



# THÈSE

En vue de l'obtention du

## DOCTORAT DE L'UNIVERSITÉ DE TOULOUSE

Délivré par :

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

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Présentée et soutenue par :

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le Samedi 07 Octobre 2017

**Titre :**

An Ecological Return to Harmony in Amy Tan's Novels

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**École doctorale et discipline ou spécialité :**

ED ALLPH@ : Anglais

**Unité de recherche :**

Cultures Anglo-Saxonnes (CAS)

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**An Ecological Return to Harmony in  
Amy Tan's Novels**

To my family.



## Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to my supervisor, Professor Harding who not only gave me the precious opportunity to study at the University of Toulouse and to be in France with my husband, but also directed me with great patience and inspired me in my studies. After many discussions, she suggested that I study the material dimensions of existence in Amy Tan's works. I found that more than other Chinese American women writers whose main concern is cultural conflicts, Tan depicts many things related to human living and questions spiritual and ecological issues. To do a thesis with original and creative ideas, Professor Harding encouraged me to create my own concept of things and recommended me some relevant books, such as: Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of things* and Bruno Latour's works. Inspired by these and other books, I developed the idea of Qi-things and then attempted to study the relation between humans and non-human things in Tan's works in terms of this hybrid concept. When after the first year of study in Toulouse I moved to study with my husband in Bordeaux, Professor Harding not only supported my choice but also kept on exchanging with me by email and Skype. After getting the news that I was pregnant with the twins, she often wrote to me to ask about my health and encourage me to carry on my study. In my thesis writing process, she has always provided useful advice and recommended references whenever I felt confused. In all, without her guidance, I could not have completed my study within five years. It has really been a wonderful study journey under her direction.

Then, I am grateful to the University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès and its libraries where I often studied in the first year of my research. Thanks also go to our lab, Cultures

Anglo-Saxonnes (CAS) for supplying me allowances several times. The secretary of our lab, Madame Hanane Serjouan helped me a lot to deal with the annual registration. And thanks to the director of my husband's research center, Professor MELIN for allowing me to study in their research centre, Centre d'Etude et de Recherches Comparatives sur les Constitutions, les Libertés et l'Etat (C.E.R.C.C.L.E), Bordeaux.

At last, I would like to express gratitude to my husband, Tianhao CHEN who also will complete his doctoral study in October 2017. During these five years, he supported our daughters and me financially with his scholarships from both the Chinese and French governments. He always accompanied and encouraged me whenever I felt desperate and confused. Thanks too to my parents and my parents-in-law who continue to totally support us whenever we need help. Finally I am grateful for my lovely twins Zijin CHEN and Zipei CHEN who make me feel much stronger and believe in myself.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

**Works by Amy Tan cited in the thesis in alphabetical order**

BD:	<i>The Bonesetter's Daughter</i>
HSS:	<i>Hundred Secret Senses</i>
JLC:	<i>The Joy Luck Club</i>
KGW:	<i>The Kitchen God's Wife</i>
OF:	<i>The Opposite of Fate</i>
SFD:	<i>Saving Fish from Drowning</i>
VA :	<i>The Valley of Amazement</i>

# Introduction

## I. Amy Tan and Her Writing

Amy Tan is one of the most well-known contemporary Chinese American women writers; her first novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) won her a world-wide reputation, and her subsequent novels have met with critical acclaim. Born in Oakland, California, and the only daughter of Chinese immigrants, from childhood Tan struggled with the contradictions between her ethnic origins and the dominant western culture of the United States. At home, she encountered strange traditional Chinese customs and parents who had high expectations of her. At school, she was an outsider struggling in the predominantly white American world. Later, as an adult, she claimed that these bicultural tensions marked her childhood and adolescence. In a 1989 interview, Tan told Elaine Woo of the Los Angeles Times: “[Her parents] wanted us to have American circumstances and Chinese character.” When she was fifteen, both her father and her older brother died of brain tumors. Their death had a profound effect on her family as her mother no longer believed in the Christian faith but reverted to Chinese customs and beliefs. As Tan wrote in her memoir,

After my father died, my mother no longer prayed to God.... To counter the curse, my mother began to call openly on the ghosts of her past, she prayed to a painting of her mother. She hired a geomancer to inspect the spiritual architecture; the fengshui of our suburban trait house...my mother still

believed I was sensitive to the other world. She often asked me to use an Ouija board to communicate with the ghost of my father, my brother and my grandmother. (OF 24-5)

Believing that a bad curse would fall on other family members, her mother decided to move. So, the Tan family embarked on a journey to Europe.

Caught in the conflicting pressure to conform to her mother's Chinese traditions and to follow the example of her Western peers, Amy Tan rebelled against whatever her mother said and expected. Without abiding by her mother's wish that she become a doctor or a pianist, Tan studied for a bachelor's and master's degree in English and linguistics. She dropped out of the doctoral program and worked her way through various jobs, such as a language consultant for disabled children and freelance writer. However, when her first story "Endgame" won her admission to the Squaw Valley Writers workshop directed by novelist, Oakley Hall, Tan began her career as a full-time writer.

With her mixed background of western Protestantism and Chinese tradition, her educational background in English and linguistics, her living experiences in Europe, and her extensive readings in contemporary works, Tan has accumulated varied and abundant materials for her novels. Her plural-cultural experience has taught her to consider multiple, conflicting points of view. In a 2013 interview with Joe Fassler, Tan states that "I question everything and yet I am open to everything. My values shift and grow with my experiences...and as my content changes so does what I believe." As a result of her bi-cultural upbringing, Tan holds neither a Western nor a Chinese worldview but entertains

the two in accordance with her experiences and her context. Her dual education has allowed her to form a syncretic philosophy that entertains Eastern and Western viewpoints.

At this point in time, Tan has written six bestselling novels and a collection of non-fiction essays entitled *The Opposite of Fate: Memories of a Writing Life*. In addition to these, she has also published two children's books: *The Moon Lady* (1992) and *Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat* (1994). As this thesis focuses on her novels, a brief introduction to each of those six novels will be presented.

With the publication of her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club* (1988), Amy Tan became a household name. Remaining on the bestseller list for nearly a year, this novel was nominated for the National Book Award and National Book Critics Circle Award. Due to its widespread popularity, it has been translated into at least twenty languages. The novel depicts the experiences of four Chinese-American mother-daughter pairs. The mothers' miserable lives in China are followed by their struggles in American society. Meanwhile, through the quarrels and reconciliations of mothers and daughters, the novel presents issues such as the search for identity, the American dream, acculturation and cultural dislocation.

Published in 1991, Tan's subsequent novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* confirmed her reputation. It addresses the relationship between a Chinese immigrant mother and her American-born daughter. The protagonist, Winnie, the mother, suffers exclusion and alienation from American society. The gap between the China she remembers and the America she inhabits creates a cultural barrier that separates her from subsequent generations. To bridge the gap between generations and cultures, Winnie tells her daughter the stories of

her miserable life in pre-communist China. At the end of the story, as both the mother and her daughter confide their secrets to each other, they reconcile with each other. By depicting the intricacies of the mother-daughter relationship, Tan further explores issues about cultural conflicts, the position of women in patriarchal society and the construction of identity.

Four years later, Tan published her third novel *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Employing multiple settings—twentieth-century San Francisco and a small Chinese village Changmian, as well as nineteenth-century China during the years of the Taiping Rebellion—this novel narrates the intricacies of sisterhood between a Chinese American, Olivia, and her Chinese half-sister Kwan and the friendship between Nunumu and Miss Banner. It is “a novel of contrasts—the story of two sisters, two cultures, two lives, two centuries linked by loyalties and betrayals, love and loss, life and death” (Huntley 113). Apart from exploring issues about the search for identity, ethnicity and cultural contradiction and integration that are familiar to readers, Tan herself claims that the novel is about love, it answers “a question about love, unconditional love.”<sup>1</sup>

Tan’s fourth novel, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, published in 2001, carries on her investigation of the theme of mother-daughter relationships. Exploring the complicated and entangled family lives of three generations, this novel is composed of three parts. The first is about the American-born daughter, Ruth who makes her living as a ghostwriter. After her mother LuLing shows symptoms of dementia, Ruth realizes that her ignorance of her mother’s memories and her past life in China are of great importance. The second part is the

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<sup>1</sup> Giving a reading sponsored by Copperfield’s Books, Tan sates that *The Hundred Secret Senses* “answers a question about love, unconditional love....” See Gretchen Giles’ interview about Amy Tan.

autobiography of the immigrant mother, LuLing. Since she has written her life story in Chinese, Ruth asks someone to translate it and learns the truth about her mother's life in China. This story within a story describes another mother and daughter pair, Precious Auntie and LuLing. The third part of the novel returns to Ruth's point of view. Once she learns the details of her mother's past, she gains a new understanding of her mother and reconciles with her.

Her fifth novel, *Saving Fish from Drowning*, published in 2005, tells a story about twelve American tourists that travel from China to Burma. An omniscient ghost Bibi Chen, the tour leader who dies unexpectedly before the group's planned departure date, narrates the story. Chen's spirit observes everything that happens during the journey. In the Yunan province of China, the ignorant and naive Americans debase a temple where local people practice their religion. When the tour arrives in Burma, members of the Karen tribe mistake the teen-aged boy among the group as "The Younger White Brother" who can save the tribe from the persecution of the army. They kidnap almost all of the tour members and take them to the Unknown Place. There the Americans experience the indigenous people's way of life and eventually reach harmony and mutual understanding with the Karen tribe. Instead of showing cultural conflicts through the mother-daughter relation, this novel treats cultural problems through the clash between American tourists and people from other places. Besides, it gives different perspectives on morality, love and ecological issues.

Inspired by a photo named "The Ten Beauties of Shanghai" which stimulates her curiosity about her grandmother's true identity, Tan centers her new novel *The Valley of*

*Amazement* (2013) on courtesans' lives. This story maps the lives of three generations of women connected by blood, history, and an evocative painting entitled "The Valley of Amazement." The mother Lucia, an American woman leaves her hometown and goes with Lu Shing, a Chinese painter to begin her new life in China. As Lu Shing's family cannot accept her, she makes her living by operating a courtesan house and brings up her daughter Violet by herself. With the overthrow of the Ching dynasty, instead of returning to America with her mother, Violet is kidnapped into a courtesan house and begins her life as a courtesan. After encountering her American lover Edward, Violet lives with him and gives birth to a daughter named Flora who is taken away by Edward's American wife after his death from influenza. But, at the end of novel, these three generations of women reunite and help each other to regain love and hope.

This overview of all her novels makes it apparent that like most ethnic American writers, Tan raises questions about ethnicity, gender and identity. She discusses the diaspora culture as well as the many facets of biculturalism: the cultural dislocation, conflicts and reconciliation between the immigrant parents and their descendants as well as the conflicts between acculturation and adherence to an ancestral tradition. However, she does not confine herself to exploring the lives of Chinese Americans and the mother-daughter relation, she also concentrates on the topics of love and betrayal, on ethical and ecological issues, and on the material dimensions of existence, such as: food, clothing, shelter and so on. Rather than being set apart as a Chinese American writer, she wants to be evaluated by the same literary criteria as her fellow American writers: "She suggested that literary works by minority writers be

evaluated as literature rather than as cultural record” (Huntley 39). According to Huntley, “Tan is an American novelist, and...the immigrant culture about which she writes is an important pattern in the great tapestry that is the United States, just as her novels are a strand in the web of twentieth-century American fiction” (40).

## **II. Critical Reception**

Critics have shown great interest in Amy Tan’s novels since the publication of her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*. Some researchers only focus on Tan’s works. Some compare Tan with other Chinese-American writers or other ethnic writers in order to reveal their own views on the same theme. In all, comments on her novels mainly focus on what we associate with human culture, as follows:

### **A. The Mother-Daughter Relationship**

Many critics focus on the mother-daughter relationship as this theme is investigated in four of Tan’s novels. According to Deirdre Donahue, “No contemporary writer has dug deeper and more effectively into the crucible of the mother-daughter bond: loving, claustrophobic, maddening, inescapable” (USA TODAY 19 Feb. 2001). Responding to the pattern of conflict and reconciliation between mothers and daughters, some critics discuss questions about acculturation and cultural contradictions. Moreover, because of her emphasis on the mother-daughter relation, some critics claim that Tan creates universal themes in her fictions. According to Assunta Ng, “Every mother and daughter ends up holding a little bit of themselves from one another, and that can widen and widen into a deep gulf” (Doten 63). So,

the investigation of mother-daughter relationship in Tan novels not only reflects contradictions and reconciliation between Chinese and American culture, but also offers readers insight into issues about family relations, love and betrayal as well as redemption.

## **B. Post-Colonial Studies**

Many critics have employed post-colonial theories to interpret cultural conflicts and mediation in Tan's fictions. Some critics think that in depicting Chinese cultural elements such as food, ghost images, and Chinese customs, Tan employs "Orientalism" to reinforce stereotypes. In *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, Frank Chin and the editors severely criticize Tan's book for resurrecting the images of a backward East, of fragile women, and of heartless Chinese men who oppress women, which caters to racist prejudices (xii). Sau-ling Cynthia Wong argues that in Tan's stories, China is a "savage" place, where only suffering and misfortune can be found (56). Chen Aimin also "charges Tan with betraying and distorting Chinese culture, employing the theory of Orientalism" (43-48). In Tan's defense, other critics claim that discourses on Chinese originals reflect what Homi Bhabha calls "the Third Space of enunciation" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 37), where cultures can meet, undergo translation and mediation, and create new hybrid forms that bridge the gulf between the exile's former land and the new country. Discussing "Translation and Agency in Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter*," Schultermandl claims that "[Ruth] thus comes to appreciate the symbolic meaning of translation as a vehicle of cultural manifestation of identity and difference at once, much in line with Homi K. Bhabha's intervention of translation as definitive moment of cultural representation, as defined by his

‘Third Space of enunciation’” (174).

### **C. Narrative Strategies**

Tan’s narrative strategy is highly praised by critics. She applied in her first two novels the narrative strategy of “talk story.” The mothers in her novels employ traditional oral forms to shape their stories and transmit to their daughters the remnants of Chinese culture that is fading even from their own lives. In Huntley’s view, “In Tan’s novel, talk story is the narrative strategy for those characters whose ties to Chinese tradition remain strong” (Huntley 32). Besides, “Talk story enables women who have been socialized into silence for most of their lives...to reconfigure the events of those lives into acceptable utterances” (33). Kitty Benedict remarks that such narrative has special meaning for women in patriarchal marriages: “The way out of this bondage, imposed by man’s need to subjugate and deny women their autonomy, is for the memories of mothers to be handed down honestly to their daughters” (10). So, the act of performing the talk story allows mothers to enunciate their miserable life in China and their struggle in American society. This enunciation is an effective way for mothers to liberate themselves from sexual and racial oppression and to bridge the gap between themselves and their subsequent generations.

### **D. The Search for Identity**

As the quest for identity is one of the most significant themes in Tan’s novels, critics have studied it from many angles, including cultural studies, feminist discourse or interdisciplinary research. Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling have study the particularities

of Asian American identity, and they claim that Chinese American women are caught between worlds. Since Chinese American women have no definite homeland, it is essential for them to find a way to solve their diasporic identity. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong brings forward the concept of deterritorialization or denationalization as a response to globalization, in which she presumes the boundaries between different countries are disappearing gradually in the process of globalization. She thinks that cultural identity and ethnic identity are not fixed in Tan's books.

Although critics have discussed Tan's works from multiple perspectives, there are still unusual phenomena in her novels that cannot be explained by the current methods. The most obvious one concerns the agency that Tan gives to ghosts. In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Tan creates a ghost narrator, Bibi Chen who is capable of shifting between a first-person narrator and a third-person omniscient narrator. Then, In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, there is the proof of reincarnation when Olivia discovers the eggs that were buried during the previous existence of her half-sister, Kwan. Some critics might speak about magical realism in connection with these details, but the hybrid theory of Qi-things<sup>2</sup> offers a different explanation in which the magical and the real are never distinct and a non-binary angle can explain these unusual things.

### **III. Approaching Amy Tan's Work through Thing Theory**

Comments on Amy Tan's novels mainly focus on what we associate with human

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<sup>2</sup> In Chinese phonetic alphabet, the Chinese word “气” is qì. Sometimes, it is pronounced as “Chee,” or is written as “chi.” But for the convenience to type, I turn qì into Qi.

subjectivity, ignoring the material dimensions of existence that figure prominently in her novels. Given modern Western culture's anthropocentric bias, in which the subject (*res cogitans*) manipulates the object (*res extensa*) and human beings are superior to things, it is quite understandable that critics focus on topics such as the mother-daughter relation, the importance of language and memory, and the conflicts incurred by living between Chinese and American cultures. However, "...in the context of the so-called 'return to things,' 'back to things' and 'turn to the non-human' which has become visible in the humanities since the late 1990s" (Domanska 171), the question of the interaction between humans and nonhumans can be productively studied in Tan's novels.

As a result of her bi-cultural upbringing, Tan holds neither a Western nor a Chinese worldview but entertains the two. Her work eschews the separation of the subject and the object; instead, both humans and non-humans can be seen as Qi-things. This hybrid concept combines twenty-first century Western "thing-theory" (Brown) and Chinese philosophies about the concept of Qi and the harmony between humans and their environment. Bringing the Chinese philosophy on things into dialogue with the twenty-first century western rethinking of things, this thesis will discuss the traits of Qi-things and how they interact with each other to construct an ecological return to harmony between humans and non-humans, microcosm and macrocosm, as well as harmony within the textual world.

To better illustrate Tan's synthetic concept of things and her thought on the relation between humans and non-humans, I will first offer a brief review of the anthropocentric western tradition and the twenty-first century western revision of "things" as well as Chinese

philosophical attitudes towards things.

### **A. Western Attitudes to Things**

“The western mind has long been dominated by the idea of human supremacy and separateness from nature, rooted in a long tradition of humanism” (Pedersen 237). Since at least the scientific revolution, anthropocentrism has been deeply rooted in western history, and it is at the very heart of modern thought. It is indispensable to the ontological architecture of the sciences, economics and politics. Associated with Renaissance humanism, human-centeredness owes much of its legacy to Cartesian dualisms such as mind/body, mind/matter and human/nonhuman. “Cartesian dualisms reproduce the idea that all humans, as opposed to nonhumans, have a ‘mind’ and possess ‘consciousness,’ which among other things, leads to the human-based ontological claim ‘cogito ergo sum’ (I think, therefore I am)” (Todd 2). “This ontological claim does not just distinguish humans from nonhumans, it has induced a privileged view of human beings in the Western philosophical tradition, one that produced (and produces) an epistemological division within humanist discourse between two essential incommensurable realms: the human and nonhuman” (Nimmo 62). Besides Cartesian dualism, Todd states that “Another notable source of anthropocentric humanist discourse can be found in Enlightenment thought, most specifically in Kant’s work” (2). Through the privileged ontological claim of humans’ superiority over nonhumans, Kant claims that human reason could replace God as the ultimate foundation of morality. “By ushering in the primacy of man from its religious origin in the divine to its secular modern form grounded in human reason and consciousness, both Descartes and Kant not only

reaffirmed the condition of ‘human centeredness,’ but also the domination of humans over nonhumans, a deeply rooted Judeo-Christian convention” (White 1204; Jonge 307).

The western tradition of anthropocentrism is most obviously reflected in a culture/nature dualism, or the ontological separation of people/societies and the rest of nature which “is a modern invention, a product of the scientific revolution and the underpinning of society’s faith in its ability to transform the world in pursuit of progress” (Woodgate 2). However, “this being said, in more recent years, there has been a pronounced ontological and epistemological shift that has decentered the human within the social sciences, and has largely been interpreted as set of critiques of humanism” (Todd 1). As Brown writes in his essay “Thing Theory”: “The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relationship to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation” (4). Thing theory defines “things” in contrast to “objects” and decentralizes human beings by reflecting on human-object interactions in literature and culture. Similarly, the relations between humans and non-humans have been reconsidered from various interdisciplinary angles, such as Bruno Latour’s Actor-network theory, Jane Bennett’s vibrant materialism, Karen Barad’s agential realism and Tim Ingold’s concept of things with life.

A discussion of the similarities and differences of the work in the new materialisms by Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, Karen Barad and Tim Ingold will be a preliminary step in this elaboration of the synthetic concept of Qi-things. Firstly, these scholars interested in “thing studies” have some points in common. For one thing, all of them refer to “Martin

Heidegger's distinction between an object (a material entity present-at-hand) and a thing (a material entity ready-to-hand). Heidegger was interested in useful things that are 'encountered in taking care' and in their being" (Domanska 173). For another, criticizing anthropocentrism and humanism, these theorists refuse the dichotomy between spirit and matter or mind and body and instead elevate things as equally important forms of existence as humans. Apart from their shared ideas, these theories have their own characteristics. An examination of their traits will show their subtle differences.

Bruno Latour argues that the modern era saw "the creation of two fundamentally different ontological zones: that of human beings, on the one hand, and that of non-humans, on the other" (Olsen 95). Latour regards both humans and non-humans entities as "actants" which is "any entity that modifies another entity..." (*Pandora's Hope* 303-8). In his actor-network theory, "both humans and non-human actors can be understood within a network wherein their identity is defined through their interaction with other actors" (Cressman 3). Besides, Latour insists on the agency of things. "The notion of the agency of things does not mean that things have intentions but that things enjoy a particular status in their relations with people" (Domanska 173). Latour has discussed how humans and non-humans execute their agencies in their interactions through various processes of mediation and the formation of collectives.

Drawing on the theories of Lucretius, Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze, and Bruno Latour, political theorist Jane Bennett has also acknowledged widespread agency in living beings and material phenomena. She advocates "thing-power/vibrant materialism" to "dissipate the

onto-theological binaries of life/matter, human/animal, organic/inorganic” (Bennett x). In her view, things are no longer passive or inactive objects but animate or “vibrant matter” with “thing power.” Arising from “bodies inorganic as well as organic,” “thing power” is “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (6). Besides, Bennett enriches her definition of material agency through the notion of “assemblages” borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari. In Bennett’s view, “Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements of vibrant materials of all sorts” (23). She emphasizes that “Each member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency of the assemblage” (24). Although each member of the assemblage has a certain vital force, none of them have sufficient competence to determine the trajectory or impact of the group. The elements of the assemblage collaborate so as to produce distinctive effects.

To criticize the ontological binary of the subject and the object, Latour and Bennett endow non-human things with agency or power and emphasize their interactions with human beings in a network or an assemblage. Comparing ANT and Assemblage thinking, Müller states that “While there are clear parallels between ANT and assemblage thinking, there are also notable differences” (30). And he points out three notable differences between ANT and assemblage thinking. Among these three differences, the first point is the most significant as Müller claims that:

ANT insists that agency is exclusively a mediated achievement, brought about through forging associations. There is nothing outside associations, and to

become capable of action, entities need to form aggregates and find allies to produce an actor-network...With its focus on relations of exteriority, on the other hand, assemblage thinking posits that the component parts of an assemblage can have intrinsic qualities outside associations that impact on and shape the assemblage. (30-1)

Attributing agency to both human and non-human actants, Latour just focuses on how human and non-human actants distribute their agencies while they interact with each other within the network. “As a consequence, seeing the world through associations, ANT has been criticized for being blind to what remains outside associations but may shape them nevertheless” (Müller 31). However, Bennett allows each entity of the assemblage to preserve its own agential impetus outside associations. And based on this point, Bennett’s assemblage “is never a stolid block but an open-ended collective, a ‘non-totalizable sum’” (Bennett 24). So, the assemblage “posits an open-ended set of capacities that is unpredictable and exceeds the properties of the component parts” (B. Anderson et al. 179-181).

Rather than talking about agency, Tim Ingold attributes life to the movement of things. Thinking about things and the entanglement of things from an anthropological perspective, Ingold insists that “the inhabited world is comprised not of objects but of things” (3). He defines the inhabited world as “an environment without objects or, in short, an EWO” (6). “In the EWO, things move and grow because they are alive, not because they have agency” (7). Although they have life, Ingold argues that things do not act singly: “The thing, however, is not just one thread but a certain gathering together of the threads of life” (10).

Ingold returns to Deleuze and Guattari, who insist that whenever we encounter matter, “it is matter in movement, in flux, in variation” (451). He recasts Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “matter-flow” as “material” and exhorts us to “follow the materials” (8). So, Ingold contends that the EWO “is not a material world but a world of materials, of matter in flux” (8). Besides, Ingold also emphasizes the entanglement of things. However, in contrast to Latour’s network of connections, Ingold regards this entanglement as “a meshwork of interwoven lines of growth and movement” (3). Taking the lines of the spider’s web as an example, Ingold states that “No longer a self-contained object, the thing now appears as an ever-ramifying web of lines of growth” (12). So, the entanglement of things does not imply relations among separate entities, but “lines along which things continually come into being” (3).

Approaching the question of things with the insights of quantum physics, Karen Barad claims that matter “intra-acts” rather than forging connections among discrete things. Based on the philosophy-physics of Niels Bohr, Barad develops her theory of “Agential Realism,” a performative understanding of “how matter comes to matter” (801). In “agential realism,” the world is composed of phenomena that are implicated in the dynamics of the intra-actions. Matter is redefined so that it

does not refer to a fixed substance; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity. That is, matter refers to the materiality/materialization of phenomena. The

dynamics of intra-activity entails matter as an active ‘agent’ in its ongoing materialization. (Barad 822)

Without the separateness of subjects and objects, matter is in a process of becoming and mutation and as such it is constituted in intra-action. Because matter is always unstable, in mutation, there is no “ontology” in Barad’s universe. In Latour’s view, agency is designated as an attribute of both the humans and the non-humans. By contrast, Barad’s agency is a dynamic in which things intra-act, rather than something that someone or something has: “Agency cannot be designated as an attribute of ‘subjects’ or ‘objects’ (as they do not preexist as such). Agency is not an attribute whatsoever—it is ‘doing’/ ‘being’ in its intra-activity” (827).

All of these theories challenge the ontological binary of the subject and the object, but they do so in different ways. Latour regards both human and non-human entities as “actants” whose identity is defined through their interactions. To Bennett, there are no inanimate objects but “vibrant matter” with “thing-power.” In Ingold’s concept of things that come into being through their interactions and Karen Barad’s definition of matter as “‘doing’/ ‘being’ in its intra-activity,” there is no separation between humans and non-humans prior to their relations.

Comparing the similarities and differences in these new philosophical definitions of things, we can find that these contemporary theorists are renewing and updating the dynamic, interactive, animated vision of universe that preceded that modern era. This view of reality is consonant with Chinese philosophers’ concept of Qi, a concept that Tan certainly knows

through her interest in Chinese cosmology. Hamilton has discussed how Tan employs Chinese cosmology, such as: astrology, Feng shui and the five elements for characterization and for the development of conflict between Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters in *The Joy Luck Club*. While showing how astrology shapes character and conflict, he states that “Adherents of Chinese astrology contend that auspicious dates for important events can be calculated according to predictable fluctuations of ch’i<sup>3</sup>, the positive life force, which is believed to vary according to the time of day, the season, and the lunar calendar” (Hamilton 128). According to Hamilton, as “the positive life force,” ch’i is the most fundamental substance of all existences. It is indispensable for the harmonious entanglement of things which is the central idea behind Chinese cosmology.

## **B. Chinese Attitudes to Things**

A fuller elaboration of the concept of Qi in Chinese philosophy is essential to define the hyphenated concept of Qi-things. In contrast to the dualistic western tradition of distinguishing man from nature, subject from object, mind from matter, Chinese philosophy has the tradition of emphasizing immanence and unity which leads to monism and the harmony between man and nature, as well as the unity of man and heaven. The mainstream of traditional Chinese philosophy has taken as its main task to demonstrate how heaven is integrated with man. Illustrating the unity of man and heaven, Tang claims that “Mencius, is the first philosopher to propose the idea of the ‘integration of heaven with man’ in a complete sense” (14). Mencius once stated that “do with all your heart, know your lot, and understand

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<sup>3</sup> Qi is pronounced as “chee,” and sometimes is written as “chi.”

heaven'; 'keep up with heaven and earth above and below'"(Tang 14). Another Confucian thinker, Dong Zhongshu advocates the integration of man and heaven as he expressed the idea that "“heaven and man respond to each other”" (Tang 14). Besides, Taoism, the philosophy of the natural and the simple way initiated by Laozi, received a foundation of metaphysical monism from Zhuangzi. Laozi urged: "“Man follows earth, earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows the Way, and the Way follows nature”" (Tang 14). In a similar vein, Zhuangzi said: "“heaven and earth live side-by-side with me and all things on earth are identified with me”" (Tang 14). So, both of them preach the unity of man and heaven, namely Tian Ren He Yi. As an essential term of Chinese philosophy, Tian (heaven) and Ren (human, man) have multiple meanings that can be classified into two types:

On the one hand, there are objective meanings, Tian means heaven, sky and Ren means human, mankind, man. On the other hand, there are subjective meanings, i.e., God, highest ruler (tian); and oneself, one's will, spirit (Ren). But those meanings could be roughly embraced under the term heaven and man, or more broadly, nature and man. Therefore, the unity of nature and man means that they formed a totality of the world, they operated by a certain unified law, and they are controlled by the same force. (Li 1)

The force that links these entities is Qi. "It is through and in the Qi that the human being is in communion with Heaven. Through this one and only Qi, Heaven, Earth and human beings are united and communicate unceasingly" (Kwong 1). Since Qi is essential for the unity of Heaven and man it is necessary to define it, to discuss its functions and to show its

significance in Chinese philosophy. This will pave the way to an illustration of this hybridized concept of Qi-things.

Literally, Qi means “breath,” “air,” or “gas.” Tracing the path of Qi through Chinese philosophy, we can summarize its significance and its historical mutations in three points. The first stage defines Qi as “the most basic material substance forming everything in the universe. It was named yuan qi or “original qi.” It is also known as “yin qi and yang qi.” (Zhang and Rose 23). Philosophers throughout China’s many ages and dynasties have contributed to regard Qi as the most basic material substance: “Wang Chong wrote in the Treatise on the Judgment of Nature (Lun Heng Zi Ran): ‘The qi of heaven and earth flow together and give birth to everything.’” (26). As well as being the material substance that created everything, Qi is the energy or natural force that fills the universe: “It is an all-present and all-penetrating, vivifying, stimulating, creative and transforming force at once strong and gentle, expressible and ineffable, at once a cosmic and human internal and external dynamism” (Kwong 1). Some thinkers conceive of Qi as the energy or natural force, permeating cosmic life and human life. The Qi of human beings is called the “manner of Qi” or the “qualities of Qi.” The weather is called Heaven Qi (*Tian Qi*) because it indicates the energy state of the heavens. The Qi of the gods is called “immortal Qi” or “spiritual Qi.” The Qi of ghosts is called “bewitching Qi” or “evil Qi.” And the spiritual state or morale of an army is called “Shi Qi.” So, as a vital force, the ontological, cosmological Qi also fills and penetrates the macrocosm as well as the microcosm. Since Chinese people consider Qi to be the fundamental substance and the energy or natural force that permeates everything, there is

no separation between subjects and objects in their thought. Quite the contrary, the unity of Heaven and Man or the harmony between man and nature distinguishes the Chinese tradition from the anthropocentric western one.

Among Chinese philosophies, Daoism concentrates on the discussion of Qi and cosmology and asserts the notion that the world begins with Qi. A key passage from the *Dao De Jing* states: “Dao gives birth to One. One gives birth to Two. Two gives birth to Three. Three gives birth to Ten Thousand Things.” In virtue of the following illustration, we can understand that these abstract terms explain how Qi gives birth to everything.

...the *Dao De Jing* records the gist of relationships between the Great Void, that which precedes creation, the dao, yin yang, qi, and every ensuing aspect of creation. The Great Void exists prior to the dao. The Oneness of dao manifests in or ‘gives birth to’ yin and yang, the ‘Two.’ Yin and yang give birth to qi and thus they are ‘Three.’ The eternal interplay between yin and yang, in other words qi, give birth to the Ten Thousand Things----that is, everything. (Zhang and Rose 27)

In a beautiful metaphor, Zhang explains how the movement of Qi shapes the world: “If we interpret the dào as the great river of all existence, then we can glimpse the relationship between qi and dào: qi is the fact and substance of this river’s flow” (27). According to Taoist cosmology, Qi is the most basic material substance forming everything in the universe. Yin and Yang, “the two complementary opposites,” are the inherent traits of Qi. Different from the binary opposite in the western sense, “this opposition is relative, and can only be spoken

of in relationships. For example: Water is Yin relative to steam but Yang relative to ice. Yin and Yang are never static but in a constantly changing balance” (Law and Kesti 4). The interchange of Yin and Yang makes Qi in a harmonious movement that gives birth to the “Five elements”: wood, fire, earth, metal and water. The Five elements, in turn, give birth to the “ten-thousand things.” Qi adheres in all things and beings. Not only natural objects, such as wind, water, fire, but also man-made things, such as houses, food, clothes, along with beings like gods, ghosts, and humans are endowed with Qi. Being a material substance as well as an energy or a vital force, Qi could be regarded as “matter-energy”<sup>4</sup> (Needham 472). Filled with Qi or “matter-energy,” a Qi-thing is not a static entity, but a “vibrant matter” or an active “agent” in the process of becoming. Intrinsic to Qi-things is a vital force similar to the “agency of things” as well as the “thing power” of “vibrant matter.”

