Chapter Title: OPENING TOPICS: Reading Chinese Fortune Cookie

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Book Author(s): LUMING MAO
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OPENING TOPICS
Reading Chinese Fortune Cookie

Chineseness becomes an open signifier, which acquires its peculiar form and content in dialectical junction with the diverse local conditions in which ethnic Chinese people, wherever they are, construct new, hybrid identities and communities. Nowhere is this more vigorously evident than in everyday popular culture. Thus, we have the fortune cookie, a uniquely Chinese-American invention quite unknown elsewhere in the Chinese diaspora or, for that matter, in China itself.

(Ang 35)

As a descriptive catch-all term, “hybridity” per se fails to discriminate between the diverse modalities of hybridity, for example, forced assimilation, internalized self-rejection, political cooptation, social conformism, cultural mimicry, and creative transcendence.

(Shohat 110)

I pause and struggle already—even before I start—over how I should proceed or in what forms I should present my thesis and advance my argument. Should I situate myself right away in European American rhetorical tradition where I assume a direct, logical, and agonistic persona—so that I can stand a better chance of being recognized, understood, and eventually accepted? Or should I enact and adopt, not a minute too soon, some other rhetorical approaches or tropes that are not informed by, or implicated in, the directness paradigm or the ideology of individualism? More specifically, can I present my arguments, say, with indirection, in small increments over time and/or through repeated analogy and allusion? Or can I completely do away with subheadings within each of my chapters and keep other transitional signposts to a minimum so as to gesture toward high-context communication (Hall 79)? Or can I even try some other strategy, say, by throwing in some Chinese along the way, or by flouting, as I have already done in the title of this book, some grammatical convention in English in order to create togetherness-in-difference? As I reflect upon these questions, upon the opposing opportunities these questions imply,
I find myself somewhat being sucked into, or involuntarily re-inscribing, a discursive dichotomy—one that I very much want to reject, and replace with this project at hand. Can I, therefore, develop a narrative that moves away from this shadowy dichotomy and that serves as another living example of *Chinese American* rhetoric? Is it rhetorically appropriate, in other words, to try to define and articulate an object of study (i.e., the making of Chinese American rhetoric) with a narrative that is inextricably infused with and deliberately constituted by the same object?

My apprehension and my hesitation are not without merit, I am afraid. Not only because I am acutely mindful of my own space—in both its literal and metaphorical sense—where different traditions and competing voices cannot help but speak and listen to each other within some highly asymmetrical relations of power, but also because I cannot shake off the dire warning Pratt gives in her “Arts of the Contact Zone,” of the indeterminate, often perilous, status that can be the fate of such narrative (37). The stakes are high, and the consequences are huge. However, like Hall and Ames (*Anticipating China* 119), I know I may never “get it right,” but I also know that I cannot let this realization stop me, and that I cannot let my own apprehension or hesitation handicap my action, stifle my narrative. In short, I must “get on with it” even as I continue to pause, to reflect, and to persuade.

It is perhaps not surprising to see emergent discourses trying to define themselves in terms of their uniqueness in relation to other, already-established discourses. Such effort, to a large extent, is in response to a traditional demand for identification, for a stable system of reference that serves as signs of discrimination and distinction. Emergent discourses that secure their uniqueness from this kind of internal coherence help counter potential skepticism and remove miscomprehension or incomprehension. They create a sense of authenticity and authority when they begin to be heard and listened to as unique discourses—though, it must be stated, such discourses are not necessarily equal in discursive value to other competing or more dominant discourses. Before too long, hopefully, they could achieve stability and identity—both of which seem essential if emergent discourses want to shed the status of being “emergent” and to secure the status of an established discourse. The question, then, becomes this: Should the making of Chinese American rhetoric exhibit this idealized growth pattern or follow this uncomplicated teleological trajectory? Put in a slightly different way, should Chinese American rhetoric be expected to demonstrate, or to be constituted by, what I call “uniqueness-quà-coherence?”
Definitions of rhetoric vary relative to, for example, historical periods and social and technological contexts—not to mention rhetoricians’ own ideological and ethnic commitments. In this global context of ours, rhetoric, for me at least, represents the systematic, organized use and study of discourse and discourse strategies in interpersonal, intercultural contexts, reflecting and reinforcing rhetoricians’ own ideology, their own norms of discourse production and discourse consumption, and their ability to persuade, to adjust, and to realign. In light of this definition of rhetoric, one may want to devise for Chinese American rhetoric a core set of discursive features that could be viewed as internally coherent and that could be realized by different forms of enunciations or representations in particular contexts and practices. In other words, one may expect Chinese American rhetoric to be able to show its own unique characteristics—that are consistently different from other rhetorical traditions and from their corresponding manifestations—in order for it to achieve both visibility and viability. For example, Chinese American rhetoric, whatever discursive features it may end up commanding, must be Chinese American enough so that it can be coherently differentiated from, say, African American rhetoric or Native American rhetoric.

The process of differentiation, unfortunately, is never an innocent one: it always embeds a likely risk of differentiating one tradition according to or in relation to the norm of some other tradition. In light of our recent experiences, the latter regularly turns out to be more recognized, more dominant, and it is invariably aligned with the powers-that-be. It is not unusual at all, as a result, to find out that such a norm enjoys a wider circulation and a longer disciplinary canonization. In fact, to all intents and purposes, it is the widely circulated, the perennially canonized that persistently serves as the interpretive example of general applicability in spite of its apparent unmarkedness. One conceivable outcome from this kind of differentiation and evaluation is a body of knowledge that, however coherently distinct, reproduces this hierarchical relationship or this existing order of discourse. Ironically, of course, it is this existing order of discourse that emergent discourses are purported to challenge and transform in the first place—so much so that it can become both possible and viable to think and communicate outside such an order, outside its (largely invisible) discursive rules and categories.

My effort to conceptualize Chinese American rhetoric without reverting back to the dominant tradition as its measuring norm coincides with, and in fact draws inspiration from, a growing number of projects that aim to articulate and to conceptualize emergent ethnic rhetorics as
sites of difference, as transformative practices, and as viable alternatives to the oft-invisible, but no less dominant, European American rhetoric. These projects are predicated more on their own terms than on the terms of European American rhetoric, or on the terms of what Glenn calls “the male-dominated and male-documented rhetorical tradition” (10). As alternative, transformative rhetorics, they “challenge and put pressure on traditional canons of rhetorical thought” and they “give voice to those whose discursive acts have gone unrecognized within Western culture” (Gray-Rosendale and Gruber 3). By “reading it [the rhetorical tradition] crookedly and telling it slant,” and by making “the unfamiliar familiar and the familiar unfamiliar” (Glenn 8), these efforts make what used to be invisible rhetorical experiences visible and consequential, and they transform what used to be at best marginalized players into legitimate, viable contenders.

