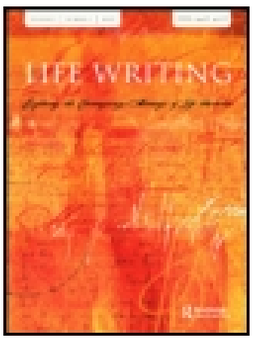

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The Relational Self: Maternal Inheritance and Eurasian Identity in Han Suyin's *The Crippled Tree*

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ABSTRACT

This work examines Han Suyin's representation of her Eurasian identity in relation to her maternal inheritance, focusing on her autobiography *The Crippled Tree*, the first volume in the series *China: Autobiography, History*. Drawing on Paul John Eakin's concept of relationality in life writing, we consider that Han's Eurasian identity was formed through her interactions and negotiations with significant others such as her mother. We argue that Han reveals her maternal inheritance in three ways: reconstructing her mother's subjectivity, recalling her mother's story, and speaking for her mother: actions that contribute to Han's self-representation as Eurasian. By intertwining her story with that of her mother, Han shows that her self-identity is relational, and presents the boundaries of the autobiographical 'I' as shifting and flexible.

KEYWORDS

Han Suyin; Eurasian identity; maternal inheritance; relationality; female autobiography

Introduction

Many factors, including gender, class, and geographic location, have influenced Eurasians' ethnic identification in the early twentieth century. For instance, the famous Eurasian writer Edith Eaton observed that Eurasians in North America were likely to pass as wholly white in the era of Chinese exclusion, whereas Dover (1937) and Teng (2012) observed that many Eurasians in Hong Kong chose to claim Chinese identity during the British colonial era to avoid prejudice and gain economic opportunity. Han Suyin (1916/17–2012) is a well-known Anglophone writer, born to Zhou Yentung (1886–1957), a Chinese railway engineer from a traditional landed gentry family in Sichuan, and Marguerite Denis (1885–1965), a Belgian woman from a bourgeois family in Brussels. Born in Henan, China, and raised and educated in Beijing, her Eurasian experience was shaped by China's encounter with the West in the early twentieth century, a time of increased Western influence and dominance in China. Teng (2013) observes that the debates over Chinese–Western intermarriage in China during this period were primarily concerned with national identity. With rising Chinese nationalism, especially following the 1911 Revolution, there was increasing hostility towards intermarriage, which was perceived as a form of national betrayal (Teng 2013). Popular perceptions of Eurasians

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were distinctly negative, casting doubt on their Chineseness and raising concerns about their foreign ancestors, who had humiliated China (Teng 2013). The Western expatriate communities in China also despised Eurasians, for they jeopardised white prestige and destabilised the racial hierarchies of the era. Although discriminated against by both China and the West, Eurasians in China enjoyed the privileges of their partial whiteness, and for Han, she also enjoyed the privileges of her rich transcultural experience and her class as a well-educated elite Eurasian.

While some individual Eurasians' ethnic identity construction was relatively stable, they were inevitably subject to a state of 'flux, shaped by historical and geographical context' (Teng 2013, 9). For instance, Han's identification underwent several shifts during her lifetime before she ultimately claimed her roots as being in China and became a spokesperson for China to the West. During Han's childhood and formative years, she was in a crisis of self-identity, with no clear sense of ethnic belonging. During her studies in Belgium (1935–1938), she criticised the policies of appeasement and Eurocentrism in the West and decided to return to China and support the Second Sino-Japanese War, which marked her initial identification with China. Later, during her stay in Hong Kong (1948–1952) and Malaya (1952–1964), she witnessed the collapse of colonialism and the rise of the nation state and eventually established her identity as a Chinese-identified Eurasian. Han's Chinese identity aligns with her paternal inheritance. As Buss (1992, 111) observes, Han's autobiography, similar to 'those of the typically father-defined subjectivity of intellectual women in the late twentieth century', is largely obsessed with male figures, such as 'the puritan, stoical, work-obsessed father Han admires as a child'. In line with Han's self-representation, she was often labelled as a Chinese writer. Teng (2012) suggests that Chinese critics made a remarkable move to reclaim Han—a globally acclaimed Anglophone author—as a Chinese writer in the post-1980s Chinese reform era.

In contrast, fewer studies focus on Han's maternal inheritance and European connections, perhaps because Han describes her relationship with her mother as strained and gives her mother less print space than her father. Buss (1992) first suggested the close link between Han's autobiography and maternal subtexts. Adding to Buss's insight, we further explore how the manifestation of maternal inheritance in Han's writing contributes to her self-representation as a Eurasian. The mother's impact on the daughter's identity formation has been widely discussed. Brodski (1977, 246) suggests an intimate connection between women writing about the self and the 'maternal pretext':

> As the child's first significant Other, the mother engenders subjectivity through language; she is the primary source of speech and love […] In response (however deferred), the daughter's text, variously seeks to reject, reconstruct and reclaim — to locate and re-contextualize the mother's message.

Brodski's emphasis on the intersubjective dimension of individuation largely resonates with the notion of relationality in life writing, an idea initiated by Susan Stanford Friedman in 1985. Friedman (1998) creates the term 'relational autobiography', arguing that women's autobiographies assert a 'sense of shared identity with other women, an aspect of identification that exists in tension with a sense of their own uniqueness'. In *How Our Lives Become Stories*, Paul John Eakin (1999, 50) extends this concept of relationality from female autobiography to all autobiography as necessarily relational, suggesting that 'all selfhood […] is relational despite differences that fall out along gender lines'.

Similarly, Smith and Watson (2001, 64) illustrate multiple others (e.g. significant others, historical others, and contingent others) in autobiography, and maintain that the boundaries of an autobiographical 'I' 'are often shifting and flexible'. These scholars contribute to autobiographical theory by exposing dialogic interaction and the mutual dependence of self and other; they also challenge 'the fundamental paradigm of the independent self of traditional autobiography, as well as the concept of monologic representation' (Davis 2005, 45).