### **C. A Hybrid Concept: Qi-things**

Having grown up in a bi-cultural environment, Tan breaks with the modern Western binarism that separates humans from other entities. In her novels, both humans and non-humans could be considered as Qi-things, a hybridized concept which includes not only natural things, man-made things, human beings, ghosts, and immortals, but also elements in the textual world, such as words and images. Endowed with Qi, “matter-energy,” all these Qi-things form and co-define each other through their interactions. Because of the infinite interplay of yin and yang or the diffusion and accumulation of Qi, a Qi-thing is able to

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Needham prefers to leave Qi untranslated, since the significance which it had for Chinese thinkers cannot be conveyed by any single English word. However, if it were indispensable to render Qi into English he calls it “matter-energy.”

transform or transport its own Qi into another Qi-thing and vice versa. Based on these mutual transforming or transporting processes, more than composite entities made up of mind and body, Qi-things are “loc[i] of creative growth within a continually unfolding field of relationships” (Ingold 4-5). They come together in assemblages consisting of multiple, heterogeneous entities joining together to form harmonious, interactive, open-ended, and constantly changing collectives.

Combining Chinese and twenty-first century western thought on “things” with interdisciplinary and cross cultural and anthropological studies, this thesis will discuss this hybridized concept of Qi-things and show how these Qi-things interact with each other in Tan’s novels to construct an ecological return to the harmony between humans and non-humans, microcosm and macrocosm, within the textual world.

The first part of this study examines the interaction of Qi-things through living. The interactions of Qi-things will be discussed in terms of eating, clothing and housing. Eating, clothing and housing constitute assemblages of human and nonhuman elements, all of which bear some agentic capacity. This capacity includes the negative power to resist or obstruct human projects, but it also includes the more active power to affect or create effects. In the mode of eating, human and nonhuman bodies recorporealize in response to each other. Food and things related to eating appear as powerful agents to shape the disposition of characters, to balance characters’ bodies and minds and to mediate human relations from disharmony to harmony. Meanwhile, as assemblages, food and discourses on food appear as sites of mutual transformations in which the border between Chinese and American food, the gap between

immigrant mothers and their subsequent generations, even the conflicts between Chinese and American cultures become blurred: hybrid food images come into being and cultural conflicts are reconciled. As far as clothing is concerned, as Qi-things, the clothes and accessories characters wear in Tan's novels are able to individualize characters through their inherent vital materiality. At the same time, through their interactions, clothes have vital force to state or even to create characters' identities. Besides creating characters' identity, the Qi of clothing acts on the social scene. As most of the stories in Tan's novels happen at the turn of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in China, we can see how the alterations of characters' clothes indicate the transitions in social conventions and social changes. On the subject of housing and furnishings as Qi-things, drawing on Chinese theories of Feng Shui, Yin Yang, and five elements and western theories about housing, I intend to explain how Tan's fictional houses interact with humans as shelters and fluid and hybrid spaces. Specifically, how does the movement of Qi in the house and furnishings affect humans and work as an assemblage? Conversely, how does the Qi of the inhabitants shape their house? Focusing on the multiple fictional dwellings in her novels, we can observe that Tan is eager to search for spatial balance within stable as well as hybrid and fluid spaces.

The second part of this study looks at Qi-things in the wider world: cosmic interactions. I will consider the idea of an ecological return to harmony through two aspects: the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world and the encounter between humans and the spiritual world. In Tan's novels, the disturbances of nature and nonhuman Qi-things are largely depicted to criticize the disruptive consequences of the subject/object

division which advocates the practice of seeing humans and nature as separate and of considering other Qi-things as available for exploitation. Observing the multiple depictions of the intimacy between humans and natural Qi-things in Tan's novels, we can find that humans are porous to the natural world around them, they interchange substances with it, so that humans and the natural world are not in opposition but ideally in communication and harmony. Besides, characters also have encounters with the spiritual world in Tan's work, so we must consider the interaction between spiritual Qi-things such as: "yin people", ghosts, "nats" and humans. Different from conventional western representations of ghosts that create a disturbance in the protagonists' world, Tan's works represent ghosts and other spiritual things are characters in their own right who co-exist alongside and in interaction with human Qi-things. Focusing on the interaction between human and spiritual Qi-things, we will find that these Qi-things assemble many more folds than the "united four,"<sup>5</sup> namely vital gatherings of the earth, the sky, human beings, the immortals and ghosts.

The third part of this thesis deals with the interactions of Qi-things in the textual world. The interaction of Qi-things will be mainly discussed in terms of narration and writing. On one hand, in discussing narration, unlike most of critics who overemphasize the mother's storytelling in Tan's novels, I elaborate on the other-than human narrators and discuss how as Qi-things, they supplement the limits of human narrators in their interactions and play active roles in shaping the text's own narrative and aesthetic expressions. On the

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<sup>5</sup> Heidegger states that the "thinging of the thing" is a gathering that always connects "...the united four, earth and sky, divinities and mortals, in the simple onefold of their self-unified fourfold" (175-6). However, in virtue of the interaction between humans and the spiritual world, these Qi-things assemble many more folds than the "united four."

other hand, in discussing writing, I show that in contrast to the phonocentric view that speech is superior to writing; Tan emphasizes the privileges of written texts and their cooperation with speech. In her works, neither texts nor speech are superior; as Qi-things, they complement each other in the task of narration. Through the interaction between human characters and written and spoken texts and the transmission of different texts, we can see how as Qi-things, different texts exert their vital force to affect humans and display their trait of gathering to move the plots forward and to return the narrative to harmony. In a metatextual development in the novels, the vibrant materiality of writing itself reveals Tan's view of literature.

In contradistinction to commentaries on Amy Tan's novels that concern exclusively human culture, this thesis concentrates on the material dimension of existences that are generalized as Qi-things. Exploring the interactions between human and nonhuman Qi-things, I discover a movement toward the ecological return to harmony in Tan's novels. My study not only opens up a new angle for readers to study Tan's novels or even other ethnic American writers' works, but also it commits itself to encouraging readers and critics to treat works written by ethnic American writers as American novels rather than ethnic cultural records, so as to understand them in their wider dimension.





## **Part One: The Interactions of Qi-things through Living**

Food, clothes and houses are the fundamental substances for humans' living. In their interactions with humans, the Qi of these man-made things communicates with the Qi of humans. So, more than the basic materials for humans to consume, these living materials are Qi-things which are comparable to Latour's "actants" or Bennett's "vibrant matter." Regarding these living materials as Qi-things, we can see how they and humans co-define each other in their interactions and how these living Qi-things affect each other in assemblages of things. The three chapters in this part of my study deal with the interactions between humans and food or things related to eating, between humans and clothing and between humans and housing. In studying these interactions, we can gain insight into the material dimension of Tan's works which is often neglected by literary scholars, and we can also see how Tan shifts from the western tradition of anthropocentrism to the posthuman ontology.

## Chapter One: The Interactions of Qi-things through Eating

Some anthropologists and more recently sociologists have made several important contributions to the study of food. Through food studies, some theorists “have elaborated on the connection between the material (natural) and the human (social/cultural)” (Todd 6). Pierre Bourdieu has had great impact within the subdiscipline of food studies. “His concept of habitus has been influential in how it has shaped scholarly discussion regarding how food is used to define taste, as well as define class and status positions” (7). Focusing on habitus within the context of eating habits (or ‘tastes’) and class, Bourdieu “makes a strong connection between human agency and the material world” (6). Based on Bourdieu’s discussion of taste and habitus, Deborah Lupton has “explored the sociocultural dimensions of food preferences, specifically concentrating on how people develop opinions of what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘bad’ taste; as well as ideas around how food is gendered” (7). According to Todd, however, “these scholars emphasize how humans interact with and are affected by nonhumans, they fall short of committing to the idea of nonhuman agency as possibly existing independently of the will of intentional, self-conscious human beings” (8). More than existences independent from the will of human beings, food and things related to eating in Tan’s novels are equivalent to humans, both of which are Qi-things, intentionally and consciously interacting with each other.

However, other “food theorists have implicitly and explicitly developed nuanced

comprehensions of non-human agency and nonhuman involvement in social networks” (Todd 6). Though Jane Bennett is not a food theorist, in her article entitled, “Edible Matter” (2007), she regards food as vibrant matter that possesses “thing-power” (2). In the third chapter of her book, *Vibrant Matter* (2010), she concludes that, “human intentionality...is not the only actor or necessarily the key operator...food, as a self-altering, dissipative materiality, is also a player” (51). Treating food as “conative bodies” or “actants” Bennett considers food, “inside and alongside intention-forming, morality-(dis)obeying, language-using, reflexivity wielding, and culture-making human beings, and as an inducer-producer of salient, public effects” (39). Besides, “by drawing from obesity studies in the United States, contemporary food writing, and ideas developed by Henry David Thoreau and Friedrich Nietzsche,” she explores “the productive power of food” and “shows how food exerts influence over moods, dispositions, and decisions, and further how food participates in ‘assemblages’” (Todd 20). If obesity is a concern it’s because the American consumer culture focuses on inciting demand in order to make profit. To Bennett, it seems that food as an incentive to consumption takes precedence over other relations. However, in Chinese culture, the consumption of food is a much more complicated social behavior. Based on Tan’s Chinese ancestral background, K. C. Chang’s observation in *Food in Chinese Culture* will be enlightening:

I have pointed out earlier that the Chinese people are especially preoccupied with food, and that food is at the center of, or at least it accompanies or symbolizes, many social interactions. The Chinese recognize, in their social interactions, minute and precise distinctions, and nuances of distinctions, in

regard to the relative statuses of the interacting parties and the nature of the interaction. Consequently, they inevitably use food—of which they are countless variations, many more subtle and more expressive than the tongue can convey—to help speak the language that constitutes a part of every social interaction. (15-16)<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, Chinese culture is more fully conscious of how food daily participates in social interactions rather than being simply matter for consumption. Nevertheless, as Todd points out: “[t]hough people are often aware and take advantage of how food affects us in a fundamentally material sense, our ability to fully account for the agency of food and its effects are often incomplete” (6). Taking food as a Qi-thing provides a good way for me to discuss the agency of food and its effects in Tan’s novels. Specifically, this chapter deals with the subject from two angles: Firstly, I will discuss the vibrant materiality of food and things related to eating. Secondly, focusing on discourses on food, I will consider how the Qi of words and the Qi of food gathers into an assemblage so as to move narratives forward. Itself a Qi-thing, discourse on food reflects what Homi Bhabha calls “the Third Space of enunciation” where the border between Chinese and American food, the gap between immigrant mothers and their subsequent generations, even the conflicts between Chinese and American culture become blurry: hybrid food images come into being in a movement toward the resolution of cultural conflicts.

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<sup>6</sup> Pi- Li Hsiao also quotes this paragraph when she discusses the functions of food imagery in Tan’s first two novels (207).

## **I. The Vibrancy of Food and Things Related to Eating**

Many critics have studied food and things related to eating since they are described frequently in Tan's novels. As Huntley points out,

Food imagery plays a significant role in each separate narrative of [*The Kitchen God's Wife*], linking past and present and future, bonding families and generations, expressing community—and providing a linguistic code that facilitates the retrieval of personal histories from oblivion. Food allows mothers to communicate with their daughters in a common language; food is an emotional homeland for both generations. (59-60)

A number of articles have concentrated on the cultural and social dimensions of food in Tan's novels. Items of food are mostly considered as objects or tools for humans to manipulate. In contrast, I think that both food and things related to eating are no longer only objects consumed by humans but Qi-things that own a vital force. As a Qi-thing, food expresses its vital force as it individualizes characters, serves as a medicine to cure as well as balance humans' bodies and minds or even mediates human relations. Focusing on the interaction between humans and food or between humans and other Qi-things related to eating, I intend to discuss how food as a Qi-thing conveys its nurturing, healing, consoling and mediating power to individualize characters, to save humans' lives, and to mediate human relations from disharmony to harmony.

### **A. Food: a Witness, Individualizing Characters**

Inspired by Emma Parker's view about how Tan uses food images: "Food imagery

saturates the novels and becomes the dominant metaphor...to describe people, landscape, and emotion” (340), Hsiao further discusses how “Tan describes the city Kwelin with a lot of symbols connected to food” and how she employs foods as “similes and metaphors in the portrayal of characters and their emotions” (208-9). When illustrating how food links characters’ emotions, Hsiao takes the example of how Jing-mei’s mother, Suyuan eats an orange slice to vent her anger on Waverly since she is sophisticated and criticizes her daughter’s writing style. Jing-mei’s narrative describes the action of eating by concentrating on sound: “I could hear my mother eating an orange slice. She was the only person I knew who crunched oranges, making it sound as if she were eating crisp apples instead. The sound of it was worse than gnashing teeth” (JLC 206). From Jing-mei’s observation, we can see that her mother treats the orange as an object through her rude way of eating it. Passages such as this one describing the interaction of food and human characters do not readily reveal the agency of food. We see that Jing Mei regards the orange as an inert object that her mother consumes to express her emotions. However, taking foods as Qi-things, and looking at other examples from Tan’s novels, we can see how the Qi of food emanates from its appearance and taste so as to individualize characters.

As the appearance of food contains its unique Qi which is able to fit the appearance or personality of characters, food has the power to characterize the protagonists. In *Kitchen God’s Wife*, the heroine, Winnie’s cousin, Huazheng is nicknamed “Peanut” since she is “small and plump like the two rounds of peanut shell” (KGW 133). The shape of food could describe the figure of characters. Comparing Helen’s appearance to food, Winnie vividly

describes Helen's plumpness: "she was plump, but not in the classical way of a peach whose pink skin is nearly bursting with sweetness. Her plumpness was round and overflowing in uneven spots, more like a steamed dumpling with too much filling leaking out of the sides" (174). Describing Helen's plumpness as a steamed dumpling rather than a peach, Winnie reveals Helen's peasant origins and hints at a certain excess ("too much") in her character.

The saying "you are what and how you eat" acknowledges the importance of food in building character. We could also add that in Tan's work, you are how you eat. The kinds of food characters choose and eat and the ways they cook food are crucial means of characterization. In scenes involving the choosing, eating and cooking of food, the Qi of food and humans interact with each other in a process of co-definition. At a dinner party, as Waverly chooses a big crab for herself, Jing-Mei Woo's mother remarks how "this crab always walking sideways, moving crooked" (JLC 208). In walking sideways and moving crooked, the crab diffuses the Qi of tyranny and imperiousness. Describing Waverly as a crab explicitly reflects her dominating and self-centered personality. On the contrary, Jing-Mei is a selfless person, for she chooses the last crab left. Food thus characterizes the individual protagonists not only through what they choose to eat but also through how they eat and cook.

In describing Helen's way of cooking food, Winnie reveals her friend's "lack of refinement and discretion" (Leduc 18). As Winnie remarks "that (Helen) was good at only those things of laborious cooking tasks: kneading, rolling, stuffing, pinching. As to her sense of taste and smell, I can only say my opinion may not be the same as others" (KGF 199). In

Winnie's eyes, "Helen was never able to understand what was going on in Winnie's life and terrible marriage in China and [she] always got wrong ideas into her head" (Leduc 19). For Winnie, Helen 's deficiency in "sense of taste and smell" underlines her lack of psychological subtlety and sense of observation.<sup>7</sup> Thus, since the Qi of food can be transmitted into humans through its shape and taste and through the way they choose, eat and cook food, food can identify characters' dispositions.

### **B. Food: a Mediator, Balancing Humans' Mind and Body**

As a Qi-thing, food is filled with a life force capable of balancing humans' mind and body or even serving as a medicine to save lives. The Qi of food emanates from its appearance and taste, and it can be seen as a life force. During the wartime, women gather together to play mahjong and eat "special dyansyin foods to bring good fortune of all kinds" (JLC 23). They eat a traditional Chinese food dumpling, as it looks like silver ingots. When the women eat it, they believe it can bring good fortune to them. Since the shape of noodles is very long, eating them means assuring a long life. Juicy oranges mean a plentiful and sweet life. When the women consume these foods, their life force is transmitted to the eaters, assisting them to confront trauma and fear. So, these special foods are no longer only objects for women to consume, but become companions that bring them comfort and relieve their fear of war and death.

Apart from those foods which look and taste healthy, ten silver chopsticks also transmit life force into Winnie. With the same function as a knife and fork, chopsticks are

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<sup>7</sup> Noëmie Leduc expresses the same view (19).

used to eat food in Chinese dietary custom. Wen Fu regards women as “a pair of chopsticks for everyday use” (KGW 282). In contrast to symbolizing objectified and obedient women, the ten silver chopsticks stand for Winnie’s strength. Those ten silver chopsticks are given as part of her dowry. However, rather than being manipulated as tools to eat food, these ten chopsticks are companions, always staying along with her. She gains some power from the chopsticks to fight against her husband’s patriarchal family, and compares the solidity of the chopsticks to her hope and self: “I would feel the weight of the silver resting in my palm, solid and unbreakable, just like my hopes. I would dangle the chain that meant a pair could never be separated, never lost” (151). Like the chopsticks, Winnie’s sense of her own value gradually becomes “solid and unbreakable,” “never lost.” Whenever meeting with difficulties, Winnie brings them out. When she views and touches them, a life force is transmitted to assist her to fight against patriarchal oppression from her husband and to survive in American society. Therefore, rather than tools controlled by humans to consume food, these ten chopsticks are Qi-things, accompanying Winnie and transmitting life force to her whenever she appreciates and touches them.

Apart from transporting Qi through appearance and taste, herbs, when served as a kind of tea, own the power to balance humans physically and mentally when they smell and drink. According to traditional Chinese medicine, herbs have the function to cure multiple diseases and are responsible for maintaining and restoring the body balance. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Kwan remembers a special herb which she used to cook for Miss Banner and describes it: “From special tree, new leaf only, very sticky... Loosen you mind. Make you feel

peace. Maybe give my memory back” (HSS 355). In Kwan’s view, the herb will not only balance mind and body but also, bring back the past of which it constitutes a material fragment. Moreover, as Libby smells and drinks this herb, its Qi transfers into her. She describes how “the mist and sharp scent of the tea waft upward. I hover over the cup, the steam dampening my face, close my eyes, and inhale the fragrance. It has a calming effect” (355). Boiling on the stove, its Qi is transmitted into the mist and sharp scent; when she inhales it, it spreads through Libby’s body and mind and balances them.

Meanwhile, as a Qi-thing filled with life force, food can serve as a medicine to save humans’ lives. In *Joy Luck Club*, An Mei's mother cuts her own flesh to cure her mother. A critic discusses this example to show the Chinese tradition of Confucian filial piety which endows flesh with a cultural or social function. But I intend to discuss the relation between Qi and blood to show the restorative dimension of food. As Qi is the vital substance comprising the human body and maintaining its life activities, to express the moment of death, Chinese people speak of running out of Qi or breathing one's last. According to traditional Chinese medicine, Qi and blood are inseparable. While Qi generates, moves, and holds blood, blood engenders or nourishes Qi. Blood is the mother of Qi. To save her mother, Anmei's mother cuts her own flesh and believes that her blood can nourish her mother's Qi and keep her alive. So, focusing on the physical dimension, we find that blood itself can serve as a medicine to save people's life. This example shows that as a Qi-thing, blood can foster human life.

Besides transforming life force to balance humans’ body and mind and to save their

lives, as Qi-things, foods still can hurt humans based on how and how much they consume. In *Joy Luck Club*, the Eurasian Lena points out that her father “died of a heart attack at the age of seventy-four since he enjoyed his five slices of bacon and three eggs sunny-side up every morning” (JLC 150). According to traditional Chinese Medicine, Qi is the vital life force that flows through all of nature. Harmony of the body, mind and Qi is realized through eating Yin-Yang balanced foods. Yin and Yang are energetic qualities that shape everything in the universe, including humans’ health. The Yin and Yang characteristic of a certain food has less to do with the actual temperature or moisture level of the food and more to do with its energies and how they affect the body. Cool or Yin foods are generally low in calories and high in potassium. Hot or Yang foods tend to be higher in calories, providing more energy and are high in sodium. Eating too much hot or cool food will throw off your Yin-Yang balance and cause adverse health effects. As bacon is high in calories and egg is rich in protein, they belong to Yang foods. Since Lena’s father eats too much Yang foods, his body loses Yin-Yang balance. Therefore, as Qi-things, foods cannot only strengthen people but also have adverse effects on them when they do not consume foods in the proper way.

Kwan, who is ethnically Chinese, criticizes the American eating habits and points out that “the foreigners liked to eat cold and hot things together, very unhealthy” (HSS 155). In contrast to the western diet that combines cold and hot things, the balance of Yin and Yang is essential in Chinese dietary culture, in which each ingredient, taste and cooking method is classified in this system, the resulting dishes having to be completely balanced so as to ensure harmony in the body that assimilates the food. This is particularly crucial concerning the

balance between hot or Yang food and cold or Yin food, which is helpful to reach personal balance both physically and mentally. Thus, Suyuan tells her daughter that “hot things restore the spirit and health,” and June follows her advice to help her depressed father (JLC 209). Moreover Old Aunt counsels Winnie to cure her child Danru by choosing the right beverage: ‘Drink lots of hot things if the sickness runs cold, cold things if the sickness runs hot’ (KGW 334). The female characters ensure Taoist balance and harmony in food just as in their selves and transmit this to their generations. Following their mothers’ advice, the characters balance their hyphenated ethnic and feminine selves.

### **C. Food: a Mediator, Mediating Human Relations from Disharmony to Harmony**

Food plays an essential role in revealing patriarchal oppression of women and mediating the conflicts and reconciliations between mothers and their subsequent generations. In Leduc’s words: “Food is both a tool for and a symbol of women’s alienation. The most alienating factor in gender alienation does not always rely on male characters but rather on the gap between mothers and daughters” (Leduc 53). However, instead of considering food as simply a tool for procuring women’s alienation, I take food as Qi-things with the agency to mediate human relations.

Food bears witness to women’s oppression in both Chinese and Anglo-American patriarchal culture. In *Joy Luck Club*, Ying-ying’s future husband uses a watermelon to represent his sexual conquest of her: “‘Kai gwa?’—Open the watermelon—he said, posing a large knife over the perfect fruit. Then he sank the knife in with a mighty push and his huge mouth roared a laugh so big I could see all the way back to his gold teeth” ( JLC 296). The

process of opening a watermelon vividly expresses his sexual conquering. The destroyed watermelon stands for Ying-ying, whose self has been destroyed by her husband like the fruit. Patriarchal oppression is even more explicit in another food. After marrying WenFu, Winnie learns from her mother-in-law how to cook hot soup for her husband. She recalls that she had to “make him a proper hot soup, which was ready to serve only when I had scalded my little finger testing it” (KGW 168). Whenever Winnie serves a hot soup, her little finger would be wounded for ensuring that he has a palatable dish. So, the cooking of this hot soup as taught by her mother-in-law symbolizes women’s inferiority to men; they must undergo torture and misery from male-dominated society in Old China. What’s more, the oppression of women is perpetuated because of male Anglo-American domination. Lena and her husband Harold work in the restaurant-designing field. Lena’s creative ideas are adopted by her husband to design restaurants which always turn out successfully. She makes a great contribution to her husband’s company, but she is unfairly treated as she is always paid less than other members. Furthermore, Harold’s deep misunderstanding of her past traumas is expressed through food. As a teenager, Lena suffered eating disorders culminating with her eating and vomiting ice-cream after she thought her non-eating had led to a boy’s death. However, as Harold is completely blind to her past traumas, he simply thinks that she never eats ice-cream because she is on a diet.

Apart from revealing the disharmony between men and women, food can mediate their relationship into intimacy. In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, when Moff and Heidi walk straight into the jungle to look for young bamboo shoots and some other foods, they are

fascinated with a red penile-looking plant. After inspecting it seriously, Moff exclaims that it is “Balanophora,” a rare species. It is not only a precious plant but also a Qi-thing, owning vital force to improve humans’ sexual relations and prevent people from death. The Qi of Balanophora is transmitted to humans through its shape. When looking it at first sight, both Moff and Heidi are attracted by its particular shape “the plants resembled crimson bananas growing out of the spongy soil set deep in a pocket of the roots of a rotting tree...The projectiles were the perfect likeness of erect penises with bulbous hoods, and the red color made them appear turgid and full to bursting” (SFD 358). The red penile-looking plant stimulates Moff and Heidi’s sexual desire. The moment they are attracted by this plant, they become fascinated with each other. They cannot help making love in the wild jungle. So, the plant’s great power can bring men and women together. Apart from its shape, which advertises its potency, it possesses inner values that prevent genital diseases. In the Karen tribe, people revere it as “Second Life” since “it was also a preventative against one of the most terrifying and deadly conditions a man could develop, *koro*, which caused the genitals to be sucked up into the body” (363). Thus, as a medicine, this plant also has the healing power to cure men of genital problems. As a Qi-thing, this special plant displays its effects when people view it and take it as a medicine.

In all, as Qi-things, foods not only affect us in social and cultural senses, for example in revealing patriarchal oppression upon women, but also display their agency in a physical sense since a red penile-looking plant can ensure healthy sexual relations.

## II. Discourses on Food as Qi-things

The interaction of food and humans appears not only through the way humans eat, cook and prepare food, but also through their discourses on food. In her study about food imagery in Tan's first two novels, Hsiao points out "[a]nother factor that makes food especially prominent in Tan's fiction is its monologue narratives" (207). These monologue narratives mainly mean Chinese immigrant mothers' talk stories through which their memories about their past lives in China and their present life experience in America are expressed through their discourses on food. In *Joy Luck Club*, the mother, An-mei states, "gossiping and cooking make up the most comfortable time in her life" (JLC 228-29). What An-mei expresses is accordant with Sara Lewis Dunne's view that "food and words are intimately connected as parts of human experience" (1552A). And she suggests that "eating and speaking are closely related because we eat and speak with the same organ, the mouth" (1552A). When characters eat foods and tell stories, the Qi of food and their words interact with each other. Therefore, their discourses on food are Qi-things which have the power to move the plot forward and conjure up hybrid food images so as to reconcile cultural conflict.

### A. Discourses on Food: Moving the Plot Forward

When discussing food and the identity of the text in her master's thesis, Noémie Leduc has illustrated how food functions as "a textual organizing thread" in Tan's first three novels (96). She states that "Food episodes and references do not only open novels or stories within the novels but also close them: they constitute a structural frame within which the novels and their stories are metaphorically cooked and eaten" (Leduc 98). Taking *The*

*Kitchen God's Wife* for example, we can see how discourse on food runs through the whole novel and moves the plot forward.

Huntley notes the structuring role of food: "Among the most pervasive motifs in *The Kitchen God's Wife* is food and the activities that surround its preparation and consumption. In fact, the novel opens and closed with celebratory dinners, and similar feasts and meals mark crucial events in Winnie's story" (93). These feasts are related by two different narrators. Winnie's daughter Pearl describes the opening and closing celebrations that take place in America. In the first chapter, at Bao-bao's engagement dinner, Pearl vividly depicts a scene in which her daughter Cleo "suddenly shrieks and then wails, the half-eaten jellyfish dribbling out from her pouting lips" (KGW 33). Cleo is disgusted with the jellyfish provided by Winnie and her explanation.<sup>8</sup> Unexpectedly, the moment she eats "some fragrant beef" which "tastes like McDonald hamburgers" (33), she stops weeping and chomps delightedly on the beef, neglecting the jellyfish. Since the descendants reject genuine Chinese food, it seems that the cultural conflicts and differences between the immigrant generation and their American-born children are difficult to resolve. While Pearl's discourse on food reveals the cultural conflict between generations, her mother, Winnie's discourse on food and things related to eating bridge this gap. In the end of novel, at Bao-bao's wedding, Winnie conjures up a hybrid tea, named "magic spring" (175). And at last, she creates a status for the eponymous Kitchen God's Wife to protect her daughter. Rather than emphasizing cultural conflict between her and the new generations, in the stories Winnie tells her daughter, memories of food knit

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<sup>8</sup> E. D. Huntley also takes this example to highlight the differences between the immigrant generation and their American-born children (95).

together her memories of China with her immigrant experience, allowing her daughter to understand her hardship in both China and America.

Besides framing the beginning and the end of the novel, discourses on food move the plot forward. As Huntley states “as the novel continues to follow Weili through her transition from young girl to young wife, food outlines the cultural and geographical contexts of her life” (93). To bridge the gap between her and her daughter, Winnie tells her daughter Pearl her stories about her past life in China and her immigrant experience in America. Among these stories, Winnie’s discourses on food are essential since they witness every turning point in her lifetime. Winnie’s discourse on food records her short and happy childhood with her mother. When recounting her childhood with her mother, Winnie thinks of her mother’s favorite food, such as “English biscuit” and “a rare little fish, called wah-wah yu” (KGW 95). Recalling the day that her mother abandons her and runs away from home, Winnie expresses her sadness through her discourse on food. She depicts how “the servant came in with two steaming bowls of syen do jang. You know the one, the salty-tasting soy-milk soup we can get at Fountain Court on the weekend. Last time, Cleo ate a big bowl by herself, no spills” (97). Although the breakfast is delicious, Winnie has no taste for it because of her mother’s disappearance. However, she points out that her American granddaughter devours it without spilling a drop. Taking this example, Huntley states that “[e]mbedded in Winnie’s reminiscence is a culinary thread that connects Shanghai and San Francisco, and links six-year-old Weili in the 1920s and three-year-old Cleo in the 1990s” (96). However, more than a culinary thread, Winnie’s discourse on this soy-milk soup is a Qi-thing which has the

power to transcend time and space so that it connects her mother with her granddaughter.

After her mother's disappearance, Winnie is sent to live with her aunt and uncle on an island. Recalling her girlhood, Winnie describes New Year's preparations in her uncle's family. She recalls that

...I watched Old Aunt in the kitchen. She was ordering the cooks to chop more meat and vegetables. And then she checked all her supplies. She lifted the lids on jars of peanut oil, soy sauce, and vinegar, smelled each one. She counted the number of fish swimming in a wooden bucket, the number of ducks and chickens pecking in the courtyard. She poked the sticky rice cakes filled with date paste to see if they had steamed long enough. She scolded a cook's helper for letting too many clouds of fat float in the chicken broth, scolded another one for cutting strips of squid the wrong way: "Stupid girl! They must curl up into a lucky ball when cooked. The way you've done it, they'll look like leftover strips of cloth. Bad Luck. (KGW 113)

Winnie's detailed description of the food for the New Year's meals indicates how important the New Year's meals are for Chinese people's celebration of the New Year. According to Chinese tradition, to celebrate the coming of the New Year, family members should get together to have a reunion dinner on New Year's Eve. For the prosperity of the family, the New Year's dinner should include food materials with good looks and significance. "The New Year dinner should include fish (魚, yú) which should not intentionally be finished. And the remaining fish is stored overnight. The reason for this stems from a pun, as the Chinese

phrase 年年有魚/餘; (nián nián yǒu yú, or ‘every year there is fish/leftover’) is a homophone for phrases which mean ‘be blessed every year’ or ‘have abundant profit every year’.”<sup>9</sup> Besides, the strips of squid curl up into a lucky ball which is a good symbol since round or circle is a homophone of a Chinese word, 圓(yuan) which means reunion. Therefore, gathering her observation of New Year’s food preparation and the Old Aunt’s criticism on food preparation together, Winnie’s discourse on food is a Qi-thing through which not only has she learned how the shape, taste and symbolism of food effect humans’ fortune, appetite and memory, but also she transmits the Chinese tradition of New Year to her daughter.

Besides the reminiscence of her mother and her girlhood, Winnie’s discourse on food runs through her stories about her married life with her first husband, Wen Fu. As Winnie has learned how to prepare food during her girlhood, she devotes herself to cooking for her husband and his family after they get married. Then, when Wen Fu serves in the air force during the Anti-Japanese wartime, Winnie accompanies him and cooks for him and his fellow pilots. Among those discourses on food, Winnie’s discourse on a special food, eels not only points out the altering geographical contexts of her life but also records the event of the Nanking Massacre which is one of the cruelest war crimes the Japanese invaders have committed in China. As Winnie remembered,

on their way from Nanking to Kunming to escape the Japanese troops, she and her company enjoy a satisfactory meal with piles of eels, ‘thick as fingers’

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<sup>9</sup> This quotation is from Wikipedia, “Reunion dinner.”

(KGW 285)...Nevertheless, when Winnie hears about the massacre the Japanese troops made in Nanking, she feels sorry for those who stay there. She becomes obsessed because, as she is enjoying the delicious eels, people in Nanking are being killed, fingers being cut off to take the rings. In her nightmare, finger-thick eels in dish, still alive, are struggling for life. The image of eels and that of fingers interact. As a result, the sight of, or even the thought of eels dismays Winnie, and deprives her of the appetite for eels forever. (Hsiao 210-11)

The discourse on eels gathers her memories about her past life in China which still have influences upon her appetite and her immigrant life. When Helen suggests that they try a new restaurant that serves “same kind of eels, cooked with chives in very hot oil,” Winnie responds that “I don’t have an appetite anymore for that kind of eels” (KGW 235). And then, she asks her daughter, “Why do some memories live only on your tongue or in your nose? Why do others always stay in your heart?” (235). As a Qi-thing, Winnie’s discourse on eels comes from the heart, providing links between past and present, specifically, resonances in her memory of that miserable wartime which still affects her present life.

