this subchapter, I will discuss the desirability of Americanness in the short stories. In 3.2, I will continue my analysis with an emphasis on the narrators as romantic partners and fathers, and discuss the Chinese extinction emerging from the two stories, as well as the collection as whole. The topics here include sexual hierarchies and emasculation, the purpose of which is to show how these themes can be read as symbolizing the characters' place not only in their romantic relationships but in society as well. In 3.2, I will also examine sexual rivalry and how

the Chinese American male is constructed in the stories in relation to males of other ethnicities, in this instance, white and Japanese.

Before proceeding to the analysis, I will first recount the main events of the two short stories. The story in "Birthday" occurs in the present moment, where the narrator has come to pick up his "ex-stepson" from the boy's biological father, because he has promised to take the boy to a baseball game in order to celebrate his birthday. As it turns out, the boy is not home, and the narrator locks himself into the boy's room and refuses to leave until he sees the boy. The boy's biological father knocks on the door and tries to make the narrator leave, while getting ready for a date with the boy's mother (the narrator's ex-girlfriend). The narrator is unaware of the two of them being back together. The reader learns the developments that have led to this point from the narrator's point of view through narrated flashbacks.

In "Pangs of Love", the story revolves around the narrator, his mother and their visit to the narrator's younger brother. Since the death of the narrator's father, the other siblings have arranged for the narrator to move in with the grieving mother. The narrator is not happy with the situation and is irritated about how his mother, ignorant on how the way the world works, interferes in his life – especially his romantic relationships. The story describes the two of them, along with the narrator's girlfriend Deborah, visiting the younger brother, who is gay. As in "Birthday", the reader is given background information on the narrator's life in America, on his previous relationships, and on the other characters in the story from the narrator's point of view.

3.1 Intergenerational Conflicts: 1st- and 2nd-generation Americans

In both "Pangs of Love" and "Birthday" the male narrators' Chinese parents want their sons, the narrators, to start a family, and, more importantly, marry a Chinese girl. In addition, the parents are described in "out-dated" terms from the point of view of the narrators; they think in a black and

white manner and do not understand the ways in which the postmodern world works. The stories depict a clash between more conservative Chinese family traditions and the multiethnic postmodern ideals of the 21st century – where for example interethnic marriage, reconstituted families, homosexuality, and being single are considered acceptable, but, on the other hand, the ideal of a nuclear family still affects people's choices. The Chinese American 2nd-generation sons have to live their lives in-between these worlds, and, therein, they are affected by their parents' as well as society's expectations.

In "Pangs of Love", the mother is discontent with and worried about his son's decisions on his love life and with the fact that her son has not been able to start a family. Conflictingly, although she urges her son to marry a Chinese girl, she accepted his ex-girlfriend, a Mandarin speaking, feminine American Mandy, into the family. However, she does not approve of Deborah, the more masculine type of American woman who the narrator is now dating. The mother interferes in all of her sons' lives, and she wants to take them on bride safaris in Hong Kong. The narrator regards his mother as conservative with "her hair in a net that seems to scar her forehead" (76). In the Pang family, (hetero)normative familial gender roles are maintained, and the gayness of the narrator's brother Bagel is kept a secret from the mother. The mother is unaware of Bagel's sexual identity, although the signs are obvious, and having to answer the question why there are no women in Bagel's house, the narrator "[is] stunned by [his] deception of her" (97). Due to a lack of communication between the mother and the son, there can be no bridge between Chinese conservative and American liberal values.