A word of caution is perhaps in order here with respect to our characterization of emergent ethnic rhetorics as “alternative,” as “transformative.” First, the use of the term “alternative” to characterize emergent ethnic rhetorics is not without problems. Gray-Rosendale and Gruber are mindful of the fact that “no rhetoric is fully ‘alternative’ but always both rewrites the tradition and inevitably becomes part of it” (4). Nevertheless, they see alternative rhetorics as significant in their own right because they “advance a critical counterpoint to the tradition” and they “expand the territory of what constitutes students’ and teachers’ perceptions of rhetoric and rhetorical texts” (4–5).

On the other hand, there is a paradox lurking here that may have escaped Gray-Rosendale and Gruber. Given the fact that words hardly ever shake off their past (Austin, “A Plea for Excuses” 201; Gee, Discourse Analysis 54), the use of “alternative” acknowledges, and in fact reproduces, a hierarchical division between (the dominant) one and the (subordinate) other—because it is precisely such division that motivates the emergence of an alternative as the “disruptive” other. Such division further risks marginalizing the alternative/the other given the value differential evidenced in cultural capital that each element in this division represents and delivers. The use of “alternative” may also imply, however incorrectly, that its counterpart (read as the dominant or the mainstream) is pure and stable, and that it is otherwise immune from alternative influences or infiltrations. As a matter of fact, though, the emergence of any rhetoric, whether it be alternative or ethnic, in part owes its genesis both to the internal divisions and instability experienced by its counterpart and to an environment where discursive differences
cannot be fully dissolved and where the process of assimilation is filled with elements of resistance.

Second, to view emergent ethnic rhetorics—like Chinese American rhetoric—as transformative in relation to European American rhetoric should not be taken to suggest at all that the latter is monolithic, rigid, and unchanging. After all, rhetoric is about discourse production and discourse consumption in particular communities and environments. As I have proposed elsewhere, since European American rhetoric, like any other rhetoric, changes over time, it might be more accurate to view such (dominant) rhetoric as consisting of certain clusters of discursive features on a discursive continuum, and over time new clusters or new alliances emerge that can overlap with the old (Mao, “Re-Clustering” 114–15). Such discursive clusters are likely to give rise to codified expressions and patterns that serve as preferred, though unmarked, modes of communication for people in positions of power. It is the same group of people that have a stake in ensuring the continuity or stability of these discursive features—because the latter help encode and reinforce a pattern of assumptions, beliefs, values, and interpretations of the world by which these people operate (Foss 291). On the other hand, these “institutionalized” features may not necessarily reflect or square with ever-changing, multi-faceted practices on the ground—even though, ironically, individuals or people of lower social status might rely on these features or these discursive constructs to read or critique their own divergent behaviors, thus perpetuating the existing power imbalance. To appropriate Bizzell (“The Intellectual Work” 3), it is the privileged social position that has remained constant and that has in turn allowed such discursive constructs to count as European American rhetoric.

Effective as these alternative, transformative articulations might be in contesting the normative powers of the dominant rhetoric, their effectiveness cannot be achieved, I want to suggest, by appealing to rhetorical uniqueness, by claiming an abstract pattern of coherence. Similarly, the making of Chinese American rhetoric cannot be realized through rhetorical uniqueness-qua-coherence. Not only because there is none to be had, but also because such a move leads to at least three problems.

First, rhetorical uniqueness is evidently predicated upon the importance of being different. But the notion of “difference” deserves some critical reflection. Renato Rosaldo, in *Culture and Truth*, criticizes the methodological norms in ethnographical studies that conflate the notion of culture with the idea of differences. For him, the term “cultural difference” becomes just as redundant as that of “cultural order,”
because “to study a culture is to seek out its differences, and then to show how it makes sense, as they say, on its own terms” (201). In this regard, the notion of difference poses a problem because such differences can never be absolute and because they are only “relative to the cultural practices of ethnographers and their readers” (202). Further, an exclusive focus on differences risks obscuring the dynamics of power and culture. For example, there are those who are culturally less visible, but enjoy enormous power to perform this kind of cultural analysis and to evaluate differences according to a (preferred) norm. And there are those who possess rich culture but wield no power, and who are only supposed to be dissected and disseminated (201–2).

Further, any discussion of difference—be it cultural or rhetorical—has to deal with the effects of difference, too. That is to say, there is a difference—no pun intended—between those who set out to identify differences only to contain their effects with, say, a metaphor of “otherness,” and those who perceive such differences not simply as the object of interpretation, but as “the active agent of articulation,” as possessing the power “to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse” (Bhabha, Location of Culture 31). In other words, any recognition of rhetorical differences pertaining to Chinese American rhetoric, or to any other ethnic rhetoric for that matter, does help challenge rhetorical homogeneity or the norms of European American rhetoric. However, if such recognition presupposes an insistence to maintain a boundary because of these differences, and to frame them within an overall boundary of a nation-state, we then run the risk of reduplicating a power dynamic that would probably make it quite daunting, if not impossible, for Chinese American rhetoric to be heard and listened to on its own terms.

Second, internal coherence is based on an assumed boundedness, in this case on a belief that Chinese American rhetoric can be cleanly set apart from other ethnic rhetorics and that it can be interpreted or illuminated as a self-contained system of signs. Drawing upon leading cultural thinker Ien Ang’s provocative work, I see our appeal to such a belief almost as analogous to claiming an essentialized Chinese identity in a postcolonial nation-state, because both—the belief and the claim—would be “tantamount to overlooking the complex, historically determined relations of power” (Ang 13). These relations of power inevitably shape and contaminate the making of Chinese American rhetoric, as the latter has come to be constructed in relation to Chinese rhetorical tradition, on the one hand, and European American rhetorical tradition,
on the other. These complex interrelationships are fraught with uncertainties, ambiguities, and contradictions—so much so that Chinese American rhetoric can never be unique, not only because there is no internal coherence to speak of, but also because it is always in a state of adjusting and becoming, both in relation to its “native” (Chinese) identity and in relation to its “adopted” (American) residency. And the process of adjusting and becoming is forever infused with its own tensions, struggles, and vulnerabilities, within the context of each and every borderland speech event.