Besides, there are many discourses on food in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. As Huntley states: “[f]ood becomes a literary language; gastronomic images and motifs provide Kwan with the means of re-creating her life as Nunumu in the last days of the Taiping regime, as well as with the words to recreate the story of Buncake, the little girl whose body Kwan appropriated long ago after the floods” (131). Taking Kwan’s preserved eggs for example, we

can see how as Qi-things, these preserved eggs and discourses on them make up an assemblage of things that moves the plot forward.

Huntley states that “[t]he preserved duck eggs represent security for Nunumu, who eventually squirrels away ten rows of jars full of eggs, and the eggs become the missionaries’ sustenance when food supplies run short during the Manchu wars with the Taiping kingdom” (132). More than representing security for Nunumu, gathering lime, salt and fresh eggs into a jar, these preserved duck eggs constitute an assemblage full of energy that is vital to life and allows the whole community to survive in the years of starvation during the conflict between Manchu and Taiping.

Meanwhile, rather than simply creating “the opportunity for Nunumu to experience her own romance with Zeng, the peddler who supplies her with jars in exchange for eggs” (Huntley 132), the preserved duck eggs bring back Kwan’s buried memories about her and Olivia’s previous life. “Attempting to nudge Olivia into overcoming her skepticism and traveling with her into the memory of their life together in the Ghost Merchant’s house, Kwan conjures up vivid recollections of the food and meals that she remembers from that existence” (132). On their flight to China, Kwan tells her experiences of preserving duck eggs at that time, but Olivia cannot believe in what she says since she considers those eggs as “make-believe eggs” and thinks that Kwan is indulged in “her illusory world of days gone by” (HSS 189). As Huntley points out that “Kwan’s recollection of those distinctive meals do not evoke any answering reminiscences from Olivia, who listens politely and even interestedly, but disclaims any memory of the meals that Kwan is describing in such detail” (132). I

cannot agree with Huntley's view that Kwan's discourse on preserved duck eggs has no effect on Olivia. Later when Olivia watches as Du Lili places a preserved duck egg into Big Ma's hand, the sight of the egg awakens her memory of Nunumu's preserved duck eggs. Therefore, she races to the burnt ruins of the Ghost Merchant's House and begins to dig near where she thinks the old garden wall might have stood. According to her reminiscence of what Kwan narrated, following her great effort, she soon finds a jar and immediately uses the handle of the hoe to break it open. From that jar, she pulls out one blackened egg after another and hugs them to her chest against which they crumble and disintegrate. For Olivia, the eggs are "relics of our past disintegrating into gray chalk," but she is beyond worry at the loss of the eggs: "I knew I had already tasted what was left" (HSS 396). Huntley points out that "the eggs are the final corroboration that Kwan's stories are records of real events and real individuals; each crumbling egg is the ultimate proof of connections and resonances between one life and the next, between one continent and another one on the other side of the globe" (135). Therefore, as Qi-things, these eggs even have the agency to corroborate Kwan's stories. Meanwhile, as Kwan firstly narrates her experiences of preserving duck eggs at that time and then her story is corroborated by her sister, the discourse on eggs is a way of gathering the past and connecting it with the present and reconciling Olivia with her Chinese sister Kwan.

## **B. Discourses on Food: Creating Hybrid Food Images**

"Food is often hybridized in Tan's novels and provides the opportunity for contact between cultures" (Leduc 41). Leduc discusses the hybridization of food to show three aspects of characters' hybridized identities. Firstly, taking the example of Winnie's father who

orders his servant to bring “English biscuits, Chinese pears, and Belgian chocolates” to eat and of Olivia who orders lasagna to comfort her sister of Chinese origins after the death of her Chinese aunt, she explains that “the hybridizing appearance of Western food in a Chinese cultural context is a source of strength and a sign of support: food is the place of cultural contact, blurring cultural boundaries and bringing people together across cultural differences” (42). Secondly, in the case of June’s discovery of many typical American foods in the refrigerator of a Chinese hotel room, Leduc thinks that “the enumeration of typical Anglo-American food in China underlines the contact and the mixing of both cultures in a mestizo process that modifies and recreates both” (42). Besides, food and language initiate the navigation and openness between both cultures. Rich invites his future mother-in-law, Lindo to go with them to China on their honeymoon and provide translations on food. As food stands for Chinese culture and identity, Lindo can thus metaphorically translate Chinese culture while translating menus, opening the way between both cultures, creating an alimentary and linguistic link: “Through linguistic and food contact, the characters of both groups can even navigate between cultures and superimpose and then mingle them just as they navigate between languages, in a never-ending process of circulation of meaning and identity elements” (44).

Indeed, I find that some hybridized food images are conjured up through characters’ discourse since it is an assemblage of their memories of China and their life experience in America. In *Kitchen God’s Wife*, employing strategies of repetition and detailed descriptions of food and characters’ senses, Winnie’s discourse on food creates some hybridized food

images which are no longer inanimate objects, but Qi-things. The Qi of these food images passes from the mother to subsequent generations; from past to present or even to future as it combines Chinese culture with American culture. Besides, as a Qi-thing is itself a hybridized concept, we can also consider these hybridized food images as Qi-things that mediate the conflicts between mother and daughter as well as cultural differences.

Repetition and detailed description of food play essential roles in reconnecting and remembering the experiences and places that Winnie has left behind.<sup>10</sup> When telling her daughter the stories of her unhappy past, Winnie repeats and explicitly depicts a food image—the dumplings that reflect her memories of China—and filters them through her comprehension of American culture. Jiaozi, called dumpling, remains a traditional dish eaten on the Chinese New Year's Eve. It is also eaten to bid farewell to family members or friends. However, appearing in three different contexts, jiaozi no longer contains its original meaning or reference but becomes something uncertain and ambiguous and available for a new situation. Jiaozi is initially served at Grand Auntie's funeral, expressing Winnie's respect and farewell for Grand Auntie. Furthermore, the image of jiaozi is repeated and depicted in detail to strengthen her memories of China. The detailed depiction in the novel, "chop enough pork and vegetables to make a thousand dumplings, both steamed and boiled, with plenty of fresh ginger, good soy sauce, and sweet vinegar for dipping" (KGW 198), shows that Jiaozi is made, cooked and eaten in the same way as in modern China, but is possessed of different meaning and reference through Winnie's memory. When she relates how she served

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<sup>10</sup> David E. Sutton points out that "the kind of detail and repetition represented by descriptions of meals and cooking note their mnemonic function" (125).

dumplings to welcome her husband and the other pilots home, she reveals the terrible relation between herself and her husband. Winnie states how: “I watched them eat, encouraged them to eat more, teased that I would be in trouble with my husband if more than ten dumplings were left over” (199). This joke about the dumplings uncovers that Winnie suffers oppression from male domination. Even though she makes it into a joke, the oppression she endures under patriarchy is real.

With the introduction of American culture into China at the end of the war, dumplings are endowed with new implications when Winnie expresses her impressions of American foods, exposing her difficulty adapting to American culture. As Winnie remembers, she is invited to attend a dance party held by Americans. At the party, she tastes three kinds of American delicacies.

The first was a soft dumpling, named for its color, brownie—so sweet it made my teeth ache. The second was the necklace food lining the tree, popcorn. It was very dry and scratchy, and my mouth watered, trying to find a flavor. And then I ate a little cracker with something awful on top. Hulan ate one too, thinking that mine had been rotten by mistake. No mistake. That was the first time we ever ate cheese. (KGW 302)

With her memory of Chinese food, Winnie takes brownie as a soft Chinese dumpling rather than a kind of American cake. However, the brownie is so sweet that it makes her teeth ache whenever she eats it. To her taste the food lacks balance that Chinese cooking prizes. Besides, it's also difficult for her to accept the other two items of American food. Her inability to

appreciate the taste of American food shows her difficulty in participating in American society. As an immigrant and ethnic minority, she still suffers exclusion and alienation from mainstream culture in spite of striving to find a place in it. So, under the camouflage of remembering her past, Winnie's discourse on American foods not only reflects cultural differences but also records her suffering in the encounter with American culture. Without hearing about Winnie's reaction to American food, her descendants are eternally unable to comprehend her internal burdens. Therefore, conjured up through Winnie's repetition and detailed description, Jiaozi or dumpling is no longer merely a traditional Chinese food eaten to celebrate Chinese New Year, but becomes a hybrid food image as well as a Qi-thing since the Qi of it connects her memories of China to her experience in America and passes from mother to daughter so as to promote their mutual understanding.

Winnie's discourse on food refers to the five senses: taste, smell, sight, touch and hearing. These sensory references conjure up hybrid food images which could stimulate the curiosity of the new generation and invite their participation into the mother's discourse which could be seen as "a third space of enunciation" (Bhabha 37). While the subsequent generations participate in this new space, the Qi of these hybrid food images transmits from mother to her subsequent generations, from past to present or even to future.

The gap between generations is seen in the daughter's attitude towards tofu. In Chinese cooking soy products are as important as dairy products in western cooking. At the beginning of *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie asks her daughter how much she pays for tofu. However, her daughter admits that she never buys tofu. She has no interest in tofu and

doesn't even know its taste. However, the Qi of tofu is spread through Winnie's discourse on it and works to stimulate the new generation's appetite. To let her daughter acquaint herself with tofu's taste, Winnie especially depicts a special variety of tofu: Cho tofu which "is fried on the outside, and when you broke it open, inside you'd find a creamy-soft middle with such a good, stinky smell for waking up your nose" (KGW 314). Impressed by the taste of American cream, Winnie intentionally describes the inside of Cho tofu as a creamy-soft texture which can be accepted by her daughter. Then she depicts the unpleasant smell as good and stimulating, so its ambivalent quality becomes attractive. Her discourse on Cho tofu is an assemblage, combining the olfactory quality of Chinese food and the American texture, which neither simply reflects Winnie's memories of China nor her immigrant experience in America but the hybridization of them both.

Apart from tofu, Winnie's discourse on moon cake makes it no longer a specialty served for a traditional Chinese Festival but a hybrid image by virtue of her fluid memory and her granddaughter's auditory sense. To stir her generations' interest to visit her, Winnie promises that "you can eat moon cakes for Chinese New Year's" (KGW 50). According to Chinese dietary culture, moon cake is a special dessert served for the celebration of Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival rather than New Year. However, for the new generations, without any knowledge about Chinese food, moon cake could be a kind of American cake, like a brownie according to their cultural references. With the elapse of time and long-term immigration, Winnie seems to lose parts of her memory about Chinese dietary culture, but indeed, to draw her granddaughters' attention, she deliberately transforms it through her impression of

Americans' taste for food. So, in this context, moon cake is neither a dessert especially served for Mid-Autumn festival nor a kind of American cake, but a new hybrid image created by the combination of Winnie's ambiguous memory of Chinese dietary culture with her granddaughter's auditory sense. Since it sounds like a kind of American cake, moon cake can stimulate her descendants' desire to visit and partake in a special food, supplying an opportunity for them to communicate, or even enhance mutual comprehension. Furthermore, weaving together two uncertain and ambiguous elements—food and memory in a new space—Winnie's discourse on moon cake allows the generations to meet, negotiate and produce a new hybrid culture.

In another form of cultural translation, emphasizing the sense of hearing, Winnie explains how special symbolic food items confer good luck on the guests who partake in them. She tells how she often cooked for her husband's fellow pilots during the Anti-Japanese war time. As she fears that some of them might not return after the next air raid, she devotes considerable time and energy to ensuring that the meals are gala affairs. As Winnie recalls in the novel:

I decided also to include a few dishes with names that sounded lucky. These were dishes I remembered Old Aunt had cooked during the New Year—sun-dried oysters for wealth; a fast-cooked shrimp for laughter and happiness; fatsai, the black-hair fungus that soaks up good fortune; and plenty of jellyfish, because the crunchy skin always made a lively sound to my ears.

(KGW 198)

In describing the lively sounds, Winnie chooses the fricative and plosive consonants of English words to evoke the remembered Chinese food. Interpreting the names of these Chinese dishes from another language and a distant memory, Winnie works on a cultural translation. However, in the process of this cultural translation, the names of these Chinese dishes no longer sound lucky. So, she has to substitute English words for good fortune and English explanations and descriptions of the dishes. Something is lost in translation. The Chinese words are not named. Without explaining the reasons why or in what ways the names of these Chinese dishes impart good fortune, the mother deliberately stimulates her daughter's curiosity to find the answer. In order to solve the puzzle, the daughter has to imaginatively enter the space created in the hybridization of her mother's memory of Chinese culture and her comprehension of American culture. So, the mother's discourse on sounds of these Chinese dishes can be taken as "a space of the translation of cultural difference at the interstices" namely the Third Space of enunciation where both the mother and her daughter can relocate their cultural identities to reconcile with each other (Bhabha 224).

In addition to employing the senses separately, Winnie conjures up an exotic multisensory image: a "magic spring" which not only evokes her memories of China but filters them through her American life experience. The water from this magic spring is "heavy as gold, sweet as honey, but clear as glass" (KGW 175). Vividly figured by the senses of touch, taste and sight,<sup>11</sup> the magic spring summons the daughter's desire. The discourse on this magic spring reappears at the end of the novel. Winnie decides to take Pearl back to

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<sup>11</sup> David E. Sutton considers more general questions regarding synesthesia, memory, and categorization which lead back to the social quality of food memories (150).

China to find the “magic spring,” which, according to Winnie and Helen, can cure Pearl’s seemingly incurable illness. Meanwhile, they keep arguing whether they can find it or not. Hearing their argument, Pearl realizes that “They are remembering together, dreaming together. They can already see it, the walk up the mountain, the time they were so young, when they believed their lives lay ahead of them and all good things were still possible. And the water is just as they imagined, heavy as gold, sweet as rare flower seeds” (410). Pearl takes the magic spring as a symbol signifying her mother’s memory as well as her hope. As the hybridization of her mother’s unforgettable experience in China and her hope for a good life in America, the water of this magic spring not only promises to cure Pearl’s illness, but more importantly, as a Qi-thing bridging past and future times, it strengthens the mutual comprehension between the mother and her daughter. Beyond her mother’s expectation, Pearl eventually believes that she “can taste it too. Only a little amount and it is enough to remember—all the things you thought you had forgotten but were never forgotten, all the hopes that can still be found” (410). In imagining the taste of the water from this magic spring, she enters the space of her mother’s memories. Born in different geographical and cultural space, Winnie and Pearl are constrained to negotiate the tension between them. Their discourse on the magic spring allows them to move across spatial and cultural boundaries, reconfiguring nostalgia for the past and locatedness in what Homi Bhabha refers to as the “Third Space” which can be regarded as an ‘interstitial space’ where a ‘profound process of redefinition’ of identity begins (Bhabha 5). The Third Space is one which the mother and daughter can construct and inhabit together, bridging generational and cultural differences.

In virtue of strategies of repetition and the detailed description of food and the characters' senses, Winnie's discourse on food is no longer an accurate reflection of her memories of China or her life experience in America but a "Third Space of enunciation," where cultures can meet, negotiate and form new meanings and representations, allowing both her and her descendants to relocate cultural identity and overcome exclusion and alienation. Entering this Third Space of enunciation, the daughter not only understands her mother's miserable past in China but also her struggles in American life since the Qi of hybrid food images passes from mother to her daughter. Meanwhile, as the daughter also takes part in the creation of the discourse on food, the Qi of mother and daughter and hybrid food images interact harmoniously, so the daughter eventually reconciles with her mother in this Third Space.

## **Conclusion**

The interaction of humans and food and things related to eating not only comprises what and how humans eat and how humans cook food and use things related to eating but also humans' discourse on food. In these interactions, food and things related to eating are no longer inert objects but Qi-things whose Qi or "matter-energy" emanating from their appearance and taste which could be transmitted into humans through the way they choose, eat and cook food and through humans' discourse on food. Focusing on the interaction between humans and food or between humans and other Qi-things related to eating, I have discussed how food as a Qi-thing conveys its nurturing, healing, consoling and mediating power to individualize characters, to save humans' lives, and to mediate human relations from disharmony to harmony. Paying attention to discourses on food, I have discussed how they outline the cultural and geographical contexts of characters' life and how as assemblages, Chinese immigrant mothers' discourses on food gather their memories of China and their life experience in America together so as to conjure up hybrid food images to reconcile cultural conflicts and to realize the harmony between Chinese immigrant mothers and their American daughters.

## Chapter Two: The Interactions of Qi-things through Clothing

As a man-made thing, clothing is both a product and a symbol of culture: “Clothing and adornment are universal features of human behavior and an examination of what they reveal, and attempt to conceal, contributes to our knowledge about the fabric of cultures and to our understanding of the threads of human nature” (Cordwell and Schwarz 1). Characters’ apparel in Amy Tan’s novels reveals their unfolding as Qi-things. The different origins of Western and Eastern civilizations over thousands of years have created distinctive varieties in costume. In Tan’s novels, the different garments worn by the characters harmonize or clash with their wearers in complex gatherings that readers are invited to interpret.

Western theorists doing cultural and sociological studies on clothing have discussed its functions quite extensively. In relation to semiotics, clothing has been analyzed as a language, that is a system of signifiers, or symbols that can be read and understood in their social context: “Though Bogatyrev does not go so far as to suggest there might be structural homologies between the system of language and the system of clothing, he does assert that, ‘In order to grasp the social functions of costumes we must learn to read them as signs in the same way we learn to read and understand languages’” (Cordwell and Schwarz 37). In Barnard’s very detailed enumeration of the “social and cultural functions” of fashion and clothing (66), they present “twelve different functions, both cultural and social, which are: protection, modesty and concealment, immodesty and attraction, communication,

individualistic expression, social worth or status, definition of social role, economic worth or status, political symbol, magico-religious condition, social rituals, and finally, recreation” (47-67). Though Barnard’s list is very complete, it is very much centered on the humans wearing the clothes.

Chinese clothing culture is distinguished from western ones due to the profound influence of ancient Chinese philosophy on Chinese clothing culture. Cao Zhenyu and Cao Yuanqian review five ancient Chinese philosophical thoughts on Chinese clothing culture. Confucianism advocated “being elegant and refined in manner” (Cao Zhenyu and Cao Yuanqian 146). In this view clothes are signs of status or personality: “what we wear must be in accordance with ceremony; only in this way can it reflect the order of social system, the person’s temperament and the following of social standard” (147). Nevertheless, as a Confucian, Dong Zhongshu, a philosopher in the western Han dynasty proposed interactions between man and the rest of the universe based on Confucius, Yin-yang and the Five elements. He believed “Interaction between heaven and mankind is the center of Dress rules” (146). Conversely, Mohism insisted that clothing should have a mainly practical purpose “clothing should meet warm first, and then seek for beauty” (146). Taoism believed “although a gentleman wears coarse clothes, he has gem in his chest” (146). Advocating “an extreme utilitarianism and absolute despotism” (153), Legalism “...always raised the thought about clothing in terms of need for rule” (153). As the main representative of legalism, “...Han Fei didn’t attach importance to the modification function of clothing and the clothing fashion and other issues were all used to emphasize the need of the rulers. He was also good at justifying

the rulers' political tricks by making use of the clothing styles people got quite familiar with" (153). The fact that these five opinions are not consistent suggests the importance of clothing as a subject of debate and an invitation for interpretation.

Although East and West have their own distinct clothing history and culture, clothing in Tan's novels is taken up in a process of integration and accumulation since she has a bi-cultural background and most of her novels deal with the great social changes at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Clothing in Amy Tan's novel is not only a cultural sign, but also a Qi-thing with a form of agency. Unlike food which has been studied a lot by many critics, clothing is seldom discussed, only Huntley remarks that "[c]lothing in Tan's novels has two major functions: to signify cultural confusions and collisions, and to signal concealment, subterfuge, or the performance of a feigned or manufactured identity" (36). As Huntley points out, when characters cannot completely master the clothes they choose, they are experiencing "some form of cultural dislocation" (36). This suggests that clothing has begun to signify something beyond the ordinary functions that Barnard enumerates. So, more than being endowed with cultural and social functions, clothing in Tan's novels is Qi-thing, just like Latour's actant which has agency or Bennett's vibrant matter which owns life force, affecting or interacting with its wearer. Bruno Latour claims that an actant is "any entity that modifies another entity in a trial, something whose competence is deduced from its performance rather than posited in advance of that action" (*Pandora's Hope* 303-8). So, more than born with or inherent in it, clothing's vital force is deduced from its interaction with humans. As a Qi-thing, clothing can modify, disguise or decorate its wearers, and, at the same time, it can be

modified or manipulated by its wearers. This kind of modifying and modified relation reflects the interactions between clothing and humans. Therefore, I will discuss their modifying and modified relation, specifically showing how personal adornment decorates, disguises or even modifies wearers' individual characteristics, how clothing is modified or controlled as a way to communicate or even create the wearers' identities and how it informs the wearers' social status, their attitude to conventions and their response to social changes.

### **I. Individualistic Expressions through Personal Adornment**

Like food, clothing is not only the basic substance for humans' living but also has vital force to individualize characters. The Qi or the "matter-energy" of clothing is inherent in its color, texture, fabric and style. In the novel, when a character picks up a dress and wears it, we can see how the Qi of the dress affects humans' mood and distinguishes one's self from others through its color, style and texture. What's more, as a Qi-thing, clothing is gifted with the power of gathering. In terms of its color, shape and texture, we can see how clothing assembles the energies of Feng shui's five elements so as to affect characters' fortune and to create harmony and balance.

#### **A. Clothing: Affecting Humans' Moods and Distinguishing One from Another**

Clothes have been compared to theatrical costumes: "Dress is a cue that communicates mood from performers to audience, a mood which may in turn be conveyed back to performers" (Cordwell and Schwarz 9). The analogy is appropriate for courtesans who are performers that have to change their costumes according to different occasions and

seasons. In *The Valley of Amazement*, Magic Gourd tells Violet:

The best clothes should be worn in public—on carriage rides, in restaurants, at the theater...In winter, the silk must be thick and as lustrous as a pearl. The collar looks best when lined with Russian shaved white fox or chin-chilla... In the summer, the top layer of silk weave will be delicate, tissue thin, and of a perfectly even weft, light but also crisp. (VA 162-3)

Magic Gourd puts the emphasis on the appearance of a high-ranking courtesan. To own a high rank, a courtesan has to wear the best clothes in public. Both summer and winter clothes should be made of silk and embroidered or even have western elements. This advice seems to correspond to Barnard's mention of how clothes proclaim social worth or status. In this perspective, the courtesans would be imitating high-ranking ladies. However, the Qi of clothes diffuses through their texture and style. With good material and well-tailored, the costumes worn by courtesans not only make them charming but also give them value in their own eyes as well as those of their audience or customers. The text actually gives agency to the clothing. In each sentence the grammatical subject is the clothes. The verb tenses begin with the passive "should be worn" in which the human being is subtly displaced from her central role, and changes to the active when the clothing itself becomes the actant "the collar looks best," "the silk weave will be delicate." So the text illustrates the power of the materials themselves and its seductive effect on the wearer as well as those who look at her.

What's more, the Qi of clothes can spread through their colors. Kidnapped into a courtesan house, Violet views six courtesans "dressed in bright pink and green colors, as if it

were still Spring Festival” (VA 96). In Chinese culture, bright pink and green colors are associated with health and prosperity. Chinese people are used to wearing clothes with bright pink and green colors to celebrate the coming of spring, which means prosperity and hope. Filled with auspicious Qi, clothes of bright pink and green colors can bring good fortune to their wearers. Besides, since the semiology of fashion “contrasting line and color in costume can express exuberant mood to others and also reinforce the same mood in the wearer” (Cordwell and Schwarz 9), wearing bright pink and green, these contrasting colors together, courtesans can express an exuberant mood to their customers and also reinforce the same mood in themselves. The two examples that follow show that the Qi of clothes interacts with other elements to produce unexpected results. In both cases the novelty of clothing that is ordinary in another context gives it an erotic charge.

Apart from reinforcing, disguising or creating humans’ mood, an unusual choice of clothing can distinguish one’s self from others since Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bubolz Eicher claim that “differentiation of one’s self from others on the basis of dress relates to rarity” (9). In *The Valley of Amazement*, Violet distinguishes herself from Chinese people not only by her looks, as she has “fair skin, brown hair, and green eyes” (VA 3), but also by what she wears since she claims that “I wore Western clothing and regular shoes. I had not had my feet crushed and wedged like dumpling dough into a tiny shoe” (3). Unlike Chinese girls who wear traditional Chinese clothes and bind their feet, Violet wears Western clothing and regular shoes which could transmit exotic Qi and differentiate her from others.

What’s more, when Lucia Minturn sees Lu Shing at the first sight, she is struck by his

difference from Western males: “he wore a long gown of dark blue silk and a vest embroidered with symbols....He had a China-man’s pigtail that ran from his crown to half way down his spine” (VA 433). A long gown and a vest embroidered with symbols and a China-man’s pigtail disperse the Qi of the Orient, which could give Lushing the charisma of a “Chinese emperor” (433). With this exotic power, Lushing’s personal adornment distinguishes him from those Americans and even fascinates Lucia. The next day when Lucia meets Lushing again, she feels disappointed since he dresses like ordinary Americans whose colorless tones disappoint her: “he was wearing ordinary clothes; dark trousers, a white shirt and gray waistcoat. I wished he would change back into the Chinese garments” (450). Typical Chinese adornment has the power to outline Lushing’s oriental traits, contrarily; ordinary Western clothes keep them under cover. In these two examples from *the Valley of Amazement*, the Qi of clothes interacts with other elements to produce unexpected results. In both cases the novelty of clothing that is ordinary in one context gives it an erotic charge in another.

### **B. In an Assemblage Gathering All Five Elements, Clothing Creates Harmony and Balance**

Besides affecting humans’ moods and distinguishing them from one another, in the manner of Qi-things, clothing has the vital force to create harmony and balance through assembling all five elements in an environment. In *Fashion Feng Shui*, Evana Maggiore explains how the energies of Fengshui’s five elements manifest themselves in physical form as color, shape and substance. “Fengshui principles teach that there is a natural order to the

universe. The world is composed of five life-forming energies—water, wood, fire, earth and metal—each of which has a distinct energetic quality that is transmitted by specific colors, shapes and substance. Thus, the five elements connect cosmic energy or Chi to physical form” (Maggiore 18). All things, both animate and inanimate, are alive with Qi, connected to each other in an invisible web of energy and in a constantly changing state. Maggiore believes that “clothing is your body’s most intimate environment and therefore, energetically influences your life in the same way that your home and business decors do” (10). For instance, to obtain water energy, she suggests people to wear clothing with “black or dark tones,” “abstract or ethnic patterns,” “sheer or supple textures,” “filmy or fluid fabrics” and “artistic or wavy-shaped accessories” (225). Since presenting all five elements in an environment creates harmony and balance, fashion Fengshui encourages people to “incorporate energetic design elements from all five elemental Archetypes into each ensemble” (120). Relating those ideas in *Fashion Feng Shui* to Tan’s novel, I will discuss how clothing assembles the energies of Feng shui’s five elements manifested in physical form as color, shape and substance so as to bring good fortune to characters and to create harmony and balance.

When Violet decides to abandon her life in the courtesan house and begins her new life with her American lover, Edward, she sells or gives away most of her costumes. But there is one dress Violet cannot part with, a lucky one, which had brought her many suitors and two patrons, including her second contract with Loyalty:

It was a green watered silk, the upper half Chinese with pearls for frog clasps and silk thread dipped in gold that had been sewn along the plackets of the

collar and edges of the sleeves. The upright Chinese collar was slightly flared to show a hint of Western lace lining. It was tightly fitted around the bodice. Below the waist, it tapered wide to accommodate a full Western skirt with large pleated folds. A false hem ended at the knees, and below that were three layers of scalloped silk of a dark emerald shade. The dress looked like the folds of a theater curtain as it was being raised. (VA 258)

This description of the dress, alternating the words “Chinese” and “Western” emphasizes its hybridity. The green watered silk contributes the wood energy that comes from blues and greens according to the analysis in *Fashion Feng Shui*. Besides, the “silk” and “western lace” are light substances that endow the dress with fire energy. Since it is “dipped in gold,” the silk thread disperses metal energy. Therefore, in addition to its balance of East and West, the dress assembles the five elements in harmony and transmits to Violet the energies of all five elemental archetypes. This dress brings Violet luck, brings her many suitors, and, what’s more, it brings her “a sense of confidence and calm, which I took to be my true self” (VA 258). Besides, the dress has the power to make Violet keep it. At first, Violet is afraid that to “keep it may pull her back to her old life” (258). But at last, she persuades herself to keep it, telling herself that she “might be able to make a few adjustments, so that it was more suitable to a life without suitors” (258). Therefore, through its color, shape and substance, clothing has the vital force to assemble the energies of Fengshui’s five elements so as to bring good fortune to Violet and to create harmony and balance or even to impel her not to dispose of it.

## II. Dress: a Communicator or even a Creator of Identity

As Qi-things, clothes not only possess the ability to individualize characters but also have vital force to state or even to create characters' identities through their interactions: "Dress functions as an effective means of communication during social interaction; it helps people to establish their identities and to identify others" (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1). Thus dress is a "communicator of identity" (5). Since they present their ideas on "how dress—as a medium of communication—relates to identity" from "a symbolic interactionist perspective," Roach-Higgins and Eicher take particular interest in works by Stone, Goffman, Stryker, and Weigert, Teitge, and Teitge.<sup>12</sup> "From the perspective of symbolic interaction theory, individuals acquire identities through social interaction in various social, physical and biological settings. So conceptualized, identities are communicated by dress as it announces social positions of wearer to both wearer and observers within a particular interaction situation" (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 5). This statement illustrates the active role dress plays—it "announces" social position, so that it states the wearer's identity before the wearer identifies herself. Nevertheless, since it interacts with other Qi-things, the announcement can be modified. It can contradict other announcements, introducing complexity into the social situation. Perhaps also it constructs identity by linking the clothes and the people in a relation.

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<sup>12</sup> Roach-Higgins and Eicher explicitly illustrate these theorists' ideas that "Stone (1962) expanded the interactionist approach beyond communication via discourse to include communication via appearance (which he defined to include dress as well as gesture and location) and highlighted the fact that dress, because it may be seen in social encounters before conversation can be initiated, has a certain priority over discourse in the establishing of identity. Stryker (1980) also incorporated the concept of identity and appearance into a conceptual perspective based on tenets of symbolic interactionism. *Society and Identity, Toward a Sociological Psychology* (Weigert et al., 1986) is valuable as a resource because of its extensive review of literature on identity as well as its appraisal of both the meaning of identity and the relation of identity to the concept of self" (5).

This makes me believe that as a Qi-thing, clothing is not only a communicator but also a creator of identity.

In my introduction, I mentioned that questions of identity have been widely discussed in Tan's novels. Surprisingly though, critics seldom link it to dress. Twigg claims that "identity and dress are intimately linked. Clothes display, express and shape identity, imbuing it with a directly material reality" (1). Based on the numerous depictions on clothing in Tan's novels, I will discuss how clothing communicates, performs and displays identity. In the traditional western view, "the self is a stable, coherent, integrated and unitary whole, it is individual" (Ho 1). In this view, identity should be fixed and unchanging. But in the post-modern view, identity is no longer stable but fluid. Contrarily, in the Chinese view, especially in Confucianism, identity is relational and collective. "In Confucian cultures, the self is what Ho (1993) calls the relational self. One which is intensely aware of the social presence of other human beings" (3). So, for the Chinese, an individual's identity is not independent but interdependent. Growing up in bi-cultural background, Amy Tan expresses both western and Chinese views of identity; it is relational and collective as well as fluid, changing according to the things the characters interact with. Besides, as most of the mother characters struggle in two cultures, they own ambiguous identities which are explicitly performed by what they dress. So, Tan creates characters whose identity is not single and fixed but multiple and mutating like her own. Focusing on the interaction between clothing and characters, I will discuss how clothing communicates relational identity, performs hybrid or fluid identity, and displays ambiguous identity.

