Family is the needle that sews together the lives of Chinese kin into the sacred fabric of tradition. To pull loose even the smallest thread from this fabric is to breach the highest of societal contracts, to commit the worst of crimes. But for those who dare to stitch their lives into a different fabric, family represents more than tradition—family, perhaps inadvertently, affords the freedom to choose where one belongs.

The insides of Chinese banquet halls all tend to look the same: an enormous single room with a high ceiling decorated in red and gold. Dragons and phoenixes dance along the walls above potted plants and large round tables draped in red tablecloths, each with an essential Lazy Susan in the middle. So many tables are packed in the room that, despite the hall’s apparent immensity, it feels crowded and small. The banquet hall can easily accommodate more than one family, and strangers end up celebrating their birthdays together, toasting long life and happiness to people they will never see again. During peak hours for dim sum, as pools of people gather at the entrance waiting for a table, entire families are seated at a time, and it becomes something of a miracle that the waiters and waitresses can navigate the throngs of people with trays of fried taro fritters and sesame balls, with carts full of chicken feet and beef tripe.

My boyfriend, Allen, takes me to my first dinner banquet, a birthday celebration for his grandfather on his father’s side, held in a banquet hall in Brooklyn’s Chinese neighborhood. We are the first ones there, arriving too early because, he still maintains, his mother told us the wrong time. An entire section of the hall has been sequestered for the celebration, and we sit alone at one table watching subtitled Chinese travel shows on the hanging TV. One by one, his extended family trickles into the banquet hall until all ten seats at each of the twelve tables are occupied, a slow parade of familiar faces and unremembered names. Our section of the restaurant becomes engulfed in a cacophony of noise: greetings between relatives, the clamoring of children and babies, the clacking of buttons on the handheld gaming devices of
teenagers who have only just arrived and are already bored. I wonder if the handful of single-family diners are ever annoyed by these celebrations encroaching on their relative peace.

In the Chinese tradition, each person’s familial status is carefully delineated by specific titles that leave no room for ambiguity—the son of your mother’s second brother, the wife of an uncle, the niece of a second cousin, even me, Allen’s new girlfriend, the most tenuous of relationships summed up neatly in a two character phrase, an explanation in and of itself.

The Chinese are a people of symbols and hidden implications. Everything served at the banquet carries a second meaning. The shark fin soup is an expensive delicacy, representing wealth. Suckling pig, if served at a wedding banquet, represents the bride’s virginity. Sea cucumber, served with abalone and vegetables, represents selflessness because its characters share the same sound as the characters for “good heart.” Fish, whose character is phonetically the same as that for “plentiful,” is essential at any celebration. The long strands of noodles represent long life, and the red of the lobster or duck represents happiness. Animals and seafood are always served whole, with the head, legs, and tails, to represent completeness.

In her essay “No Name Woman,” Maxine Hong Kingston tells the story of her aunt, a woman who broke the very completeness that the Chinese hold sacred. By committing adultery and giving birth to a child out of wedlock, her aunt brings unspeakable shame to her family. She is punished not only by her fellow villagers “for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them,” but also by her family, who forever denies her existence, “deliberately forgetting her” even in death (313, 315). Kingston’s mother tells her the story out of necessity, a warning for young Maxine to heed: do not act like your aunt and bring shame to your family. But where the story ends is not as clear to Kingston as it is to her mother. For her mother, the story, once it is told and its purpose served, again becomes nothing more than an unspeakable family secret. For Kingston, the story serves as a guide as she tries to establish “how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fit[s] in solid America” (309).

Kingston writes, “A family must be whole, faithfully keeping the descent line by having sons to feed the old and the dead who in turn look after the family” (313). Chinese families are supposed to be “round,” complete, traditional. Each generation carries thousands of years’ worth of customs and beliefs that are meant to be passed down to subsequent generations. Each family is always surrounded by its ancestral spirits to whom family members
pray for protection and for whom they burn paper goods as blessings. Kingston’s aunt was expected to keep this cycle of traditions, “to maintain the past” (311). But as Kingston dramatizes, “the rare urge west had fixed upon our family” (311). Whereas her four brothers had all traveled across the physical boundaries of their homeland, Kingston’s aunt “crossed boundaries not delineated in space,” trespassing against the circle that was meant to shape her life (311). What happens to those of us who trespass against the traditions of our ancestors—who venture overseas? Have we been deliberately forgotten by our ancestral spirits, or are we the ones who have forgotten them, shunning our burdens of tradition to seek a new life, an American life?