Third, if “our everyday lives are crisscrossed by border zones, pockets, and eruptions of all kinds” (Rosaldo 207), and if “we are all implicated in each other’s lives” (Anzaldúa 243), the making of Chinese American rhetoric is no exception. It is hopelessly intertwined with other ethnic rhetorics, because its voices and aspirations can easily find resonance and empathy in the chambers of other people’s hearts both at crossroads and across space and time. Moreover, any on-going efforts for Chinese American rhetoric to stake out rhetorical uniqueness through internal coherence may in fact betray a nagging anxiety, both distorted and revealing, to validate its existence by, ironically I might add, clinging to a European American ideal of “a bounded, distinctive, and independent whole” (Geertz 59). Just as such a whole is in fact always both situated and “distributed,”6 so the making of Chinese American rhetoric cannot be not situated and distributed—in the sense that it is always located in particular, specific contexts, and that it always operates at many different but interlocking levels informed or implicated by both Chinese and European American rhetorical traditions. Not only is this ideal of a “coherent whole” deeply flawed, but also any stabilized, unique characteristics could quickly become candidates for stereotyping and for easy reproduction.

How do we, then, move beyond uniqueness-qua-coherence? How can we articulate the making of Chinese American rhetoric without incurring these problems? I think the answer to these questions may be found in the Chinese fortune cookie—not so much in the “good fortune” it regularly dispenses as in the ways in which it evokes and embodies two distinctive traditions.

I often give out Chinese fortune cookies to my writing students at my own school. Not that I necessarily believe in the ability of good fortunes inside Chinese fortune cookies to lift up the spirits of my students, but that I see these fortune cookies as a generative analogy for the kind of rhetoric I want to articulate and promote both for my students and
for myself. Crispy, sugary, and dumpling-shaped, a Chinese fortune cookie serves as the finale of, and in fact represents a constitutive ingredient/ritual of, a Chinese meal in Chinese restaurants in America. We would probably feel cheated if we didn’t get served with fortune cookies at the end of such a meal. While we may indulge ourselves in eating a fortune cookie, we may not be cognizant of the two traditions it faithfully represents. On the one hand, the fortune cookie represents a centuries-old Chinese tradition of using message-stuffed pastry as a means of communication—a tradition that started in fourteenth-century China as a covert means to share information and to get organized without being detected by the authorities. On the other hand, serving dessert at the end of a meal is a European American tradition, because the Chinese traditionally do not eat dessert at the end of a meal. That is why we do not find fortune cookies in restaurants in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Europe at all—and we don’t feel cheated either for not eating them at the end of such a meal over there.

In a sense, the Chinese fortune cookie becomes a product of contradictions: it is born of two competing traditions and made viable in a border zone where two cultures come into contact with each other and where gastronomical narratives are punctuated by rhetorical performances. At the same time, the Chinese fortune cookie makes no effort to mediate these two very different traditions or to deny each its own history and its proper place in a Chinese meal. On the contrary, the two traditions are allowed to co-exist with each other in every single Chinese fortune cookie, which in turn has served its dual function faithfully—both to initiate a fortune-sharing communicative activity and to remind its participants that it’s time to pack their bags.

While I know how quickly one can overextend the significance of any useful analogy, I cannot help but submit that the making of Chinese American rhetoric bears an unmistakable resemblance to the birth of the Chinese fortune cookie—a resemblance stemming not so much from any shared essence between them as from the associations they invoke with both Chinese and European American traditions. I draw comfort, too, from Ien Ang who, as indicated in the first epigraph for this chapter, also appeals to the Chinese fortune cookie in her efforts to highlight how Chineseness takes on new form and content in its new, diasporic environment. Like the Chinese fortune cookie, the making of Chinese American rhetoric is born of two rhetorical traditions, and made both visible and viable at rhetorical borderlands as a process of becoming. It is this kind of rhetoric that I want to develop and advocate in this book, and beyond.
A word or two may be entered at this early juncture to clarify my use of “Chinese American.” By characterizing this emergent hybrid rhetoric as *Chinese American*, I do not intend to suggest that only Chinese Americans use and experience this rhetoric. Rather, it can be used and experienced not only by Chinese Americans, but also by Chinese, European Americans—or any other individuals for that matter. At rhetorical borderlands, which have become increasingly more visible and geographically less confined, Chinese, Chinese Americans, and European Americans can participate in the making of Chinese American rhetoric, as long as Chinese and European American rhetorical traditions are being brought together and as long as relations of power continue to make their presence felt in the process.

Further, the realization of Chinese American rhetoric can be observed by *either* our success in achieving those “articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings” (Massey 154) *or* our failure to engage, to overcome silence and prejudice—almost like one can observe an existing rule by either honoring or breaching it. Chinese American rhetoric can be realized not only by our own (successful or failed) practices, but also by our reflections of others’ experiences—be the latter articulated, silenced, or embedded in their own historical, social, and linguistic contexts. These reflections enable us border residents to imagine what is like from the other tradition’s perspective—whether it be Chinese or European American—and to interrogate its discursive practices and material conditions. In the process, our reflections and our interrogations help cultivate and nurture a subject position that negotiates between two rhetorical traditions and that challenges and contests the discourse of essentialism and duality. They in fact become, I submit, the stuff that Chinese American rhetoric is made of.

In addition, the making of Chinese American rhetoric does not necessarily embody the “growth pattern” in which it evolves from an emergent ethnic rhetoric to an established one. Nor does it necessarily follow the model in which it could be passed from generation to generation to a point where it may become indistinguishable from European American rhetoric. As a process of becoming, Chinese American rhetoric may not settle into a discourse of established or blurred identity any time soon. The reason is perhaps straightforward: not only will relations of power remain highly asymmetrical for a long time to come, but also communication at rhetorical borderlands will continue to be inflected with ambiguities, uncertainties, and even contradictions. In a word, contingency and contestation are almost immanent to the making of
Chinese American rhetoric insofar as there are border residents at rhetorical borderlands.