Relating to the gayness of the narrator's brother, Fung discusses coming out in an Asian American context. He maintains that, in comparison to white members of the gay community, coming out might present a riskier alternative to an Asian American gay person because of the possibility of losing the support of one's ethnic community, which often functions as "a rare source of affirmation in a racist society" (340). In "Pangs of Love", Bagel prefers white friends and,

therein, does not seem to care about his Chinese community. Instead, he has a family of gay roommates, whereas the narrator has nothing even resembling a family. As depicted in the short story, Bagel's home is a communal environment, where his roommates represent a substitute family for him and where his gay identity is accepted. The outside as well as the inside of their home is symbolically colored white, which can be read as a sign of Bagel's assimilation: he has succeeded by rejecting his Chinese heritage. In fact, the only thing in Bagel's home suggesting his ethnic origins is a "Chinese-looking platter" (89, emphasis added), on which he arranges the dumplings the mother brings him: just as the platter, he too only *looks* Chinese. While the narrator and his mother visit Bagel's home, they all sit down for dinner and the mother spills soy sauce from a container staining the white fabric of Bagel's chair. The "Chineseness" that the mother brings with her to Bagel's home only clashes with the American identity Bagel has attained through gay identity. The narrator has no such a "pillar" in his life; he is a heterosexual and unable to get the American women he wants.

In "Birthday", the narrator's father expresses traditional cultural expectations, in that he does not like "the idea of his only son adopting a used family" (6). The father suggests the narrator rather find a Chinese girl instead the American girl, who ultimately leaves him. The narrator's mother, who is said to talk in aphorisms, maintains that "[I]ove between lions and sheep has but one consequence" (6). Here, the idea of different species appears and although it is not disclosed which species points to Americans and which to the Chinese, it is nonetheless clear that the mother sees the two as different species. However, as lions are predators and sheep are prey, the mother's comment can be read as a warning; if the Chinese American male, "the sheep", wants to survive, he should not love a white woman. The narrator's parents are unable to understand the life he is striving for trying to establish a relationship with a white woman, while the narrator himself seems to consider American society as more refined and progressed and refers to China as a "lipstick-free society" (7) – a Chinese woman cannot live up to his concept of femininity and desirability. His

own ideals, however, are contradictory in terms of the society he sees around him and which does not sympathize with him.

Furthermore, loss of communication emerges as a theme in “Birthday” both from the relationship between the narrator and the boy, and from the narrator’s relationship with his own father: “What good’s a son that doesn’t know who his own father is?” (6) says the narrator’s father. This refers to the now estranged little boy the narrator was willing to adopt, while in a relationship with the boy’s mother. However, it is easy to read the line as referring to the relationship the father has with his own son, the narrator. The narrator is at a loss trying to communicate to the boy, whom he is not allowed to see anymore, and remembers his own father always knowing how to manage as a parent in America: “... the way my father came home one day from Sears with a bat and ball and glove for me. There he was, son of China’s great famines, who knew nothing of [baseball] ... but somehow he anticipated my next step” (16). However, it is a different task for the narrator, for there is no place for this kind of heroism in the narrator’s world, and the attempts of a Chinese American male to adopt a son that has white biological parents are bound to fail. Therefore, the loss of communication with the boy is not only intergenerational, but racial as well. In the past, the boy knew the narrator’s name, “... Wallace Wong – the clearest three syllables in his vocabulary...” (4), but as he now tries to express his feelings to the boy through pictures, he is unable to: “... I haven’t said what I want to say, that no matter how hard I try, I’m stuck doing the same old things in the same old ways. ... Ours was a simpler world. He must be a different boy now.” (16).

The gap between the 1st-generation Chinese parents and their sons in the two short stories manifests itself quite literally also through the language barrier that exists between them. The Chinese mother in “Pangs of Love” is described by the narrator as laughing at TV talk shows “like most Americans” (75), when, at the same time, she speaks very little English and, in reality, does not understand what is said in them. The son, on the other hand, seems by these standards to be fully American – English is his first language – and he is, in fact, “yellowfacing” his mother in that

he makes fun of her comical broken English. In the short story, this can be seen as an act of internalized racism on the narrator's behalf.

A similar racist attitude towards a Chinese parent is also present in "Birthday", where the narrator draws a picture with crayons of himself in order to communicate with the boy who has been taken away from him in a battle for custody. He gives his drawing "some teeth, big yellow squares" (6) and discovers the creation reminds him of his father. The stereotypical derogatory cartoon image of a Chinese person often includes, in addition to slanting eyes, big square front teeth pointing out of the mouth. Both narrators perform these racist acts towards their parents or themselves in a similar way as white people have done in U.S. history, which shows that they have internalized a sense of inferiority as American citizens.