### **A. Dress: Communicating Relational Identity**

The mothers in Amy Tan's novels tell stories about their past lives in China. So, both their daughters and readers realize that to constrain their behavior in old China, Chinese people abided by Confucianism which is "an ethic governing human relationships of which the most important are the Five Cardinal Relationships: between ruler and minister, between father and son, between husband and wife, between brothers, and between friends" (Ho 116). Ho uses the term "relationship dominance" to capture the essence of social behavior in Confucian societies, in contrast to the individualistic Western pattern. Besides, he uses the term "relational identity" to refer to identity defined by a person's significant social relationships. "Relational identity" is also called "collective identity," wherein an individual's identity is defined by membership in the reference group to which he/ she belongs (117). For Chinese people, individual identity tends to be interwoven with collective identity. Each member partakes of the attributes of the group.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, based on Ying-ying St. Clair's story, we understand that clothing, as a communicator of identity, defines Chinese people's relational and collective identity. Describing a collective celebration, Ying-Ying tells how: "Our entire family was already standing outside...everybody was dressed in important-looking clothes. Baba was in a new brown-colored gown, which while plain was of an obviously fine-quality silk weaves and workmanship" (JLC 76-7). Woven of fine-quality silk, the gown which Yingying's father wears is filled with Qi of dignity as only wealthy men can wear silk in Old China. Thus it can signify his rich family background and high social status. Apart from the host of the family,

all family members should choose “important-looking clothes” which have the power to display their family’s superior social position. On the other hand, if any family members wear common clothes, their adornment will lose the whole family’s face and make them feel humiliated. As Ho points out: “...relationship dominance is to capture the essence of social behavior in Confucian societies, in contrast to the Western individualistic pattern” (116). An individual is not regarded as a separate being, but as a member of the larger whole. Meanwhile, “Clearly clothing in traditional China was not simply a matter of fashion or taste or social status, although it was all of those too; it was perhaps most importantly a signifier of cultural identity—and superiority” (Steel and Major 16). Not only does Yingying’s father wear a fine-quality silk gown to signify his superiority in the family, but also her mother dresses in silk.

To celebrate the Moon Festival, a traditional Chinese festival to celebrate the reunion of family members and the harvest, as the hostess of this family, Yingying’s mother elaborately prepares “new tiger clothes” for her daughter (JLC 71). When Yingying gets up in the morning that day, “instead of dressing me in a light cotton jacket and loose trousers, Amah brought out a heavy yellow silk jacket and skirt outlined with black bands” (71). Matching the color yellow with black, the color of these clothes is like tiger skin, so it is called “new tiger clothes.” What’s more, as the pattern on the forehead of a tiger is a very similar to the Chinese character which means “king,” Chinese people believe that as the natural-born king, tiger is an emblem of dignity, ferocity, sternness, courage and by itself is Yin energy. In addition, woven with silk and dyed the yellow color that is exclusively used to

make the imperial family's clothes in Old China, this tiger clothing assures an intangible supremacy. Filled with Yin energy and supreme force, these clothes can transmit power to their wearer. Later, Yingying claims that "Mama had on a jacket and skirt with colors that were the reverse of mine: black silk with yellow bands" (77). Thus, Yingying's mother invests a great deal of thought and time in making their outfits and hopes that the moment her daughter wears it, she can harness the tiger's power in their lives since they live in a patriarchal society. The clothes Yingying's mother wears reemphasizes her and her daughter's supreme positions.

In the traditional Chinese world-view, the emperor was not merely the ruler of an earthly country, but the sovereign of 'All Under Heaven,' ruling the earth on heaven's behalf...by adopting regalia in a color the resonated with a particular season (such as yellow at the height of summer), he was doing his part to ensure that appropriate seasonal energy radiated throughout the realm.

(Steel and Major 16)

Just as the seasonal energy of yellow clothing assures the emperor's power and guarantees his rule, so the black silk with yellow bands proclaims the superiority of Yingying's mother in the family.

Moreover, clothes with the same colors and texture and with a similar pattern indicate that Yingying and her mother are interdependent and interrelated. Neither Yingying's nor her mother's identities can be defined independently of this mother-daughter relation. Their identities are interwoven and relational. In the same way the clothing of her father's

concubines and their daughters proclaims their shared status: “My half-sisters wore rose-colored tunics and so did their mothers, my father’s concubines” (JLC 77). Unlike the color red and gold which are emblems of luck, prosperity and dignity, the color rose has no special significance in traditional Chinese culture. So, apart from pointing out mother-daughter relations, these rose-colored tunics indicate Yingying’s half-sisters and their mothers have no important status in the family. Rather than simply indicating mother-daughter’s relations, clothes contribute to creating their relations and relational identities by visually linking the wearers together. Since we can visually link Yingying and her mother together, “the black silk with yellow bands” creates their relational identities. We can also visually associate Yingying’s half-sisters with their mothers as “rose-colored tunics” creates their relational identities too. Therefore, apart from a communicator of identity, clothing also has the power to create relational identities.

### **B. Dress: Displaying Ambiguous Identity**

Huntley states that “[c]haracters, [especially immigrant mothers] who are unable to integrate Chinese culture with American culture or who are experiencing some form of cultural dislocation tend to be recognizable in Tan’s novels by the way they dress” (36). Almost all mothers in her novels bring silk dresses when they emigrate to America. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Suyuan Woo arrives in the United States with “one stiff leather trunk filled only with fancy silk dresses” (JLC 8). Those silk dresses taken by Suyuan are cheongsam which are one-piece Chinese ladies’ dresses that were the epitome of Chinese identity and feminine beauty during the middle decades of the 20th century. “Like other forms of

traditional or quasi-traditional national dress, the Cheong-sam can be worn to highlight ethnic connections or heritage” (McKean 39). So, silk dresses are picked up by immigrant mothers to express their links with their homeland. “But for Western Women, the Cheongsam is bound up with the idea of exoticism and orientalism– the mysterious East” (39). Therefore, these silk dresses are completely inappropriate to Suyuan’s new life, and she must resort to wearing “...two hand-me-down dresses, all too large in sizes for American women” (*JLC* 8). To adapt to new life in America, Suyuan has to abandon her favorite silk dresses since they are filled with exotic Qi. However, the donated western dresses which she wears are inappropriate to her body. As an old lady, she dresses strangely and wears clashing colors which mean that she struggles between two cultures.

Similarly, when joining *the Joy Luck Club*, Jingmei Woo’s mother and Auntie An-mei “were dressed up in funny Chinese dresses with stiff stand-up collars and blooming branches of embroidered silk sewn over their breasts” (*JLC* 19). But in Jingmei’s view, “these clothes were too fancy for real Chinese people...and too strange for American parties” (19). The Joy Luck aunties’ dress signifies that they struggle between Chinese and American culture. On their arrival in the United States, they cannot wear Chinese dress in public. So, they choose to wear it at their own party to signify their links to China. However, in their daughters’ eyes, those dresses are endowed with funny and exotic Qi since their style and texture are never adopted in American clothes. Living in America for a long time, the mothers gradually adapt to American life and reconcile themselves with American styles: “the Joy Luck aunties are all wearing slacks, bright print blouses, and different versions of sturdy walking shoes” (19).

These clothes signify that they seem to be gradually assimilated into American culture to some degree. But Jingmei remembers that every time she goes with her mother to Chinatown, “wearing light-blue polyester pants, a red sweater, and a child’s green down jacket—she didn’t look like anybody else” (238). As the color red and green do not match with each other based on Chinese clothing culture, “a red sweater” does not match with “a child’s green down jacket.” In her daughter’s eyes, the combination of colors also seems odd. So, combining mismatched colors with a child’s jacket, her mother does not like anybody else and loses her dignity in her daughter’s view. But it is understandable that as her mother has undergone a long journey which “started in Kweilin in 1944,” then passed Chungking, Shanghai, Hong Kong and ended in San Francisco in 1949” (238), she has lost her cultural identity. The clothing she wears suggests a form of confusion. She is no longer typically Chinese and she has not become American. As she wears polyester pants, a red sweater and a child’s green down jacket together—a strange assortment of colors and fabrics—what she wears announces that she is someone who struggles in between and has an ambiguous identity. Moreover, in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Olivia’s half Chinese sister; Kwan has “a penchant for peculiar color combinations” (Huntley 36). Olivia remarks that: “Everything about her is loud and clashing” (HSS 20). After years in America, Kwan still dresses like an immigrant since annual family Christmas photographs show her wearing bright summer clothes.

Besides, Winnie’s mother embodies cultural confusion with her wardrobe of Western dresses and Chinese robes. Whether she puts on a Western dress or Chinese dress, she is in a dilemma: “she put on a western dress, looked at herself in the mirror, then took that off. She

put on a Chinese dress, took that off, put on another Chinese dress, frowned” (KGW 93). When her mother was a little girl she got a western education. But as a concubine in a traditional Chinese family, she has to submit to Confucian conventions. Her difficulty in choosing dresses shows that she suffers cultural confusion even if she does not immigrate into America. After putting on and taking off different outfits several times, she puts the first dress back on, “a jade-green dress with short sleeves and a long straight skirt of smooth pleats running down to her ankles” (93). Her final choice, called a western dress, is actually a hybrid outfit, as it combines the color of a valued piece of Chinese jewelry, the jade stone, with western dress style. There is a Chinese saying that goes “Gold has a value, jade stone is invaluable.” Jade embodies the Confucian virtues of courage, wisdom, modesty, justice and compassion. The color of jade depicts loyalty while its flaws reflect sincerity. Wearing a dress of a jade green color suggests that her mother cannot efface the root of Chinese culture. As the “the Double second” wife, she has to be loyal to her husband even if she is extremely reluctant to be. Meanwhile, she is enlightened by western culture, so that she is eager to escape from the submission to Chinese patriarchy and to pursue freedom and equality. At last, she vanishes one day and there are many theories about her disappearance. It is said that she commits suicide or she runs away with a man. In short, Winnie’s mother’s fate is a riddle, and her hesitation over the choice of clothing is one of the clues that allow both Winnie and readers to imagine the unknown sequel to her story. Because of the special color, texture or style, clothes own specific Qi which could be transmitted to the wearers. So, what clothes and how these mother characters wear them announce their cultural confusion and ambiguous

identity.

### **C. Dress: Performing Hybrid or Fluid Identity**

Besides announcing Chinese mothers' struggle between two cultures, dress is able to perform American daughters' hybrid or fluid identity. "The link between clothing and identity is a long established theme in dress studies, though one that has been given new impetus by the rise of postmodernism with its emphasis on identity" (Twigg 2). The link has been theorized in terms of performativity, "emphasising its role in processes of self-realization and presentation" (3). Apart from expressing cultural identity and clashes, clothing is able to perform hybrid and fluid identities. In *The Valley of Amazement*, Violet changes clothing as she develops, so that it plots her mutations in the manner of a bildungsroman. So, I will initially discuss how she enacts or performs her hybrid and fluid identity through the medium of dress.

When Violet is a little girl, "western clothing and regular shoes" identify her as an American. But she does not control the clothes she wears. Others impose them on her. Kidnapped into the courtesan house, Violet is forced to become a virgin courtesan and dress in a courtesan's fashion. Mother Ma is pleased to see Violet in her new clothes and says "fate changes when you change your clothes" (VA 110). Obviously, it suggests that as Qi-things, clothes have the agency to alter the wearers' fate. After deciding to live with Edward, Violet donates some costumes to other women in the courtesan house. One of those donated costumes, "an excursion costume for carriage rides, a showy one, with a high-neck fur collar," does not suit Violet's complexion in her view (257). Tinted "an odd shade of mauve," it

seems that the color of this costume is too close to the violet of the character's name to be attractive. Instead, it spreads misfortune because of its color. As it does not suit Violet's complexion, whenever she wears it, she "had bad luck with suitors who did not pay or with slights by Loyalty" (257). Thus, to attract others she has to open up a gap between her complexion and the things she wears. In contrast to the costume with mauve colors, another dress lifts her out of the ordinary and individuates her: "It was a green watered silk, the upper half Chinese with pearls for frog clasps and silk thread dipped in gold....Below the waist, it tapered wide to accommodate a full Western skirt with large pleated folds" (258). Combining the upper half in the Chinese style with the lower half in the western style, this dress is endowed with hybrid Qi that accords with Violet's hybrid identity. In this costume, Violet claims, "I'd had not only luck but also a sense of confidence and calm, which I look to be my true self" (258). As the hybrid Qi of this dress does suit Violet's hybrid identity, it brings her good luck, a sense of confidence and makes her feel she has found true self. As Violet's "greatest achievement in fashion," this dress is popularized in courtesan houses. Some courtesans copy a few of its features—"the lace, the false hem, the scallops, and the collar's flared shape" (258). As a result, the ones worn by other courtesans looked like the cheap replicas of Violet's original.

Clothes change as Violet changes her role. Clothing possesses the radical transformative power to disguise characters. In her role as the wife of her American lover, Edward, she adopts different style of western suit, "a dark blue walking suit," to disguise her former identity (VA 259). The "walking suit" allows her to walk away from her life as

courtesan. Her servant Magic Gourd wears “a dull brown western dress with a blouson that hid her breasts and waist” and she claims that “the dress was ugly, but it suited her new life” (259). Somehow the ugliness of the dress suggests that Magic Gourd will not remain in this role permanently. It does not “suit” her in the way that Violet’s walking suit matches her new life. Nevertheless, attire can indicate rank and respectability, since Violet claims that wearing western clothes could allow them to be treated with respect.

Once again, clothes change from western style to traditional Chinese style when Violet decides to become Perpetual’s wife. Perpetual is a scholar who claims that he lives in a countryside estate, the ancestral home of a scholar family. To adapt to her new role, Violet thinks that “the clothes should not be too fancy or modern. No western touches...a bit traditional out there” (VA 348-9). Finally, the tailor makes four fancy jackets which are “dowdy” and “voluminous,” “like the clothes that faithful widows wore so as to not incite lust” (349). Sedate in appearance, Violet believes that these clothes will assist her to perform her new role as a scholars’ wife. However, Perpetual’s family members figure out that Violet is a courtesan based on “the color of her theatrical clothes” (365). The Qi of the fabric reveals her hidden past. Indeed, the clothes reveal that Violet’s identity is a theatrical performance. Her clothes change as she changes roles, so that her identity is always fluid and in the process of becoming.

Clothing obviously signifies the hybridity of Violet’s identity, but for Peanut in *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, it fails to work. Western clothing and cosmetics are not appropriate for her as she is too typically Chinese. She imitates hairstyles in a foreign beauty magazine and

“twists her curled hair off to the side” (KGW 118). However, in Winnie’s eyes, this hairstyle is not a good style for her. Besides, Peanut dresses in a western coat, “a black curly lamb with a stiff rolled collar and shawl of padded brocade”, “along with a pair of new high heels” (118). What she wears declares the wealth and high social status of her family and she is in vogue. But the size and style of western clothing does not fit her. The coat is so long that it is impossible for her to walk and a pair of new high heels makes her walk slowly. Apart from dressing in western way, Peanut also makes herself up like western women. Covering “her plump cheeks and small nose with a fine rice-white coating,” she fails to make herself beautiful but makes herself like “a foreign ghost” (119). Meanwhile, “Painted her lips cinnabar red, her mouth looks like a monkey’s bottom. And with a smiling movie star as her guide, she quickly dabbed two dark smudges above and below each eye, then drew a thick line on her eyebrows so that they resembled two dark cricket legs about to leap” (120). The narrator underlines the comic incongruity of the effect Peanut achieves by using animal metaphors, and especially by comparing her lips and eyebrows to the nether parts of animals. Her effort to beautify herself makes her little brothers laugh in whispers and out loud. And villagers laugh as they walk past her on the road. Therefore, the western style of clothing and cosmetics are not fit for Peanut as their Qi is incompatible. Designed and made according to western frames and complexions, Western clothing and cosmetics do not suit Peanut as she is a typical Chinese filled with oriental Qi. So, for Peanut, hybridity fails to work. Later in the novel when the narrator describes her transformation into a Mao-suit wearing rebel, Peanut seems to have found the right fit between her own Qi and that of her clothing. “Her hair was

cut short, parted no particular way. She wore a plain buttoned jacket of poor quality, and so shapeless I could not tell if she had grown fat or thin” (348-9). This plain buttoned jacket identifies that she has become a Communist.

### **III. Dress as an Interpreter of Social Status, Convention and Social Changes**

In the conservative view, “...clothing should be appropriate to one’s gender, age, and place in the social hierarchy. Clothing, in other words, not only served to distinguish Chinese people from barbarians; it also served, through elaborate sumptuary rules and social conventions, to reinforce the structure of Chinese society itself” (Steel and Major 18). The fit between individuals and the clothing they are expected to wear is far from being natural.

#### **A. Transitions in Chinese Dress**

At the very end of Qing dynasty and in the formative years of the republican period, Chinese people undertook serious reforms in everything from politics and industrial technology to art and fashion. In the fashion field, “two types of public women emerged as fashion leaders: the women of style, who could be a socialite, but was more often an entertainer or prostitute; and the girl student” (Steel and Major 133). So the courtesans in *the Valley of Amazement* are fashion leaders. How they dress and what they wear not only expresses their rebellion against the constraints of traditional Confucian convention but also reflects transitions in Chinese dress and creates modern Chinese fashions. When teaching Violet what is in fashion, Magic Gourd mentions that when she was a courtesan, binding breasts was popular but “these days, younger men find large breasts lurid and exciting” (VA

162). From binding breasts to making them prominent, Chinese women liberate themselves from the restrictions of Confucian convention and pursue a more natural form of beauty under the influence of western culture.

As we know, “during the nineteenth century, Chinese women usually wore a combination of two or three garments: a full jacket (ao), pleated skirt (qun), and/or loose, wide trousers (ku). The jacket was fairly long and loosely cut with wide sleeves” (Steel and Major 44). Rather than wearing a loose jacket and wide trousers, Magic Gourd declares that the jacket a courtesan wears “will be so tight, everyone can see your shapeliness. The skirt will be well-fitted so that no imagination is needed to see the curves of your rump” (VA 162).

The tight jackets and well-fitted skirts that courtesans wear reflect the fashion trend since

in the early twentieth century, Chinese women also began to modernize their clothes by combining aspects of eastern and western styles. Skirts, jackets, and trousers were all cut closer to the body.... Jackets often acquired a fashionably high collar, a feature that is still associated with Chinese dress. This new skirt and jacket ensemble (often made of the same material) was one of several hybrid styles that young Chinese women developed. (Steel and Major 45)

The transition from loose jackets and wide trousers to tight jackets and well-fitted skirts accompanies the transformation from Old to Modern China, showing how the Qi of clothing acts on the social scene. Combining eastern and western styles, the new matching jacket and skirt or jacket and trousers ensembles are a hybrid style which reflects the great influence of western culture on Chinese culture in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As a fashion guide, Magic Gourd not only tells Violet that tight jackets and well-fitted skirts are fashionable but she also asks the tailor to “make a costume in the colors of the imperial family” (VA 162). Based on the theory of five elements, the color yellow stood for earth, symbolizing the center of the universe. So, it seems that the color yellow is infused with the divine power. As the emperor is considered as “the son of Heaven” (Cao 149), the color yellow is taken for granted as the color of his costumes. Yellow was adopted by emperors, dynasty after dynasty, representing their divinely-entrusted power, boundlessly sacred and noble. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the color yellow became the exclusive color for the imperial family. Ordinary people were not allowed to wear yellow. However, with the overthrow of Qing dynasty, Magic Gourd dares to break old convention and abrogate the superior power of the color yellow on purpose, so she asks the tailor to make costumes in imperial yellow and hopes she and Violet “are the first to flaunt these colors” (VA 163). So, here the interaction between humans and their clothing is reflected in that the color of the costume can endow an emperor with superior power and yet the people can eradicate imperial power by widely adopting the traditional costumes. Thus, the political transition is manifested in dress in the adoption of the color yellow by the common people. Magic Gourd believes that “an imperial-yellow jacket and kingfisher-blue pantalets” have the power to attract suitors’ attention when Violet wears them in public. Besides, Magic Gourd prepares Violet with “costumes made in Imperial violet, the exact shade” (162). Here, according to an article “Symbolism of Colors, Associations of The Five Elements in Chinese Beliefs and Feng Shui” from *Nations Online*, “imperial violet” means the color purple as

purple in Chinese culture refers to the North Star (Polaris), which in ancient China was called the Ziwei Star, the North Star was in traditional Chinese astrology the abode of the Celestial Emperor. So, clothes with imperial violet are exclusively for the imperial family in Old China. However, Violet breaks the conventional hierarchies through wearing costumes made in Imperial violet. Besides, as the color violet has the same pronunciation as her name, Magic Gourd believes that costumes with the color violet will assist Violet to become a central figure for the mosquito press. What's more, as the color violet is "in motion,"<sup>13</sup> specifically a color intermediate between red and blue, clothes with this color becomes a Qi-thing which is instinct with the power to signify Violet's fluid identity when she wears it.

What's more, the transition in Chinese culture can also be seen in the growing popularity of Western dress styles. Apart from making costumes with imperial colors, Magic Gourd prepares to get Violet "a European hat" (VA 163). With "a fan of baby ostrich feathers on top," this "quite outlandish" hat reflects how the western style comes into vogue. Magic Gourd believes that this European hat has the agency to make Violet out of the ordinary, so that Violet's violet hat "would be reported in the tabloids, too" (163). This gesture works in Western codes of dress as well as Chinese ones: "According to surveys in Europe and the United States, violet is the color people most often associate with extravagance and

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<sup>13</sup> I quote this concept from the article entitled "Symbolism of Colors, Associations of The Five Elements in Chinese Beliefs and Feng Shui." This article states that in terms of the Five Elements theory, there are five basic colors: black, white, red, green and yellow which symbolize different meanings. Besides these five main colors, other colors are 'in motion' which consist of a "main, dominating" color and a shade of another color. Such a mixture of colors can lead to a combined interpretation.

individualism, the unconventional, the artificial, and ambiguity” (Varichon 138). So, like her name, this violet hat defines Violet’s unconventional personality and ambiguous identity.

### **B. Foot Binding: a Radical Form of Body Modification**

Clothing and body transformation are indissociably linked in human culture: “...dress of an individual is an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body” (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1). One of the most extreme examples of this is seen in the Old Chinese custom of foot binding. Applying painfully tight binding to the feet of young girls to prevent further growth, foot binding is defined as “a radical form of body modification” (Steel and Major 38). Kidnapped into a courtesan house, Violet spies a tiny pair of embroidered shoes in her room that evokes this old Chinese convention that apparently began in the declining years of the Tang dynasty and experienced a long history. During the Song dynasty (960-1279), foot binding “spread from the palace and entertainment quarters into the homes of the elite” (37). Foot binding was a means of male control over women, a sign of class status, and a necessary operation for women to marry well. Bound feet limit women’s mobility; therefore, they have to depend on their families and are unable to take part in politics, social life and the world. It becomes a means of displaying status, as women from wealthy families do not need their feet to work and could afford to have them bound. Nevertheless, Ebrey suggests that “the spread of foot binding in the Song... [served] to emphasize the distinctions between men and women, Chinese and non-Chinese...” (40). “In other words, anxieties about masculinity and national identity, rather than the desire to oppress women, per se, contributed to the spread of foot binding” (40). This might help

explain why bound feet were once considered intensely erotic in Chinese culture, and a woman with perfect lotus feet was likely to make a more prestigious marriage.

However in *The Valley of Amazement* this custom is evoked in a way that suggests the evolution in Chinese society. Due to their “grimy lining” and “crushed flat backs” (VA 258), these tiny shoes have run out of Qi. Without Qi, they have become inanimate and useless, so they are destined to be abandoned. Their abandoned fate inspires Violet to imagine a sad-faced girl who is thrown away just like the shoes she has left. Moreover, Violet believes that the shoes are an omen which indicates that she will suffer the same miserable fate. At the same time, this tiny pair of embroidered shoes perhaps indicates social changes since “[a]fter the Qing dynasty was overthrown and a republic was declared, foot binding was outlawed” (Steel and Major 44). Just as the shoes are abandoned by their owner with the overthrow of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of the Republic, Violet suffers the same fate, for she is also abandoned by her mother, who goes back to America and leaves her in China. As a Qi-thing, this tiny pair of embroidered shoes not only evokes Violet and the readers’ impressions of an old Chinese convention but proclaims its owner’s and Violet’s miserable fates. Meanwhile, its abandoned fate indicates the social changes at the beginning of twentieth century in Chinese society.

## Conclusion

Clothing in Tan's novels is a Qi-thing, that derives its Qi or "matter-energy" from its color, texture, pattern and other physical forms and that exerts its Qi in the interaction with humans. Due to its "matter-energy," clothing is capable of individualizing characters. In the manner of Qi-things, clothing plays as an assemblage that is able to affect characters' fortune and create harmony and balance through assembling all five elements in an environment. Besides, more than communicating characters' identity with its function as a cultural symbol, clothing has vital force to create characters' identity. As the discussion above, rather than simply indicating mother-daughter's relations or family ties, clothes with the same colors and texture and with a similar pattern contribute to create their relations and relational identities by visually linking the wearers together. At the same time, besides announcing Chinese mothers' struggle between two cultures, dress is able to perform American daughters' hybrid or fluid identity. Finally, from traditional Chinese dresses to Western style of dresses or clothes combining western and Chinese cultural traits, the transitions in clothing mirror the social revolution and the abolition of some outdated conventions. In all, focusing on the material dimension in terms of clothing, we can see that far from inanimate objects, cloth images in Tan's novels are Qi-things which not only have "matter-energy" but also play as assemblages to create harmony in human life.

## Chapter Three: The Interactions of Qi-things through Housing

In creating or evaluating fictional dwellings, writers and theorists consider the following question: is the house a space with four solid walls or a permeable and fluid space? “For many older writers the house provides a necessary fiction of firmness,” it is a secure shelter in “four walls” for confirming the identities of its inhabitants (Larson, Saggini and Soccio 2). But “...in modernist texts, these later houses are permeable and fluid spaces, for good or ill—inside leaks outside, outside—perpetually under construction, disintegrating from within, unsettled and unsettling places of settlement, rarely shelters, at best precarious zones of sociability bordering on no-man’s-land” (2). In the world described in Amy Tan’s fiction, it becomes difficult to imagine houses as secure shelters. In a world in a state of flux, living spaces continually renegotiated, rewritten, restructured or dismantled by diasporas, resettlements, and border-crossings, as well as the forced migrations of war or other factors.<sup>14</sup> Houses are imagined, built, inhabited in time and space, traversed by history and events, in a story that repeats and revises itself even as Amy Tan writes. Among the house images found in her work, some act as shelters for protecting dwellers or defining their identities. Others

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<sup>14</sup> I take some of these points from Janet Larson, Francesca Saggini and Anna-Enrichetta Soccio and omit some factors since they are not presented in Tan’s novels. See their declaration: “It also becomes increasingly difficult to imagine houses as secure shelters in a world in a state of flow, its living spaces continually renegotiated, rewritten, restructured or dismantled by diasporas, resettlements, border-crossings, the forced migrations of war and extreme weather events, and the myriad other transformations of identity, economics, culture, society and habitat that attend globalization and, most recently, the upheavals of ‘democratization’” (1).

are fluid and hybrid spaces where characters seek their identities and strive for stability. Whether secure dwellings or fluid spaces, houses in Tan's novels act as Qi-things, interacting with their inhabitants like food and clothes. Operating as Qi-things, the houses Tan represents take on the dynamic interplay of diverse, contending forces—intra-psychic, sexed, gendered, raced, and/ or classed, the domestic and the universal.<sup>15</sup> In this part, I will discuss how Tan's fictional houses interact with humans as shelters and fluid and hybrid spaces. Specifically, how does the character and quality of the inhabitants shape their house? Conversely, how does the house contribute to the character, experience and world of the inhabitants?

### **I. Houses as Interactive Spaces**

In reality as in fiction, the house could be said to narrate the social and the individual. Both the social order and structure and the character and quality of the inhabitants shape the house. Meanwhile, the house declares the social status and the character of the owner and shapes the experience and world of the inhabitants. For Duncan (1981) dwellings are “an extremely important aspect of the built environment, embodying not only personal meanings but expressing and maintaining the ideology of prevailing social orders” (1). In Tan's novels, some male-dominated fictional dwellings, typically in the style of the traditional Chinese house, the courtyard house, reveal the patriarchal social structure and its inhabitants' social status. Reciprocally, the inhabitants' character, taste and relations contribute to the form and

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<sup>15</sup> I quote this sentence from Janet Larson, Francesca Saggini and Anna-Enrichetta Soccio and rewrite it a bit. See the original sentence: “How do house representations operate as signs for the dynamic interplay of diverse, contending forces —intra-psychic, sexed, gendered, raced, and/ or classed, the domestic and the global, the artistic and the theoretical, nostalgic revivalism and functionality?” (2).

interior space of the house. As an expression of social structure and patriarchal power, these male-dominated houses seem to create disharmony by not making space for maternal power. But in fact, Tan aims to create spatial balance since female characters always can find a place where they belong to though they live under the patriarchal roof. Apart from male-dominated houses, mothers' houses are places of intimacy that protect the individual's thoughts, memories and imagination.

### **A. The Search for Spatial Balance within Male-Dominated Houses**

Daoist and Confucian philosophies had somewhat different influences on Chinese architecture: "Daoism stressed a harmony between buildings and their environments, finding architectural expression in beautifully sited buildings and romantic ensembles, and developing artificial landscapes and ideal man-made environments. The qualities of Confucian architectonics emphasized the importance of hierarchical order, axis and symmetry to control spatial organizations" (Needham 1971). As many stories' settings happen in Old China, in many works Tan depicts some Chinese houses whose patterns and spatial organization integrate with traditional Chinese philosophy. Under the influence of Confucian ideology, some dwellings are male-dominated spaces since they express hierarchical order and patriarchal power. Thus, we can consider these male-dominated houses as examples of territorialized or disharmonious spaces since they leave no room for maternal power. Besides, there is a traditional Chinese house form—the courtyard—in which high walls on four sides enclose the buildings and courtyards of the residential compound. Through one thousand

years of housing development, the courtyard house had been set up as an “ideal model.” The physical design and spatial organization of the traditional courtyard house compound illustrate both the Daoist and Confucian ideas. Although also illustrating patriarchal power, the courtyard houses are harmonious spaces since they express the harmony between men and nature and there are deterritorialized spaces which provide female characters with “lines of flight.”<sup>16</sup> Based on Tan’s depictions in her works, I will discuss how these male-dominated houses express social order and patriarchal power and illustrate the harmony between men and nature and how spatial balance is created within the patriarchal space.

#### 1. The Integration of Ancient Chinese Philosophies and the Pattern and Form of Male-dominated Houses

In *The Joy Luck Club*, in Lindo Jong’s story, the form and spatial organization of the Huangs’ house strongly reflects the hierarchical order prevalent in Chinese society and the strictly governed human relations in feudal society. The higher a house is located, the better the social position its dwellers enjoy. Lindo realizes that as the Huang’s house sits higher up in the valley; they have a much better position than her family. In the same vein, low buildings in the Huang’s house are built for storing supplies, for servants and their families. So, the high and low location of the house reveals the hierarchical order in Chinese society. The Huang’s house also reflects the Chinese convention that several generations live under one roof, and their relational identities are expressed in their occupation of the building: “The house had been in the family for many generations....There were four stories, one for each

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<sup>16</sup> A line of flight is a concept developed by Gilles Deleuze and used extensively in his work with Félix Guattari.

generation: great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, and children” (JLC 52-3). However, the house has two faces and “a confused look” (53). Based on the outside, the house seems to be important, as “there are two large round pillars holding up a veranda entrance to the front door” and “Huang Taitai, had added imperial dragon heads at the corners of the roof” (53). The well-decorated exterior of the house signifies its dwellers’ high social status and prosperity. Inside, the house is not well decorated except for a parlor on the first floor, which the Huangs use to receive guests. This room shows the wealth and old prestige of the family: “Tables and chairs carved out of red lacquer, fine pillows embroidered with the Huang family name in the ancient style, and many precious things in this parlor” (53). The outside of house and the parlor not only express the Huangs’ richness and prestige but also show Chinese people’s concern about their face-saving and vanity. However, the family members cannot enjoy their own living quarters since “the rest of the house was plain and uncomfortable and noisy with the complaints of twenty relatives” (53). The contrast between the well-decorated outside of the house and its uncomfortable inside space reveals that considering the whole family as a community, Chinese people would rather protect the prestige of this community than care about each family member’s benefit. Therefore, the contrasts in the decoration of the outside and inside of the house reveal that Chinese people worry more about the whole big family’s collective face and prestige rather than individual’s state of life.

What’s more, the arrangement of the Huang’s house reveals the hierarchical order prevalent in traditional ancient Chinese families, as the best room is reserved for the elders, while the kitchen, a noisy and filthy place, is adequate for the cooks and servants. When

Lindo is a little girl, she is promised to the Huang's son for marriage. When she arrives in the Huang's house, she is treated as a servant and forced to stay in the kitchen to cook for other family members. Her placement within the house obviously points out that women have a low status and must be obedient to the older generations and to their husbands in feudal Chinese society. Therefore, in the Hong's house, the spatial pattern is disharmonious as there is no personal space for women.

Besides, in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, both Winnie's father's house and her uncle's house are male-dominated spaces which individually illustrate Confucian and Daoist ideologies. Winnie's father's house is an expression of her father's social status and patriarchal power. Winnie leaves her father's house and is sent to live with her uncle's family after her mother disappears. She has the chance to revisit her old home when Old Aunt brings her to talk about her marriage. As an outsider, Winnie is scared of the house and states that "the house was ten times bigger and better than our place at the Mouth of the River....It was the kind of place where everything you saw you wanted to touch, yet you were afraid to move one step in case you knocked something down" (KGW 139). The structure and decoration of the house reveal that its host, Winnie's father owns a superior social and economic status. There are western styles of "ornate stands," "white marble floor," and "wide spiral staircase;" all these decorations are filled with the Qi of dignity. They impart dignity to the host, Winnie's father. But after the war, when Winnie goes back to her father's house, she finds the house is damaged by the war. So is her father. From the outside to the inside of this house, there are signs of decline. The windows behind the shutters have been broken and not yet

replaced. When coming into the sitting room, Winnie finds that “the sofa cushions and curtains were worn-looking, papers were scattered everywhere, dust had gathered in every corner” (323). So, it seems that the house bears the marks of the trauma of the war. Indeed, the servant says “our house had suffered from the war” (323). Nevertheless, Winnie states that “it was not bombs or bullets that had caused the damage. It was my father’s weak will” (323). Obviously, the Qi of the host closely links to the Qi of his house. As the host has neither a strong will nor a resilient state, his house and even everything he ever used becomes damaged gradually.