Let me now start with the concept of border zones or borderlands, which Rosaldo and Anzaldúa talk about and which I have so far referred to only briefly. In her preface to the first edition of *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa characterizes borderlands as “physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (19). And Giroux describes the borderlands as a space “crisscrossed with a variety of languages, experiences, and voices” that “intermingle with the weight of particular histories that will not fit into the master narrative of a monolithic culture” (209). In fact, we can go so far as to say that we all now live at borderlands, given the fact that this world of ours has become increasingly interconnected and interdependent. It is at these borderlands, both literal and metaphorical, that Chinese American rhetoric, or any other ethnic rhetoric, has the potential to become visible and viable, though the risk is equally great of it becoming “frozen for inspection” (Rosaldo 217) or not getting listened to and heard on its own terms—a point to which I will return shortly. Not because Chinese American rhetoric can achieve its uniqueness and thus legitimacy through coherence at the borderlands, but because the borderlands provide a generative space where, Ang writes, “fixed and unitary identities are hybridized, sharp demarcations between self and other are unsettled, singular and absolute truths are ruptured, and so on” (164). To describe the matter another way, the borderlands become, in the words of Bhabha, a “third space” that “enables other positions to emerge” and “sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives” (“Third Space” 211). As a result, Chinese American rhetoric can gestate and coalesce at these spaces. It can begin to yield multiple acts—of signification, ambiguity, as well as contradiction—creating identities that are implicated in the old relationships and indicative of the new ones. As such discourse emerges as a creative and viable form of communication, these in-between spaces become both highly rhetorical and intensely interpersonal.

Anzaldúa further characterizes borderlands as “vague and undetermined,” as places that are “in a constant state of transition” (25). For her, too, borderlands are both metaphorical and physical: they are places where the mestiza “operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned” (101). And these are places where divergent thinking is
taking place, “characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes” (101). Further, her own experience of living on the borderland between Mexico and the United States, of claiming and celebrating this mestiza status, is not a matter of desire, but one of survival and resistance (Ang 166). Rhetorical borderlands are no exception: they are vague and undetermined, not only because they are in transition, in movement, but also because there is always, for each discrete communicative act, an excess of meaning yet to be processed, yet to be fully grasped. It is this excess of meaning, both in its production and in its consumption, that further aggravates this sense of ambiguity, indeterminacy, and vulnerability.

I cannot help, at this moment, but recall experiences, both my own and others’, of reading fortunes inside fortune cookies in Chinese restaurants in America. More often than not, our fortunes, be they terse predictions, pithy proverbs, or Confucian sayings, tend to be “happy” or “auspicious.” However, we never fail to fret over, perhaps half seriously, the unspoken, the silenced, and the yet-to-be-decoded. We know that there is always a nagging “but” ready to punctuate the good fortune popping out of every fortune cookie. Take, for example, this apparently auspicious prediction, “You shall never worry about wealth in your life”—one that pops out often from fortune cookies we eat at the end of a Chinese meal. But such fortune is no less burdened with an excess of meaning that could quickly deflate the happy moment. “Does that also imply,” a good friend of mine once reminded me, with all seriousness, as I exhibited some jealousy for not getting such good fortune at regular intervals, “that the person in question is not going to be around for too long?” While I refuse to subscribe to this kind of ominous reading, I have become more cautious about, or less boastful of, the happy fortunes I have come into possession of these days because of their potential ambiguity, indeterminacy, and vulnerability. And as I move back and forth between gastronomical narratives over the import of fortunes stuffed inside fortune cookies and discursive experiences felt and realized at rhetorical borderlands, I have become all the more mindful of how unsettled or indeterminate the process of production and consumption can be—which presents, in turn, both opportunities and challenges.

Rhetorical borderlands bear an unmistakable family resemblance to what Pratt calls “contact zones.” Contact zones, according to Pratt, are “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other,
often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (“Contact Zone” 34). At the same time, contact zones provide, she suggests, creative energy for new forms of expression, and one such form is what she calls “autoethnographic text”—where “people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (35). That is, autoethnographic texts, composed by conquered others, are “in response to or in dialogue with those texts” that Europeans have constructed of their conquered others (35; emphasis original). These texts are outcomes of “a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or the conqueror,” and they are “merged or infiltrated to varying degrees with indigenous idioms to create self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding” (35). These autoethnographic texts, while representing “a marginalized group’s point of entry into the dominant circuits of print culture” (35), have to negotiate with both metropolitan audiences and indigenous or local discourse communities. Thus, their fate can be highly indeterminate, if not perilous: they could suffer “miscomprehension, incomprehension, dead letters, unread masterpieces, absolute heterogeneity of meaning” (37). In short, autoethnographic texts are “a phenomenon of the contact zone”—similar to, Pratt tells us, the process of transculturation whereby “members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (36). And I might add that this process of selection and invention by subordinated others is always filtered through their own particular experiences, through their own historical memories, and through their own “terministic screens” (Burke, Language 45).

Rhetorical borderlands create and nurture new forms of expression, too. That is to say, rhetorical borderlands make it possible for Chinese American rhetoric to be created and to be experienced. Like autoethnographic texts, Chinese American rhetoric may face similar perils ranging from misunderstanding, to misrepresentation, to wholesale rejection. At the same time, Chinese American rhetoric does not just “select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (Pratt 36). Rather, it selects and invents from both Chinese rhetorical tradition and European American rhetorical tradition, and it engages these two traditions in a way that may blur boundaries and that may disrupt asymmetrical relations of power. Such rhetoric may further enable its border residents to take the other’s perspectives as seriously as one takes one’s own (Rosaldo 207)—however antagonistic or ambiguous the other’s perspectives may sometimes turn out to be.
Caution must be exercised here. As a metaphor, “borderland” or “contact zone” is likely to be heir to some of the ills that affect most, if not all, metaphors. Generally speaking, the use of metaphor allows us to represent or understand one kind of experience or concept in terms of another (G. Lakoff and Johnson 5). Further, our understanding or representation is normally focused on one particular aspect of that experience or that concept. So, by stating that “Argument is war,” one is singling out the battling, winner-taking-all aspect of arguing, while neglecting or overlooking other aspects or characteristics about arguing (10). As we all know, in almost any sincere argument there is the basic need to demonstrate one’s willingness to understand the other’s point of view and to be cooperative in securing each other’s uptake. And take “Time is money” as another example. By comparing time to money, we are highlighting the economic, monetary aspect of time so that we can put our time to good use, to generating economic capital. But in doing so, we are obscuring other aspects that are perhaps just as important to our understanding of time—such as the fact that time normally cannot lead to greediness and corruption, but money can, or the fact that time does not fluctuate in value, but money does. Therefore, the use of metaphor is never total, but always partial, incomplete, and inflected with a particular orientation or ideology. As G. Lakoff and Johnson rightly point out, “if it were total, one concept would actually be the other” (13; emphasis original).

In Imperial Eyes, Pratt tells us that she borrows the term “contact” from the phrase “contact language” used in linguistics. Contact language refers, in linguistics, to an improvised language that develops in places, such as ports, trading posts, plantations, and colonial garrison towns, where most speakers have no common language.14 By using the term “contact,” Pratt aims to “foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination” (7), and she wants to treat such relations between colonizers and colonized in terms of “copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices” (7).