Sitting next to Allen at one dinner banquet after another—his family celebrates the birthdays of all four of his grandparents in a similar fashion—I worry about how Chinese I really am. In a room full of people who speak the same language I’m supposed to speak, who celebrate the same holidays I’m supposed to celebrate, who ward off the same superstitions I’m supposed to ward off—in a room full of people who are supposed to be my people—I feel like a stranger, a foreigner confused by the customs of the people she is visiting, everything momentarily lost in translation.

Occasionally Angela, Allen’s brother’s girlfriend, joins us for dinner as well. She speaks both Mandarin and English and chats with everyone as if she’s already married into the family. She visits her parents in Taiwan every year, brings gifts every time she visits Allen’s family, and politely refuses their gifts, the Chinese way, before finally accepting them. She is the traditional Chinese daughter to my American-born Chinese odd child. Watching her pour everyone tea before refilling her own cup, I wonder what my mother was really up to when she decided to raise her daughter as American and not Chinese, rupturing the roundness of her family by leaving it behind and denying me the chance to become a member of the larger Chinese family, in which, as Kingston writes, “Everybody has eight million relatives” (313). Everybody but me.

Whereas Allen comes from a complete family with a slew of relatives to collect red envelopes from on Chinese New Year, I live alone with my mother and collect no red envelopes from any relatives; my mother never kept in touch with them. Allen’s family carried its ancestors and its traditions to America. Maintaining the cycle of ritual, they set up shrines in their homes on traditional Chinese holidays, burning incense and kneeling in prayer to their ancestors before they ate. But my mother did not travel more than three thousand miles to “keep in touch” with the relatives she determinedly left behind. She traveled halfway around the world, brazenly crossing the invis-
ble boundaries and taking me with her, to put as much distance as she could between us and the country to which she refuses to return. While my father, who lives in Elmhurst, implores me to learn Chinese and keep in touch with my ethnic roots, my mother is trying to rub out even the hyphenated “Chinese” in my Chinese-American upbringing.

My mother’s approach to the Chinese traditions of family isn’t without its repercussions, though; any divergence from normative ideas of family carries with it the stigma of being “broken.” But Barbara Kingsolver, in her essay “Stone Soup,” challenges the widely held assumptions that a family has failed because it has strayed from the normative model. Discussing her own family situation, she writes, “The main problem with our recognized family is that other people think we have a problem” (276). People feel sorry for her daughter because she is a “child of the divorce” (275). When I tell people that I live with my mother and only my mother, they nod as if writing an asterisk by my name. She is the child of a single parent. When people ask me if I speak Chinese, I chuckle nervously and say, “I speak a little.” They nod. I have become Americanized, unfortunate in the abandonment of my native language. When I tell people that my mother and I do not cook at home, the shock on their faces is hard to miss. Eating a home-cooked meal exemplifies a family’s roundness, and anything less betrays the misshapen geometry of a dysfunctional family. The non-traditional family is too often seen as an aberration, an anomaly, “a harbinger of cultural ruin, a slapdash substitute” (Kingsolver 274). But, as Kingsolver discovers, there are unexpected benefits to the non-traditional lifestyle. Kingsolver’s daughter has “three sets of grandparents!” (276). She can live with her mother in the country or with her father in the city. In the dissolution of Kingsolver’s traditional family, her daughter actually gains more than she loses (276).