Our study conceptualises Han's text as a relational autobiography, which Eakin (1999, 69) defined as autobiographies that 'feature the decisive impact on the autobiographer of […] key other individuals, usually family members, especially parents'. Eakin (1999) coins the term 'the relational life' to describe the story of a relational identity model developed in collaboration with others, most often family members, and suggests that such narratives defy genre classifications by combining the autobiography of the self with the biography of the other. 'This indeterminacy of form', as Eakin (1999, 176) argues, reflects 'the psychological ambiguity of the collaborative situation' and implies that the identity of the autobiographical 'I' 'includes and is included in the identity of the other whose story she presents'. Moreover, Eakin focuses on the tension between relational and autonomous modes of identity. He argues that, although relational autobiography appears to conceptually embrace the 'structuring bond between self and other', 'the desire for autonomy, mastery of one's origins, and authorship' persists:

> Children may be 'episodes in someone else's narrative', as Carolyn Steedman proposes […] when children turned adults become the authors of such a narrative, however, it is a different story, and the tables are turned […] they make someone else into 'episodes' in their own narratives. (Eakin 1999, 181)

Eakin reflects on the unequal power distribution in situations when children become the authors of their parents and take over or appropriate their parents' voice. He further focuses on the ethical problems raised by the tension between self and other in relational lives.

An autobiography reading that emphasises how the self is inscribed in relation to others is especially important for conceptualising the often-contradictory spaces that produce Eurasian identity. Between 1965 and 1992, Han published her six-volume autobiography, *China: Autobiographies, History*, which included *The Crippled Tree*, *A Mortal Flower*, *Birdless Summer*, *My House Has Two Doors*, *Phoenix Harvest*, and *Wind in My Sleeve*. These books chronologically recount Han's experiences from her childhood to late adulthood and give a coherent and informative account of China's history from 1885 to 1992. We primarily focus on Han's first volume, *The Crippled Tree*, in which she writes about her family's history and recalls her childhood. Rather than a simple nostalgic recollection of the past, writing *The Crippled Tree* was a practice of self-discovery, self-knowledge, and self-creation, driven by a desire to validate, authorise, and gain individual identity. Instead of presenting her autobiography as a solitary, introspective, monologic utterance, Han showed that her self-inquiry was relational and routed through others:

> I wanted to write a book about my father and mother and about China […] I did not know where to begin, how to start. China to me was of course my father and mother, and all I myself knew of China. To separate them from me would be to denude my story. (Han 1972, 16–17)

By stating that her own story is inseparable from that of her parents, Han shows that her parents' stories are deeply implicated in her own, and through these stories, she forms her identity. In the following sections, we use Han's writing about her mother to discuss three ways she incorporates relational narratives in her autobiography and presents her self-knowing as essentially relational. We demonstrate the complex and difficult negotiating process that simultaneously acknowledges her connection with her maternal inheritance, and her desire to break away from her mother's traumatic and negative legacy, and invent, redefine, or twist her mother's life to better reflect her sense of self.

Reconstructing the mother's subjectivity through fictionality

In 1905, when Han's father was studying in Belgium, he and her mother, Marguerite, fell in love at first sight. Because their families opposed their love, Marguerite deliberately became pregnant and forced her family to agree to their marriage, and went to China with Yentung in 1913. Influenced by popular fiction in Europe, she imagined China as a romantic and exotic country. However, she was disappointed to find that she could not endure traditional Chinese family rules, and was further disillusioned by the poverty resulting from wars across China. Moreover, with China's rising tide of nationalism and anti-imperialism, Marguerite's European appearance often caused her problems. In the end, afraid of the Communist Party, Marguerite left China around 1948, the year before the People's Republic of China was established.

Cosslett (2000) observes that many female autobiographers attempt to reconstruct their mother's subjectivity by writing their mother's stories in relation to their own and explains that reconstructing the mother's subjectivity differs from recalling stories about the mother, which merely present what the author remembers or has been told about her mother. By contrast, reconstructing the mother's subjectivity largely relies on fictionality. Recalling stories shows the mother's influence on the narrator, while reconstructing the mother's subjectivity involves a feminist-motivated move by which contemporary female autobiographers recover their protagonist's 'hidden, silenced, or lost' matrilineage by assuming that the character's identity relies on or is related to that of their women ancestors (Cosslett 2000, 142). Both modes of narrative co-exist in Han's writing. In this section, we primarily focus on her reconstruction of her mother's subjectivity. It is worth mentioning that the process of reconstruction involves simultaneously restoring and creating the mother's subjectivity. The elements of imagination and creation in Han's autobiography are implicitly revealed by her admission that she lacks knowledge about her mother and her interior subjectivity. Han fails to elicit more information about her mother from the Denis family because the subject of her parents' marriage caused much family disruption and grief, and it was painful for them to talk about it. Han's earliest recollection of her mother as a person separate from herself was of her sitting crouched over a table and writing to her parents in Belgian, refusing to let her daughter know the contents of the letter and saying to her, 'leave me alone'. As Han grew up, the rift with her mother increased; she began to refer to Han as 'that woman' and refused to speak to her for over thirty years. Does the mother really want her daughter to know her interior subjectivity? Does she believe that a common understanding can be achieved between her daughter and herself? How did the mother's feelings and thoughts change over these years? How

did she redefine and re-evaluate her past? None of these questions have answers. The geographical and psychological distance between Han and her mother impedes Han's ability to know her mother's interior subjectivity; therefore, she fills this gap by incorporating her own imagination and blending voices from her father, her brother, and her Third Uncle, creating a collage of her mother's story.

The six volumes of Han's autobiography are prefaced by the opening scene of *The Crippled Tree*, which largely involves elements of the daughter fictionalising and reconstructing the mother's subjectivity.