The racism towards parents can be seen as one of the elements in the stories showing the narrators' failure as sons. In addition, this failure is visible in the many words referring to death and dying throughout "Pangs of Love". In the story, the narrator envisions violent scenes relating to his mother that depict chaos, mayhem, destruction and death. Also, the narrator's father has recently died. The death of the first generation implies, on the one hand, assimilation, in that the narrator sees his mother as an obstacle on his way of becoming an American man. On the other hand, however, the narrator will be left alone after his parents are both dead. This describes the narrator's "in-betweenness"; he is torn between being American and being a good son to his Chinese mother. He belittles his mother and describes her as "innocent as a child" (77), yet he himself feels like a child, "a linguistic dwarf" (78), when trying to communicate with her in Cantonese. The narrator considers his mother naïve and ignorant, unaware of what is going on in the world, since everything has to be patiently explained to her. Showing a newspaper, he tries to educate her on how "people are dying everywhere" (78), but this turns out to be pointless, "a task equal to digging a grave without a shovel" (78), because of his poor Chinese vocabulary. In this way, the narrator fails as a son; he has internalized the racist attitude the American society has had against him and this shows

in his behavior towards and the belittling of his mother. The narrator characterizes himself as “a responsible citizen of the planet” (76) by watching the news and following the newspapers, but when it comes to his family, the characterization reads as follows: “Some son I am” (77).

In the ethnic context of both “Pangs of Love” and “Birthday”, the narrators are refusing their Chinese inheritance and they feel the pressure to fit in to the American society; they are somehow compelled to aspire for Americanness. Yet, at the same time, they are unable to have what they desire. In “Pangs of Love” for example, as already mentioned, the narrator, at the same time, describes his mother as fitting the category of “most Americans”, while making fun of her in a racist manner. This juxtaposition raises the questions of whether the narrators *should* then become “Americans” and whether American identity is ultimately seen by them as something desirable and why?

In both stories, the American society is through metaphors presented as having a pre-written script for its Chinese American male inhabitants. In “Pangs of Love” the narrator watches a show wrestling fight with his mother, where, to the mother’s devastation, a Japanese samurai wins over a “doe-faced boy named Bubby Arnold” (94). On the one hand, the defeat of the Japanese man over the white man in the story reflects the American-Japanese relationship during the events of the Second World War and the attack in Pearl Harbor. However, due to the masculine rivalry that exists in the story between the Chinese and the Japanese male – the narrator has lost the woman of his dreams to a Japanese man and is “sized up” by his Japanese boss every time they meet – the defeat of the American wrestler can also be read as the symbolic defeat of the Chinese American male. In this way, the wrestling script functions as a metaphor for that of the American society for the “doe-faced”, i.e. emasculated, Chinese American males.

The mother in “Pangs of Love” cries, when the Japanese Samurai wins an all-American hero in a game of show wrestling; she does not know that the fight is scripted.³ The narrator comforts her by saying “[i]t’s *all* fake” (94, emphasis added). It seems as if he is by this referring not only to the show, but to the whole concept of Americanness and what it means to members of ethnic minorities – in this case Chinese Americans. The narrator vividly remembers a wrestling match from his childhood, where an Italian sailor immigrant mythically beat the “vicious long-haired blond” (93) in the ring, but the narrator himself is unable to live up to the same myth of Americanness and the American Dream; in the artificial and superficial American society reflected in the short story, it is made impossible for him. The idea of artificiality is constantly present in the narrator’s life for example through his work, as he works for a company that manufactures synthetic flavors and fragrances: “Our mission is to make the chemical world, an otherwise noxious, foul-tasting, polysyllabic ocean of consumer dread, a cozier place for the deserving noses and tastebuds of America” (76). Therefore, ironically, the narrator is himself a sustaining part of the system creating an American world that is essentially artificial.