However, as we embrace the promises of this metaphor, Hall and Rosner remind us, we tend to gloss over its perils or to overstate “its potential for cultural mediation” (103). Or as Ang points out, there is a clear inclination “to value, if not celebrate and romanticize notions of the borderland, the ‘third space’, the liminal in-between” (164). More bluntly put, borderland or contact zone tends to be imagined “as a utopian site of transgressive intermixture, hybridity and multiplicity” (Ang
For Hall and Rosner, this kind of characterization reflects a desire to stabilize and tame what is otherwise a dynamic concept—a position that I share. However, the dynamic, processual characteristic they ascribe to the definition of Pratt’s “contact zone” does not stem from her own revisions of the concept in her subsequent work as they seem to be suggesting. Rather, what has emerged from Pratt’s later work is a more focused effort on her part to address “highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (Imperial Eyes 4; also see 7) and to highlight “how differences and hierarchies are produced in and through contact across such lines [of difference]” (“Criticism” 88; emphasis original). Likewise, the making of Chinese American rhetoric is necessarily dynamic amidst some highly asymmetrical relations, not because the concept of rhetorical borderlands is “in the making” (Hall and Rosner 103), but because the making of Chinese American rhetoric is always a process, an instance of comings-to-be.

For Ang, this celebratory, romanticized inclination simply fails to recognize that borderlands or contact zones are “not a power-free site for unrestrained and heteroglossic dialogue and exchange, but a contested terrain where concrete, differentially positioned subjects have to forge particular strategies to speak and to be heard” (169). Even in a most idealized speech situation, where cooperation is assumed and expected (Grice 26), there is still this matter of the transfer of meaning, which, following Grice again (31–37), is to be accomplished not by securing a one-to-one correspondence between words and meanings, but by calculating whether or not the (ideal) speaker means more than or other than what he or she says. In places like rhetorical borderlands, it should come as no surprise that efforts to communicate and to make oneself understood become exponentially more problematic and contentious.

In light of these cautionary observations, we should then resist any move to idealize rhetorical borderlands as simply liberating, empowering, or equalizing, because we can’t lose sight of the partiality and incompleteness immanent to the (metaphorical) image of rhetorical borderlands or contact zones. After all, borderland heterogeneity and interlocking co-presence, while potentially transformative, may very well in the process aggravate—rather than alleviate—communication and mutual understanding.

There is another related question I must address at this point. Namely, is it then appropriate to view the making of Chinese American rhetoric at rhetorical borderlands as an example of hybrid rhetoric, given the fact that it is constituted by both Chinese and European American rhetorical
traditions? It is perhaps reasonable, and even logical, to view Chinese American rhetoric as a hybrid because it indeed invokes and involves two kinds of rhetorical practices and their underlying traditions. However, just as the characterization of any ethnic rhetoric as “alternative” may have already marginalized it relative to its dominant counterpart, so the use of “hybrid” to characterize the making of Chinese American rhetoric engenders its own problems—problems that have to be confronted and properly dealt with if we want to achieve a more informed understanding of Chinese American rhetoric as a borderland rhetoric.

To be blunt, the use of “hybrid” as a borderland image may foster an illusion that the creation of hybrid rhetoric will contribute to a discursive harmony, which in turn will make our border-crossing experiences both easier and more risk-free (Bizzell, “Basic Writing” 7–8). By definition, the term “hybridity” entails the emergence of things new or different out of two or more heterogeneous or incongruous sources (The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed.). Or, as R. Young puts it, it implies “a disruption and forcing together of any unlike living things” (26). Not only does the term suggest the “impossibility of essentialism” (R. Young 27), but also it can represent a promising response that mediates the real and potential differences between its (two or more) originating sources. Therefore, the making of Chinese American rhetoric as a hybrid can serve to fuse or synthesize differences evidenced in these two individual rhetorical traditions. The fact that Chinese and American rhetoric are now mixed into and contained within one single, if not unified, whole called “Chinese American rhetoric” suggests at least a blurring, if not erasure of, rhetorical hierarchies and discursive boundaries.

However, it is quite easy, Ang reminds us again, to “extol uncritically the value of hybridity without carefully understanding its complexity and its contradictions” (194). It is indeed tempting to tout an emergent hybrid like Chinese American rhetoric as a symbol of “harmonious fusion or synthesis,” which Ang dubs “liberal hybridism” (195). But such optimism fails to recognize the basic fact that differences or divisions may not be completely erased, no matter what. And as my second epigraph by Shohat indicates, the hybrid as a symbol of happy fusion fails to consider or discriminate those specific power relations and historical conditions that configure our encounters and that determine the natures of our hybridity—not to mention the fact that any hybrid, like Chinese American rhetoric, once stabilized into a harmonious whole, can simply be overwhelmed by the dominant tradition, given the unequal, imbalanced power relationship that exists between them (Dobrin 46–47, 51).
Then, there is this (intractable) problem with the use of metaphor. The characterization of Chinese American rhetoric as a hybrid in this context of rhetorical borderlands is metaphorical and quite appealing. For one thing, the image of a hybrid certainly blurs the boundary between two rhetorical traditions. For another, it can lead us to recognize the inescapable impurity of all rhetorical traditions. But as I have suggested above, the use of metaphor is inevitably partial because it keeps us from focusing on those other aspects of the same concept that are often incommensurable with the metaphor in question. In this case, the image of a hybrid, when applied uncritically to the making of Chinese American rhetoric, simply abstracts different histories and experiences from situated practices. That is to say, the image of a hybrid severs the concrete link between different histories and experiences and their corresponding particularizing contexts, but it is precisely the intermingling of these two sides that produces and informs the particular manifestations and distinctive experiences of Chinese American rhetoric. Herein actually lies a paradox: the image of a hybrid purports to transcend *situated* rhetorical differences and dominance, but it is the situated, the specific, that grounds our experiences and that underpins our complex forms of participation.17

By opening up the problems and complexities associated with the term “hybridity” or the image of a hybrid, I am not suggesting that we reject the term or the image altogether—because that would be almost like fighting a losing battle, given the fact that we are all implicated in each other’s lives or that we live in what Ang calls “complicated entanglement” (194). In other words, hybridity is here to stay.