While Kingsolver shatters the traditional “Dad, Mom, Sis and Junior” family mold, Kingston’s ancestors go to enormous lengths to keep the cracks in their family from showing (274). Her aunt’s existence is meticulously torn from the sacred fabric of Kingston’s family history, in an effort to quell the sting of her betrayal. Forced to remain silent about her aunt’s life for nearly two decades—because, as her mother insists, “your father does not want to hear her name” (314)—Kingston participates in her aunt’s punishment. Kingston will never know the real story of her “Father’s drowned-in-the-well sister” (309). Yet, in her attempt to understand what it means to be Chinese-American—a gap bridged easily by a single hyphen—Kingston pries loose the stitches her ancestors have sewn shut over her aunt’s existence. Kingston recasts her aunt, the disgraced adulterer, as her ancestral guide to the immi-
grant’s transplanted world in America. She asks, “When you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese?” (309). Caught in the tension between her mother’s mysterious stories and her own budding curiosity of “trying to get things straight,” between being traditional “Chinese-feminine” and being “American-pretty,” Kingston turns to her aunt for “ancestral help” (309, 312, 313, 311). Yet it is in America, where she is embarrassed by her mother’s loud, immigrant “screams in public libraries or over telephones,” that Kingston’s own voice speaks loudest (312). Following in the footsteps of her aunt, her “forerunner,” she tears open the fabric of tradition in search of her own individual completeness (311). Just as Kingston’s aunt gave up family for “a charm that vanished with tiredness, a pigtail that didn’t toss when the wind died,” Kingston makes public a family secret, breaking her parents’ decades of silence in an effort to understand where she belongs in “solid America” (311). For Kingston, family becomes more than merely the round shape of completeness. Family becomes a choice. And despite her father’s adamant decree that she never “tell anyone that [she] had an aunt” (314), Kingston’s choice is clear: she chooses to redraw the shape of her family, and “after fifty years of neglect, [she] alone devote[s] pages of paper to her [aunt]” (315).

At the end of the dinner banquet, I become a make-shift family photographer, tasked with coaxing and coordinating Allen’s dozens of relatives into the viewfinder of a digital camera the size of a credit card. Like a galaxy of aimless stars, Allen’s family floats in and out of my camera lens, a swirling mass held together by the gravity of Chinese tradition. Once in a while, his relatives beckon me to join them in the photo, and I look as if I belong there, another branch of their ever-expanding family tree.

But I wonder if my awkward smile betrays the choice I have made. Growing up, my mother told no stories of forgotten aunts who brought unspeakable shame to my family. But she did present me with a conundrum of choice like the one Kingston faces. While Kingston, in making her decision, struggles to maintain her ties to the immigrant world of her parents and the Chinese-American world of her youth, my choice is much simpler. Traveling three thousand miles from home, my mother abandoned our ancestors for the freedom of a foreign land. I bear no burden of family, no need to piece together untranslatable Chinese traditions into my American life. Kingston observes roundness in all facets of her life, in “the round moon cakes and round doorways, the round tables of graduated size that fit one
roundness inside another, round windows and rice bowls” (313); my round empty plate, at each and every dinner banquet, like all the symbols and superstitions that are supposed to dictate my life, is absent.

When the festivities finally die down and the leftover food has been carefully packed and distributed in Styrofoam containers, Allen’s relatives exchange good-byes and slowly shuffle out of the banquet hall in heavy coats, heading off in the wintry darkness of 8th Avenue toward their cars. Allen and I are last to leave the banquet hall, falling behind his parents and brother, carrying our own cartons packed with chicken and lobster. I take one last look at the banquet hall, and the choice I think I have made comes full circle. Each round table bears the remnants of his family’s mirthful celebration, empty tea pots, half-eaten pieces of fruit and cake lying in the silence of the vacant restaurant. I marvel at this emptiness, the emptiness of the holes my mother tore open in our lives, the emptiness of “the unspeakable,” the emptiness of freedom, of choice (309).

Sometimes my mother tells me that she’s glad I spend time with Allen’s family, glad I’ve found what she’s never been able to give me—a complete family. But I’m not too broken up about not having eight million relatives. I’m short eight million noisy, judgmental people who would poke their heads into my life to tell me they do not accept me. I will probably never be like Angela and pour tea for everyone. Secretly, I hate drinking tea; it burns my tongue and the roof of my mouth. My Chinese vocabulary will probably never expand past the handful of words I know how to use today, and it will probably always be augmented by English phrases. And my family will probably always be half-round. Why would I want to limit myself to a circumscribed family anyway? There are more than eight million people in the world, and my could-be relatives occupy only a “coin-sized” roundness in a much larger whole (313). My half-family, as Kingsolver would say, is a “big empty pot” (278). I’m just waiting to throw something of my own into it.

WORKS CITED
