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[Andrea Estrada](#)

UCSB Scholar Examines the Figure of the Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature

Anger and bitterness often pervade narratives written by second-generation Asian American daughters, despite their largely unremarkable upbringings.

In her new book, "Ingratitude -- The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature" (New York University Press, 2011), erin Khuê Ninh, assistant professor of Asian American Studies at UC Santa Barbara, explores this apparent paradox, locating in the origins of these women's maddeningly immaterial suffering not only racial hegemonies but also the structure of the immigrant family itself. She argues that the filial debt attached to these women both demands and defies repayment -- all the better to produce the docile subjects of a model minority.

"The term 'debt-bound' is a reference to the feeling of filial obligation, and that for me is the primary, core mechanism that underlies the parent-child dynamic," said Ninh. "It structures the logic of how the parent and daughter are supposed to interact." Ninh argues that the logic is extremely detrimental to the child, not only because of the ways in which it is paradoxical -- unsolvable, irresolvable -- but because it therefore puts the child in a bind from which she cannot escape, no matter how hard she tries or how obedient she is.

"Her life is not hers," Ninh said. "One of the comparisons I make is to the structure of peonage. Your life is already in hock when you're born. So everything you do, whether it's good or bad, adds to your debt. If your life is an investment, everything that builds on that investment is somehow owned by the investor. Or is courtesy of the investor. So nothing that you do -- good or bad -- is really your own."

Through readings of Jade Snow Wong's "Fifth Chinese Daughter," Maxine Hong Kingston's "The Woman Warrior," Evelyn Lau's "Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid," Catherine Liu's "Oriental Girls Desire Romance," and other texts, Ninh offers not an empirical study of intergenerational conflict as much as an explication of the subjection and the psyche of the Asian American daughter. She connects common literary tropes to their theoretical underpinnings in power, project, and subjugation. Literary criticism crosses over into a kind of collective memoir of the Asian immigrant's daughter as an analysis not only of the daughter, but for her and by her.

"There's a hurtful notion to the very paradigm of the debt or debtor that can end up being very harmful," Ninh continued. "The thing about making a child feel that she owes her life to her parents is that it breeds ambivalence about that life as the thing that weighs her down. Her life is the source of her subjection."

That experience may manifest itself in depression. In fact, Ninh noted, studies show that Asian American college students have higher rates of depression and suicide as compared to their peers. And Asian American women ages 15 to 24 have the second highest rate of suicide, just behind Native American women.

Ninh uses the book to explore the emotional pain that seems so illogical. "One of the things I tried to contribute is an explanation of not just what hurts, but why it hurts," she said. These may be hyperachieving families, she noted, in which recognized forms of abuse are not a factor.

"It's difficult to locate the source of pain when there doesn't appear to be anything wrong. The child may feel, 'If nothing is wrong, then why am I hurting? Why is this seemingly innocuous set of discourses or languages pushing me to these kinds of extremes?' Complaints sound trivial, and that only makes it harder to cope."

The book, she continued, is very much an effort to give second-generation Asian American women some language so they can get start their own conversations and speak their own pieces.

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