For the last several years, I have been attending the annual party sponsored by my local Chinese American community to celebrate Chinese New Year. I enjoy the food, the company, and the festive atmosphere. The highlight, for me at least, has to be the performances that showcase Chinese culture and tradition, performances that I look forward to every year. But I am also no less eager to see how the organizers every year mix the show with performances that celebrate European American culture and tradition as well. So, in one year I watch Chinese American and European American girls perform jazz and tap dances together, to be followed by Chinese folk dance featuring a group of Chinese students wearing authentic ethnic Chinese costumes. In another year, I become almost mesmerized by a group of local high school American students performing Chinese martial arts (武术, “wushu”)18 with both grace and precision, and their performance is preceded by twelve Chinese
American couples participating in ballroom dances accompanied by Chinese traditional folk music.

I marvel at these mixed performances—examples of hybridity—but I also wonder what they mean exactly to these performers and to the spectators. Could they mean that cultural differences can be overcome and traditional boundaries crossed? Could they also mean that multiracial harmony can be attempted and indeed become quite successful—at least at these levels and on these occasions? While I am not a skeptic by nature, I cannot resist asking, in my heart of hearts, if there are tensions that cannot be reduced or if there are differences that cannot be fully absorbed. And what are some of those specific conditions or power relations that have motivated these performances and that have shaped, if not forced, other encounters and their hybrid consequences? I begin to feel ambivalent about these performances, and I begin to feel even vulnerable—because I am just as implicated in these performances as my fellow performers.

I marvel at the image of the Chinese fortune cookie, too, because it is nifty and real, and because it literally embodies a happy fusion of two traditions—one uses message-stuffed pastry as a means of communication and the other serves dessert at the end of a meal. But I also begin to spot the rupture and fission sneaking up on this fusion. For example, the Chinese fortune cookie, while it considers America its “home,” is no less attached to a Chinese tradition, because it is always known as the Chinese fortune cookie. And although the fortune inside is regularly written in, and communicated through, American English, their consumption has never been fully disengaged from a (superstitious) Chinese frame of mind operating in the background. Such signs of tension are almost irreducible, ready to disrupt the harmony projected by the otherwise coherent fortune cookie. In spite of this newly-found awareness on my part, the Chinese fortune cookie, insofar as I can tell, continues to serve its dual function without missing a beat.

What should we do, then, with hybridity, with the making of Chinese American rhetoric being characterized as a hybrid rhetoric? In view of the complexities and challenges made real by the discourse of hybridity, Ang writes:

What we need to question, then, is not so much hybridity as such, which would be a futile enterprise, but the depoliticization involved in the reduction of hybridity to happy fusion and synthesis. I would argue that it is the ambivalence which is immanent to hybridity that needs to be highlighted,
as we also need to examine the specific contexts and conditions in which hybridity operates. (197; emphasis original)

It is these "specific contexts and conditions" that I am most interested in uncovering in the making of Chinese American rhetoric. And it is both the ambivalence and vulnerability—which are in fact constitutive of hybridity—that I am committed to elucidating.

To begin to examine these "specific contexts and conditions in which hybridity operates," we must first recognize that there will be times when instances of incommensurability become irreducible. In fact, we should not treat discursive encounters at rhetorical borderlands as living examples of how differences from two incongruous traditions can now co-exist in a new, benign hybrid. Rather, we should seize such encounters or moments of co-presence as an opportunity to trace the complex past that has informed their respective experiences, and to recover the different paths each has traveled to arrive at this borderland destination. After all, rhetorical forms are never innocent, and they always encode particular stances, situated modalities. In so doing, we can begin to see and address those particularizing aspects and their underlying structures that a metaphorical hybrid may very well hide or elide.

Second, the making of Chinese American rhetoric as an emergent hybrid should not be seen as an occasion for celebration, because there is nothing to celebrate. To bring back Anzaldúa again, to practice Chinese American rhetoric at rhetorical borderlands is not a matter of desire, but one of survival. Because identity continues to be privileged as "the naturalized principle for social order" (Ang 200), hybridity is still seen as problematic, as anomalous, even though, paradoxically, it is almost everywhere in our world now. In this regard, we should mobilize Chinese American rhetoric as an emergent rhetoric to address and deal with this paradox. We need to highlight the fact that our rhetorical practices are forever entangled now, and that our identities are being shaped and nurtured by a multitude of interrelationships, by a web of interweaving movements. To the extent that we succeed, we can then begin to challenge "the fundamental uneasiness inherent in our global condition of togetherness-in-difference" (Ang 200; emphasis original).

Third, while I have no intention of diminishing the dialogic opportunity the making of Chinese American rhetoric presents, I don’t want us to overlook the fact that hybridity is also “about the contestations and interrogations that go hand in hand with the heterogeneity, diversity and multiplicity we have to deal with as we live together-in-difference”
To put it more matter-of-factly, at rhetorical borderlands where there is more than one language, more than one culture, and more than one rhetorical tradition, if nothing else, the basic question of communication never goes away in terms of who has the floor, who secures the uptake, and who gets listened to. Therefore, unless we are prepared to deal with these challenges and complexities inherent in the making of Chinese American rhetoric, or any other emergent ethnic rhetoric, we may end up either idealizing the making of Chinese American rhetoric or overlooking altogether how tensions between two traditions become manifested in particular, specific practices. In short, what I intend to focus on in this book is a rhetoric that seeks not uniqueness-qua-coherence from within, but complexity, heterogeneity, and ambiguity from both within and without—from a space where different rhetorical practices meet, clash, and grapple with each other, and where their encounters are always inflected with highly asymmetrical relations of power. While there may not be any recognizable logic to its formation, there is a lot of authenticity in its representation, in its expressiveness, in its articulated moments. It is, to use Ang’s felicitous term, “togetherness-in-difference”—rather than harmony-in-difference—that becomes constitutive of the making of Chinese American rhetoric.

If the making of Chinese American rhetoric is now about togetherness-in-difference, one major question remains: How should we border residents actually go about practicing or realizing this togetherness-in-difference as we enter into these highly asymmetrical relations of power? Or how can we effectively negotiate this co-presence of two rhetorical traditions—deeply inflected with their own historical identities, with their own modalities—without either underestimating their inherent challenges or idealizing their combined creative potential? Critical discourse analysis, in my view, may provide some helpful perspectives over these paradoxical moments.

Critical discourse analysis views language as a type of social practice, as a socially conditioned process (Fairclough 18–19). Any communicative action—an example of discourse—involves not only a text, but also a corresponding process of production and consumption to be completed in social context. As a matter of fact, it is social context that serves to influence and to determine the process of production and consumption (20–21). Consequently, any text, be it written or spoken, is no longer seen as an innocent instrument of representation, but as the discursive performance of socially situated speakers and writers who are necessarily connected to
the process of production and consumption, on the one hand, and to the structures of power and domination, on the other (Kress 85–86).