The idea of a pre-written script for Chinese American males in America appears also through the numerable references to popular culture throughout *Pangs of Love*. Lee refers to popular culture as the site of “struggles over who is or who can become a ‘real American’” (5). In the stories the references to popular culture include, for example, films, television, radio shows, celebrities, and the wrestling mentioned above: these elements are visibly present in the narrators’ lives in “Birthday” and “Pangs of Love”. The different media of popular culture serve to sustain the script that is written for the Chinese American male narrators. In “Birthday”, for example, the narrator’s rival, a white man, is a movie producer by profession and he writes screenplays. At the end of the short story, the reader is left with the impression that the man has written the story where the narrator first loses the child to this man and finally finds out that he has lost the woman to him as

³ It is presumable that the mother’s hatred towards the Japanese stems from her life back in China. The mother had most likely been a witness to several violent Japanese attacks that started at the end of World War I in 1919 and continued through the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937-1945. (Chang, 198; 215-217.)

well. There is no active role for the narrator in this story; he is a bystander, merely watching as the plot evolves in front of him.

As the narrator is locked inside the boy's room he has occupied inside the man's house, he tries to draw a picture to the boy in order to communicate his feelings to him. The man's violent knocking on the door disturbs him, but as the man stops knocking and goes away, the narrator says "[c]an't draw with him there, can't draw without him there" (6). Thus, the narrator seems to have no voice of his own in the American society; he is not an active subject, but a passive, almost invisible one: "It's true I have no rights except those that come with love" (3), the narrator says near the beginning of the short story. In this society, where the narrator cannot function as an active subject, love is simply not a strong enough force to help him achieve what he strives for. The biggest issue is that he cannot function with "the man", i.e. society, but not without "the man" either.

Ultimately, as the analysis shows, the intergenerational conflict between the Chinese American male narrators and their Chinese parents evolves in the stories in to a larger conflict between the Chinese American male and the American society. In the stories, Americanness is depicted as something artificial, as not having much to offer to the narrators, although they are compelled to strive for it. However, because the narrators have internalized the racist attitudes the white majority has had towards them, the Chinese American male narrators are unable to build a bridge between their Chinese heritage and Americanness. Therefore, they fail as sons of Chinese parents and fail to experience fulfillment in the American society.

3.2 Romance, Fathering and Masculinity

Whereas the previous subchapter discusses the Chinese American male narrators in relation to their 1st-generation Chinese parents and examines the desirability of Americanness, as it emerges from the stories, this second subchapter focuses on the narrators in two other familial roles – as a

romantic partner and as a father. Therein, the topics include: Chinese extinction in America resulting from the narrators' willingness to only establish relationships with American women; sexual hierarchies and emasculation; and, lastly, sexual rivalry and the Chinese American masculinity in relation to other ethnicities.

The male characters in the two short stories by David Wong Louie are unwilling to marry women of their own ethnic background. Instead, they try to sustain romantic relationships with white American women – but fail therein. In addition, the lack of heirs emerges as a prominent theme in the short story collection. In Asian American men's writing in general, as Wong and Santa Ana note, “male anxiety over emasculation and failed paternity lingers ... in the form of fear of cultural extinction resulting from excessive assimilation” (199). Although compared to the struggling Chinese American males of earlier times, the well-being of the Chinese American male in the 21st-century U.S. in terms of socioeconomic instances, such as education and work, has improved, and although this well-being defines the male characters in “Pangs of Love” and “Birthday” as well, it appears inevitably superficial. In her discussion on Chinese extinction in America, Wong (187-189) maintains that in the world of *Pangs of Love* a “collective biological extinction” (187) should no longer be a threat and that the external factors should not bear obstacles for the Chinese American male to produce an heir – be that with a white woman. However, it is one of my arguments in this thesis that the external factors, i.e. the American society, do in fact emerge from the short stories as forces preventing Chinese American men to procreate and, what follows, is a threat of Chinese extinction in America.