> Dear Papa, dear Mama,
>
> Today I shall not have time to write you a very long letter, because the bandits were here last night, and the cook has been decapitated. His head is in the garden, so I have shut the window. The little one is crying with prickly heat, but I cannot get any talcum powder so please send me two dozen tins, it is easy to get in England. I have had to give up my corsets too, and you would not recognize me, I drag myself in slippers all day long. (Han 1972, 11)

Han begins by quoting her mother's only surviving letter from a trunk full of letters written to her parents in Europe when she was in China. The remaining letters were all burnt by Han's elder brother, Son of Spring, in a moment of anger with the mother he simultaneously hated and loved. These letters covered the mother's entire life in China from 1913 to at least 1940, when the father, to whom the letters were addressed, dies. From the only surviving letter, Han reconstructed the terrible situation her mother faced on the day in 1917 or 1918 that she wrote the letter in China: the cook's head hanging on a pike outside the shut window; the cot with the wailing baby, which the narrator admits could perhaps be her; the sneering crowd of villagers gathered around the house, standing, laughing, and calling the mother a 'foreign devil'; the hysterical mother repeatedly sobbing, 'enough, enough. I want to go back'. Some of the scenes can be identified in the mother's letters (e.g. the cook's head and the wailing baby). Others, such as the sneering crowd of villagers and the mother's hysterical shouting, are not mentioned in the letters. Because Han could not have witnessed the day, these details were likely reconstructed by her imagination. 'Imagination' may not be accurate here, because these scenes are not entirely a figment of Han's imagination, but are drawn from her life experiences. As Han's autobiography shows, she often witnessed similar scenes of her mother screaming at her father to return to Belgium; she also heard a similar story told by her mother and her Third Uncle, describing how her mother is laughed at and called a 'foreign devil' by unfriendly residents. By splicing memories and stories about her mother, Han fictionalises and dramatises the day her mother wrote the letter. Lee (2007, 49) notices the fictional elements of this autobiography's opening scene and comments that it 'reads like a horror story of rampant atrocities with a morbid scene of physical and emotional entrapment'. Lee suggests (2007, 49) that Han challenges autobiographical convention by combining 'the two unbridgeable genres of history and fiction'. Adding to Lee's work, we argue that the element of fiction not only defies the genre's conventions, but also functions to reconstruct the mother's subjectivity. Via a third-person narrator, Han (1972, 11) enters into her mother's consciousness and reconstructs her feelings:

> [They] gave back a heavy somnolent indifference, the enormous indifference of the enormous, strange land around her, an indifference more suffocating than any enmity, more void than any vacuum, making of the whole populous land a desert where she turned on herself, imprisoned among crowds, imprisoned in indifference, in dirt, in squalor, an enormous rat-cage without beginning or end that she paced, a rat-cage she had walked into led by what had once been love and was now the wail of a child, another child in her belly, the cook's head, on a pike outside the shut window, buzzing its flies above the tomatoes her husband had planted two months ago. (Han 1972, 11)

Han compares China to 'a desert' and 'an enormous rat-cage', two significant metaphors in revealing her mother's inner feelings. To some extent, the two metaphors are what T.S. Eliot termed 'objective counterparts', which refer to the artistic mechanism whereby emotion is evoked in the reader.

> The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (Eliot 1920, 92)

'The desert' and 'the rat cage' are objective counterparts of the mother's inner world, reflecting her subjective feelings about China. In Westerners' stereotype of China as a densely populated country, 'the populous land' forms a distinct contrast with the mother's inner sense of China as a desolate desert where she was imprisoned among crowds. Juxtaposing the populous land, the desert, and the image of the mother alone within crowds reveals the mother's inner sense of alienation and loneliness; for her, China is an 'enormous', 'strange' and 'alien' country, where she was perceived as a 'foreign devil' and 'incomprehensible woman' and had to fight alone against a century of accumulated dislike and unconscious hostility towards Whites. The word 'indifference' appears four times in the extract, and Han describes this as 'more suffocating than any enmity, more void than any vacuum' (Han 1972, 11). The words 'suffocating' and 'void' vividly reveal the mother's sense of helplessness. The xenophobia and nationalist sentiments make China a desert in which the mother is imprisoned. Her terrible predicament is also reflected in the rat cage metaphor, in which the mother becomes a trapped animal, and her family in China is a giant cage. Han depicts a hysterical mother full of resentment towards her husband and children, and tries to restore her mother's subjectivity by showing her mother's complexity: '"To go, to go", She bent over the wailing child. "Stop it, do you hear me? Stop it, or I … " The next moment she had picked it up, kissed it wildly. "My baby, my baby"' (Han 1972, 12). While doing her best to look after her husband and children, she cannot help but resent them for having wasted her years. It is worth noting that, in this opening scene, Han refers to her mother by her name, 'Marguerite', instead of 'my mother', thus recognising her mother as a separate individual with her own name, life, and subjectivity, like the narrator herself.

It is doubtful that Han could entirely restore her mother's subjectivity, because apart from cultural issues, there were many factors that could potentially cause her mother's mental suffering. For instance, alienation from her husband, supply shortages, and the trauma of losing several of her babies owing to the difficult living conditions by the railway. These elements are largely ignored or untouched by the author as she reconstructs her mother's life. However, Han's attempt to restore her mother's subjectivity

nevertheless forms a sharp contrast to her brother, who tries to silence his mother by burning her letters. We suggest that Han's bitter depiction of a hysterical mother and her traumatic subjectivity constitutes an integral part of her self-exploration and self-discovering. Although Han did not live through the traumatic events her mother experienced, she is nevertheless deeply influenced by what Marianne Hirsch (2001) calls 'postmemory'—traumatic memories parents pass on to their children. Schwab (2010, 14) adds to Hirsch by arguing that children receive their parents' 'violent histories not only through the actual memories or stories of parents (postmemory) but also through the traces of affect, particularly affect that remains unintegrated and inassimilable'. Han reconstructs her mother's story, including her hysterics, rage, despair, and grief, to patch together a history she has never lived, and investigates the impact of trauma transmission from her mother to her. This narrative process fosters empathy between Han and her mother, softening the more fraught aspects of their relationship. It also provides Han with a more cohesive and historical foundation for her sense of self. As Hirsch (2001, 12) maintains, while the traumatised parental generation is often left with gaps, holes, or distortions in memory, perhaps 'trauma can only be witnessed and worked through' in subsequent generations, 'who received its effects, belatedly', by means of creative investment and creation. Furthermore, Ganzevoort (2008, 19) suggests two opposing perspectives on trauma: the first sees trauma 'as an "alien" intrusion' that requires resistance, and the second sees trauma as essential to identity development that calls for acceptance. Song of Spring, believing his tragic life to be payment for his mother's courage in marrying a Chinese, sees transgenerational trauma as a threat to his European identity. He thus tries to escape from the traumatic experience of being a Eurasian by burning his mother's letters. In contrast, Han acknowledges that the traumatic wounds transmitted from her mother are so important in her life that they define her identity. Rather than resisting the trauma her mother inflicts on her, Han accepts and integrates them as identity makers that affirm her uniqueness: she becomes who she is because of the transgenerational trauma she suffers. As Han (1972, 16) claims, 'the stupid man [Son of Spring] […] cutting himself off definitely from all that hurt him, trying to escape. And there was no escape, except in facing facts. That was my quality, and mine alone'. Transgenerational trauma thus adds meaning to her life and makes her identity more complex and extensive, enabling her to have a better understanding of the particular social and political context that shapes her mixed family and her Eurasian identity. Han's acceptance of transgenerational trauma is critical to maintaining maternal connections, but it also raises the question of whether she can live as a separate individual with her independent selfhood while continuing to suffer from the heavy burden of postmemory. Han's text seems to indicate that she is unable to entirely individuate herself from the traumatic effects of her maternal legacy; yet she refuses to portray herself as a passive traumatised individual who lacks a sense of agency and continues to repeat her mother's trauma. As she reassures her parents, 'do not worry and do not regret […] For although the tree was crippled, it has gone on living, and who knows but that its fruit shall be sweeter and better than that of any other?' (Han 1972, 306). Although she cannot fully heal from her mother's traumatic legacies, Han nevertheless manages to respond to traumatisation in a positive manner and reintegrate and live with transgenerational trauma in a less conflictual way.