In fact, critical discourse analysis aims to put into crisis, or denaturalize, these kinds of connections. More precisely put, it seeks to problematize those underlying “common sense” assumptions that “rationalize” these connections (Fairclough 76–77, 88–89). To the extent that these “common sense” assumptions act to disadvantage, to control, particular groups or subject positions at a given moment in society, critical discourse analysis seeks to effect change “not only to the discursive practices, but also to the socio-political practices and structures supporting the discursive practices” (Kress 85). In this sense, it is unabashedly partial, and it becomes, in my own words, “discourse analysis with an attitude.”

At rhetorical borderlands, we border residents are deeply situated and our rhetorical practices are intensely social. We therefore face enormous constraints, for example, on what we say, on what relations we enter into, and on what subject positions we occupy. In turn, such constraints exert structural effects on how we form our knowledge and beliefs, on how we establish our social relationships, and on how we cultivate our social identities (Fairclough 38–39, 61–62). However, Fairclough reminds us, constraints are enabling, too. That is to say, socially situated participants are “only through being so constrained that they are made able to act as social agents” (32), and in fact being constrained, for Fairclough, is “a precondition for being enabled” (32). In this regard, we still have to act as subjects in order to draw upon discourse types and patterns to perform our own speech acts, to enter into or deal with particular relations, and to engage with representations that others have made of us (Pratt, “Contact Zone” 35). Through these instances of interaction and interrogation made possible by borderland heterogeneity and multiplicity, we can begin to challenge and to put pressure on these constraints and on these asymmetrical relations of power—though we should have no illusion that differences will disappear because of co-presence. More importantly, we can begin to represent and name our borderland experiences with our own voices, with our own hybrid rhetoric—a necessary first step toward creating new cultural, discursive realities.

There is another paradox that we may experience in practicing togetherness-in-difference. As I have suggested above, the making of Chinese American rhetoric involves the process of selecting and inventing from both Chinese and European American rhetorical traditions. On the other hand, we may not be free all the time in (performing the act of) selecting and inventing from these two traditions or from
their specific practices—whether our purpose is to facilitate everyday communication or to initiate social transformation. To put it bluntly, borderland choices can be quite limited, and borderland access can be very restricted—herein lies the paradox.

Critical discourse analysis recognizes this kind of paradox, too. As Kress points out, the available linguistic—and rhetorical I must add—forms have been formed by past interactions, which are imbued with power differentials and which are filled with preferred, canonical structures or patterns. As a result, no linguistic, rhetorical forms are neutral or immune from their own histories and precedents (90; also see Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 54). There also exists this urge, regularly embraced and actively promoted by the dominant culture in society, to standardize or to foreclose on meaning potential in order to forestall the potential of meaning heterogeneity.21 In addition, the value of a word very much depends on the relationship of that word to all other related words in the same cluster or in the same discursive field (Fairclough 78–79).22 For example, the value of the word “individualism” depends on and is indeed made complete by other related terms, such as “rights,” “independence,” “personal property,” and “democracy.” Together, they form their own cluster, and together they convey a set of meanings particular to the discursive field they inhabit.23

However, texts or communicative behaviors don’t just instantiate prior meanings embedded in a single word, in a cluster of words, or in a stretch of utterances. Rather, texts or communicative behaviors enact their own meanings and engender their own associations between participants and in particularizing contexts. Similarly, what makes Chinese American rhetoric enabling and generative is not so much the birth of a hybrid as what I call “the occasion of use,” which makes the birth of a hybrid both possible and potentially promising. That is to say, the occasion of use necessarily ascribes agency—however constrained—to us border residents, and it yields new meanings—however limited—to each and every communicative process. In fact, it is through these recurring occasions of use that we cultivate new ways to think of ourselves, of others, and of our world.

I often grow restive, if not defensive, whenever the subject of conversation turns to Chinese fortune cookies. My past experience tells me that in spite of its present-day ubiquity, the Chinese fortune cookie continues to inspire a sense of exoticism, and it continues to generate a discourse that shows both an appreciation of the other and a desire to frame the other in a context that often is not its own. For some individuals, it seems, a Chinese fortune cookie can only become “palatable” if it is “peppered” with this kind of discourse.
I invariably want to challenge this kind of discourse because it simply fails to represent the Chinese fortune cookie. I want to tell this “migration story” about these two traditions inside or behind the Chinese fortune cookie, and I want the Chinese fortune cookie to be represented not as some detached, exotic artifact, but as an example of cultural hybrid that is both unified and contradictory. But I am also nervous, because I don’t want my narrative to be misconstrued as just critiquing this discourse of vacillation. While it is a critique, the narrative is also my sincere attempt to narrate, as directly as possible, a history for the Chinese fortune cookie and to trace the path that it has traveled. Not infrequently, I feel unsure of its uptake by my interlocutors.

I worry about the fate of Chinese American rhetoric, too. As an emergent ethnic rhetoric, Chinese American rhetoric, like other emergent minority voices, challenges a society “that espouses universalistic, univocal, and monologic humanism” (JanMohamed and Lloyd 1). To the extent that it does, and to the extent that it serves to empower its users and to enhance their agonistic effectiveness, its (oppositional) significance should be valued and celebrated. What becomes problematic is when we treat Chinese American rhetoric simply as an oppositional discourse, as a mode of resistance to the dominant rhetoric. As I have argued above, the making of Chinese American rhetoric is promising because it represents a hybrid that serves to blur the boundary and to destabilize the binary between the dominant and the subordinated. To come back, then, to set up Chinese American rhetoric only as an oppositional discourse may detract from, however inadvertently, the very attempt to challenge the discourse of duality and to articulate the positive values of Chinese American rhetoric or its togetherness-in-difference.

Here it is useful to reflect on JanMohamed and Lloyd’s efforts to ward off attempts to view minority discourse as simply oppositional or antagonistic. For them, that is to say, “an emergent theory of minority discourse must not be merely negative in its implications” (8; emphasis added). Rather, such theory should articulate the positive practices and values embedded in the works of minorities, and it should further reaffirm that “even the very differences that have always been read as symptoms of inadequacy can be reread transformatively” (8). So should, I suggest, the making of Chinese American rhetoric. As a matter of fact, Chinese American rhetoric as an emergent rhetoric cannot be treated only as an oppositional discourse, because it is always in the state of constant negotiation and adjustment and because it is always attended by this fluid,
dynamic process. It is best, therefore, to characterize Chinese American rhetoric as a rhetoric of becoming.