In “Birthday”, the narrator hears a story on the radio about California condors going extinct and tries to imagine himself “... as a condor at the end of evolution ... [gazing] at the last females of my species.” (7). Nevertheless, the story suggests that the narrator's “species” does not include white women. He continues on the subject: “I knew I was supposed to mate, but I wasn't sure how” (7). As he then chooses a partner – “the bird with the blond tail feathers” (7) – he hears his father's

voice disapproving of his choice. The narrator makes his choice in hopes of mating with someone who has “good genes” (7), but fails, for he mates with the wrong kind; something his mother has warned him against (see 3.1). The narrator considers himself as the rightful father to this former girlfriend’s child and is clinging on to this boy in an insane way – by forcing himself into the boy’s room in the house of the boy’s real father. Locked inside he cannot think of any other way of communicating with the boy except by drawing a picture. He does not have the means for a fair fight, but is completely alone in this futile battle for the boy; his parents do not sympathize with him – his mother asks him whether he is “eating rice again, now that the [ex-girlfriend] was gone” (8) –, and neither does the society sympathize with him. This shows in his desperate attempt to call a radio psychologist for help: the show’s producer only tells him that his story is too complex to be discussed on the air: “He wanted me to simplify it” (9).

In “Pangs of Love”, the mother worries about her son not being able to marry. Here the idea of Chinese extinction emerges through the narrator’s envisioning images of death and destruction in relation to the mother, who is the last representative of the first generation. The narrator shows his mother a picture of a dead body in a newspaper in hopes of giving her insight on “the larger geopolitical landscape [that] escapes her” (77). The narrator says “[t]hat’s a dead person, ... [p]eople are dying everywhere” (78), and although trying to make a point about foreign politics, the narrator’s line can be read as referring to the destiny of his own kind; the imminent extinction. Adding to the threat of extinction is the narrator’s own incompetence in and the inability to relate to anything and everything Chinese.

In both short stories analyzed in this thesis, there are sexual hierarchies constructed between the Chinese American male narrators and their white female sexual partners, where the narrators are put in an inferior position to their partners or emasculated. In “Pangs of Love”, the narrator has failed a romantic relationship with the woman of his dreams, the feminine American Mandy. Mandy only found the narrator sexually attractive when under the influence of aphrodisiacs. The

narrator has since had to “settle” for a more masculine American woman, whom his mother does not approve of. Even the narrator considers Deborah “... not a keeper anyway” (84), but “... the rebound among rebounds; only somehow she’s stuck” (84). The sex is satisfying with Deborah, the masculine woman, whereas aphrodisiacs were needed with Mandy, who is described as the epitomization of femininity. There are two sides to using aphrodisiacs: on the one hand, Mandy needs them in order to be sexually attracted to the narrator, and, in the end, chooses a Japanese man instead, which serves to emasculate the narrator. On the other hand, however, the narrator is also taking the aphrodisiacs with Mandy, whereas he does not need them with Deborah, who calls him “a mama’s boy” (85), which Cheung considers “Eurocentric bias” (186) on Deborah’s behalf. The narrator is emasculated by Deborah, and although he realizes there is something wrong with this situation, he is powerless to change it. In order to enjoy sex, the narrator seems to need this submission and emasculation, which reflects the narrator’s position in the society and, accordingly, internalized racism.

Furthermore, in “Pangs of Love”, the sexual hierarchy between the narrator and the character of Deborah and the emasculating effects of Deborah are constructed through her appearance and manners; as already stated, she is very masculine. Deborah is described as having features that are typically considered masculine; she is characterized as “a bean pole” (83), she has “no rump to speak of” (83), and when she visits the narrator’s mother, she comes “dressed in a most unladylike fashion” (83). In addition, she acts rude and abrupt in social situations, which by traditional standards would not be considered typical feminine behavior. The fact that the male narrator has a satisfying sex life with this kind of a woman, in addition to emasculation, can also be considered suggesting homosexuality, and this is often the category to which the Chinese American male falls into, as the typical image of an Asian gay man is determined by effeminateness. In contrast, the character of Mandy in “Pangs of Love”, feminine and likeable, functions as the symbol of the ideal nuclear family life that is figuratively prohibited from the narrator.