However, the depiction of Winnie’s uncle’s house emphasizes more Daoist ideas. Based on its form and structure, Winnie’s uncle’s house is, at its inception, a typical courtyard house. I will discuss specifically how its pattern and spatial organization integrate with Daoist ideology and how its decoration and furniture express its inhabitant’s social status, personality and taste. The uncle’s house is composed of two parts: “Old East” and “New West.” The Old East is “a big Chinese house, only one story, with a square courtyard bordered by walk-ways and living quarters, all the doors and windows facing in. The most important rooms faced east” (KGF 115). In virtue of its structure and spatial form, this house is a typical ancient Chinese dwelling, called a Siheyuan or courtyard house. There is nothing accidental about the arrangement of the buildings: “From the point of view of *Feng-shui*, a basic courtyard unit is not only a house of dwelling, but also a structured vision of the universe and an ideal container of Qi, being a reflection of the cosmos of Heaven and Earth” (Liu and Awotona 4). Considering its structure and spatial organization, I will discuss how the

Old East plays its role as an ideal container of Qi to enhance its inhabitants' prosperity, fortune and health. Like other courtyard houses, the Old East has a square courtyard. "In the minds of the Chinese, the square figure corresponds to a cosmic symbolic representation because ancient Chinese people believed that the 'sky is round and land is square.' This ideal form conforms to the Chinese people's "close to the earth" idea, or the belief that when man is close to the earth, health will prevail" (4). Apart from the square courtyard, the direction of doors and windows affect dwellers' fortune and health. With "all the doors and windows facing in," the layout of the Old East is "...enclosed to form a container, allowing the site itself to be filled with lively Qi (Breath)" (4). As an ideal container of Qi, the Old East can bring good health and fortune to people living in it as they breathe the refined and cohesive Qi every day. Besides, since it is closed to the outside and open to the inside, the Old East can be regarded as a wise integration of two philosophical ideologies. On one hand, as a homeland, the courtyard house can protect the self-sufficient feudal families from outside forces and disturbances; on the other, it roots them in the mode of agricultural production, bringing them closer to nature. In the Old East, the most important house should face east since a Chinese saying goes that "the purple cloud is from the east" which means a propitious omen appears from the east. So, facing east, the most important rooms can absorb the most auspicious Qi. As the most important rooms are provided for the old generations, the old generations will have longevity and good health. Thus, as a traditional courtyard house, the physical design and spatial organization of the Old East reflects the holistic and harmonious relationship between man and nature which Daoist philosophy embraced.

In contrast to Old East, “New West faced the west and stood two stories high, with three chimneys sticking out of the roof” (KGW 115). New West does not conform to the pattern of a courtyard house. As it faces the west, it cannot easily absorb the refined Qi. Also, in New West, Qi exhausts itself as there are three chimneys sticking out of the roof and expelling Qi out of the house. Depleted of Qi, the New West can be considered as a place with bad Fengshui. So, it is deserted by Chinese people even if it is well built. Winnie means to do her mending there, but as she feels that she “was stuck inside a cricket cage” (115), she leaves New West immediately and believes that it is not a good place to dream about her future.

## 2. Deterritorialized Places: Creating Spatial Balance within Male-dominated Houses

On one hand, some male-dominated houses are forms of “territorialized” or disharmonious spaces since they express patriarchal power and cannot provide any space for maternal power. On the other hand, others, especially the courtyard houses, embody spatial balance since they express the harmony between man and nature and contain spaces that female characters can deterritorialize. In this part, I will discuss how these “deterritorialized” places act as shelters where female characters search for stability and self-development.

As an expression of patriarchal power, Winnie’s father’s house is filled with patriarchal Qi which makes his daughter apprehensive. But filled with maternal Qi, her mother’s room provides a ‘deterritorialized’ place where she feels she belongs. Winnie claims that whenever she thinks about her childhood, she remembers only her mother’s room. In Winnie’s memory and imagination, her mother’s room is filled with western things, such as

“English biscuits hidden on top of her tall dresser,” “soft furniture, Italian automobiles and French gloves and shoes” and “a bottle of French perfume” (KGW 90). All these western things reveal that Winnie’s mother is a modern woman who has enjoyed a western education. Although a concubine of a traditional Chinese family, her mother does not abide by old Chinese traditions but longs for her own way of life. As she is not satisfied with her status in the family, she dares to run away but her disappearance is a riddle. The things in the room remain to reveal Winnie’s mother’s personality. The memory of the mother’s room “does not come from a nostalgia for childhood, but is given in its actuality of protection” (Bachelard 45). This room seems to have maternal power, as it is not only a place for Winnie and her mother to live together but also a shelter, protecting Winnie from the disturbance of other family members. Like her mother, this room protects Winnie well as it can supply western food for her to eat and exotic things for her to play with. However, with the disappearance of her mother, Winnie no longer gets protection from this room. She is forced to leave this room and is sent to live in her Uncle’s house. So, it seems that the mother and her room coexist or are united, when the mother lives there, her daughter can get protection from both her mother and the room. When the mother disappears and abandons her daughter, so does the room.

Winnie has the chance to revisit her mother’s room when her aunt brings her back to her father’s house in Shanghai. As Winnie once lived in this room with her mother, she has deep feeling for everything in it. She inspects and touches everything. She finds her mother’s private things could not be kept but “the furniture was the same” (KGW 145). Since her mother has disappeared, her room is “considered a bad-luck room” (145). Even though the

house is filled with many people, no one wants to live in this room as its occupant has mysteriously gone missing. After the war, Winnie returns to her father's house, but her husband, WenFu's family also move into this big house. And Winnie's mother-in-law occupies her mother's room. To get back for herself, Winnie plays a trick to her mother-in-law when she complains that "Last night was so cold, as if a wind were blowing right through the walls" (330). To the Chinese, when a wind blows through the walls, it means that a ghost is in the house. As Winnie confides to Wen Fu's mother that once a woman died in this room, she believes that there is a ghost haunting in it. She no longer dares to live in this room and forces Winnie to change rooms with her since she believes that this room holds the Qi of a ghost. So, in this way, Winnie gets back her mother's room. To other family members, this is a haunted place. But to Winnie, it is a shelter filled with maternal Qi where she can search for stability and herself. Meanwhile, spatial balance is created as there is a maternal space within the male-dominated house.

Apart from Winnie's mother's room, the greenhouse in Winnie's Uncle's house is also a "deterritorialized" place where Winnie can feel she belongs. The greenhouse is initially built to "grow roses, grow orchids, grow luxuries that had no lasting value" (KGW 115) which is uncle's first hobby. But as he has new hobbies, he tires of the greenhouse and abandons it. Based on its structure and pattern, the greenhouse seems to be superfluous and unnecessary: "added to the south side of New West," the greenhouse looks like "a drawer pulled out, left out" (115). Like the green house and everything in it, Winnie confronts the same fate of being abandoned. After her mother's disappearance, she has to move to her

uncle's house. Her uncle's typical courtyard house is a territory of power that expresses old Chinese social hierarchy and structure. As an outsider, Winnie has no place in her uncle's house, and nobody in this house really cares about her. But Winnie shelters herself in the greenhouse, as she claims that "I realized that was the kind of place my mother and I belonged to, only that kind of place, where things are thrown away" (116). Without a place in her uncle's house, Winnie settles down and deals with secret things in the greenhouse. She reads *Chin Ping Mei*, a forbidden book, and both she and Peanut confide secrets to each other.

Apart from becoming a treasured hiding place during Winnie's childhood, the greenhouse is her soul habitat where she can shelter herself. Once Winnie stays in the monastery in Hongchow, she often walks up the pathway and reaches the little outdoor pavilion that reminds her of the greenhouse on the island. She longs to be back at that place where I had hidden myself, where I pretended to be lost, where I imagined somebody would find me. I was remembering my poor little broken treasures: my mother's painting, the wings of a butterfly that crumbled into dust, a dried flower bulb that I once watered every day, thinking it would grow into a fairy maiden who could be my playmate. (KGW 181)

To other family members, these damaged things are inanimate, useless and out of Qi, but, to Winnie, those deserted things in the green house are not inert objects but animate Qi-things or treasures that she can confide to and invest with her hopes and dreams. Therefore, as a Qi-thing, the greenhouse is a "deterritorialized" place which provides a "line of flight" for Winnie to escape the territory of her uncle's family's power. Meanwhile, it

exhibits spatial balance as it provides a space for female character within the patriarchal space.

### **B. Maternal Houses: Spaces of Intimacy**

Patriarchal houses strive for spatial balance, although they often exhibit imbalance. However, maternal houses are “spaces of intimacy.” According to Bachelard, the house is an especially suitable site for phenomenological research into the intimacy of peoples’ mental space: “The house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind....Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human being’s first world” (Bachelard 6). Some houses and some rooms in the mother’s house depicted in Tan’s novels are not so much social spaces as spaces of intimacy, as they can shelter day-dreaming, protect the dreamer, and stir memories. Thus, I will discuss how houses and rooms in the mother’s house—as spaces of intimacy—integrate the characters’ thoughts, memories and dreams or, to put it differently, how human memories, thoughts and dreams inhabit domestic space.

As the mother-daughter relation is a central concern in most of Tan’s stories, mothers’ houses are essential settings where mothers narrate while daughters listen or where they communicate with each other. In these mothers’ houses, a room is always reserved for their daughters no matter how long they have left their home. Once the daughter returns home, her room and everything in it evokes her thoughts, imaginings and memories about her past life

with her mother. These spaces are places of intimacy where both the mother and her daughter can recollect, memorize and imagine their past lives together.

In her second novel *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Tan addresses the relationship between a Chinese immigrant mother, Winnie, and her American-born daughter, Pearl. As an immigrant Winnie suffers exclusion and alienation from American society. Thus, she can only console herself in her own house, as it is a shelter and a castle where she can relieve her inner heartache. The family members' rooms in Winnie's house have the power to trigger her thoughts, memories and longings. Firstly she cleans up the living room and her bedroom. The moment she enters there, her husband's picture and "the curve of his body sunken in the bed" capture her attention and evoke her thoughts of him. Then, she goes into her son's room. The closed dresser always keeps secrets or forbidden things. There she finds a Playboy magazine that she prohibited her son to read, asking him to throw it away. Finally, she goes into Pearl's room. She recalls "so many hurts and fights in this room" (KGW 81), and its furnishings inspire specific memories. "The curved dressing table" lets her think of the misunderstanding between her daughter and herself. Winnie gives her favorite dressing table to Pearl, but as a young girl, Pearl cannot appreciate this old-fashioned thing "with the round mirror and silver handles." She even hates it and believes that her mother "picks this one out just to torture me" (81). To express her vexation, she carves tiny words into the top of this table. These tiny words vex Winnie in turn, but when she realizes Pearl did it twenty-five years ago she calms down. Besides the dressing table, a pink plastic box entitled "My Secret Treasures" also lets her remember past conflicts with her daughter. Even though the Winnie did not understand

Pearl at the time, the box has the almost magical power to reveal its host's inner heart. On Pearl's tenth birthday, Winnie gives her this box and claims that "you can put things, such as secrets, privacy and American junk inside" (83). More than a box filled with a young girl's secrets, Winnie sees it in retrospect as "the treasures of my young daughter's heart" (83). To comprehend her daughter's hidden feelings, Winnie decides to open this box, and she finds inside it things which she had warned her daughter not to use. What's more, she finds a small card with a picture of Jesus on one side and on the other side, the words: "In loving memory, James Y. Louie." (84). It is covered with angry black marks that indicate Pearl's great misery at her father's death. As Pearl wouldn't grieve or cry at her father's funeral, Winnie has always thought that Pearl was indifferent to her father's death. But this small card with many angry marks reflects her true heart. Opening this box of "Secret Treasures," Winnie moves closer to understanding her daughter's inner heart.

As Bachelard states "our house is our corner of the world" (4). To Winnie, her own house is the corner of the world that shelters her memories and regrets about her family members. For Pearl, her former room in her mother's house is "a place of intimacy" where she can think, remember and imagine her past life with her mother. A cultural gap separates Pearl from her mother, and she seldom returns to her mother's home after her marriage. But with the sudden death of Grand Auntie Du, Winnie asks Pearl and her family to attend the funeral and invites them to stay the night in her house. As Pearl cannot refuse this request, she and her family spend a night in her mother's house. That night, Pearl and her husband Phil stay in her old room. The moment Pearl enters her old room, she feels surprised that

“except for the fact that everything is a bit too clean, the room looks the same as when I was a teenager” (KGW 17). Although Pearl hasn’t stayed there since she has been married, her mother has carefully kept everything in the room as before. It’s obvious that all the things in Pearl’s old room show how her mother loves and misses her. Nothing has changed except her opinion of the dressing table that was the source of misunderstanding between the mother and the daughter. Winnie gave her favorite dressing table to Pearl as a gift of love, yet the young Pearl did not appreciate the gift, for she hated old-fashioned piece of furniture. However, Pearl claims that “it actually looks quite nice, art deco” (17) and she wonders if her mother would let her have it. From disliking to liking this dressing table, Pearl gradually appreciates and understands her mother.

The things in Pearl’s old room reflect her mother’s traditional Chinese virtue of thriftiness. Pearl notices that her mother “has placed my old Chinese slippers under the bed, the ones with a hole at each of the big toes; nothing ever thrown away, in case it’s needed again twenty years later” (KGW 17). The Chinese slippers remembered from twenty years previously pass on the message that nothing should be wasted. Apart from the slippers, the towels prepared for the family also reveal that Winnie’s carefulness about conserving things, as they are the thirty-year-old Christmas gift from the Kwongs. In all, all these things in Pearl’s old room are representative existences of the past. They are able to express the dwellers’ personalities and record the conflicts between the mother and her daughter. They recall memories about their past life together, and, at the same time, as vital Qi things, they prompt the mother and daughter to revise their understanding of each other.

What's more, the mother, LuLing's apartment plays an important role in Tan's fourth novel, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, which explores the complicated and entangled mother-daughter relationship of three generations. After Lu Ling has symptoms of dementia, Ruth returns to her apartment and helps her to clean it. Lu Ling's apartment is a place of intimacy since it is filled with hiding places. Bachelard speaks of "the images of intimacy that are in harmony with drawers and chests, as also with all the other hiding-places in which human beings, great dreamers of locks, keep or hide their secrets" (74). Thus, closet, floorboard, fireplace and other hiding places in Lu Ling's apartments are images of intimacy since both Lu Ling and Ruth keep and hide their secrets there. Bachelard further claims that "wardrobes with their shelves, desks with their drawers, and chests with their false bottoms are veritable organs of the secret psychological life....They are hybrid objects, subject objects. Like us, through us and for us, they have a quality of intimacy" (78). Indeed, these hiding places in Lu Ling's apartment are no longer utilitarian objects but animate or Qi-things that have the "quality of intimacy" Bachelard finds in humans and their dwellings. They have the agency to conceal both Lu Ling and Ruth's secrets and true selves and thereby to estrange them from each other, nevertheless, they also have the power to reveal. When cleaning Lu Ling's apartment, Ruth begins her journey to discover these secret places with their hidden things that are able to signify both her own and her mother's personalities and evoke Ruth's memories of her conflicts with her mother. Investigating the hiding places offer her the means to discover the women's inner selves.

When Ruth opens a closet, "hand towels with holly motifs" in it touch her. In her

view, the old towels are no longer objects but Qi-things “suffused with a life and a past. They had a history, a personality, a connection to other memories” (BD 128). A towel with fuchsia flowers reveals Lu Ling’s traditional Chinese virtue of frugality that she hopes her daughter will inherit. When Ruth uses “the towel with fuchsia flowers” instead of “the green towel with frayed ends” (128-129), Lu Ling scolds her. However, the adult Ruth is also quite used to a simple and thrifty life, for she has inherited these values from her mother. Besides, rushing over and peeling back the rug, Ruth finds that the floorboard is also “one of her mother’s hiding places, where she hoarded valuables that might be needed in time of war” (130). Under the floorboard, Ruth finds “the gold serpentine bracelet” which reveals her mother’s habit of making provisions for rainy days. What’s more, the never-used fireplace is another secret spot where Ruth finds “a twenty-dollar bill wrapped around four singles” (131). As her mother’s small treasure, this twenty-dollar bill lets Ruth think of her adolescent past and the tricks she played on her mother of replacing the twenties with tens to buy forbidden things. When cleaning LuLing’s apartment, Ruth rediscovers these hiding places and re-encounters the treasures that express her mother’s personality and prompt Ruth to remember and reevaluate her mother and her own upbringing.

Ruth’s hiding place is her diary which “could be proof of her existence...in her diary, she could be as truthful as she wanted to be” (BD 132). The diary records the secrets that Ruth would not confide to her mother. In case her mother read the diary, she attempted to hide it in different places. But her mother always managed to find it and to forbid her to do the things about which she wrote. As a result, Ruth accuses her mother of reading her diary,

but LuLing responds that “a daughter should have no secrets from a mother” (133). She does not realize how her demands for no secrets drive her daughter to hide even more from her. As both LuLing and her daughter Ruth will not confide in each other but instead hide their secrets in their own ways, their misunderstanding becomes deeper and deeper. Thus, as a Qi-thing of intimacy, the diary also calls up Ruth’s memories of fighting with her mother and her struggle to have an existence apart from her. As an assemblage of hiding places, Lu Ling’s apartment is filled with her and her daughter’s secrets that are no longer secrets with the passage of time, but treasures or Qi-things. Each of them has a history that expresses the hider’s personality and inspires connections to other memories.

## **II. Seeking Identity and Stability in Fluid and Hybrid Spaces**

Rather than being fixed as shelters, castles, or stable containers and settings, houses also become fluid and hybrid spaces in virtue of diasporic resettlements and border-crossings, the forced migrations of war or other factors. These fluid and hybrid spaces in Tan’s novels make possible different kinds of social relations and interactions. These temporary dwellings and their inhabitants are produced and redefined in the process of mutually constitutive and transformative becoming.

### **A. Houses as Hybrid and Heterotopian Spaces**

Tan’s bi-cultural background means that her novels are particularly concerned with issues of diaspora, cultural conflict and conciliation. To reflect on these issues, her novels feature hybrid and heterotopian spaces where different cultures meet and interact and

characters search for their cultural identities. Two theoretical concepts will be helpful in exploring these questions. The first is Homi Bhabha's idea of cultural hybridity, developed in *The Location of Culture*; the second is Foucault's idea of heterotopias, developed in a brief but fundamental essay on the subject.

Bhabha mainly uses the term "third space" to describe cultural hybridity. In an interview, he states that "the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge" (Rutherford 211). And for him, the third space is an "interstitial or in-between space," where "the cutting edge of translation and negotiation" occurs (Bhabha 208). This space is above all textual, "the Third Space of enunciation" where "the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (211). In a word, constructed around ambivalence, ambiguity and hybridity, Bhabha's Third Space of enunciation has particular implications for cultural analysis that pays attention to the construction of new culture and cultural identity. In her novels, Tan imagines hybrid spaces where East meet West in encounters that evoke Bhabha's concept of hybridity.

Besides being hybrid spaces, Tan's houses sometimes evoke the heterotopias elaborated by Michel Foucault. In contrast to a utopia, which is a "site with no real place," heterotopia is "a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space" (Foucault 3-4). Foucault articulates several possible types of heterotopia. Firstly, crisis heterotopias are "privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to

society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis” (4). Today, these “heterotopias of crisis” are replaced by “heterotopias of deviation: those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (5). Rest homes, psychiatric hospitals and prisons are typical “heterotopias of deviation.” Secondly, Foucault states that “the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (6). A garden can be a heterotopia as all the vegetation comes together in this space, in this sort of microcosm. Thirdly, “heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time” (6). Museums and libraries are heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time. Besides, heterotopias also link to time in its most flowing, transitory, precarious aspect, for example, the fairgrounds are temporal heterotopias. Fourthly, there are heterotopias of ritual or purification which are spaces that are isolated and penetrable yet “not freely accessible like a public place” (7). Finally, heterotopias “has a function in relation to all the space that remains” (8). Their first function is to “create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory” (8). Their second function is to provide a space of compensation, in other words, a space that is other. Foucault states that “Brothels and colonies are two extreme types of heterotopia” (9). As Tan depicts some courtesan houses in *The Valley of Amazement*, I will discuss how these courtesan houses serve as compensatory heterotopias where both courtesans and their customers indulge in illusion.

As Tan’s newest novel, *The Valley of Amazement* (2013) is about courtesans’ lives, the courtesan house is one of the most important settings. The beginning of the novel introduces

the courtesan house run by the American mother. This brothel was originally the villa of a poet, Pan Ku Xiang. Like the face of its owner, the gate of the mansion has the power to embody his status. The gate of the poet's mansion announces his high social status and wealth: "the thick gate refreshed with red lacquer and the brass fittings polished to a gleaming richness" (VA 9). After he dies, his eldest son hires the best stone mason to carve a stele to memorize him. But as his descendants sell the place for a cheap price, they are cursed and get bad luck as retribution. As a haunted place, this villa is abandoned. When Lucia buys the house, she hires an Italian actor who acts as a Feng Shui master to improve the Feng Shui of this villa. This masquerade is the first step in her transformation of the poet's house into a hybrid, heterotopian space of illusion. At the same time, Lucia turns the haunted and desolate villa into a good Feng Shui space where Yin and yang can be in balance and ghost and humans can coexist in harmony. As a dwelling for the poet ghost, she buys a fine stele that "sits on a tortoise and is crowned by a dragon, symbols of honor reserved for a high official" (6). As ghosts are filled with the Qi of Yin and humans are filled with the Qi of Yang, Chinese people think that ghosts live in Yin houses and humans live in Yang houses. So, we can consider the fine stele as a yin inhabited dwelling suitable for the poet ghost. With the building of this fine stele, a yin inhabited dwelling within the yang inhabited dwelling, Lucia's courtesan house has a good Feng Shui as "the ideal feng-shui space is also supposed to balance Yin and Yang" (Xu 273). Thus, the poet ghost and humans live harmoniously in the courtesan house.

Besides being a good Feng Shui space, the courtesan house is a hybrid place where

East meets West. With an English name “HIDDEN JADE PATH” on the right pillar and “THE HOUSE OF LULU MIMI” in Chinese on the left, the courtesan house mixes codes with these bilingual names, giving a Chinese flavor to English and an English flavor to Chinese (VA 9). This hybridizing impulse also affects how rooms of the house are decorated. Passing the vestibule, customers will “...come to where East meets West, the Grand Salon, the common ground for businessmen of two worlds” (8). Decorated with western furnishings, such as “...colorful tapestries, thick carpets, and an overabundance of low divans, stiff settees, fainting couches, and Turkish ottomans” (10), the Grand Salon has an authentic sense of Western fashion. Alongside this western style of decoration, there are “the blue and white vases” in the Orientalist style that is quite amusing to the Chinese. The blue and white vase is originally a style typical of Chinese decorations. It designates a white vase decorated under the glaze with a blue pigment, generally cobalt oxide. However, the blue and white vases put in the Grand Salon are not traditional Chinese blue and white wares but hybrid images. “Imported from France and painted with depictions of Chinese people whose faces resembled Napoleon and Josephine” (10), they are examples of Chinoiserie; they combine the hue of Chinese blue and white wares with the portraits of the French emperor and his queen. Obviously, these vases emphasize the hybrid atmosphere of the salon.

What’s more, the paintings express the clash of cultures since Chinese people cannot appreciate the references from western art: “...rosy-cheeked Roman goddesses with muscular white bodies, who cavorted next to similarly muscled white horses—grotesque shapes...” (VA 10). These female images from classical western art are bestial and exotic in Chinese eyes.

So, the Grand Salon is a hybrid place where East meets West, where cultural reconciliation takes place at times but where sometimes cultural divergences are difficult to resolve. In this place, not only do eastern and western furniture and decorations interact with each other, but also eastern and western businessmen communicate and negotiate there.

Furthermore, the courtesan house is a heterotopia where both courtesans and their customers indulge in fantasies and games of make-believe that reveal the social space within which the site is located to be based on illusion. The courtesan house imitates and even parodies cultural codes, exposing the arbitrary nature of the conventions that govern life outside. When Magic Gourd instructs Violet in how to become a popular courtesan, she explains how the courtesan creates “a world of romance and illusion” and invites her customers to join in (VA 140). To entice customers, the courtesan should dress up as a high-ranking courtesan and touch their inner heart by playing instruments and singing. Besides, the courtesan should master love-making positions and learn how to give a glimpse of her charms to seduce her customer. Besides, to gain “...the Four Necessities: jewelry, furniture, a seasonal contract with a stipend, and a comfortable retirement” (146), Magic Gourd states that a courtesan “...must be popular, desired by many suitors who give you costly gifts” (147). So, courtesans and their customers expose the monetary basis of relations outside the courtesan house.

In the courtesan house, the boudoir is a separate and private space where the courtesan and her customer indulge in sensual pleasures. Nevertheless, the hierarchical social structure beyond the gates operates within the courtesan house, for the women’s status

decides how much privacy they enjoy: “The highest-ranked courtesan had the room farthest from the hallway, which gave her the most privacy” (VA 16). The courtesan’s boudoir is a separate space where activities take place out of sight. Whether higher or lower-ranking courtesans, the women all have a boudoir which “...had a window facing the inner courtyard, and this was ideal for moon watching” (16). Open to the inner courtyard and closed to the outside world, the boudoir is an enclosed space where the courtesan, whose occupation forces her to conceal her misery and distress from her customers, can confide her feelings to the moon lady when she watches the moon. The function of the courtesan house is to permit customers to indulge in illusions so as to escape from the pressures of the real world. In the Grand Salon, both Chinese and western businessmen smoke cigars and relax, as if the general colonial context in the surrounding world were free of cultural conflicts. The women also indulge in private fantasies. The Cloud Beauties remember their miserable former lives; make comments on their customers, and dream of their future lives in the “Family Hall” (15). In her boudoir, Magic Cloud imagines her previous life with the Poet Ghost. Meanwhile the courtesan’s boudoir is “the heterotopia of deviation” as both courtesans’ and their customers’ behaviors are outside the norm. Their behaviors violate Chinese feudal ethical codes, even, or perhaps especially, while they imitate them. Therefore, the courtesan house is a heterotopia where deviations occur and both courtesans and their customers are engaged in illusions.

### **B. Houses as Unstable and Fluid Spaces**

Besides hybrid and heterotopian spaces, there are unstable housing spaces which can

indicate disharmonious human relations. The house and the decorations in it are able to reveal the conflicts or disharmony between wife and husband. To keep their independence and love without obligation, Lena and her husband Harold in *The Joy Luck Club* decide to share living expenses equally once they live together. But in fact, Harold manipulates and oppresses Lena at home and work. Encouraging Harold to create his own company, Lena works hard and provides some creative ideas on restaurant design. But she never gets equally rewarded. As Lena's boss, Harold never pays her what she deserves. Besides, Lena claims that "since Harold pays more, he had the deciding vote on how the house should look" (JLC 189). Lena is deprived of the right to decorate the house and to decide how much she should pay for their mutual living expense. As Harold is manipulative when it comes to furnishing the house, it is in a state of imbalance that Lena's mother, Yingying, observes. When she visits their house, she feels that "this is a house that will break into pieces" (294). "The slant of the floor" and the guest room with a sloped roof makes her feel as if she is "running down." Based on the unbalanced state of the house, Yingying foresees the conflicts and disharmony between Lena and Harold.

Indeed, the collapse of furniture and decorations in their house signifies that their relation is on the verge of collapse. A white marble end table that Harold made in his student days is "a poorly designed piece" in Lena's view. Since it is "made out of a slab of unevenly cut marble and thin crisscrosses of black lacquer wood for the legs," this table is clearly top-heavy. Yingying claims that "it is heavy white marble on skinny black legs" (JLC 294). The colors white and black recall the sign for Yin and Yang. As the colors and materials are in

discordance, Yin and Yang are unbalanced. The end table Harold designed is a sign of a marriage in which he wants to dominate. What's more, responding from a feminine perspective, Lena thinks that the table Harold designed is filled with masculine Qi rather than feminine fluidity. Thus, this table collapses when Lena's mother puts her handbag on it. "The cylindrical black vase on top starts to wobble. The freesias in the vase quiver" (191). So, the unstable and unbalanced state of house and furnishings in it indicate the couple's unequal relations.

What's more, as shelters and hybrid spaces, houses can function as a chronotope, or fused time/space, when they operate as "the more general theoretical ground of a narrative," revealing a "particular understanding of historical time in relation to space" that constitutes a literary text's underlying principle of representation, and that is loaded with values, associations, and ideas (Bakhtin 84-258). In the course of Winnie's journey to escape from the war, the novel brings together the house and the chronotope of the road. Winnie visits many cities, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Suzhou, Nanjing, Wuchang, Changsha, Guiyang and Kungming. Whenever she visits a new city, the houses she lives in or the places she stays, reveal her search for stability and identity in time and space. As chronotopes, these fictional houses have narrative-and-plot-generating significance; they not only reveal her living state but also embody the geography and local conditions of different places in China.

On the eve of war against the Japanese, Winnie accompanies her husband to the city where he gets his pilot's training at an American-style air force school. Therefore, they move to "live in a place in Hangchow that had once been a monastery" (KGW 166). All the military

couples can have a private room. The little monastery room in which Winnie and her husband dwell is a male-dominated space where Winnie suffers and bears patriarchal oppression. Every night, her husband commands her to say “dirty word, words for a woman’s body parts” when they are making love and begs for sex acts which betray Winnie’s own will (169). If Winnie refuses to submit to her husband’s order, he tortures her physically and mentally. Therefore, this monastery room is a space filled with masculine Qi where there is no space for Winnie. However, fearful that they will be infected by the American pilots’ sexual diseases through sharing the same bathroom, Winnie and other pilots’ wives decide to search for another bathroom. Finally they find “an extra room that had once been used to store the dragon-well tea leaves brought down from the mountainside” (172). This extra room is a feminine and natural Qi-filled space in which Winnie and the other women assist each other and get together into a community. To bathe with warm water in the extra room, all the women share the work and cooperate with one another. While one boils water, others run back and forth to carry buckets of hot water and boiled cloths. When they bathe, hot water trickles down to the floor and onto the leaves. Then the steam rising from the buckets on the floor has the agency to make old leaves revive and make the room fill with the scent of dragon-well tea. Thus, women “would all breathe and sigh, breath and sigh, letting this fragrant dew fall on our faces” (172). Thus, in this new bathroom, feminine Qi and fragrant natural Qi from the dragon-well tea leaves harmoniously interact and integrate with each other. While Winnie suffers sexual oppression in the monastery room, she can find her own place and relax in this extra room which is a “deterritorialized” place as well as a harmonious

place filled with feminine and natural Qi. Juxtaposing the private room with the extra bathroom in the monastery, Tan balances a masculine-oriented chronotope with a traditionally feminine one.

Since the war begins, Winnie and other pilots' wives are on their Taonao road. They cannot control their own fate but move from one place to another. Different houses and rooms they live reflect that they are on the chronotope of the road. Whenever Winnie arrives in a place, she depicts the cityscape and the house she lives. As the warlike condition goes from bad to worse, so do their living conditions. Hangchow is at first a place of respite and calm before the storm of war breaks out. After staying there for a short time, Winnie and the other pilots' wives are sent to Yangchow to be reunited with their husbands. Winnie states that Yangchow is an old-style place with no tall buildings and the place they live expresses a decline in their situation, into "mud and dirt" (KGW 195). Then, when moving to Nanjing, Winnie lives in a big house which has once been a fine-looking mansion, built for a foreign businessman, but the inside of the house is dilapidated. She describes how "the sofas had worn down...the rugs scraped thin...And in every room, the wallpaper was cracked and peeling. The kitchen had a leaking coming from two corners...this house was like an orphan, no family to love it" (206). Rooms and furnishings in this fine-looking mansion spread ruined Qi which makes this house like an abandoned child. However, because of her pregnancy, Winnie is still eager to furnish the house. She decorates it with "a few extra pieces of furniture" and settles down in a home though the whole city is in a state of panic—"taonan-crazy" (219). By furnishing the dilapidated house and settling down in a

home, Winnie looks for stability but when told to move to another place, she has to desert the new home that she has arranged.