Almost opposite of this treatment is a liberal desire to endorse and embrace Chinese American rhetoric or any other emergent ethnic rhetoric as part of an on-going drive to promote multicultural rhetorics. While I am not necessarily opposed to multicultural rhetorics, I do want to address a few problems that this kind of embrace and inclusion seems to have ignored or pushed into the background.

The emergence of multicultural rhetorics represents a serious attempt to challenge rhetorical homogeneity and to recognize and validate the need for different rhetorics and their communities to co-exist with each other. But it does not address the complexities as well as uncertainties that necessarily arise when these different rhetorics come to interact with each other as they have to. Drawing upon Ang’s critique of multiculturalism, the promotion of multicultural rhetorics is almost based on a rhetorical fantasy that “the social challenge of togetherness-in-difference can be addressed by reducing it to an image of living-apart-together” (14; also see 138–49).

Further, the inclusion and celebration of rhetorical diversity by multicultural rhetorics does not solve the asymmetrical relations that remain between the dominant rhetoric and other emergent ethnic rhetorics, such as Chinese American rhetoric. To be sure, multicultural rhetorics are predicated upon an understanding that differences should be encouraged, included, and embraced—an understanding that should be applauded and encouraged on its own. The question, though, becomes this: Who is giving and who is receiving this encouragement, this inclusion, and this embrace? And is this process unidirectional or bidirectional? It seems clear that it is still the dominant rhetoric that does the giving, whereas emergent ethnic rhetorics serve as passive recipients. In other words, the embrace and inclusion promoted by multicultural rhetorics are not without conditions and constraints—not to mention the fact that “new” rhetorics can quickly be framed or contained within the old paradigm, multicultural rhetoric or not. Absent any immediate solutions to such problems, I feel increasingly ambivalent about these “additive” moments in our desire to celebrate pluralism in general, and about any specific efforts to add Chinese American rhetoric to multicultural rhetorics in particular.

I think Pratt is right when she warns us of the complexities and perils in connection with the reception of autoethnographic texts at contact zones. As I have been arguing so far, such complexities and perils attend, in more ways than one, Chinese American rhetoric at rhetorical borderlands. As an example of “complicated entanglement” (Ang 194), the
making of Chinese American rhetoric is intensely performative as two different rhetorical traditions come to grapple with each other amidst some highly complex relations of power. And Ang is equally right when she reminds us that rhetorical borderlands are filled with contestations and interrogations because of their immanent heterogeneity, diversity, and multiplicity (200). At the same time, I want to emphasize the importance of being reflective, being able to imagine what it is like from the other tradition’s perspective, as we participate in these contestations and interrogations. Indeed, reflection is a must at rhetorical borderlands, and it must go hand in hand with our complicated entanglement. Otherwise stated, our practices of togetherness-in-difference have to be coupled with the ability to interrogate ourselves, to imagine what our practices may look like from the other side, from the other’s perspective.

To be reflective in these kinds of moments is more than just professing our own position or ideology—a familiar move regularly adopted in personal narratives these days. That is to say, it must be acknowledged that we always start from somewhere in the making of Chinese American rhetoric. More bluntly put, we usually start from where we are, and with terms, concepts, and lived experiences that are close to our (ancestral) home and tradition, to which we often claim a real or imagined allegiance. Wittingly or unwittingly, we take part in this (constrained) creative process at rhetorical borderlands by relying on our own tradition, on our own primary Discourse.26

There is more. To be reflective also means taking ourselves beyond admitting where we initially are and examining where we have been. To put it more directly, we must reflect on how we use our own lived experiences to engage the unfamiliar, to grapple with the other’s representation of us, and to direct our critical gaze at discursive experiences and material conditions that constitute the other rhetorical tradition (read as European American). By using our own “terministic screens,” so to speak, we can better assess and engage its history, its underlying ideology, and its entangled relationship with our own (Chinese) rhetorical tradition. Self-reflection, as a result, helps yield an awareness of differences between these two traditions without any “exaggerated notions of uniqueness and incommensurability” (Ang 175) and without any assumed or imposed notions of hierarchy and superiority.

In a word, to be reflective is to refuse linear progression and closure as the only mode of representation. Indeed, each reflective moment begets another, and each process raises the level of understanding, and further enriches and perhaps complicates subsequent reflection. To draw upon...
Bakhtin, just as each situated utterance is “a link in the chain of speech communication” (“Speech Genres” 93), so each on-going reflection is related not only to preceding, but also to future reflection. Together they become a form of meta-discourse as well: they serve as a running commentary that unpacks the history and ideology of each embodied tradition and that critically reflects upon the tensions, ambivalences, incommensurabilities, as well as the creative potentials, at the point of contact when one tradition meets with the other and when, to appropriate Geertz, “experience-near” and “experience-distant” concepts are brought together into simultaneous and interconnected view (57, 68–69).27

Allow me to return to the analogy of the Chinese fortune cookie to conclude this chapter. If my reading so far offered of Chinese fortune cookies is persuasive enough, it is fair to say that no shared attributes have existed or have been developed between the tradition of using message-stuffed pastry as a means of communication and that of eating dessert at the end of a meal. At the same time, the lack of commonality between the two has not prevented both traditions from sharing a joint membership that emerges out of, and further solidifies itself through, each and every Chinese fortune cookie—in spite of those tensions and contradictions inherent in almost any hybrid product.

Likewise, the making of Chinese American rhetoric as an emergent hybrid involves and embodies two very different traditions. However, these two traditions have also established an emergent joint membership in a space that is inhabited by asymmetrical power relations, crisscrossing movements, and co-existing but divergent voices. Further, Chinese American rhetoric is made possible through contestation, interrogation, and reflection. In fact, this kind of interactive process can be characterized as an example of “heterogeneous resonance.” By “heterogeneous resonance,” I mean that while there is no shared essence between these two traditions, there is a great deal of proximity-induced interaction and realignment. Further, these instances of interaction and realignment are tied to each particular speech event or to specific acts of communication,28 and they are realized through competing voices and through ambivalent yearnings. In the process, they contribute, in ways big and small, to the making of Chinese American rhetoric. In short, it is these borderland moments of togetherness-in-difference that I want to focus on and articulate in the rest of the book. It is these processual instances of heterogeneous resonance that are in fact scaffolding much of my discussion in this chapter and that will soon pervade my discussions and representations in the next five chapters.