Recalling the mother's story: 'I carry something of my mother in me'

Han's primary strategy for showing her internal identification with her mother is to recall childhood memories of listening to her mother tell her own story. As discussed previously, this differs from reconstructing the mother's subjectivity; recalling the mother's story serves to show the mother's influence on the narrator (Cosslett 2000). Burstein (1996, 10) maintains that the mother's self-told story gives her a perspective from which 'she can see herself as a central—rather than a subordinate—figure in the family narrative'. Furthermore, as Plummer (1995, 20) suggests, storytelling involves a process of interactions:

> Story telling can be placed at the heart of our symbolic interactions. The focus here is neither on the solitary individual life (which is in principle unknown and unknowable), nor on the text (which means nothing standing on its own), but on the interactions which emerge around story telling.

Thus, we explore how the mother's narrative enters Han's narrative, the relationship between Han's childhood experience and her adult identity, and the specific impact her mother had on Han's identity formation. The importance of her mother's story is emphasised in Han's text. As she recalls, throughout her childhood she was told stories of her mother's childhood and life as a young woman.

> There were many stories of Mama's life, told round the lamp. Her [Han] children were enveloped in them, carried by them, floating in the stories of Mamma on the railway, Mama in Belgium, Mama in China. (Han 1972, 318)

> At six a child remembers everything, especially a child with an auditory memory like a tape recorder, who was later to remember dialogue, scenes, acres of small events adding up to a total story […] which shaped the child and made her future predictable. (Han 1972, 281)

Listening to her mother's story was a family routine in Han's childhood memory. As she describes it, her childhood was 'enveloped in', 'carried by', and 'floating in' her mother's stories; these stories 'shaped' her and 'made her future predictable'. These words reveal the significant unconscious impact of Han's mother on her.

As mentioned previously, storytelling involves the process of interactions. Although they were told the same stories, the emphasis differs between Han and her siblings regarding the stories' focus as told to them. Han's brother, Son of Spring, identifies a sense of shame and considers his tragic life to be payment for his mother's courage. For Tiza, Han's dedicated, calm, and pretty sister, the stories convey the mother's anxiety about the prejudice that her Eurasian children may suffer. As a result, both Son of Spring and Tiza choose to identify purely as European. By contrast, Han associates her mother's story with the rebellious spirit that helps her to fight against the negative social stereotypes of Eurasians with whom she identifies. In Han's memory, her mother portrayed her childhood self as wayward and headstrong; she was a rebel who hated the constricting home life of a well-behaved young lady of her class and who deliberately broke the rules at her convent school. During her formative years, she braved the prejudice of the times and her staid Belgian family to fall in love with a Chinese man, a heathen, and deliberately became pregnant to force her marriage.

This spirit of disobedience is conveyed in the mother's story and later becomes a key word in Han's self-representation. Han recalls her childhood self as tough, strong, and

all-too-vigorous, always battling against her mother and quarrelling with her siblings. To some extent, the difficult relationship between Han and her mother is a continuation or repetition of her mother's strained relationship with her own parents. While Han's mother disobeys her own father by marrying a Chinese man, Han disobeys her mother in claiming a Chinese identity.

> But I carry something of my mother in me. All my childhood I battled against her, in typical Denis fashion, and finally we forswore each other, again in Denis fashion. I'm sure mother is happier, at war with me, than if reconciliation, so diminishing, had occurred. (Han 1972, 196)

Carrying 'something of my mother in me' and behaving in 'typical Denis fashion', Han reveals how her mother's rebellious spirit has been passed on to her and forms her own sense of self. At the end of the fifth volume, *Phoenix Harvest*, Han concludes that her courage to 'scream against the general contempt for Eurasians' comes from her mother:

> My mother. That stubborn woman I hated with such utter love; and how beneficial and stimulating this hate proved, pushing me to do all the things she did not want me to do! And now I like her, know what she gave to me, although my mind is not built as hers. She braved all the prejudices of her day, her staid Belgian family, to fall in love with a Chinese. She came to China with him, and gave birth to eight children, and lived in the stations along the railway lines of China. Their decades together were of sorrow and pain and insecurity, of war and running away and making do; and seeing their children despised for being Eurasians. Only I had the courage (or the foolishness) to scream against the general contempt for Eurasians, 'But we are the future'. I stuck to my 'foolishness', and in this extravagance I was like her when she chose Papa, deliberately becoming pregnant to force her marriage. (Han 1980b, 651)