In fact, the literary trope of the unattainable white woman often recurred in the first period of Asian American men's writing that Wong and Santa Ana discuss in their article. David Wong Louie is what Wong and Santa Ana call a third period author, and, in her article, Wong argues that "the world of *Pangs of Love* is hardly the world of the 'old-timers' with direct links to the Exclusion era" (181). However, since the short story collection begins with a story called "Birthday" and ends with a story called "Inheritance", and since alienation, emasculation, and the Chinese extinction are its prominent themes, *Pangs of Love*, in my opinion, can be considered to be directly linked to the Exclusion era: it represents the *inheritance* of the Exclusion era and contributes to the discussion of the legacy of white racist practices aimed at Chinese Americans.

The narrator in "Birthday" also found himself in an emasculated position in his relationship with Sylvie, the boy's mother. The narrator has not heard from Sylvie ever since he came home from work to find her gone, but he had "learned to expect such behavior" (4). Although the couple's sexual life is not discussed in the story, there is another section in the story that reveals the positioning of the two in the relationship. In the scene, Sylvie urges the narrator to steal a radio that belongs to her former partner, who is the boy's biological father and with whom Sylvie eventually reunites: "... she wanted me to prove that I really loved her. She was still recovering from the marriage then and didn't trust what anyone said ..." (4). It becomes clear to the reader that Sylvie is playing with the narrator, when, after he has gone into a gym and stolen the radio, she tells him to keep it for himself. The narrator is merely a pawn in a game that exists between Sylvie and the other man.

In "Birthday", the white man, the boy's biological father, is a screenwriter and has written a script about his marriage and break-up. Since the boy's father is referred to as "the man", which reflects overpowering masculinity – what I see as alluding to whole American society here – the narrator has no means of opposing or resisting this pre-written scheme of things that works against him. In the story, besides the white woman, also the child that the narrator is trying to get to

represents the key to accessing Americanness. The narrator is holding on to the child, although it is obvious he has already lost him to the biological father. The narrator believes that he and the boy share a mutual mode of communication that is different from that of adult speech, and he has to regress to the level of a child and draw a picture with crayons in order to communicate his sentiments to the boy. He draws a self-portrait which, however, “[is] sizing up more feline than *Homo sapien [sic]*” (5, emphasis in the original). In the adult, or the *human*, world he is unable to connect. As the narrator enters the boy’s room in the upstairs of the man’s house, he does not recognize the boy’s room, and as he wonders whether the room reflects the man’s taste instead, he ends up thinking, “... I tried to imagine the boy playing with these contraptions ... But I couldn’t remember his voice. It was lost to me, just as my own boyhood voice is forever gone ...” (14). This implies that he has already lost the fight over the boy a long time ago and that he is no longer a part of the life of any of these characters in the story, but a complete outsider. The narrator is also an outsider in his own personal life, which shows in him being estranged from the events he is narrating: he does not discuss the people by their names, but instead, throughout the story, he talks about “the boy”, “the boy’s mother”, “the boy’s biological father” (i.e. “the man”). The reader learns the names Welby and Sylvie through the man.

The narrator’s desperation grows as he realizes more and more that he is no longer a part of the boy’s life: “Ours [meaning him and the boy] was a simpler world. He must be a different boy now.” (16) In a way, the “Chineseness” has now grown out of the boy, but the narrator is still left with it and, also, left alone. In the climax of the short story, after recognizing the man’s new girlfriend as Sylvie, his ex-girlfriend as well as the man’s, the narrator realizes that the family has come back together. Hence, the norm of the white nuclear family is sustained leaving him once and for all outside the triangle: the narrator says “[...] it isn’t how I’ve imagined it would feel when Sylvie finally came home.” (17)⁴ He is not questioning the fact that the home here refers to the

⁴ In reference to the previous paragraph, this marks the only time the narrator uses the name Sylvie at the end of the short story.

other man instead of himself. The narrator submits to the three of them being a family together. In other words, the narrator is left alone in a house that is not his to realize that the time has come for him to go away, to leave the “Americans” alone. He feels content as he, like a servant, finishes baking a birthday cake for the boy. This is the role “the man”, and society, has written for him.