The chronotope of the road continues to shape narrative events, as Winnie passes many cities and stays in many houses. As the capital city Nanjing will be occupied by the Japanese, all the pilots and their wives are ordered to move to Kunming. The houses Winnie lives in on the road are not shelters with solid walls but flexible and open spaces that reflect the centrifugal forces organizing the narrative of her escape. On the road from Nanjing to Kunming, she passes many cities and stays in various hotels. The chronotope of the house serves as means of measuring how, when the road narrative takes place in wartime, real historical time and space as well as fictional time and space are articulated in relation to each other.

When finally she arrives in Kunming, the house she lives in there narrates her living condition and shapes her daily life. She lives in a foreign-style house which is “still Chinese in feeling and thinking” (KGW 238). The spatial allocation of the house reveals that there is strictly social hierarchy even if it is in wartime. There are two large common rooms downstairs; one is a big kitchen which is a space only for the cook and servant. While the servants work hard in the kitchen, the occupants entertain themselves in another common room. They enjoy themselves by turning on the radio, the fan, and the lamps and playing mah jong rather than thinking about the war.

Meanwhile, where these pilot couples live depend on their husbands' status in the military. “Since Jiaoguo was a captain, he and Hulan had the best part of the house, the two

large rooms downstairs” (KGW 239). The remaining pilot couples all live in rooms upstairs. As the wife of the inspector has already chosen the best upstairs rooms because of her husband’s higher ranking, Winnie and her husband receive the worst rooms that Winnie describes as “both ... facing a bad-luck direction” (239). However, with the sudden death of the inspector, Winnie takes over the best upstairs rooms by paying extra money. Winnie seeks stability and good luck by changing rooms; however the best upstairs rooms cannot grant her what she wishes. After moving into the new room, Winnie’s first baby dies in her womb, her second child dies because of diarrhea, and she still suffers male-domination and sexual oppression.

On the chronotope of the road, some houses and rooms are able to assist Winnie to search for freedom and identity. But it seems that she cannot find a Qi-filled place like the “extra bathroom” until she meets an American, her future husband Jimmy Louie in an American dance party. To celebrate the victory of expelling the Japanese, the Americans hold a dance party and invite all the pilot couples to participate. The place where they hold the party once was a large warehouse, but now it is filled with Christmas rhythm as Americans decorate it with trees, “candy canes, candles and other shapes in bright colors” (KGW 301). Full of Chinese and American food and decorations, the party site is a hybrid space where Winnie can temporarily escape her husband’s control and where she encounters an American, Jimmy who falls in love with her at first sight. However, when Winnie returns home, her husband tortures her physically and mentally and even divorces her on paper. In Old China, it is a big tragedy and shame for a woman if she is divorced. However, this divorce paper is

what Winnie longs for. It emancipates her from marital constraint. So, she leaves her home and moves to “a poor room in a straw house” (KGW 310). Although the living condition is very bad, this poor room provides Winnie and her son a private space to enjoy a free and happy time. They are engaged in their own world and strive to change it from dirty to clean. However, the happy time is transient as her husband quickly finds her and breaks his promise to divorce. Therefore, both the warehouse where the party held and the poor room can provide Winnie only a transient space of freedom and stability. With the end of the war, Winnie returns to Shanghai and lives in her father’s house which is still a space filled with masculine power as it is occupied by her husband and his family. In all, in the chronotope of the road, the houses Winnie lives in or the places she stays not only shape narrative events but also reveal her search for stability and identity in time and space, though it is difficult for her to escape from male-domination and sexual oppression. The novel positions itself in relation to the genre of road narrative, innovating it by hybridizing the house chronotope with the chronotope of the road. In this way, novel demonstrates the instability of social positions in wartime Chinese society and opens up temporary spaces of liberty for its female protagonist.

## Conclusion

Either as stable dwellings or as fluid and hybrid spaces, fictional houses in Tan's novels are Qi-things which have vital force to make different kinds of social relations and interactions. Through creating many stable domestic spaces, Tan aims to search for spatial balance within male-dominated houses as well as maternal houses. At the same time, concentrating on issues of diaspora, cultural conflict and conciliation, in her novels Tan creates hybrid and heterotopian spaces where different cultures meet and interact and characters search for their cultural identities. And she even creates fluid spaces where temporary dwellings and their inhabitants are produced and redefined in the process of mutually constitutive and transformative becoming. Through creating these multiple fictional dwellings in her novels, Tan is eager to search for the harmony not only between men and women, but also between humans and nature or even between humans and the spiritual world which are the issues that closely and insistently concern her. Apart from conjuring up fictional houses in her novels, in real life, Tan has created a "Tree house" as her own dwelling to seek for the harmony between nature and culture. She resides in San Francisco, with her husband in a house they designed. Interviewed by *The Wall Street Journal* on 30 July 2014, Tan reveals that she and her husband designed their own house to feel open and airy, like a tree house, but also to be a place where they could live comfortably into old age. Allowing Tan to freely inhale and exhale natural Qi and bringing her back into old memories, more than a tree house, her residence is a Qi-thing or what Haraway would call a "natureculture" which is able to combine nature and culture. Considering all the elements in the natural and

the spiritual world as Qi-things, the next part will further discuss how the harmony between humans and nature and between humans and the spiritual world come into being through their interactions.

## **Part Two: Qi-things in the Wider World: Cosmic Interactions**

Focusing on humans' daily activities, such as eating, clothing and housing, I have discussed the interaction between humans and man-made Qi-things. The present part concerns Qi-things in the wider world, the interaction between microcosm and macrocosm. I consider the microcosm as human individuals and the macrocosm as everything else in the natural and spiritual world. Therefore, this part divides into two chapters: the first dealing with the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world and the second with humans' encounters with the spiritual world.

## Chapter Four: The Interconnectedness between Humans and the Natural World

In an interview, Amy Tan states that “I have a fascination with the natural world, and I see parallels in the natural world with human beings” (Goodreads Nov. 2013). Obviously, Tan emphasizes the interconnectedness of humans and nature rather than their dualistic relation. Like the mother-daughter relation, the relation between humans and nature is also a main topic in her works that is worthy to study. The idea of human supremacy and separateness from nature is rooted in the western tradition of humanism. In contrast, Chinese Taoist philosophy emphasizes immanence and unity which leads to monism and the harmony between man and nature. Under the influence of her bi-cultural background, Tan has her own concept of the relation between humans and nature. Rather than separating them, Tan regards humans and nature as Qi-things that have vital energies and interact with each other. In her works, she reveals how the interactions between humans and nature can develop from disharmony to harmony. On one hand, she criticizes the western dualist tradition, but on the other, she takes her distance from outmoded Chinese conventions and customs through depicting humans’ destruction of nature, their cruelty to animals and the oppression both women and nature suffered. She attributes the destruction of nature not only to the western dualist tradition with its emphasis on control and domination but also to old Chinese conventions with their respect for hierarchy. In all, she reflects on humans’ disrespect toward nature beyond ethnicity and nationality. Her works reflect the post-humanist view of things as

well as the holistic idea in Chinese philosophy that nature and everything in it are Qi-things that have vital agencies and harmoniously interact with humans.

### **I. Disruptive Intra-Actions that Disrupt the Subject/ Object Division**

One of the most important ecological critiques of the subject/object split can be found in the writings of Val Plumwood. For her, the dualistic mindset defines both the self and its relations with the wider world: “Dualism has not only shaped our conception of human identity and the conception of the relations between humans and nature, but has also shaped the western mechanistic conception of nature” (Plumwood 104). To understand the rationalist account of nature and human identity, Plumwood examines the Cartesian contribution to the development of the western rationalist tradition. Descartes inherits the conceptual schema that devalues the body, nature and the feminine. But he extends the human/nature dualism to separate the mind and consciousness from the body and sensation. “On Descartes’ account, mind, the inner mechanism which explains the operations of the mechanically conceived human body, also divides humans utterly from the rest of nature, from which mind is totally absent” (113). Descartes separates humans’ mental world from the natural world. The mind is totally absent from nature. Meanwhile, he “shifts the basis of mind from rationality to consciousness” (114). Consciousness divides the universe completely in a total cleavage between the thinking being and mindless nature, and between the thinking substance and “its body” (116). In all, “the body and nature become the dualised other of the mind” (115). It is obvious to Plumwood that the dualist idea is rooted in westerners’ minds, shaping their

insertion within the environment. However, Amy Tan looks to her Chinese origin to provide a different mirror for her to reflect on western rationalist ideas. Turning now to the depiction of the nature/culture division in her books, I will discuss how they reveal and criticize the western dualist tradition.

### **A. Women and Natural Qi-things: Victims under the Control of Anthropocentrism and Patriarchy**

When discussing the relations between feminism and ecological feminism, Plumwood finds that they hold different views on the relation of women and nature. She states that “one essential feature of all ecological feminist positions is that they give positive value to women’s connection with nature” (Plumwood 8). Whereas ecofeminists favor women’s connectedness with nature, feminism regards “the connection between women and nature as an instrument of oppression, a relic of patriarchy” (20). Based on her review of feminist and ecofeminist ideas, Plumwood advances her own view on the alliance between women and nature. She creates the term “backgrounding” to express “one of the most common forms of denial of women and nature...their treatment as providing the background to a dominant” (21). She states that “the backgrounding and instrumentalisation of nature and that of women run closely parallel” (21). It is obvious to Plumwood that the connection between women and nature is that both of them suffer from their backgrounded and instrumental status. Besides, in a cross-cultural context, WEI Qinqi states that “Chinese ecofeminism, therefore, ought to take its own justification not from investigating how close women are to nature, but from

how close the way women are dominated to that nature is” (753). Thus, unlike many ecofeminists who overemphasize “the transcendental and mysterious links between nature and women, a link to which men claim no access,” WEI also deplors the domination that both women and nature suffer and states that “to join women and nature is therefore to highlight the suffering of both” (753). Like Plumwood and Wei, Amy Tan investigates the similarities between the ways women and nature are dominated. In *The Bonesetter's daughter*, both female characters and nature suffer oppression and destruction from patriarchy and anthropocentrism.

#### 1. Precious Auntie and nature: “the other” of anthropocentrism and patriarchy

The novel narrates the misfortunes that Precious Auntie and Luling suffer in the “Immortal Heart village.” The village and natural things in it are Qi-things which have vital energy. However, the things that are held most precious—the tree, jade, and the dragon bones suffer from “too much admiration” which is a kind of euphemism for the acquisitive relation that people have with Qi-things. Rather than having the respect that the word “admiration” implies, the people want to own these powerful things, but in trying to have them, ironically they destroy them. Thus, these natural Qi-things are no longer immortal and animate but become inert or even dead. For one thing, the village changes from an immortal place into a desolate one. The village begins as a sacred place since the rich and poor make a pilgrimage to a tree which is planted by an emperor to honor his dead mother. The emperor’s respect for his mother is so great that the tree becomes immortal and has vital energy. All the pilgrims pin their wishes on the tree and they chip off some bark or snap off some twigs as souvenirs

before leaving. However, “suffering too much admiration, the tree dies and is no longer immortal, nor is the village” (BD 147). Meanwhile, the same acquisitive, materialistic response to powerful things lies behind the story of the moving cliff. The land behind the house that the Liu family inhabits becomes a moving cliff as once “a warlord dreamed that the insides of the mountain were made of jade and ordered people to dig them” (152). Called “the End of the World,” the moving cliff descends into a wasteland filled with “unwanted babies, suicide maidens, and beggar ghosts” (153). Precious Auntie and her brothers and sisters go the cliff and descend into this underworld where they smell “the stink of ghosts” which “rose from the earth...and wafted toward us on the wings of a thousand flies” (153). Seen as commodities to be plundered, the mountain and the immortal tree are destroyed by humans’ desire and avarice. Therefore, they no longer have their own vital energy but become inert and desolate. Nonetheless, although the smells and the flies suggest the termination of certain Qi-things, there is a transformation into another form of ‘vibrant matter’ even if it is abject.

Apart from the village and the tree, bones are the most vibrant Qi-things which maintain not only their physical function but also play an essential role in excavating the family name and history as well as reconciling the relationship between LuLing and her daughter, Ruth. Images of bones haunt the whole novel. Above all, dragon bones are vibrant Qi-things with “a certain effectivity of their own” (Bennett xvi). With curative powers, “The bones were well known for curing anything from wasting disease to stupidity” (BD 168). As a bonesetter, Precious Auntie’s father uses dragon bones to heal people’s broken bones. Later,

scientists prove that these bones are not dragon bones but the bones of ancient ‘Peking Men.’ It is said that “a person might earn a million copper for single piece of dragon bone” (171). As the dragon bones are worth so much, almost all the village people try to dig them up. As a result, the village “looked worse than a burial ground dug up by grave robbers” (173), so that again the narrator associates the plunder with death. People treat the bones as valuable objects and pursue their economic profit at the expense of the environment. Paradoxically it’s the belief in the power of these Qi-things that becomes destructive of the environment. Obsessed with the power and the economic benefits of these Qi-things, humans destroy their own village in order to obtain them. The village becomes an example of the wrong kind of relation to the land.

Like these natural Qi-things and the village, female characters suffer a similar process of oppression in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*. Born and raised in the Immortal Heart village, Precious Auntie suffers the same miserable fate as her home. Born into a bonesetter’s family, Precious Auntie does not initially suffer from any feudal oppression. Her father spoils her and lets her to do whatever she wants since all other family members have died and Precious Auntie becomes the only descendant. She learns to read and write and even becomes a good assistant who can help her father to set the bones of injured men. As an independent woman, she is not obedient to the custom of feudal marriage but chooses free love. She resolutely refuses to be a concubine of Chang, a coffin maker, and chooses instead to be a wife of the son of the LIU family. However, her own choice of marriage leads to a fatal disaster, as her spurned suitor resorts to violence to enforce masculine will. On the road to the wedding, the

coffin maker and his companion disguise themselves as bandits and despoil the dowry. What's worse, they kill Precious Auntie's father and her future husband. Finally, Chang obtains the dragon bones at the expense of humans' lives. Precious Auntie accuses Chang of being the killer when he arrives at the funeral with two coffins. But no one believes her, treating her as a madwoman who has lost her reason through grief. Her neighbors are thus complicit in putting an end to her resistance to the feudal order.

Precious Auntie feels so desperate that she tries to commit suicide by swallowing boiling ink. Miserably, she fails to kill herself but wounds her face and loses her voice. Her loss of voice only materializes the powerlessness of women in traditional Chinese culture. What is more, she is deprived of the right to be a mother since she is pregnant before getting married, evidence of her resistance to Chinese feudal tradition. Therefore, her loss of status is complete when she has to play the role of nursemaid to her daughter, Luling. With the loss of her family, her face, her voice and her right to be a mother, Precious Auntie's life is replete with misery. What's worse, Chang still tries to get Luling within his grasp since she knows where bones buried. He asks Luling to be his daughter-in-law. Precious Auntie sees through his trick and prevents Luling from getting married at the expense of her own life. When Luling refuses to take her advice, she kills herself and becomes a ghost haunting the Liu family and forcing them to cancel the marriage. In weaving Precious Auntie's miserable fate into the destruction of the mountain, Amy Tan reveals that the closeness between women and nature is not so much due to their intimacy as to the oppression and domination imposed on them.

Besides suffering the same oppressive fate as nature, Precious Auntie finally returns to nature. After Precious Auntie's death, Luling reads the letter she has left and realizes the truth. As she knows that her corpse is thrown into "the End of the World," she goes there and looks for it. She finds that Precious Auntie's hair, body and bones are integrated into "the End of the World." The integration of Precious Auntie's corpse into the mountain illustrates humans' return to nature and the reestablishment of the harmonious state between humans and nature that Daoist philosophy advocates.

2. The interaction between Luling and the natural world: developing from harmony to disharmony

Precious Auntie and the other natural Qi-things connected with her are always treated as "the other" and suffer from the oppression of patriarchy and anthropocentrism; in contrast, the forces around Luling interact with her harmoniously as well as dis-harmoniously. After the death of Precious Auntie, Luling is sent to an orphanage created by the American missionaries. Therefore, escaping from feudal patriarchy, Luling begins her new life in the orphanage. According to the song that the missionaries teach these orphans to sing, they have the equal right to study and learn and are free to choose their beliefs and their partner in marriage. Under the guidance of the missionaries, everyone helps each other, in unity and fraternity. Luling realizes her self-worth by teaching the orphans calligraphy and painting. Meanwhile, she and Pan Kaijing, a geologist fall in love and get married. As long as human relations are harmonious, so is the relation between humans and nature. To collect and dig the bones of Peking men, scientists work in the quarry at Dragon Bone Hill. They strive to trace

human evolutionary history and civilization through these bones rather than capturing their economic profits. The bones they have dug up have the capability of recovering and reconnecting with the past. Therefore, rather than recklessly ransacking the land, they dig carefully and orderly in every field painted with white lines. The hill and those bones that scientists find are well protected and conserved. As Luling and Kai Jing describe their effortless love and imagine themselves as “...two stalks of bamboo bending toward each other by the chance of the wind” (BD 234). When men and nature are in harmony they enter into ‘the fourth level’ of “the effortlessness” which “is greater than this (Divine), and it is within each mortal’s nature to find it. We can sense only if we do not try to sense it. It occurs without motivation or desire or knowledge of what may result. It is pure. It is what innocent children have...It is the natural wonder that anything exists in relation to another” (234). This effortlessness comes from respecting the rule to “follow the laws of the nature,” summarizing Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi’s attitude towards the relationship between human beings, things and nature. Following the natural world leads to a state of harmony in which humans and things in nature can coexist without strain or conflict.

However, this ecological harmony does not last long and is destroyed by the Sino-Japanese war which is a struggle for domination of both the land and the Chinese people. For one thing, after the Japanese attack the Mouth of the Mountain, Luling’s husband, Kai Jing and his colleagues are forced to join the Communist troops and then are killed by the Japanese officer since they refuse to confide the place where the Communists are hiding. While Luling grieves for the death of her husband, she is forced to flee the fighting.

Threatened by the outbreak of the civil war, she first moves to Beijing and then to Hongkong. Because of the war, Luling is displaced and deprived of a home. Meanwhile, other Qi-things suffer the same oppressed and persecuted fate. The bones of Peking men that had been carefully extracted from the End of the World are said to have been smashed by train or sunk the bottom of the sea. Both the Americans and Japanese treat these Qi-things as if they are material objects. The lack of respect for them destroys them and makes the effort to exploit their power worthless. Furthermore, the victims of war suffer a similarly destructive course. When Luling is exiled to Hongkong, she lives in “Kowloon Walled City” which is replete with Chinese refugees. The air around the place that she lives “is a choking sour stink that reached like fingers into her stomach and pulled her inside out” (BD 271). Here, the stinking air that Luling smells is the parallel with the smell of death at the End of the world since both of them have agency. The negative forces of the stink effect the exiles displacement. Unable to endure the stinking air and her life in HongKong, Luling expects to sail for America, “a land without curses or ghosts” (284). Therefore, it is obvious that Luling and the place she inhabits suffer the same oppressive fates as her mother.

Nevertheless, the oracle bones that Precious Auntie leaves for her assist her a lot. As precious things with great value, they buy Luling’s ticket to America. However, the moment Luling sells the bones; they lose their function of recording her family name and history. She loses her roots and becomes a person with no identity in American society. She suffers racial discrimination and struggles in cultural conflicts. Finally, Luling suffers from dementia and cannot remember what her family name is until she encounters the oracle bones when she

visits the Asian Art Museum. LuLing recalls part of Precious Auntie's name when she sees an oracle bone: "Liu Xing. He call her that. My mother say he write love poems about this" (BD 360). Later, when Ruth asks LuLing what Precious Auntie's family name is in the museum, she hesitates only a moment before answering: "Family name Gu" (BD 360). So, as Qi-things, the oracle bones in the museum have the "thing-power" to awaken LuLing's memory of her family name. Besides, it is important and necessary for Ruth to know the family name and history, especially when she discovers that her mother is diagnosed with dementia. She calls Auntie GaoLing to ask whether she remembers Precious Auntie's family name. She has no idea about it at first, but finally she finds out and explains its complex meanings to Ruth:

Gu as in "gorge." It's a different gu. It sounds the same as the bone gu, but it's written a different way. The third-tone gu can mean many things: "old," "gorge," "bone," also "thigh," "blind," "grain," "merchant," lots of things. And the way "bone" is written can also stand for "character." That's why we use that expression "It's in your bones." It means, "That's your character."  
(BD 335)

Based on Auntie Gao's explanation, both the bones and the land are bound together to identify Precious Auntie and shed light on her true character. With the excavation of the family name, Ruth and her mother reconcile with each other. Luling no longer talks of the family curse, and instead she recalls "being loved very, very much. She remembers that to Bao Bomu she was the reason for life itself" (BD 337). Therefore, these bones act as the

thread tying together lost Qi-things. They help in recovering the family name and play an essential role in the reconciliation of mothers and daughters.

## **B. Animals as Victims**

“In *Zoographies*, Matthew Calarco offers an insightful analysis of anthropocentric trends in recent Continental philosophers Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Giorgio Agamben, and Jacques Derrida...” (Turner 1). Besides revealing these philosophers’ views on the animal-human distinction, Calarco states his own view that “the human-animal distinction can no longer and ought no longer to be maintained” (3). He supports Donna Haraway’s view that “many people no longer feel the need for the separation of human and animal” (*Simians, Cyborgs and Women* 152). It means that westerners should “...let the human-animal distinction go or, at the very least, not insist on maintaining it” (Calarco 149). Therefore, unlike many philosophers in the western tradition, rather than insisting on the animal-human distinction, Calarco claims that it is time to take into consideration the connections between humans and other animals.

Since Calarco’s analysis about these four philosophers’ views on the human-animal distinction could be employed to discuss the issues of animals in Tan’s works, I will briefly review their views. The first chapter charts the ways Heidegger distinguishes between human beings and other animal species. Calarco argues that although Heidegger criticizes “...human chauvinism and metaphysical humanism, his work ultimately remains dogmatically anthropocentric” (14). Focusing on the writings of Emmanuel Levinas, the second chapter

analyzes “two related anthropocentric gestures in Levinas’s thinking” (Turner 3). For one thing, Levinas states that “non-human animals cannot experience themselves as subject to an Other’s ethical demand and respond altruistically. For another, non-human animals have no ability to truly provoke this kind of altruistic response in human beings.”<sup>17</sup> “In the third chapter, Calarco maps the question of the animal through the writings of Giorgio Agamben” (Turner 5). Agamben gives the name “anthropological machine” to the mechanism underlying our current means of determining the human-animal distinction. He argues how best to halt the anthropological machine and create a posthumanist politics. However, his term “coming community” and his thoughts sometimes are criticized as utopian. As for Derrida, although he is highly suspicious of classical formulations of the human-animal distinction, he still insists on the differences between human beings and animals and rethinks their differences in a nonhierarchical and nonbinary way. Calarco claims that “Derrida’s insistence on maintaining and reworking the human-animal distinction is profoundly mistaken” (145). Besides, he states that “there is an ethical dimension to the question of animal in Derrida’s works” (Calarco 5). Although Derrida advocates a contextual or situational ethics and politics that are aligned with animal rights, his work remains ambiguous on the question of general strategies in the field of animal rights.

### 1. Animals as “anthropological machines”

In the light of these philosophers’ views, I will discuss how Tan’s works critique the animal-human distinction of the western anthropocentric tradition. Along with nature and

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<sup>17</sup> I paraphrase Turner’s view (3).

women, animals are also victims since men have acted as though all Qi-things exist for the benefit of humans. In her works, Amy Tan reveals how cruel people can be to animals when they are treated as “anthropological machines” at the disposal of humans rather than as living beings. In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Tan depicts how a buffalo suffers at men’s hands. On their way to visit Stone Bell Temple, the American travelers notice that a buffalo is brutally utilized like an “anthropological machine” by its owner. The men beside the buffalo keep whipping it to force it to smash the mud without a break. The buffalo’s eyes are covered so that it will not know it is going in circles. It is tied to a pole and made to circle around in order to soften the mud to fill in the mold. When the tourists see this cruel scene, no one can pretend to be unaffected emotionally. While the American tourists condemn the animal’s maltreatment, the tour guide, Miss Rong rationalizes the mistreatment that the buffalo suffers by explaining that “This is karma. Past life this buffalo must be doing bad things. Now suffer, so next life get better” (SFD 77). She tries to attribute the mistreatment of the buffalo to Buddhist ideas of Karma which is the spiritual principle of cause and effect and “a pragmatic way of viewing all the misfortunes of the world” (77). But apparently, those American tourists disapprove of or even are indignant at her explanation. They think Miss Rong’s interpretation about buffalo’s torture is absurd and ridiculous. They intend to call her “Miss Wrong” which indicates that she is not qualified to be a tour guide. Here, Chinese people are criticized since they take the Buddhist idea of karma as the excuse for their cruelty to animals. Indeed, they do not care for the well-being of animals but treat them as slaves. Compared with the Chinese people’s maltreatment of animals, those American tourists seem to

sympathize with the buffalo and even shed tears. But actually, they are hypocritical as the narrator points out that “most Americans, especially those with pets, have great sympathy for animals in misery, often more so than for miserable humans” (77). The comparison between the two cultures brings out the way that different forms of oppression can be seen as normal by those who practice them.

In American culture, animal suffering tends to be hidden from view, as we are reminded when the tourists encounter the slaughter of a pig in their visit to Jingpo village in Ruili. “A hair-raising scream” catches their attention before they arrive at the village. As pork is indispensable food material in the villagers’ daily life, it is common to kill a pig. However, witnessing the slaughter makes these tourists uncomfortable. Esme, the youngest member of the group states that “people can be so mean that they don’t even know it” (SFD 116). Furthermore, the screams of the pig provoke people to think of their atrocities to other kinds of animals. By including these two animal scenes in the novel, Amy Tan reveals how unthinkingly people make animals their victims. However, to these tourists’ surprise, children also maltreat animals. In Jing po Village, American tourists meet three child cowherds. Rather than being well treated, their water buffalo serve as “trampoline and vaulting horse” (117). These three boys kick the buffalo, vault themselves onto it and tumble off its spine. It is obvious that even children treat living things without consideration or respect. They regard themselves as the masters who can entertain themselves through the instrumentalization of animals.

“What the question of the animal obliges us to consider is precisely the anthropocentric value hierarchy that places human life always and everywhere in a higher rank over animal life” (Calarco 110). Tan also reveals the anthropocentric oppression upon animals in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. While Olivia and her husband, Simon accompany her half-sister Kwan on a trip to China, they reflect on how “China has traded its culture and traditions for the worst attributes of capitalism: rip-offs, disposable goods, and the mass-market frenzy...” (HSS 213). While they criticize western consumer culture’s bad influence on Chinese culture, they also witness how Chinese people are influenced by traditional western dualism. In the market, they find that various birds are captured in cages. And they heard that local Chinese people eat birds and believe that eating cat-eagle can “give humans’ strength and ambition” and “be good for improving your eyesight” (215). To Oliver and Simon, it is unbelievable that these Chinese people achieve their aims through the sacrifice of animals. While they condemn these Chinese people’s cruelty to birds, they are surprised that Kwan buys a cat-eagle from a peddler. They misunderstand that Kwan will kill the cat-eagle and eat it like those Chinese. However, she buys it with other purpose. According to a legend, Kwan believes that the bird can carry her wishes and help them to come true when it flies away at the top of the mountain. Kwan states that before she left for America, she raised three birds so she could make three wishes at the top of the peak. But when she climbed to the top of the mountain and opened the cage, only two of the birds flew away and the third one failed to fly. Therefore, her first wish: to have a sister she could love with all her heart and her second wish: to return to China with her sister have already come

true. However, her third wish: to hear Big Ma say that she was sorry to send Kwan away could not be realized since Big Ma died in a bus accident on her way to meet Kwan. With the death of Big Ma, Kwan's third wish becomes irrelevant. Since she no longer needs the bird's help to realize her wishes; she opens the cage and lets the owl fly away. So, rather than eating the cat-eagle, Kwan actually saves it from the peddler. Nevertheless, whether treated well or badly, animals are regarded as instruments that can assist humans to achieve their aims.

## 2. The ethical dimension of animals

Philosophers reflecting questions of ethics and humans' relation to animals tend to focus on animals' capacity for suffering. In the article *Suffering Humanism, or the Suffering Animal*, Meighoo offers a critical reading of the concept of suffering in Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* and Jacques Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Jeremy Bentham's *An Introduction of the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, and Emmanuel Levinas's *Humanism of the Other*. "Within the animal rights movement as well as the currently burgeoning field of animal studies, the capacity for suffering has largely displaced the capacity for reason or language as the ultimate criterion for defining the ethical subject" (Meighoo 50). Meighoo states that "Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* and Jacques Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* are two of the most important texts on the ethical question of the animal" (52). Both deal with the question of suffering, and "not only do they both cite Bentham's famous question on the capacity for suffering among animals, but they also make the argument that this capacity is not simply one capacity among others" (53). Besides these common points, their concepts of suffering are very different. Singer explains that "the

capacity for suffering provides the sole precondition of all ethical or moral interests” which means that “suffering is the capacity for having other capacities” (54). However, Derrida holds that “the capacity for suffering, then, indicates an incapacity, an inability, or a radical passivity that is prior to all capacities” (56). As an “incapacity” suffering cannot define the ethical subject. Tan’s works deal with animals’ capacity of suffering, so she also considers the question of animal ethics. In *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, she depicts a scene about humans’ atrocities to a pig. Since the animal is not an inert object but a Qi-thing, it has the capacity to make humans reflect on the question of animal ethics.

While the Chinese pilots and their wives are escaping away from the war, they meet with obstacles on the road. Once a fallen-down tree blocks their way; another time it is “a pig who would not get out of the way” (KGW 225). The driver drives forward very slowly and nudges the pig with the truck bumper. The pig responds by butting his head against the truck, attacking it as if it is a fellow being. When other people in the truck laugh at the pig’s intimacy with the truck, Wen Fu points his gun at the pig. The animal’s behavior changes: “his ears now twitching, his tail stiff and pointed, watching Wen Fu with a wary eye” (224). The expression of the pig suggests its awareness that it can suffer. Extremely frightened of being killed, the pig stares at the human as if imploring him to lay down his gun. However, Wen FU is not touched by this encounter. He fires his gun and hits the pig in his stomach even if the pig’s master tries to save him by scolding him. However, this ethical encounter with animal suffering calls for and provokes the narrator and readers’ thoughts. In response to his ruthless behavior towards the pig, the narrator regards Wen Fu as “some kind of crazy

demon” (224). What’s more, this encounter inspires readers to reflect over the human-animal relation. It seems that Wen Fu and the pig transform in contact with each other. Exposing his brutish nature when he shoots the pig, Wen Fu becomes the human animal; at the same time, revealing his fear in front of the threat to his life, the pig becomes the animal human. Therefore, this encounter erases one of the traditional distinctions between humans and other-than-human animals since both of them have consciousness. Both can display aggression and fear. In showing this in her fiction, Amy Tan calls into question anthropocentric principles and the ethical dimension of the animal question.

Besides, Tan also reflects on animal ethics in the novel, *Saving Fish from Drowning* whose title points to a hypocrisy. Crossing the border into Burma, the American tourist group arrives at the town of Muse. They encounter “a pile of shiny carp” and “the bloody carnage of a dead pig” on their way to visit the local market (SFD 162). And they are told by the local Burman that “they are saving fish from drowning” (162). To these civilized Americans, these Burmans’ belief is hypocritical and self-deceiving. While they mock and criticize this view, they witness the fish suffering, for the narrator describes how “the mouths of the fish [were] still moving,” and “the fish continued to flop” (162-3). Without water, the fish fruitlessly struggle to stay alive on the shore. While encountering the fishes’ struggle, these tourists reconsider the human-animal distinction and the question of animal ethics. As living-beings, humans’ and fishes’ ways of survival are different. Depending on their lungs to inhale and exhale oxygen from air, humans live on the earth. However, the fish use their gills to filter and extract oxygen in the water. Therefore, fishermen break the fishes’ way of survival when

they scoop up the fish and bring them to shore. They let the fish drown on land rather than saving them from drowning. Actually, they are the murderers rather than the saviors. Meanwhile, their encounter with the practice of “saving fish from drowning” lets these Americans reflect on the animal suffering and ethics when they confront humans’ slaughter. Faced with evidence of the fishes’ suffering, they still argue whether chickens, pigs and other animals can suffer when they confront animal slaughter.

Through depicting the scene where Wen Fu kills a pig and the example of “saving fish from drowning,” Tan calls into question the human-animal distinction and implicitly makes a case for animal rights.

### 3. Women: suffering the same oppressive fate as animals

What’s more, both animals and women are victims under the control of patriarchy. In *The Valley of Amazement*, after being kidnapped into a courtesan house and beginning her career as a courtesan, the heroine, Violet loses her freedom and makes a living by entertaining her customers. She compares herself to “a singing sparrow in a cage” (VA 233). Based on what Violet confides, we can see that both women and animals are imprisoned to entertain their male masters. They lose their freedom under the oppression of patriarchy. Although she assimilates herself to an imprisoned bird, Violet also imagines herself as a bird who owns “strong wings” and can flee oppression with the assistance of “her own slice of wind” (377). After realizing that she is tricked by a scholar named Perpetual, Violet is eager to become a bird who can escape the patriarchal oppression she endures in Moon Pond village by virtue of her own capability and the agentic power of wind. The imagery makes it

obvious that both women and animals are victims under the control of male-domination. Finally, Violet realizes her dream since she and her female companions join together and assist each other in escaping the clutches of their masculine oppressor.