The shape of Han's story is of a woman warrior fighting against social prejudice and achieving self-development. She disassociates her biracial identity from its strong connections with degeneration, and instead provides a positive image of mixed-race people. As Ling (1990, 179) suggests, Han is a word-warrior, whose texts are a form of 'affirmation of self in opposition to all forms of domination and negation'. It is clear that Han wants her mother to fit into her narrative of self-struggle and self-development. She portrays both her mother and herself as fighters, who have the courage to break social stereotypes to pursue the autonomy of the self; her mother braves the social prejudices of her day to marry Han's father, and Han challenges the negative social stereotypes of the Eurasians by claiming that 'we are the future'. However, Han's act of fitting her mother's story into that of her own undermines her mother's position as a central figure in the family narrative—a perspective that the mother's self-told story often gives to her. It is also doubtful that Han's narrative of her mother's story can actually restore her mother's interior subjectivity. Indeed, her mother may refuse to be depicted as a fighter. In her later years, the mother probably regretted her youthful rebellion, which may explain why she left China in 1948 to settle in the United States and never returned. Han describes the scene of her mother's departure:

> I could see Papa lying in bed, saying in his low, spent voice, a little breathless, 'Don't worry, I'll be all right'. And Mama did not worry, of course not, not for him, but thudded about, hauling her luggage and making last minute recommendations to Papa and to the servant, Hsueh Mah. Mama had left Papa and gone with Tiza. (Han, 1980a, 24)

It is evident that the immediate cause of the mother's departure on the eve of the People's Republic of China's founding was her fear of the Communist Party. However, her indifference to her husband's illness and her hasty departure indicate that she has no sense of nostalgia for her years in China.

Rather than a rebellious fighter, the mother may have preferred to be represented as the 'romantic one'—the nickname given to her by the Denis family. She was not interested in fighting against social prejudices and injustices; all she sought in life was romance and a happy marriage. Her expectations for her daughters were not to be women warriors, but to be beautiful, lovely ladies, and to have a happy marriage. Tiza was her ideal daughter—a dedicated, calm, and pretty girl who shared her mother's romantic fantasies of love and family, and eventually married an American —in contrast to Han, who was intellectual, tough, and full of opinions. As Han (1966, 275) describes:

> Tiza had a grace and beauty uncommon among so many beautiful Eurasians in Peking; bone structure, features, poise, gestures, the sureness of a feminine personality, good taste in dresses, and my mother's approval and love. I remained a frowning urchin, with a young colt stance, but Tiza smiled with that particular turn of her round amber eyes, and men would be subjugated. Tiza was born a woman, I would always remain a juvenile.

Tiza's 'grace', 'beauty', and 'feminine personality' represented a feminine mode of self-identity, which formed a distinct contrast to Han's rebellious and masculine personality. Buss (1992, 144) observes that 'the mother, traditionally patriarchal in her own definitions of what a daughter should be, wishes for a daughter who exhibits a fragile beauty as well as a fragile will'. In line with Buss, we suggest that the mother's favouritism towards Tiza largely reveals her own allegiance and conformity to Victorian ideals of femininity prescribed by her society: an ideal of womanhood, as Henry (2005) suggests, characterised by submission, domesticity, and family. In this sense, the mother was not a rebel, but a defender of the society. These details reveal the mother's refusal to fit the story Han is composing for her.

Further, the most ambivalent part in Han's narrative of her mother's story is her claim that her 'scream against the general contempt for Eurasians' comes from her mother (Han, 1980b, 651). In fact, the mother is troubled by her children's inability to be read as white and always accuses Han of holding the family from fully integrating into the white community. The autobiography shows that there is a significant shift in Han's perspective on her mother as a small child, whom Han refers to as Rosalie, and the narrating 'I'—the adult Han who is doing the remembering and the story narrating. While the mature narrator presents herself as an inheritor of her mother's spirits, and claims that her courage to be a Eurasian stems from her mother, the child Rosalie considers herself a rebel against her mother's wishes, and her mother as an objector to her identity as a Chinese-identified Eurasian:

> 'We are half-castes', she [Rosalie] said, 'Eurasians. That's what we are […]'.

> Mama, face blushing with anger, gathered herself for battle […] she shouted, 'vicious and wicked. Look at yourself! You a Chinese! You will never be Chinese, and let me tell you why: the Chinese will not have you! […] They will call you half-caste and mixed blood, for that is what you are. But not your brother. He looks European'.

> And Rosalie, also bright-red with anger, shouted: 'I hate you, I hate you. Why don't you go back, why don't you go away where you came from, and leave us in peace?' (Han 1972, 403)

Lee (2007, 58) suggests that Han's adoption of the third person for her childhood self can be interpreted as a literary strategy to signify 'an unbridgeable psychological, emotional, and ideological tension' between the I-narrator and she-Rosalie. To some extent, Rosalie's attitude towards her mother is characterised by what Adrienne Rich (1986, 236) calls 'matrophobia'—'a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free'. However, in retrospect, the narrator begins to understand her mother and re-values her mother's role in her identity formation:

> And yet Mama was truly innocent, feeding her children well, watchful for their physical security. It was not her fault that she was in the wrong context both of geography and history, not her fault that she clothed her overweening emotions in the white anxious robes of wrathful angels, not her fault that she never stopped to think of her children as people. (Han 1972, 409)

The narrator portrays her mother as a defeated fighter, whose courage is worth praising, although she is defeated by the wrong geographical and historical context. As her daughter, Han is thus duty-bound to carry on her mother's spirit and continue the fight against social prejudice. It is obvious that the shift in perspective between Rosalie and the narrator 'I' signifies a process of retrospective forgiveness; after years of antagonism, the narrator eventually understands her mother and sees similarities between them. More importantly, we argue that this shift in perspective reveals the constructed nature of Han's memory of her mother. Her attempt to fit her mother's story into that of herself evokes what Eakin (1992, 143) terms a 'shift from a documentary view of autobiography as a record of referential fact to a performative view of autobiography centered on the act of composition'. As Smith and Watson (2001) argue, memory plays a significant role in autobiographical performativity and storytelling. They further explain that memory is a meaning-making process. Rather than simply a replica of the events themselves, memory involves the remembering subject's active reinterpretation and creation of the past in the present. In the act of remembering, narrators 'form fragments of memory into complex constructions that become the stories of our lives' (Smith and Watson 2001, 16). Therefore, Han's act of recalling her mother's story is not a passive recovering of what happened, but is motivated by a desire to preserve something valuable from the past, to find in her mother's story a reflection of herself. Han's appropriation of her mother echoes Wong-Wylie's (2006, 142) concept of 'matroreform': 'a cognitive, affective, behavioural, and spiritual reformation of mothering from within, including removal and elimination of obstacle to self-determination and self-agency'. This concept develops from Rich's theory of 'matrophobia'—the fear of becoming like one's mother; yet, it avoids the negative connotations of the word 'phobia', which Wong-Wylie maintains implies irrationality and illogicality. During this matroreform process, parts of the mother's subjectivity is ignored, denied or misunderstood, to be fitted into Han's narrative, to become a source of her own subjectivity.