The Chinese American male narrators in the two David Wong Louie short stories are in a position where they have to “compete” with other masculinities; in “Pangs of Love” with other Asian masculinities, for which the warrior-type Japanese boss and Mandy’s new Japanese lover serve as examples, and in “Birthday” the competition is between the narrator and a white man. In this way, there are constructions of sexual rivalry established between the narrators and the men of other ethnicities. The Japanese boss in “Pangs of Love” represents the hyper-masculine side of Asian American ethnic otherness, in contrast to the emasculated Chinese ethnicity. In “Birthday”, the narrator is defeated by his “arch nemesis”, the white man, who wins the custody of the boy. In this way, both stories discuss interracial power structures in terms of masculinity, male roles and sexual rivalry, and not only do the stories discuss male relations between Chinese and white American men, but also among Asian-born men.

For example, at the beginning of “Birthday”, the narrator describes a man knocking violently on the door behind which he is situated. The man’s house, inside which they are both in, is described as a large Greek-style house, which can be seen as a symbol for the white tradition: something the narrator cannot be part of. Although the man knocks aggressively, he talks to the narrator in a soothing manner – as if talking to a child. The narrator is differentiated from this white man, he is being infantilized as a racial other. The narrator is the “underdog” in every conversation taking place between him and the man, the man representing an overpowering force. As stated previously, the narrator cannot be seen as an active participant in the game that evolves around the man and the woman (Sylvie), and he is merely the passive scapegoat, who is hurt as a result of the man hurting

Sylvie and Sylvie retaliating on the man: “I hurt her, she hurt me; now you’re hurt” (11) the man says to the narrator.

Relating to the discussion Asian American male agency in the American society, Cheung points out that there is a possibility for Asian American men to renounce the fight for masculine agency by renouncing the stereotypical violent martial arts hero, and, instead, appear as “poet-scholars”. This, according to Cheung, is another stereotypical image that “offers an ideal masculinity that is at once sexy and non-aggressive and [offers] a mode of conduct that breaks down the putative dichotomy of gay and straight behavior” (190-191). In this case, nevertheless, there remains the risk of seeming unmanly by American standards, which then reinforces the common image of the effeminate Asian male (Cheung, 191). Alternatively, Cheung (191) argues, the Asian American male should resist the Western ideals and being conscious about “the white gaze” and instead “reclaim an alternative repertoire” (191) on the quest for, in this case, Chinese American manhood. In the two short stories by David Wong Louie, however, the Chinese American male narrators are unable to do this. In the stories, the American society gives its Chinese males certain roles, beyond which it is impossible for them to move. This is particularly noticeable in the narrators’ romantic relationships with white women: the role of a family man with (a white) wife and children does not constitute an alternative for them in the American society. Instead, the Chinese American male narrators are constantly placed in an inferior position to men of other ethnicities. Resisting the pre-written script would present a salvation for them, but, in the short stories, the Chinese American males are only able to see themselves through “the white gaze”. They have internalized the white racism, which prevents them from experiencing fulfillment in America through creating a culture of their own.

4. Conclusion

In “Pangs of Love”, there is an interesting choice of words. When the mother catches the narrator having sex with Deborah, the narrator says: “... I meant to say, ‘What are you looking at?’ full of indignation, but it came out a meek, ‘What do *you* see?’” (84, emphasis added). Here, the pronoun *you* is not only aimed at the mother, but directly at the reader as well: the reader is invoked into thinking about the Chinese American male in the United States. In this thesis, with my primary material consisting of two short stories from David Wong Louie’s *Pangs of Love* – “Birthday” and “Pangs of Love” – I have analyzed Chinese American male roles in the context of family relations. The aim was to determine how the short stories depict “Americanness”. This was examined through the Chinese American male narrators and their family relations, since, in the stories, family relations demonstrate the Chinese American man’s inability to experience fulfillment in the American society. In my analysis, I focused on the narrators, firstly, as son of Chinese parents, and, secondly, as romantic partners and fathers.