## **II. Harmonies between Humans and Nature**

Besides revealing and criticizing the disruptive consequences of the subject/object division from the perspective of ecocriticism, Tan advocates the harmony between humans and nature, which she explicitly represents in two aspects. For one thing, humans and non-human Qi-things in nature are presented as “companion species” rather than in binary relations. Employing Donna Haraway’s concept of “companion species,” I will discuss how humans and natural Qi-things communicate and interact with each other in a harmonious way. For another, the harmony between humans and the wider world is mainly presented by the coexistence of human and natural places. Tan’s novels depict many natural places that are not inert objects but animate Qi-things, having effects on and interacting with humans. In all, in blending the post-humanist view of things and the holistic idea in Chinese philosophy, Tan invites us to accept nature and everything in it as Qi-things that have vital agencies and harmoniously interact with humans.

### **A. Companion Species: Humans, Animals and Significant Otherness**

Like Plumwood, Haraway is concerned with undoing the traditional binary models of relations in Western culture, in particular in relation to the problem of anthropocentrism. In *The Companion Species Manifesto*, she redefines the relation between humans and animals

by focusing on dogs: “*The Companion Species Manifesto* is, thus, about the implosion of nature and culture in the relentlessly historically specific, joint lives of dogs and people, who are bounded in significant otherness” (Haraway 16). The two species are no longer joined as master and slave or as master and pet, but coexist and interact as companions. Both humans and dogs are significant others to each other. While she focuses on dogs, she also states that “dogs are my story here, but they are only one player in the large world of companion species” (Haraway, *Companion Species* 25). Therefore, besides dogs, “companion species” also refers to a range of human and non-human animal relationships where humans and non-human animals have co-constitutively evolved alongside one another. “...the significance of companion species is neither fixed nor containable, but instead, is always shifting, changing and incomplete” (Vanderwees 74). Haraway tells stories about the interactions between dogs and humans through the concept of “metaplasma” which means, in her words, “the remodeling of dog and human flesh, remolding the codes of life, in the history of companion-species relating” (Haraway, *Companion Species* 20). In other words, the companion species relationships are not stable but “continuously in a state of becoming” (Vanderwees 74). Through the concept of “metaplasma,” Haraway advocates an ethics of reciprocal communication between humans and non-human animals and exemplifies this in practice by acknowledging the histories of her canine companions and through her participation in the human/dog sport of agility. She argues that the relationship between dog and handler demonstrates the inadequacy of binary distinctions between nature and culture and communicates the need for an understanding of “naturecultures” (Haraway, *Companion*

*Species 65*).

Apart from depicting humans' maltreatment of animals, Tan's novels also advocate this kind of companion species relation between humans and animals through reciprocal communication and by redefining animal training as an interaction based not on commands and orders but on demonstrations of "the corporeal posture of cross-species respect" (Haraway, *Companion Species* 42). Thus, I will discuss how characters and animals interact with each other as companion species in Tan's novels.

#### 1. Dogs: bringing strangers into proximity and creating a relation

Tan's latest novel, *The Valley of Amazement* maps the lives of three generations of women, the mother Lucia, her daughter Violet and her granddaughter Flora. These women's relations with one another are defined by rupture. The mother Lucia, an American woman, leaves her hometown and goes with Lu Shing, a Chinese painter to begin her new life in China. As Lu Shing's family cannot accept her, she makes her living by operating a courtesan house and brings up her daughter Violet by herself. With the overthrow of the Ching dynasty, Lucia decides to return to America and attempts to reunion with her son who is brought to America by Lu Shing's family. However, unfortunately, instead of returning to America with her mother, Violet is kidnapped into a courtesan house and begins her life as a courtesan. She cannot escape her role as a courtesan until she encounters her American lover, Edward. They get married and live together. And then Violet gives birth to a daughter named Flora. However, since Edward dies of influenza and Violet has no certificate to prove that she is legally entitled to bring up Flora, Flora is taken away by Edward's American wife who

becomes her guardian and brings her into America. All in all, for historical and personal reasons, these three generations of women are together for a while and then separated from each other. However, the dogs they feed are not merely their pets but Qi-things that have agency to create a relation that brings them into proximity.

After being separated for many years, Violet and her mother, Lucia get in touch with each other again through the exchange of letters. In a letter, Violet tells her mother that her daughter, Flora also lives in America and requests her to look for Flora. Lucia finds out that Flora lives in Croton-on-Hudson and rents a bungalow in that town to spy on Flora. After observing carefully, Lucia finds that Flora is an independent and solitary girl who does not care for any other people. Indeed, “her favorite companion is a little perky-eared dog, the color of a dirty mop” (VA 547). Rather than getting along well with other humans, Flora considers her dog to be the companion who can play with her. Therefore, Lucia plans to be close to her granddaughter with the assistance of a dog. To run into Flora, Lucia buys a perky-eared cairn terrier like Flora’s and names it Salome. With Salome’s help, Lucia runs into Flora often at the park. As Lucia expected, the two dogs are eager to play with each other and finally they become friends with each other. Meanwhile, Lucia attempts to use the dog to communicate with her granddaughter, but Flora holds an indifferent attitude and will not respond to her. Compared to dogs, it is much more difficult for humans to open their hearts to each other. This example seems to reverse the master-pet relation. Instead of the owner teaching the pet, the animal shows the humans a lesson about love. Dogs can bring strangers into proximity and create a relation.

Besides, in *the Valley of Amazement*, a “golden fox cat” is the heroine Violet’s only companion since the courtesan house where she lives is an adult’s world. When Violet wants a friend, her mother gives her the cat, Carlotta. Like Violet, the cat also suffers from abandon as it once belonged to a pirate. No one else would like to adopt a pirate’s cat if they have other friends. However, this cat becomes Violet’s only companion in the courtesan house. They maintain an intimate relation since Violet claims that “she belonged to me, and I to her, and that was a feeling I had with no other—not even my mother” (VA 4). As Violet refers to the cat by the third person pronouns “she” and “her” rather than it, she shows that she never considers the cat as an inert object but as an animate thing. They are “companion species” since Violet and her cat stay and play together day and night; Carlotta and she cannot stand being separated from each other. Violet apologizes to Carlotta when she has to go to San Francisco with her mother, which means breaking her promise that she will always love her and return for her. Violet relates how: “as my mother and I walked through the gate, I heard Carlotta cry out. I turned around and she was twisting her body, trying to reach me” (92). It is obvious to her that when she walks through the gate, her cat feels abandoned and protests at her leaving. Her account of this moment of separation shows that Violet and her companion cat have deep affection for each other. As companions, they are inseparable, but ultimately, both Violet and her cat, Carlotta suffer the same abandoned fate.

What’s more, Violet never commands the cat but she abides by Violet’s will voluntarily. However, other people in the courtesan house only regard the cat as an animal or an object that should be obedient and subordinated to humans; they chase and provoke it

randomly. Suffering from the unfriendly treatment, the cat scratches anyone who chases her off the furniture. So, almost everyone in the house fears the cat. Unlike the companionable relation between Violet and her pirate cat, other people maintain a hostile relationship with the cat. Although they are hostile to each other, they also keep a companion species relation since other people share their living space with the cat. In Violet's view, her cat is an animate Qi-thing who not only has affection but also has the capability to protect herself and her companion from violation. Moreover, Violet understands that the cat has a sensitivity to human emotions: "Carlotta sensed fear in people who approached her, she bristled and let them know they were right to be scared" (VA 5). Once the cat attacks a seventeen-year-old boy named Loyalty Fang, who comes to the courtesan house with his father. As he jabs Violet and grabs the cat's tail, to protect her companion and herself, the cat "digs her claws into his arm and peels off four bloody ribbons of skin and flesh" (5). After that, Violet thinks the boy has been murdered by the cat. However, rather than sympathizing with the death of the boy, Violet is scared that her companion, Carlotta will be taken away and drowned. To readers' surprise, the cat becomes the intimate bond between Violet and her lover, Loyalty Fang. Attacked by the cat, Loyalty Fang loses his chance to have romance in the dream world of the courtesan house. But the pale white scars left by the cat stimulate his desire and yearning for romance, which drives him to be successful and independent. Since he becomes successful in business and can have all the "pretty flowers" he wants, he loses himself and feels vaguely dissatisfied. Under the oppression of Chinese patriarchy, women, especially courtesans are objectified as pretty flowers to entertain their customers. However, when reencountering

Violet and recalling the assault he once experienced in the courtesan house, Loyalty Fang retrieves his desire and the power of yearning. Therefore, it seems that both Violet and the cat—because of their resistance to that objectified status—have the power to stimulate desire and yearning and evoke Loyalty’s new purpose in life.

In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Tan depicts a little girl, Esme, who has an innate love for animals. Unlike adults who treat animals as objects to possess or maltreat, Esme regards animals as her companions. In LiJiang, she sees “a tiny Shih Tzu Puppy” in the hotel’s beauty parlor and buys it from a girl who looks the same age as her. She really cares for and loves the little dog even though it has “runny eyes and a cough” (SFD 60). Esme illustrates human beings’ capacity for pure love for animals. Later, when visiting the Stone Bell Temple, Esme encounters “a dirty-white Shih Tzu, toothless and deaf” which reminds her of the little puppy back at hotel. She approaches and expresses her instinctive love for the dog, while it barks ferociously at her. In Esme’s eyes, the tiny Shih Tzu puppy is not simply a pet but a companion. When the tourist group votes to decide whether they will take a long trip to Burma directly, Esme votes against it because she is afraid that the Shih Tzu puppy is too weak to take a long trip. Through this relationship between the girl and the puppy, Tan reveals adults’ indifference to animals or even other human beings. Their only concern is whether they will get their money’s worth on the trip.

2. Animal training as an interaction based on demonstrations of “the corporeal posture of cross-species respect”

In her discussion of training stories, Haraway argues that as people learned to show

their dogs “the corporeal posture of cross-species respect,” they “became significant others to each other” (*Companion Species* 41-2). Furthermore, Haraway introduces Susan Garret, a consummate agility competitor and teacher who advocates “positive bondage” between people and their dogs. To keep a closer, more responsive training relationship, Haraway

...directs the human to make careful lists of what the dog actually likes; and she instructs people how to play with their companions in a way the dogs enjoy, instead of shutting dogs down by mechanical human ball tosses or intimidating over-exuberance. Besides all that, the human must actually enjoy play in doggishly appropriate ways, or they will be found out. (*Companion Species* 45)

In short, she demands that the human and the dog engage “in one-on-one relationship, in otherness-in-connection (Haraway, *Companion Species* 45).

In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Tan depicts a dog trainer, Harry who “revolutionized dog training” (SFD 51). His work trains people to treat their companions as Qi-things, as living beings deserving respect rather than objects. The revolutionized training method that Harry practices is in accordance with Garret’s “positive bondage” and Hearn’s “relational practice of training” through which both dogs and their trainers are remodeled (Haraway, *Companion Species* 54), suggesting that Tan is familiar with Haraway’s views. Firstly, Harry has led the movement to abolish aversive dog-training methods. It turns out to be better to treat dogs with care, respect and sympathy than punishment. Meanwhile, as “the Dog Trainer of Dog Trainers,” Harry instructs people how to train their dogs. He initially notes that “dog

temperament is not ingrained from birth but is shaped by interaction with other dogs and people and by tasty bribes” (SFD 49). So, dog trainers should realize that dogs do not possess fixed or inherent traits but rather that they are always in the process of identification through interactions with other dogs and their trainers. He claims that “given positive reinforcement, dogs respond more quickly and consistently to what humans want” (49). And dogs “learn new behaviors more quickly through luring, shaping, and capturing” (49). The narrator remarks that, “Harry Bailley believed in training people early, before they could inflict any lasting damage upon the wee and impressionable pooches” (50). Thus, he opens “Doggie classes” in which dog handlers can learn how to be good trainers through practicing what Haraway calls “the discipline of companion species relating under the sign of significant otherness” (Haraway, *Companion Species* 49). Dogs and their handlers are no longer in guardianship or property relations but in companion species relations. In this relational practice of training, not only humans but also dogs have species-specific capacities for moral understanding and serious achievement. Dogs and their trainers are in “reciprocal possession.” They construct “rights” in each other, such as the right to demand respect, attention, and response. Dogs obtain respect and care in practice with their handlers. Moreover, dog handlers probably can find companionship with like-minded humans, as the Doggie classes is “a fantastic way for singles to meet” (SFD 52). In all, in Harry’s Doggie classes, abiding by “ethics of reciprocal communication, human not only train their dogs, but dogs also train their humans” (Vanderwees 78). And both of them discover happiness together in the labor of training which is “an example of emergent naturecultures” (Haraway,

*Companion Species* 52).

### 3. Bacteria as companion species

Haraway creates the term “companion species,” to describe a theory of relating. For her, companion species is about the ever changing network of species which create a significant otherness. Besides animals, there are also other companion species. In *When Species Meet*, she regards bacteria as companion species that are essential for humans. She remarks:

I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to me being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm. I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions; better put, I become an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates. To be one is always to become with many. (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 3-4)

Haraway details the role that bacteria plays in the community of the human body. Along with other microorganisms, the bacteria make up our bodies and they work together to maintain our equilibrium. But when other tiny organisms enter our bodies and attempt to colonize them, the effects can be dramatic. In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, there is a scene showing how bacteria affect human action and relations and even the development of the plot. On their way to The Stone Bell Temple, the American tourist group sees a roadside restaurant. Being

famished, they decide to eat there. No matter what they wish to eat and do not wish, the cook provides “a bit of something that resembled pork, and might have been chicken, rice twice reheated, and all of it invisibly sprinkled with cock roach legs coated with little microbes that feed off human intestinal lining” (SFD 69). Even though these foods contain little microbes, some tourists still cannot help washing them down with plentiful bottles of warm beer and cola. However, the little microbes begin to produce an effect in their bodies after they eat up these foods. Some of them can overcome those invaders in virtue of their inherited robustness. For the others, this “*Shigella bacillus*...had already begun their descent into foreign gut, and would wend their ways into intestinal tracts and into bowels” (71). With the development of the story’s plot, these bacteria insist on working in these tourists’ bodies and finally interrupt their bodies’ equilibrium on their way to Burma. The narrator states that “Marlena, along with several others on the bus, was starting to feel the cramping effects of dysentery as it prepared to make its inexorable descent” (SFD 180). These bacteria not only heavily affect Marlena’s intestinal canals but also her expression. As she is too embarrassed to speak out about her suffering, Marlena has to hide her distress and unconsciously holds “a castrating look” caught by Harry, who misunderstands it as a signal that Marlena has no affection towards him or even detests him. Harry feels distressed by Marlena’s look and puzzles over why she presents this sudden turnabout. Therefore, while all the affected tourists get off the bus, searching for privacy in the pitch-dark night and amidst unknown vegetation, Harry also leaves the bus to clear his head. However, as Harry is unhurried, he helplessly stares at the leaving of the bus on his road to return. No one realizes Harry is missing, not even Marlena. Due to the

“*Shigella bacillus*,” she concentrates on her stomach cramps. She mistakes Harry’s “genuine English puzzlement” for “a cold frown” (183), similar to the disapproving look of the patriarch that her father and ex-husband had too often expressed. So, when Harry does not resume his place by her side, Marlena interprets it as an expression of his displeasure with her. Due to these bacteria, the novel’s plot gains complexity and the human relationships get rearranged.

Different from the bacteria that play the role as companion species that estrange human relations, parasites and some natural Qi-things have the agency to bring humans closer. In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, there is a scene featuring a parasite and “sweet wormwood” as companion species, bridging the gap between culture and nature and making human relations more intimate. When the American group arrives in Burma, the boy Rupert is taken for the “Younger White Brother” who can save the Karen tribe from persecution. Everyone except the ailing Harry is kidnapped by the tribe and taken to the Unknown place. There they live an aboriginal life that puts them at risk of disease. Rupert and many of the other American tourists catch malaria. Nevertheless, they do not become ill from living with the Karen: “it was not these female mosquitoes that infected them with the *Plasmodium* parasites. It takes at least a week for the parasites to incubate before bursting from the liver” (SFD 312). Before they arrive in the Unknown place, bacteria have lurked in their bodies. The moment the local tribal people hear that these Americans are infected by malaria, they try to provide “the sweet wormwood tea” made by the grandmother, which is capable of curing sick people. However, these Americans do not believe in the medical value of the tea and refuse to drink it.

The grandmother has to feed the Americans patients the tea secretly, but an American tourist, Heidi catches two old grandmothers feeding her companions a strong-smelling liquid. After careful inspection, another tourist, Moff finds that the leaves that the grandmother uses to make the tea are from “*Artemisia annua*”, also known as “sweet wormwood” (340). At last, Moff claims that “*artemisia annua* does have an antibacterial property, maybe even antimalarial” (341). Realizing the antibacterial function of the sweet wormwood tea, the American tourists drink it and gradually recover from malaria. Due to the parasite and the sweet wormwood, the relation between these American tourists and the Karen tribe people and the relations among these American tourists become closer and more intimate. The American tourists gradually come to accept and appreciate the food and the tree houses provided by the Karens. Under the guidance of the Karen, these American tourists also learn how to make full use of natural materials and harmoniously coexist with nature. Meanwhile, two kids in the group become companions. When Rupert has recovered, he encourages Esme to pull through. Therefore, as companion species, the parasite and natural Qi-things let these American form closer bonds with each other and to the local tribe people as well as with their natural environment. Finally, these American tourists and the Karen coexist harmoniously in the primeval forest.

## **B. The Coexistence of Humans and Natural Places**

Besides criticizing the patriarchy and anthropocentrism that women and nature mutually suffered, Tan advocates the harmony between humans and nature, explicitly

represented by the coexistence of humans and natural places. Realizing that “the literature of place holds special importance in American letters,” like most American writers, Tan sees places not simply as a backdrops for human action but as “major agents in the definition of human relations” (Harding 5). In an interview, Tan states that “Early on, I also need a setting. They’re inspired by places I’ve been, usually those with historical and geographical interest” (SFD 481). Crossing two continents, the historical and geographic settings of her novels are selected not simply by her imagination but her own experience. In terms of ecocriticism, Professor Wang Lili has discussed how nature is represented and what role the physical settings play in the plots of three of Tan’s works. In her view, characterized by natural primitivism, physical settings in Tan’s three novels are no longer inert natural places but are personified as characters that play essential roles in the development of the plots and have great influence upon other characters. However, in my view, more than their role in plot development, these natural primitive places are Qi-things that interact with humans. Specifically, a natural place is able to gather humans and other natural things and offers “a powerful nexus for collecting evidence of their complex interactions” (Harding 1). Moreover, human beings can identify and re-identify themselves when encountering natural places. Therefore, I will discuss how natural places themselves and natural things in them interact with humans.

#### 1. The Unknown Place: a powerful nexus for the complex interactions of humans and nature

Among Tan’s works, *Saving Fish from Drowning* most significantly represents her ecological ideas. It is a story about a group of twelve American tourists on a journey to China

and Burma. They encounter many natural places which lead both the American tourists in the novel and readers outside to reflect upon the relation of nature and human beings. Natural settings in this novel are not arbitrarily selected but based on Amy Tan's own experience since she was invited to go on a cultural and arts tour of Burma at the end of 2000. In an interview, she states that "Had I not gone to Burma, I wouldn't have set the story there. I can do plenty with imagination, but when the setting itself is a major character, I need to have touched the ground that my characters walk" (SFD 486). Rather than considering natural settings as inert objects, Tan views them as animated characters or lively Qi-things in interaction with humans. Tan depicts a virgin forest named No Name Place which gathers the Karens, American tourists and natural things and offers a powerful nexus for their complex interactions.

Because of the tragic purge of tribal minorities by the Burmese junta, the Karens flee to No Name Place and harmoniously live an aboriginal and isolated life. Filled with energetic and vibrant natural Qi-things, this primeval land supplies the Karen people with food, clothing, medicine, housing, and all other living necessities and becomes their homeland. Meanwhile, the Karen people make full use of these natural materials without excessive exploitation. They live in the natural shelters formed by trees and equip themselves with many other Qi-things available in the forest: "...they were tree houses, each the hollow of a tree base just large enough for one or two people. The walls were formed of the long skeletal roots, their spacings woven with palm thatch. The roofs were low, and bound with interlaced vines and runners. Other tree huts and various small shelters lay beyond the perimeter" (SFD

262-3).

When Karens get ill, they can find some effective plant medicine in the forest to cure themselves. Living in this remote place, Karen people become friends with nature. They respect the forest and it rewards them. They become an integrated part of nature. They sincerely care for the welfare of their environment and strive to be in harmony with it as the narrator insists: “Their only desire was to live peaceably among themselves, in harmony with the land, the water and the Nats, who would be pleased by how much the tribe respected them” (SFD 202). Their integration with nature is so complete that they do not distinguish themselves from it; a grandmother of the Karen tribe states that “we moved as one, for we were the field, we were the grass...” (279). Lovingly embracing nature, the Karen people become a part of their natural surroundings. Integrated in nature they coexist in harmony with everything around them.

However, this harmonious state is interrupted with the arrival of the American tourists. Due to their inherent imperialistic sense of superiority, these American tourists are blindly arrogant on the trip to the oriental countries. They disregard and disrespect the natural scenery and the “Stone Bell Temple” which Bai people regard as a holy place. Therefore, they are forced to leave China and begin their adventure in Burma. Arriving in Burma, these American tourists are led to No Name Place by two Karen members who expect Rupert to be their “Younger White Brother” and save their tribe from persecution. On their way to No Name Place, the ghost narrator Bibi Chen sees the glories of nature which reveal themselves in the hidden forms of life:

a harmless snake with iridescent stripes, myriad fungi, flowering parasites of colors and shapes that suggested sexual turgidity—a wealth of waxy flora and moist fauna endemic to this hidden spot of the earth, as yet undiscovered by humans, or at least those who assigned taxonomic labels. I realized then that we miss so much of life while we are a part of it. (SFD 251-2)

As the ghost narrator claims, these living things are hidden from the American tourists, who cannot see and appreciate the glories and beauty of nature without the help of modern technology.

Once the American tourists get to the No Name Place, it becomes a site of complicated interaction between the modern and the primeval. The visitors initially experience surprise and fascination for the Karens' aboriginal way of life. But it is difficult for them to accept the Karen people's medicine, food and other living habits without reserve. However, living with the Karen people, the tourists alter their ideas gradually. Under their influence, the tourists learn to accept and appreciate all natural things and get closer to nature.

The soup of sweet wormwood made by the Karen grandmother initially changes these tourists' attitude toward nature. Some of the tourists suffer from malaria and their companions refuse to drink the soup. Since their condition gets worse and worse, the Karen women secretly feed them the soup. After drinking these sweet wormwood teas, these American tourists get cured and gradually regain their health. After this event, these tourists gradually get used to the jungle life. They adopt the termite powder offered by the tribe to prevent mosquito bites, and learn to appreciate the food prepared by the Karens. At first, they

miss their modern bathrooms with the hot water, and they try heating water on the stove. A couple of days later, the American tourists also bathe in the running-steam trough as the tribe people do. The tourists also adopt the Burmese tunics and longyis that are offered by the tribe people. The American women even learn from the Karen grandmother how to weave a blouse after making yarn out of strands of bamboo. In all, through the trip to Burma, the Americans get closer to nature and learn to how to coexist harmoniously with the Karens and nature. Clearly, the No Name Place is a Qi-thing that has the ability to involve humans with nature and bridge the gap between primitiveness and modernity.

## 2. The village: Changmian: an agentic assemblage crossing time and space

E.D. Huntley suggests the complexity of place in her description of Tan's novel, *The Hundred Secret Senses*:

Employing multiple settings—twentieth century San Francisco and Changmian, China, as well as nineteenth-century China during the final years of the Taiping Rebellion—Amy Tan spins out *The Hundred Secret Senses* across two centuries and two continents, unraveling the mysteriously interwoven stories of Olivia Bishop and her half-sister, Li Kwan, and Nelly Banner and her 'loyal friend' Nunumu. (113)

Among these multiple settings, Changmian village is an agentic assemblage which has the capability to gather the stories of Olivia's journey with her half-sister, Kwan and her husband Simon together with stories of their previous lives.

With a strong, respectful sense of place, Tan bases her novel's physical settings on her

own experiences. Changmian village is based on Tan's travel in Guilin, a city renowned for its magnificent hills, caves, and waterways. One day, while collaborating on the movie version of *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan and her two other friends hired a driver and headed south without an exact destination. And so by chance, they "wound up in the middle of nowhere, in this instance a hamlet of pristine scenery and stone-stacked dwellings. There were no paved roads, no electricity, no plumbing other than the water that ran through gullies and irrigation ditches, and was brought into the village through hand pumps" (OF 252). They encountered a primitive village that became the archetype of Changmian. What's more, they walked through the village and climbed into the surrounding hills. While the wild scenery surprised them, Tan's group attempted to adventure into it further. However, they did so with the distinct sense, that "we had trespassed into a forbidden realm and that something terrible had happened in the very spot where we were standing" (253). Therefore, they stopped further exploring this wild place. In her novel, Tan creates characters to further explore the village and its surroundings that she and her friends experienced. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, the heroine Olivia and her husband Simon visit Guilin, especially Changmian village, under the guidance of her half-sister, Kwan. Olivier is impressed by the primitiveness of this village. She cannot help expressing the feeling that "unspoiled by progress, mired in the past, (Changmian) is a charmed world of the distant past" (HSS 230). However, far from being a static place, this village is a Qi-thing endowed with vibrant agencies. Huntley comments that "in all of its incarnations, Changmian is the setting for Kwan's epic narrative of love and loss and rebirth—and both Changmians become the sites of Olivia's journey toward self" (129).

More than a simple setting, Changmian village exhibits its power to narrate the cycle of Kwan's birth and death and rebirth and it urges Olivia to re-connect with her psyche and reconcile with Simon.

To Kwan, Changmian is her "emotional and psychological homeland, the native landscape of her lives, and the place to which she must finally return to fulfill her dreams" (Huntley 129). Changmian situates the cycle of Kwan's birth and death and rebirth. Firstly, it records her previous life during the Taiping years. It links lives of two women: Nunumu, the Hakka girl that Kwan claims is her previous existence, and Nelly Banner, the American to whom Nunumu gives her complete loyalty and finally, her life. In the novel's present, to resolve Olivia and Simon's marriage crisis, Kwan persuades them to visit China with her. The moment Kwan arrives in the Changmian village, she senses that its landscape has changed. The big thousand-year-old tree no longer exists. The mountain looks smaller, perhaps washed down by the rain. When Simon disappears after he quarrels with Olivia in the village's wild surroundings, Kwan accompanies Olivia to revisit the land which records their previous existences. To Kwan, this wild land is not inert but a vibrant Qi-thing, witnessing the two women's previous friendship. She claims that every rock, every twist and turn in the hills are like her old friends. She asks Olivia to stay there and she looks around and finally finds Miss Banner's music box, which provides a chance for Kwan to recount their previous friendship to Olivia. They go on searching for Simon and encounter "the cave with the lake". Since Kwan knows that its inner structure is like a maze, she orders Olivia to wait outside the cave and she enters into it to find Simon. However, she vanishes into the Changmian caves and is

never found despite an intensive and protracted search. Nine months later, Olivia gives birth to a baby girl who she believes is a gift from Kwan. Her baby girl is the reincarnation of Kwan since she likes playing the music box that Kwan left. So, rather than considering the caves as a labyrinth, we can regard it as the passage to reincarnation. When entering the cave, Kwan seems to enter into Olivia's womb and reincarnates as her baby girl. Therefore, in entering into the cave, Kwan gets reborn. As natural Qi-things, Changmian and its surroundings is the matrix for the cycle of birth, death and rebirth of Kwan.

What's more, as a vibrant natural Qi-thing, the village exhibits its agentic powers with the interaction of humans. It provokes effects on humans' moods and relations. In the company of Kwan, Olivia and Simon settle down in Changmian village. One day, after having breakfast, Simon asks Olivier to go for walk, and they mean to talk about their marriage. However, their meandering becomes an adventure that takes them closer to the wild and natural scenes around the village. On their way to the stone wall, both of them think of what they should say to each other while they encounter walls made out of huge blocks of cut stone, steep and rocky mountains, or limestone peaks looking like sharp coral. The wild and natural scenery around the Changmian village affects Olivia's mood. She is awed by its wildness. She thinks they are trespassing in a forbidden realm and suggests they head back. However, as her husband climbs further up the path, she has to follow him and further explore these natural places. What's more, while Olivia waits alone, the wild land makes her nervous and lets her imagine bad consequences. When Olivia feels tired from the process of exploring, Simon asks her to wait there and he further looks around. Alone, Olivia worries

about Simon's safety. The wildness of this place and the severe weather transforms "worry ... into panic" (HSS 333). She cannot stand being alone in the wild landscape. However, only by confronting it alone does she realize how much she loves and needs Simon. She calls for his return. When Simon suddenly appears in front of her, they embrace and keep each other warm. Therefore, close to nature, they gradually open their minds to each other. Olivia expresses her fear that Simon's ex-girlfriend Elza is always in his heart. They fight and then they reconcile with each other in this wild land.

On another occasion, when Kwan accompanies her sister to search for Simon, the wild land affects Olivia's mood, making her anxious and inspiring negative thoughts. She imagines a bad outcome for Simon. As she looks the things around her seem to change: "the more I watch, the more unsteady the ground feels, like the bottom of a salad spinner. And now the peaks, the trees, the boulders grow enormous, ten times larger than they were" (HSS 345-6). These natural things make Olivia lose herself physically and mentally. However, as Kwan reappears in front of her, she calms herself down while the landscape around her readjusts: "as my fear ebbs, the landscape begins to look more benign. The wind pushes against my face" (345). Natural things in the wild land have the power both to terrify and to calm.

Besides, the things that Kwan finds in this wild land make Olivia believe Kwan's stories about their previous friendship. At first, Changmian seems to Olivia to be "a fabled misty land, half memory, half illusion" (HSS 205). However, when exploring the wild land around Changmian with Simon, Olivia realizes with surprise that "Changmian is a familiar

land-scape, the setting for the stories that Kwan insinuated into her dreams time and again years before” (Huntley 129). Olivia initially thinks the place is only Kwan’s make believe. However, when she revisits this wild land with Kwan, she finds that it is no longer a fictional setting but a Qi-thing, storing Miss Banner’s music box, herbs and a hand-stitched book, things that jointly witness their previous life together. When Kwan finds these ancestors’ legacies and shows them to Olivia, she also shows her loyalty to her. Seeing these historical things, Olivia is no longer afraid of Kwan’s stories but feels that she can enter world of Yin with Kwan. Therefore, revisiting the wild land with Kwan, Olivia reconciles with Kwan and reconnects with her own psyche.

Exploring natural places in her novels, Tan moves from a relatively human-centered world view to a much wider vision. We can find that Tan prefers to select natural places in Asia rather than in America. Traveling these natural places in Asia, the protagonists learn to integrate into the environment in a more harmonious and holistic way. In recording excursions into places that are unfamiliar and ask to be explored, Tan’s novels urge readers to rethink their own conception of place, to gain awareness of the vitality of the environment, and to take a more respectful view toward it.

## Conclusion

In depicting the oppression and domination imposed on female characters, animals and other natural things, Amy Tan not only criticizes the western dualist tradition with its emphasis on control and domination but also reveals old Chinese conventions with their respect for hierarchy. Since men act as though all Qi-things exist for the benefit of humans, they treat female characters, animals and other natural Qi-things as “the other” and make them suffer from the oppression of patriarchy and anthropocentrism. As well as revealing the resulting disharmonious interaction between humans and nature, Tan expresses her ecological idea by imagining harmonious interactions between humans and nature. Drawing on Donna Haraway’s concept of “companion species,” this chapter has shown that as Qi-things, dogs are capable to bring strangers into proximity and create a relation. At the same time, as a Qi-thing, this *Shigella bacillus* in *Saving Fish from Drowning* has vital force to complexify the novel’s plot and rearrange the human relationships. Different from the bacteria that play the role as companion species that estrange human relations, parasites and “the sweet wormwood tea” made by the grandmother of the Karen tribe have the agency to bring humans closer. Then, based on demonstrations of “the corporeal posture of cross-species respect” (Haraway, *Companion Species* 42), animal training becomes an assemblage through which we can observe that dogs do not possess fixed or inherent traits but rather that they are always in the process of identification through interacting with other dogs and their trainers.

What's more, the harmony between humans and the wider world is mainly presented by the coexistence of human and natural places. Tan's novels depict many natural places that are not inert objects but animate Qi-things, having effects on and interacting with humans. In all, in weaving the post-humanist view of things and the holistic idea in Chinese philosophy together, Tan illustrates her ecological view that nature and everything in it are Qi-things which have vital forces and harmoniously interact with humans.