Compared with the paternal inheritance, the maternal inheritance in Han's text is ambiguous: she represents her mother as a woman she simultaneously loves and hates; while doing 'all the things she [the mother] did not want me to do', Han also admits

that 'I was like her'. Eakin (1999, 87) observes that autobiographies written by children about their parents are as diverse as the bonds they record: 'when the bond is untroubled', the story is likely to be a traditional kind, where 'filial piety produces a memorial to a beloved parent'; when the bond is strained, however, the motivations for autobiographies tends to be more intense, and characteristics in autobiographies 'are set in motion by the existence of tensions and secrets'. Han exposes the full complexities of the mother–daughter relationship, charactering her relationship with her as mother as both difficult and cherished and embittered yet intimate. It is through her complex mother–daughter relationship that the conflict between her desire for personal empowerment and the maintenance of maternal connections emerges. Han emphasises her mother's rebellious personality that she inherits and shares and her strong connection with her mother, whose story represents authoritative discourse that shapes her self-identity. Yet, as a rebellious child, she simultaneously seeks to individuate herself from her mother's authority to forge her own identity. By appropriating her mother's story and making her mother into episodes of her own narrative, Han reclaims the mastery of her identity and becomes self-determining.

Speaking for the mother: historicising the mother from a Eurasian perspective

Descriptions of Chinese and Western societies are an essential part of Han's autobiography. Therefore, this section explores the relationship between Han's writing about society and her Eurasian identity. Han contextualises her mother's life by providing detailed accounts of Chinese and Western history, such as Western racialism, the cultural conflicts between traditional China and the modern West, and the rising nationalist fervour and xenophobic sentiments caused by the invasion of Western imperialism. The contextual background is important because it explains the hysterical actions of Han's mother, and thereby avoids presenting her as an incomprehensible woman. Buss (1992, 110) suggests that, unlike romantic autobiography, which emphasises the 'uniqueness of the egocentric individual', a memoir shows individuals 'as integrally involved with, constructed by, and responsible to their communities'. In choosing the memoir form, Han historicises her mother by relating in detail 'her mother's history as a mother' (Buss 1992, 113). Such a narrative contrasts sharply with 'the narrative forms of patriarchy' in which 'women's acts as bad daughters, bad wives, bad mothers are presented to us uncontextualised by motive or reason, as pure evil, archetypal, unexplainable, [and] hysterical' (Buss 1992, 112). More importantly, we argue that Han contextualises her mother from a Eurasian standpoint. The meaning of Eurasian subjectivity varies for each individual. In Han's semi-autobiography *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, Han (1954, 242) defines her Eurasian subjectivity as the ability to have a flexible and dialectical angle of vision, a double perspective: 'the meeting of both cultures, the fusion of all that can become a world civilization'. Zhang (2021, 127) suggests that Han's Eurasian subjectivity embodies the mentality of the modern intellectual in exile suggested by Said: a self-satisfied marginality that maintains intellectual curiosity, wandering at the crossroads of multiple cultures and inspiring productive, critical perspectives. Han's writing about her mother reflects her critical attitudes towards both Western and Chinese culture, avoiding aligning

herself with Westerners in their Eurocentric views of China or with the Chinese nationalists in their hostile attitudes towards the West.

Han describes in detail the cultural shock that her mother experienced in the Zhou family: the complicated ancestor rituals, the irritation of never being alone in a large family, and the unendurable, enclosed life of upper-class Chinese women in that era. She ends her description of her mother's life in the extended family thus:

> It is a pity that never for a moment did the Family round her guess what they were doing to her. Their non-comprehension was equal to hers, their reactions were equally blinded, and perhaps in the final count even more ferocious because they were so absolutely righteous, even their slighting sanctioned by custom, propriety, tradition, her status in the family. A collective is a cruel thing because each member reinforces the other in a course of behaviour, like a pack of hounds pursuing a deer at bay to the last; and yet, they never knew that they were hounding her. They did try their best, forgiving her much. (Han 1972, 293–294)

Although criticising her mother and her extended Chinese family for equal 'non-comprehension' and 'blindness', Han primarily stands on her mother's side. To some extent, her mother's situation raises the question that Spivak (1996, 2003) asks, 'Can the subaltern speak?' While Spivak argues that female immigrants to the United States remain the victims of historical silencing as they can only speak within the prescribed hierarchy of capitalism, Han's mother's case demonstrates that collective oppression also plays a significant role in the historical silencing of women. She compares the members of the extended Chinese family to a pack of hounds and her mother to a deer. The relationship between them has thus become that of perpetrator and victim. Han describes the Zhou family as 'ferocious', 'hounding', and 'pursuing', portraying it as a cruel system that hunts her mother pitilessly. More importantly, their pitilessness is in sharp contrast with their intention to 'forgive' her mother. The word 'forgive' reflects the subconscious belief of the Zhou family that they are the ones who are right, and that customs and tradition further legitimate their 'absolute righteousness' (Han 1972, 293). We argue that this worsens the mother's situation; she cannot speak for herself since it is she who is on the 'wrong' side and is being forgiven. As Han (1972, 294) describes, 'she [Marguerite] rapidly went to pieces in the hot summer […] until she became fixed in her attitudes and unable ever to reason herself out of them again'. It is evident that Han disagrees with her mother's loud protests, hysterical actions, and anti-Chinese sentiments. Still, unlike her father, who is like a deaf-mute to his wife's flow of words, and her brother Son of Spring, who burns a trunk of his mother's letters, Han deeply sympathises with her mother's pain, which was caused by loneliness and being misunderstood. Therefore, Han uses her autobiography to save her mother from being silenced, articulating her mother's unspeakable discontent and resentment.