The narrators’ relationship with their Chinese parents is determined by a both figurative and concrete intergenerational gap. The loss of communication manifests itself through a language barrier, as the second-generation Chinese American male narrators do not speak Chinese, whereas internalized racism represents an important factor contributing to the cultural gap between the Chinese American male narrators and their parents as well as the narrators’ failure as sons of Chinese parents. The narrators are in a way “programmed” by the American society to consider people of Chinese ancestry, themselves included, as inferior, and, because of this, they cannot embrace their Chinese heritage. Nevertheless, because they are seen as different from the white majority in the U.S., they can never become fully Americanized either. In the face of the death of the 1st-generation Chinese, the narrators exist in a state of in-between and are in a way cultureless, and since they are unable to create their own culture, this further alienates them and makes them

outsiders. The stories depict Americanness as something undesirable and artificial, and yet the narrators blindly aspire for it, because that is in “the script” for them.

As men, the narrators find themselves in a similar in-between space. In the short stories, Chinese masculinity is presented through the narrators as inferior, when compared to, for example, white and Japanese masculinity. For this reason, the narrators are unable to sustain romantic relationships with the white women they want, who, instead, rather choose white or Japanese men. At the same time, Chinese women are out of the question for the narrators. The Chinese American male’s internalized racism and feelings of inferiority are also shown in the narrators’ romantic relationships – particularly in their relationships with white women, where the narrators constantly become emasculated. The stories depict a vicious circle of emasculating relationships that are bound to fail, and, in the end, the narrators’ inability to form a family will inevitably result in an extinction of Chinese people in America.

Ultimately, in terms of attaining agency, it is a very hopeless situation for the Chinese American male that is depicted in the two short stories from David Wong Louie. In my opinion, the stories add to the discussion of the racist and stereotyping literary tradition written by white people about the emasculated Chinese American male. In fact, the male characters of Louie’s short stories have internalized this tradition and appear helpless in terms of resisting its effects. In this way, the stories ultimately serve to criticize the Chinese American male by showing where this “self-pity” will lead – an extinction – but, at the same time, also criticize the postmodern American society for not giving much a choice for these men.

In the postmodern American society of *Pangs of Love* – long after the atmosphere of 1960s civil rights movement era – where a person’s position in the society should by legal grounds no longer be determined by his/her ethnic background, the fight over agency for the Chinese American male is only superficially futile. The male narrators in David Wong Louie’s short stories serve as examples of this. The Chinese American male narrators may by many measures seem rightful

members of the American society, but, on a closer look, instead appear alienated and in a constant state of in-between. The following quote from “Birthday”, “[c]an’t draw with him there, can’t draw without him ...” (6), referring to the white man to whom the narrator has lost his step-son as well as the boy’s mother, functions as an apt metaphor for the Chinese man’s place in the American society as it is depicted in the short stories. The Chinese American male is not able to experience fulfillment as an American, and, at the same time, not able to embrace his ethnic inheritance by creating a culture of his own despite the obstacles either. The Chinese males find themselves in an emasculated position in the society and are only able to examine themselves through the white gaze.

David Wong Louie’s *Pangs of Love* was published in 1991, over 20 years ago. During this time, the American society has been affected by many changes, wherefore we no longer refer to the present day America by using the term “postmodern”. Instead, we might use a term such as “post-postmodern”. Accordingly, it would be interesting to study the texts of today’s Chinese American male authors to see how Chinese American masculinity and the role of the Chinese American male in the American society are discussed in the more current works, and whether the emasculation and alienation of the Chinese American male still continue to emerge as prominent themes from them.

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