Apart from these adjustment problems, Han also shows how her mother becomes the target of Chinese nationalist resentment; how a century of accumulated dislike and unconscious hostility towards Whites militate against her being accepted. As discussed previously, the opening scene of *The Crippled Tree* shows how the children surrounding the house imitate the mother, laugh at her, and call her a 'foreign devil'. The episode in the cinema is another example: Han recalls a childhood memory of going to the cinema in China with her parents and her sister Tiza. Han was not sitting in the same row as her family because there were only three seats there. When the American film showed a

plotline containing racial slurs, a young student got up and began to shout, and was soon dragged away and beaten by the police. The young boy sitting next to Tiza left his seat to run to the aisle to get closer to the student, as many others did. Afraid, her mother asked Han to sit with them. When the boy returned, the mother indicated Han's seat, and said, 'You can sit there'. The boy began to shout, 'This is my seat', and it soon developed into a riot:

> The young boy suddenly raised his fist and screamed: 'Down with all white devils from over the sea', and there was a noise like a train approaching quickly, and it was the whole cinema, all the people there, together making this noise. They stamped, clapped, whistled, and suddenly they were all shouting, in time: 'down with the colonists, down with the imperialists', and singing. (Han 1972, 366)

Faced with a century of accumulated dislike, the mother fails to reason with herself; her only defence is to become aggressively anti-Chinese and lose herself in tears and rage. The image of Han's mother in these episodes differs from the works of other Asian writers of the same generation in that 'the social hierarchy is being challenged and turned upside down'; 'the privileged white woman is no longer occupying her privileged space' (Lee 2007, 50). Han writes in detail about the trauma her mother faced, questioning the concept of an East–West dichotomy in the mater narrative of modern Chinese nationalism, and warning against attempting a kind of 'national salvation' characterised by deep and morbid xenophobia and racialism.

The racial prejudice against Eurasians of China's Western community further deepens the mother's pain. Marguerite loses her son Sea Orchid because the doctor's French wife forbids their entrance and says that the doctor cannot be wakened in the night to see a half-caste child. For Han's mother, Sea Orchid's death was evidence of the inherent defect of the mixed-race, instead of an example of racial ideology harm. After Sea Orchid's death, Han was born. The mother refuses to take care of her baby, calling her a 'half-caste brat' who is 'not my child' (Han 1972, 305). As a victim of racial ideology, Marguerite wrongly transfers her sorrow and anger to her daughter, because Rosalie takes the place of Sea Orchid. Although Marguerite 'tried hard to love her daughter, and she did her best', she 'never really forgave her daughter for having taken Sea Orchid's place' (Han 1972, 305). Attewell (2016, 230) argues that a main reason for the mother's rejection of her daughter is her failure to understand her personal plight in relation to the larger social structure:

> Mad with grief, Marguerite assigns responsibility for the turning away of the doctor and his wife to her children, rather than to the racist hierarchy of value that views her relationship with Yentung as a breach in the norms of European womanhood and construes their children as unworthy of care.

Han is much more able than her mother to read the social structure. While her mother could not understand the root of her tragedy and wasted her lifetime in tears and anger, Han represents her mother in denouncing the era in which she lived and vindicating her mother's courage in fighting against the racial stereotypes of her time. She does not blame her mother for her injustice and neglect, because she is aware that her mother is 'a victim of a history she never made' (Han 1972, 306). Han establishes a direct link between herself and the environment. As the subtitle of *China: Autobiography, History* indicates, Han's book consists of both the narrative of her individual life and her observation of the

society that decisively shapes her mixed family and her Eurasian experience. She often acts as an auto-ethnographer, who systematically investigates the historical contexts and situates her own and her parents' histories within a series of historical frames. She interprets the lives of her mother and herself as products of Western hegemony and Chinese nationalism, admitting that 'we are all products of our time, vulnerable to history' (Han 1972, 17). In doing so, Han (1972, 293) is able to comprehend the historical constraints imposed on her mother and the influence of social prejudice from both the West and China that played in making her mother 'a dislocated, hectic, suspicious woman'. The criticism is aimed not at her mother, but at the turbulent years of the early twentieth century, which was full of racial prejudice and cultural clashes, which her mother was forced to live under. The act of contextualising her mother thus not only symbolises Han's reconciliation with her, but also criticises the particular social and historical reality in which Han and her mother live—both the West's and China's lack of comprehension, causing the trauma of her mother's life and the plight of her Eurasian children who find themselves belonging nowhere, despised by both sides. The critical engagement with her mother's story allows Han to take part in the active process of what Melissa Brown terms 'negotiated identity'. Identities, as Brown (2010, 466) maintains, are 'the negotiated outcome of what people claim for themselves and what people in their social environment allow them to enact'. Hall (2021, 3) suggests that the meaning of 'negotiation' includes communication, compromise, and the actions of 'crossing or getting over' some obstacle through skilful manipulation. In the case of Han, negotiation is used to describe the ways in which she resists and alters the stereotypes of Eurasians prevalent in society and reclaims her agency under an oppressive social environment. While Han's hopeless and powerless mother had become the 'victim of situations' and accepted her Eurasian children's degraded status, Han refuses to accept such role assigned by society (Han 1972, 293). She seeks to negotiate her Eurasian identity beyond the pathological images of Eurasians as 'tragic mulatto' and redefine her mixed-identity on her own terms. Writing becomes a powerful tool in this negotiation process. As Ling (1990, 158) argues, Han is a word-warrior, whose writing shares the aim of 'righting wrongs by writing wrongs'. While Eurasians were often portrayed as 'a problem', Han turns the tables and centres on the problems and constraints that Eurasians encounter in negotiating their identities. By using her 'strongest talent'–words–Han exposes the forces that deny her 'voice and self-definition' and affirms her sense of self 'in opposition to all forms of domination and negation' (Ling 1990, 178–179). Apart from protesting the stereotypes of Eurasians, Han's act of speaking for her mother also reveals the imbalanced mother–daughter power relationship. To exorcise the threat of repeating her mother's tragic life and reclaim mastery of her self-identity, Han takes over her mother's voice by positioning herself as analytically equipped to put her mother's plight into words while her mother remains voiceless. Goldstein (2001, 49) summarises the use of binary oppositions, which easily map onto gender. Table 1

To a large extent, Han objectifies her mother by depicting her mother with certain feminine stereotypes: she is nicknamed 'the romantic one', nourishing her life with the novels she devours; she is emotional and irrational, often plunging herself into tears and pain, unable to understand and articulate her plight. In contrast, Han actively distances herself from these stereotypes and rationally engages with and analyses various

Table 1. Binary oppositions mapped onto gender.

Masculine/subject	Feminine/object
Knower/self/autonomy/agency	Known/other/dependence/passivity
Objective/rational/fact/logical/hard	Subjective/emotional/value/illogical/soft
Order/certainty/predictability	Anarchy/uncertainty/unpredictability
Mind/abstract	Body/concrete
Culture/civilised/production/public	Nature/primitive/reproduction/private

Source: Goldstein (2001, 49).

cultural contexts. Although this imbalanced mother–daughter power relationship sacrifice parts of the mother's subjectivity, it enables Han to break free from the negative inheritance of her mother. Different from her mother, who is imprisoned within a single culture and perspective, Han embraces her hybrid identity that is characterised by fluidity, openness, and multiplicity. With her biracial inheritance and rich transcultural experience, Han is able to speak from a multiplicity of perspectives and adapt herself to various cultural contexts. By breaking free from the constraints of her society and her mother's negative legacy, Han reclaims control over her self-identity and provides a positive image of mixed-race people based on a sense of pride in their achievements in, and contributions to, intercultural communication.

Conclusion

Han is a Eurasian who primarily identifies as Chinese. Scholars, especially Chinese scholars in the post-1980s Chinese reform era, tend to focus more on Han's self-representation as Chinese and less on her Eurasian identity. Shifting the focus from Han's Chinese identity to her Eurasian identity, we suggest that the latter is reflected and represented in her autobiography in several ways, including her reconstruction of her mother's subjectivity, her recollection of her mother's story, and how she speaks for her mother. Han recalls and reconstructs her mother's traumatic experience of interracial marriage to facilitate her own self-knowing and self-discovery, constituting an essential part of her Eurasian identity exploration. Further, the mother's rebellious spirit and courage to break the social prejudice of her time were passed on to Han through her mother's storytelling, encouraging Han to challenge the prevalent social stereotypes regarding Eurasians. Finally, Han's act of historicising and speaking for her mother saves her mother from being silenced and articulates her mother's unspeakable discontent and resentment. By recovering her mother's story and voice, which were previously marginalised, silenced, or ignored, Han highlights both the characteristics of her mother's personality that she shares, and her strong connection to her mother, whose life is the foundation of her self-identity. This process of reconstructing the mother's life to facilitate the daughter finding her sense of self is critical to maintaining maternal connections. As Lowinsky (1992, 12) puts it, a 'woman who wishes to be her full, female self needs to know the stories of her Motherline'. Han's acknowledgement that she is connected to both her maternal and paternal inheritance distances her from Eurasians who identify with or pretend to be only Westerners or only Chinese; she believes these Eurasians lack the courage to face the facts. She locates herself at the intersection of the Western and Chinese communities, and embraces a mixed identity to include the multiple aspects of her selfhood.

The tension between relational and autonomous modes of identity that Eakin mentions is noteworthy in Han's text. While embracing her maternal connection and working to reconstruct her mother's voice, Han tries to separate herself from her mother's authority and reclaim mastery of her self-identity by rewriting her mother's story, taking over her mother's voice, and including her mother in her own narrative episodes. Despite the generational gap between mother and daughter, and divisions between their different cultural perspectives and identities, Han positions herself as capable of understanding and representing her mother. Instead of signalling her speculation with phrases like 'I assume', 'I imagine', or 'perhaps my mother thinks', Han prefers to conceal the presence of her speculation, which largely blurs the line between verifiable evidence and her own imagination. In some chapters, Han suspends her third-person narrator and incorporates her mother's voice by adopting her mother's first-person point of view, concealing the fact that she is the one mediating all the material. Han's unmarked speculation and self-effacement largely downplay her power over her mother's inheritance and disguise the fact that, at the metafictional level, the mother's image remains unknown because her stories are all written by Han. Rather than showing the real image of her mother, Han's writing about her mother is primarily about herself. By telling her mother's story, she charts a trajectory back to herself that reveals what she thinks of herself. The unequal distribution of power in such situations is central to Eakin's discussion about the ethics of life writing. He suggests that 'representation of the self and voice of the other acquires a special power', which may potentially violate the individual's right to privacy and assault his 'inviolate personality' (Eakin 1999, 181). In line with Eakin, Cosslett (2000, 149) emphasises the mother's unknowability, caused by the imbalanced mother–daughter power relationship, arguing that, although daughters' accounts of their mothers' stories are an essential part of their subjectivity, mothers are frequently 'denied full subjectivity'. Both Eakin and Cosslett are primarily concerned with the violation of what Eakin calls 'the proximate others' in life writing. While admitting that Han's appropriation of her mother's story is, to some extent, a form of violence against the integrity of her mother's inheritance, we argue that it also allows her to break free from the negative inheritance of her mother and avoid repeating her mother's pain and trauma. Hall (2021) points out that the daughter's recycling of the mother's story carries the risk of repeating these behaviours. To avoid such repetitions, Hall (2021, 183) suggests that a critical engagement with the mother's story, 'not only narrating it but also reinterpreting it', is required. Han's narrative of her mother's story is framed and mediated by her critical reinterpretation, which reflects her own opinion of events. While still maintaining a close connection to her maternal inheritance, Han has agency to reform her maternal connection and redefine her identity and place on the motherline. Different from her traumatic mother, who remains voiceless owing to a lack of the intercultural communication competence that Han cultivated since childhood, Han presents herself as culturally confident in analysing the complex cultural issues. Challenging the negative perceptions of Eurasians, Han presents herself as a bridge between Chinese and Western cultures, who embodies the advantages of both worlds and represents the future of the world. Han's articulation of her Eurasian identity begins with her maternal inheritance but is not limited to it. With her biracial cultural background, Han presents herself as capable of transcending her traumatic matrilineage, and recreates her Eurasian identity based on a sense of pride.

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