## Chapter Five: Encounters with the Spiritual World

I have to write what I have to write about, including the question of life continuing beyond our ordinary senses—Amy Tan<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world, Tan presents the cosmic interactions of Qi-things through the encounters between humans and the spiritual world. In Tan's memoir, she relates how she invites a ghostbuster to evict a ghost who haunts the attic of her house. This experience proves that Tan believes in the existence of supernatural elements. However, rather than dismissing this as superstition, readers are invited to see these supernatural elements that she creates as embodiments of love, individual loss and historical trauma. Having experienced a lot of deaths of people who have been close to her, Tan has long thought about how life is influenced by death, how mortality shapes what you believe in and what you look for. Endorsing the synthesis of intuitive and rational knowledge as a means to understanding the relation between humans and nonhumans and to understanding the universe, she includes many supernatural elements in her novels. Her "Yin people," ghosts and "nats" are different from conventional western literary representations of

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<sup>18</sup>Amy Tan expresses this view in "The Salon Interview: Amy Tan The Spirit Within" on 13 Nov. 1995.

ghosts that make a disturbance in the protagonists' world but can usually be interpreted as projections of their psyches. In Tan's works, ghosts and other spiritual things are characters in their own right who co-exist alongside and in interaction with human Qi-things. Focusing on the interaction between human and spiritual Qi-things, this chapter will explore how these Qi-things assemble many more folds than the "united four," namely the vital gatherings of the earth, the sky, human beings, the immortals and ghosts.<sup>19</sup>

### **I. The Interactions between Humans and Ghosts**

Studies of the ghost narrative generally focus on how haunting is a metaphor for the resurgence of past traumas. Kathleen Brogan labels the ghost narrative in American ethnic writing as a form of "cultural haunting" in *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* (1998). Wu claims that "...Tan's ghost storytelling contains three important tropes: the historical haunting from the traumatic past of China, the domestic haunting from the Chinese/American family, the border-crossing haunting outside Chinese America" (63). It seems that critics take the ghosts' haunting effects as an effect of psychic projection caused by trauma rather than explaining the reason why ghosts own this unique agency. In traditional Chinese thought, it is Qi that endows the ghost with haunting effects. In his article "Qi in Traditional Chinese Thoughts," Eisen discusses the idea of a Chinese philosopher, Zhang Zai's idea that every birth is a condensation and every death is a dispersal

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<sup>19</sup> Heidegger states that the "thinging of the thing" is a gathering that always connects "...the united four, earth and sky, divinities and mortals, in the simple onefold of their self-unified fourfold" (175-6). However, in virtue of the interaction between humans and the spiritual world, these Qi-things assemble many more folds than the "united four."

of Qi. Thus, Qi is the physical and spiritual substratum of human life. When a man dies, the Qi of his body disperses and transmutes into his spirit form, his ghost. Therefore, ghost images in Tan's works are spiritual Qi-things which have agentic power to haunt humans. Based on Chinese philosophies about ghosts and spirits, I will discuss how these ghost images, including a ghost narrator, ghost lover and mother ghost execute their spiritual power to haunt human's dreams, memories and imaginations. Meanwhile, not only do the ghosts own Qi, but also the objects that people used during their lifetimes conserve their Qi, thereby becoming mediums for humans to encounter after the death. I will therefore discuss how spiritual Qi-things and humans coexist and interact with each other through ghost haunting as well as through the medium of Qi-things.

#### **A. Ghosts Hunt Human's Dreams, Memories and Imaginations**

In Chinese tradition, the most common conception regarding the origin of ghosts is that they are the spirits of deceased humans. However, Daoism explains the origin of ghosts based on the theory of Yin-yang balance. "For the early Daoist texts... *The Canon of Great Peace* (Taiping-jing), for example, has its own explanation of the origin of ghosts based on the theory of Yin-yang balance" (Poo 246):

The living persons are yang, ghosts and spirits are yin, the living belongs to day, while the ghosts and spirits belong to night...When yang rises, it will overcome the yin, so that yin will be hidden and does not dare to appear at will. As a consequence ghosts and spirits become hidden. If yin rises, it will overcome yang, and when yang is hidden, ghosts and spirits could be seen in

daylight. Thus when yin overcomes, it means that ghosts and spirits will cause harm. (Wang 49-51)

Commenting on this passage, Poo explains that “this deliberation of the nature and mutual relation of yin and yang, of course, does not replace the idea that ghosts are dead humans, only that their appearances are regulated or conditioned by the balance of the yin and yang forces” (247). Since the human is yang and the ghost is yin, the interaction of humans and ghosts presents the interplay of yin and yang which is seen as “[Q]i (in both yin and yang forms) operating in the universe” (Worm 217 ).

Besides being regulated by the balance of the yin and yang, as the spirit of the dead, a ghost appears in two forms: the hun and the po which are “two pivotal concepts that have been, and remain today, the key to understanding Chinese views of the human soul and the afterlife” (Yü 363). Hun and Po is also an expression of Yin and Yang as Master Hu—a Shaolin qigong practitioner states:

Hun controls yang spirits in the body,

Po controls yin spirits in the body,

all are made of qi.

Hun is responsible for all formless consciousness,

including the three treasures: jing, qi and shen.

Po is responsible for all tangible consciousness,

including the seven apertures: two eyes, two ears, two nose holes, mouth.

Therefore, we call them 3-Hun and 7-Po. (Twicken “Taoist Models of *Hun* and *Po*, Part Two”)

As two parts of the soul, the po and the hun are also regulated by the yin and yang forces. As spiritual Qi-things in Tan’s works governed by the yin and yang forces, ghosts intervene in the plot ; specifically hun and po haunt humans’ dreams, memory and imagination so as to reach the yin-yang balance.

#### 1. A ghost narrator: haunting human’s dreams

In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, there is a scene in which we discover that the ghost narrator Bibi Chen not only accompanies the American tour group on their travel but also has the ability to haunt her friend Walter’s dream to get him to help the tour group across the border. Since some American tourists ignorantly disrespect the traditions of the Bai minority, they are forced to end their journey in China and go to Burma. However, since Bibi Chen scheduled the tour itinerary before her sudden death, nobody can notify the tour guide Walter that the tour group has to enter Burma ahead of time. To inform him the ghost of Bibi Chen haunts his dream, she visits Walter late in the night when he is in the farthest shores of his sleep and she realizes that “(she) could be found, in dreams, memory, and imagination” (SFD 139). If we wonder why Chen has the ability to enter Walter’s dreams, her further explanation of her present situation in limbo sufficiently explains that the hun haunting endows her with this agency. Chen claims that “the Buddhists say a dead person stays three days around the body, then another forty-six before departing to the next incarnation. If that was the case, then

I had yet another month or so to go...” (143-4). Her claim is in accordance to the Daoist principle of “three *hun* and seven *po*,” which is not only Daoist; “Some authorities would maintain that the three-seven ‘soul’ is basic to all Chinese religion” (Harrell 522). “During the Later Han period, Daoists fixed the number of *hun* souls at three and the number of *po* souls at seven. A newly deceased person may return (回魂) to his home at some nights, sometimes one week (頭七) after his death and the seven *po* would disappear one by one every 7 days after death.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, according to her claim and the Daoist concept, the ghost Chen is in limbo since her *hun* is free from her body, however her *po* still stays in the body. Liberated from her body, Chen’s *hun* exists in “a free-floating consciousness” which is so permeable that it haunts Walter’s dreams and overlaps his consciousness. In her article “Ghosts in Ancient China,” Emily Mark claims that the *hun* was the rational part of a person, their personality, it was also thought to be the part of the person affected by illness in life, and the “astral self” who would appear to others in dreams after death. So, as a ghost, Chen is able to intervene with the living through her *hun* haunting. She haunts Walter’s dream and incites him to voluntarily contact and help those American tourists to go across the border. Meanwhile, as the *hun* haunting, the ghost Chen expresses the yang aspect while the night presents the darkness of yin; thus her *hun* haunting of Walter’s dream in the night presents the interaction of yin and yang forces as a means of resolving the tourists’ problem.

## 2. Ghost lovers: haunting humans’ memory and imagination

In theorizing haunting in literary texts, Kirss claims “...more than literary

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<sup>20</sup> This view is quoted from “Number of souls.” *Hun and po*. Wikipedia.

personifications or theoretical metaphors,...the raising of questions about haunting ... relate to remembering and the past” (21). In accordance with Kirss’s statement, in Tan’s works, the interaction of ghost haunting with human memory and imagination not only represents the traumatic past that characters experienced but also reveals the social reality that women suffer inequality and oppression in Old China.

Besides, Kirss states that many critics and theorists endow ghosts with magic dimensions.

As both Kwon and Avery Gordon are careful to point out, hauntings are not to be dismissively categorized as “folk belief,” nor should their connection to religion be sanitized by secular explanations. Nevertheless, spectrality in social experience can be ‘de-transcendentalized’ (according to Spivak’s way of speaking), its magic dimensions seen in terms such as Kwon’s “vitality” or Gordon’s “animation.” (24)

In his fieldwork in Vietnamese villages, anthropologist Heonik Kwon points to ghosts as “constitutive of social life” and employs the “vitality” of ghosts to attest to “a set of inventive wartime and postwar kinship practices” (7). Kirss concurs with Avery Gordon that, “... ‘ghostly matters’ is far from being a euphemism for superstition or folk belief deemed obsolete in a modern age. They designate real social phenomena: the ghost, very much alive, is a symptom of what is missing and brings a ‘charged strange-ness’ into a situation. ‘It gives notice not only to itself but also to what it represents’” (Kirss 23). Endowed with force like Kwon’s “vitality” or Gordon’s “animation,” ghosts, especially ghost lovers in Tan’s works are

vibrant Qi-things haunting their lovers' memories and imaginations to express their traumatic past as well as reveal social reality.

In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, the mother Winnie Louis' narrative is filled with haunting ghosts. Among them, her recollection of her ghost lover not only reveals her traumatic past in China but also has historical significance since it happens with the background of the Sino-Japanese War. Winnie's ghost lover is her husband's colleague, who is also a Kuomintang air force pilot fighting against Japan. Although Winnie's husband cannot appreciate her, Gan secretly falls in love with her and confides to her that he is haunted by "...the ghost named nine bad fates..." (KGW 203). The ghost tells him that he will die at the time when the ninth bad fate comes. Later on, Gan's plane crashes, and he dies in the hospital. After his death, Gan turns out to be Winnie's "ghost lover" (205). Her ghost lover's haunting in Winnie's memory not only represents her deep sorrows and regrets in the past but also reveals the fact that women are inferior to men in Old China since Winnie's husband does not appreciate her but considers her as a servant, attending to his daily needs, and a sexual slave, compelled to say some dirty words the moment they have sex.

Moreover, in her latest novel, *The Valley of Amazement*, which deals with courtesans' lives, Tan depicts a courtesan, Magic Cloud who imagines that a poet ghost haunts her. She lives in the American mother, Lucia's courtesan house which was originally the villa of the poet, Pan Ku Xiang. After the poet dies, his eldest son hires the best stone mason to carve a stele to memorize him. But after several generations, the house becomes dilapidated. As his descendants sell the place for a cheap price and dishonor the spirit of their ancestors, they are

cursed and get bad luck as retribution. The house is said to be a haunted and abandoned place and no one dares to enter into it. However, when Lucia buys the house, she hires an Italian actor who acts as a Feng Shui master to improve the Feng Shui of this villa. It may seem to readers that Tan makes fun of Chinese customs since the Italian actor that she creates is a fake. However, one could also arrive at the opposite interpretation. The action that Lucia carries out in buying the stele appeases the spirit so that the mock ceremony turns out to be effective. She buys the fine stele as a yin inhabited dwelling suitable for the poet ghost. Thereafter, the haunted and desolate villa becomes a good Feng Shui space where yin and yang can be in balance and the ghost and humans can coexist in harmony. There is no need to expel the ghost, as there would be in a western narrative.

In this yin-yang balanced space, the courtesan, Magic Cloud imagines the poet ghost as her husband in a past life. Without true love in real life, her belief in the existence of her phantom lover is a way to relieve her sadness and desperateness. Nevertheless, the narrative suggests that we do not need to explain this as the psychological projection of a lonely woman. Magic Cloud claims that she can sense the arrival of the poet ghost when she feels cool breath blow over her cheek. What she states is accordant with the Chinese belief that as the human is yang and the ghost is yin, when the ghost passes by the human, he or she can sense that cool breath over his or her cheek. Sensing the presence of the poet ghost, Magic Cloud claims that he is her soul mate and “[w]e shared only our spirit...with pan the Poet, I felt only love, and he felt the same for me” (VA 109). In her boudoir, Magic Cloud has a simple Ming table holding scholar treasures, the accouterments of the literati. She claims that

these pieces belong to the Poet Ghost, “...an inkstone of purple duan, brushes with the softest sheep hair, and inksticks carved with garden scenes of a scholar’s house” (22). She imagines that the Poet Ghost especially appreciates her scholar treasures more than those in the other boudoirs. Through the virtue of these scholarly Qi-things, the woman and the ghost free their spirits from their bodies and mutually share an idealized spiritual love different from the relation that the courtesan had with her human lovers. In all, the haunting of Magic Cloud’s poet ghost lover assists her to confront all the cruelty and sadness she has encountered during her life.

### 3. The spirit power of mother ghosts

Besides ghost narrator and ghost lovers, Tan creates two mother ghosts: An-mei’s mother and Luling’s mother, Precious Auntie, who believe that they become more powerful in death than in life. In virtue of Chinese conventions about ghosts and spirits, we can see how these mother ghosts exert their ghostly powers to protect their daughters and to take revenge.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, ghost haunting is embedded in Anmei Hsu’s memory about her nameless, widowed mother, who “transforms from a social ghost to a real ghost returning to haunt her husband, thus demonstrating a threat to the male-dominated society” (Wu 66). Raped by Wu-Tsing, a rich merchant, An-mei’s widowed mother is coerced into being his fourth concubine. Since her remarriage dishonors her family and transgresses Chinese feudal ethics, this widowed mother is excluded from her family and is considered as a ghost that people are “forbidden to talk about” (JLC 37). In this respect, she becomes a “forbidden

taboo” and a “family ghost” in the social context of old China (Wu 66). However, unable to tolerate her humble and unfair status as Wu’s fourth concubine, An-mei’s mother poisons herself two days before the Chinese Lunar New Year. Rather than representing female characters’ weakness, Tan empowers this widowed mother with the ghostly power gained through her suicide. According to Chinese tradition, “on the third day after someone dies, the soul comes back to settle scores” (JLC 290). As An-Mei’s mother poisons herself two days before the Chinese Lunar New Year, her dead soul can return on the first day of the New Year, a day when “all debts must be paid, or disaster and misfortune will follow” (290). Scared of being haunted by An-wei’s mother’s ghost, Wu-Tsing promises that he will honor both An-Mei and her brother as his own children and their mother as his favorite first wife. Therefore, by committing suicide, An-Mei’s mother transforms her “weak spirit” into ghostly power (289). What’s more, her ghostly power is passed to her daughter, An-Mei and her generations and makes them become stronger. On that day three days after her mother’s death, An-mei “frees herself from maidenly silence, a self-liberation that enables her to ‘(learn) to shout’<sup>21</sup>” (Snodgrass 68). Meanwhile, An-mei’s recollection of her mother’s ghost story encourages her daughter Rose Hsu Jordan to confront her domineering husband, Ted, who throws her out of their house during a painful divorce. Therefore, An-Mei’s mother’s ghost power not only makes Anmei stronger but also instructs her granddaughter how to deal with her marriage problem.

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<sup>21</sup> Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club*. (290).

In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Tan depicts the mother-daughter relation of three generations, the grandmother Precious Auntie, the mother Luling and her daughter Ruth. Through the narrative of the American-born daughter, Ruth, Tan presents her belief in the power of death. Ruth has thought about death every day since childhood. She ponders whether death entails that “people disappear” or “become invisible” and why her mother seemed to think that “dead people become stronger, meaner, sadder” (BD 103). After a constant reflection, Ruth claims that “[d]eath was not necessarily a portal to the blank bliss of absolute nothingness. It was a deep dive into the unknown. And that contained all sorts of bad possibilities” (103). Her vision of the unknown realm of death reveals Tan’s belief in the power of the dead. In virtue of its uncertainty, death becomes a way for her characters to become stronger than in their lifetime.

Having failed to dissuade her daughter Luling from marrying the son of the evil coffin maker, Chang, who has caused the death of her father and grandfather, Precious Auntie believes that her death is the only way to wake her daughter up and prevent this marriage. According to what she believes, she becomes more powerful in death than in life. After Precious Auntie commits suicide, the Chang family cancels the marriage contract immediately since they are scared that she will return as “a live-in ghost, haunting them forever” (BD 204). Meanwhile, after Precious Auntie’s death, her ghost haunts LuLing’s foster father’s dream and causes a disastrous fire that destroys his Peking headquarters and burns buildings on either side. “Although the incident can be explained as a series of mishaps following a bad dream, the conflagration appears to be the work of a spiteful phantasm, a literary metaphor for Liu’s guilty

conscience” (Snodgrass 70). Following the traditional western representation of ghosts, Snodgrass regards this ghost haunting as the projection of a human’s guilty conscience. Meanwhile, she also claims that “according to Chinese thinking, the Liu’s rapid decline as magnates of the inkstick business proceeds directly from their mistreatment of Precious Auntie” (71). Traditional Chinese thought holds that a human’s death only means that his or her body is out of Qi; however, his or her spirit/Qi still exists in the form of a ghost that includes two forms: *hun* and *po*. In her article “Ghosts in Ancient China,” Emily Mark states that [a]fter death, these two aspects could return to cause problems for the living if proper burial rites had not been observed or for other reasons such as unfinished business, a vow taken, to right a wrong, or just to visit. The *hun* and *po* haunt in different ways.

Stories of ghosts haunting a house where they once lived, haunting relatives, or appearing to strangers for help are all examples of *po* hauntings.... [However,] *Hun* hauntings were different because the *hun* was not as attached to the body. Stories about spiritual possession, ghosts appearing as though they were still living, or ghosts taking revenge on the living are examples of *hun* hauntings. (Mark “Ghosts in Ancient China”)

Since the Liu family does not offer a proper funeral for Precious Auntie but throws her body in “the End of the World” (BD 204), her soul cannot rest in peace. So, her *hun* haunts the Liu’s dream and takes revenge on their family. As a ghost, she is endowed with a super power of condemning the Lius’ maltreatment of her and playing tricks on them. To chase the ghost of

Precious Auntie away, Big Uncle knocks over the oil lamp. At this time, Precious Auntie knocks the match out of his finger-tips so that the floor burns. Big Uncle shouts to Little Uncle to help him douse the fire; however under the control of “Precious Auntie’s trickery” (207), he pours out a jar of wine instead of the pot of cold tea so as to cause the fire disaster.

Through creating these mother ghost images, Tan reflects on the question of death and asks us to believe in the power of these ghost Qi-things. “She shrugs off the obvious and reaches for an absolute, the fact that ghosts are the human need to know that love survives death and lives beyond day-to-day sensations” (Snodgrass71). What Snodgrass fails to recognize here is that more than abstract personifications of human needs, Tan’s ghosts are Qi things with their own powers and motivations.

### **B. Humans’ Encounters with Ghosts through Inherited Qi-things**

In addition to the ghosts that haunt dreams, memory and imagination, ghosts can contact humans through the mediums of spiritual Qi-things. According to traditional Chinese beliefs, a ghost is the spirit form of the deceased man. And the Chinese believed that it was possible to contact the spirits of deceased relatives and ancestors through a medium. Deeply influenced by this Chinese cultural heritage, Tan believes that the things used by the dead in their lifetime keep their spiritual or ghostly Qi. Therefore, in her novels, ghostly presence is mediated through these things that create haunting impacts on human beings. Meanwhile, exhumed objects are also spiritual Qi-things insofar as they are traces of the traumatic and historical past. Therefore, I will discuss how humans encounter ghosts through the dead’s

possessions and through exhumed things.

In *Hundred Secret Senses*, the story begins with the narrative of the American-born heroine, Olivia, a character that Huntley identifies as deeply troubled by past rejections:

As Olivia narrates her own story, she reveals that at the core of her identity lie angst and unhappiness, doubts and skepticism. In Olivia's version of events, life has been one long series of rejections—first by her father who “abandons” her by dying when she is only four years old, then by her mother whose energy is consumed by a succession of boyfriends, and finally by Simon who appears never to have come to terms with the loss of his first love. (Huntley 121-2)

Apart from these various upsetting experiences, her Chinese half-sister, Kwan's belief in the existence of ghosts, yin people and the world of yin also makes Olivia become skeptical and full of self-doubt. Meanwhile, Olivia claims that “I never thought that he (Simon) too would fill my life with ghosts” (HSS 92). In fact, Olivia is haunted by the possessions of Simon's ex-girlfriend:

The way I embraced Elza's former life...When Simon and I had to pick recipes for Thanksgiving, we chose Elza's oyster-and-chestnut stuffing over my Chinese sticky-rice-and-sausage. We drank our coffee out of two-handled ceramic mugs Elza had made at a summer camp for musically gifted children. In the evenings and on weekends, we played Elza's favorite tapes.... (107)

Although Elza dies of a skiing accident before the novel begins, objects once used by her

make Olivia live under her shadow. Elza's possessions are filled with her own unique Qi, which is disharmonious and distinguished from Olivia's Qi. Rather than inert objects, they are vibrant Qi-things with the power to absorb Olivia's psyche, reflecting her doubts about Simon's love. Olivia is not only skeptical about Simon's love but also suffers a crisis of belief as she doubts in mind that "Who and What am I supposed to believe?" (HSS 222). Suffering a crisis of belief, Olivia "is unable to accept Kwan's unconditional love or to believe that Simon genuinely loves her and not the ghost of his ex-girlfriend Elza" (Huntley 122). However, to save Olivia and Simon's marriage and let Olivia get overcome her identity crisis, Kwan organizes a journey to China with Olivia and Simon, to her native enchanted village of Changmian. This journey encourages Olivia to acknowledge the reality of the World of Yin and the truth of reincarnation.

In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Tan sketches an omniscient ghost narrator, Bibi Chen, who mysteriously dies before the China and Burma trip that she organizes for her twelve American friends. Before the ghost Bibi accompanies her friends along for the trip, she relates the history of her shortened life at the beginning of the novel. She thinks of a piece of jewelry, "a hairpin with a hundred tiny leaves carved out of bright imperial-green jade" which her father gives her mother to commemorate her birth (SFD 25). This hairpin explains why Bibi's mother named her Bifang which means "her precious jade, her budding treasure, her glorious spring" (25). Like this piece of jewelry, Bibi Chen is her mother's most precious gift. But, in fact, Bibi has not benefited from that maternal love since her mother died of diabetes, and she was raised by her father's first wife, Sweet Ma. After her mother's death, Bibi steals

the hairpin from Sweet Ma but, in turn, it was stolen by an unfaithful servant, Luo. Then, just as she lost her mother's love, she lost her mother's treasure forever. Therefore, this hairpin is not an inert object but a vibrant Qi-thing, albeit a ghostly one at first, since it embodies Bibi's traumatic memory of the loss of her mother.

No further mention of the mother's jewel appears until the detective attributes Bibi's death to a haircomb in the end of the novel. When Bibi receives her mother's lost jewel from her Chinese cousin, she notices that it is a haircomb instead of a hairpin as she had remembered. The detective deduces that the haircomb is the lethal weapon that killed Bibi when she fell from a stool and the jade piece cut into her neck: "The traumatic memory of the lost mother is an important hidden text in the novel and later becomes the key to the mystery of Bibi's own death" (Feng 66). Based on the text's narration, Feng also claims that the mother's heirloom turns out to be the murder weapon and Bibi "is literarily killed by maternal memory and love" (66). However, in my view, rather than being a lethal weapon, as "the maternal heirloom" (66), the haircomb is an agentic medium for the spiritual reconciliation of Bibi and her mother. Although the mother has died, the haircomb keeps its owner's Qi, when it cuts into Bibi's neck, Bibi senses her mother's Qi transferred into her body. As Bibi narrates in the last page of the novel:

I rubbed my mother's haircomb against my cheek and pressed it near my heart. I rocked it as one might a baby. For the first time I felt the emptiness of her loss replaced with the fullness of her love. I was burst with joy. And then my knees grew weak. They wobbled and grew rubbery. I felt a softening wave

and I tried to push it away. But then I realized what it was, my holding back my feelings so I wouldn't fall. Why should I not feel it? Why have I denied myself the beauty of love? And so I did not stop myself. I let joy and love and sorrow wash over me. And with the haircomb close to my heart, I plummeted off the stool. (SFD 472)

When her mother's heirloom cuts into Bibi's cheek, Bibi encounters the ghost of her mother since she claims that she feels a softening wave which indicates the coming of her mother's spirit. Encountering her mother's spirit, Bibi loses her rational mind and lets her emotions; body and spirit follow her mother's spirit. Feng sees this in psychological terms as a form of transference: "Having never experienced a mother's love or caress, Bibi transfers her daughterly emotion onto the object representing the mother's body and transform it into a maternal embrace. Through this practice of transference and transformation, Bibi reengages with the irrecoverable loss so that she can finally overcome it" (Feng 66). In my view, more than representing the mother's body, the haircomb embodies the mother's Qi and spirit. To deeply interact with her mother's Qi and spirit, Bibi even irrationally presses the haircomb near her heart. It seems that the deeper the haircomb presses into Bibi's heart, the more she feels the maternal love and the more their Qi and spirits reconcile with each other. Therefore, rather than destroying Bibi, the haircomb liberates her from a loveless life and gives her a chance to be reborn as a spirit to experience a lovely trip.

## **II. The Yin World: a Wholistic Life that Merges the Cultures of America**

In the salon interview, Tan states that "(western) people have such terrible

assumptions about ghosts—you know, phantoms that haunt you, that make you scared, that turn the house upside down” (Bloom 95). To distinguish her own perception of ghosts from the western one, Tan even creates the term “Yin people” for those who “are not in our living presence but are around, and kind of guide you to insights” (95). Moreover, she reveals that she benefits from the yin people who push her to write.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Tan draws much more on the world of the spirits than in her previous books, probing the question of life continuing beyond our ordinary senses. Incorporating paranormal phenomena and magical realism—what Western aesthetics might class as superstitious elements—Tan creates a seemingly unreasonable Yin world which is filled with supernatural elements: yin-eyes, yin people and a hundred secret senses. The narrative demands that we see these supernatural elements not as a representation of superstition but as Qi-things with agentic power to produce effects. Thus, besides ghost haunting, I will discuss how these supernatural Qi-things reconcile the sisterhood between a Chinese American woman, Olivia, and her Chinese half-sister Kwan, two women who are also connected through their previous lives and the cultural and historical conflicts and how they deconstruct the so-called reasonable American social reality.

#### **A. Kwan: a Chinese Girl with Supernatural Vision, Yin Eyes**

At the beginning of *The Hundred Secret Senses*, the heroine Olivia—also the narrator—informers readers about her half-sister Kwan whose “yin eyes” make her able to

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<sup>22</sup> In the 1995 salon interview, Tan states that “[she] was pushed to write ...by certain spirits - the yin people.”

communicate with Yin people and ghosts. There is a hesitation in these opening lines between the narrator's faith and doubt, since she initially attributes belief only to Kwan: "My sister Kwan believes she has yin eyes" (HSS 1). However the following sentence omits this qualification: "She sees those who have died and now dwell in the World of Yin, ghosts who leave the mists just to visit her kitchen on Balboa Street in San Francisco" (1). The narrator thus brings together details that would be familiar to American readers (the American kitchen) and those that would be alien (ghosts from the mists). Elsewhere, Tan has stated that "Kwan comes strictly from my imagination, from that world of yin that I write about" (Bloom 96). Tan suggests to her modern American readers that she does not hold these "superstitious" beliefs but makes a distinction between the real and the imaginary. Gifted with yin eyes and also from the world of yin, Kwan is the most essential supernatural Qi-thing who executes her agentic power in many aspects. For one thing, with "Yin eyes," Kwan can diagnose ailments: "While working for twenty years at Spencer's drugstore in the Castro community, Kwan diagnoses muscular-skeletal ailments with a handshake and advises AIDS patients on health matters" (Snodgrass 99). When shaking hands with strangers, she can tell whether they have ever suffered a broken bone.

Conrad states that Tan relies upon "superstitions about ghosts, the afterlife, and reincarnation to show a cultural tension between Chinese folkways and American customs" (51-2). Indeed, Tan's belief in these supernatural elements provides the occasion for showing the tension between the two cultures. Influenced by the western rational tradition, her American families cannot believe in Kwan's ability to see and talk with Yin people but regard

it as an abnormal trait. After Olivia confides Kwan's exotic capability to her parents, her stepfather books Kwan into the psychiatric ward where the doctors diagnose Kwan's Chinese ghosts as a serious mental disorder and treat her with electroshock therapy. However, all the electricity that the doctors force into her brain runs through her body. It changes her hairstyle and endows her with a bizarre capability. Her hair becomes "bristly, wiry as a terrier's" (HSS 18). And she has the ability to interfere with radios, televisions, and watches and to recharge telephone and flashlight batteries with a touch of the fingers. Thus the narrative makes fun of the western scientific treatment of Kwan's supernatural vision. But the text does more than that, since the plot requires our belief in Kwan's supernatural abilities and illustrates how Kwan executes her agentic power to assist her sister.

Huntley states that "Kwan's most distinctive characteristic is her regular conversations with people who are already dead" (125). Employing her supernatural power of talking to Yin people and ghosts, Kwan assists her sister, Olivia to obtain and then save her marriage. Firstly, with the help of her friend, Toby Lipski, a yin person, Kwan contacts Elza, who is Simon's ex-girlfriend who lost her life in a skiing accident. Using her yin eyes, Kwan passes messages between the living and dead. She illustrates inter-world communication by chatting with Elza and passing on her messages to Simon. Kwan confides to Simon that Elza has begun her new life with her parents in the Yin world and she asks Kwan to tell Simon that he must no longer think about her and should begin his new life too. Therefore, after the communication, Simon is relieved by the death of Elza and believes that Olivia is his true love. With the help of Kwan, Olivia gets her wish to be married to Simon.

What's more, when there is a marriage crisis between Olivia and Simon, Kwan again uses her yin eyes to save their marriage. She communicates with Lao Lu, a friend from the Taiping days and now a yin person who announces that Olivia and Simon must remain married because their fates are forever intertwined. Kwan transmits what Lao Lu said to Olivia and makes her believe that her marriage with Simon is fated. Besides, to save their marriage, Kwan brings Olivia and Simon to take a trip to her hometown, Changmian, a Chinese village where they open their minds to each other when they are close to nature and finally reconcile with each other. But there are many twists and turns before their reconciliation. At one point, Olivia and Simon have a quarrel in the village's wild surroundings and then Simon runs away and disappears. Assisting Olivia to search for Simon, Kwan even sacrifices herself. Kwan accompanies Olivia to revisit the land to search for Simon. On their way to search for him, Kwan and Olivia encounter "the cave with the lake" (HSS 382). Since Kwan knows that its inner structure is like a labyrinth, she orders Olivia to wait outside the cave and herself enters into it to find Simon. As a result, she vanishes into the Changmian caves and is never found despite an intensive and protracted search. It seems that Kwan foresees the danger awaiting her and accepts it. Therefore, the narrative demonstrates the power of yin eyes and the force of these spiritual Qi-things. With yin eyes, Kwan is a supernatural Qi-thing who strives to assist her sister or even at the expense of her life.

## **B. The Secret Senses: Primitive Instincts to Overcome Racial Discrimination and Cultural Conflicts**

Besides yin eyes, Kwan has another supernatural power that is “hundred secret senses.” In the novel, there are many dialogues about “secret senses” between Kwan and her sister, Olivia. In virtue of the dialogue, Kwan not only instills the knowledge of what these secret senses are to her sister but also inspires her how to obtain and employ this supernatural Qi-thing.

Huntley states that “these secret senses are the keys to Kwan’s certitude about life; they are her connections to other lives” (125). When Olivia asks Kwan to expel the ghost of Simon’s ex-girlfriend, Elza from Simon’s heart, Kwan initially explains to Olivia what the secret senses are and how to employ them to send a message to her friend, Toby Lipski, a yin person who can help her to contact the ghost of Elza. For one thing, Kwan suggests people are born with these senses; they are similar to primitive instincts. They are not really secret; they are merely called so because people have forgotten they have them. For another, their number is given as one hundred because they mix the wholistic kinds of senses together, “senses like ant feet, elephant trunk, dog nose, cat whisker, whale ear, bat wing, clam shell, snake tongue, little hair on flower” (HSS 113). It seems that the hundred secret senses draw on all the different capacities of the animal and plant kingdom. Besides, as Kwan explains, the hundred secret senses reconcile the powers of the mind, heart and body: “memory, seeing, hearing, feeling, all come together, then you know something true in your heart...You use you secret sense, sometimes can get message back and forth fast between two people, living,

dead, doesn't matter, same sense" (114). As a supernatural Qi-thing, the person who possesses the hundred secret senses mobilizes an assemblage of all "the other senses, other modes of knowing, other avenues from the outside into the soul" (Huntley 125). Therefore, mobilizing all the senses in her heart, Kwan is able to send messages to her friend from the Yin World.

What's more, with the hundred secret senses, Kwan is able to have a heart-talk with Big ma who died in a car accident on her way to meet Kwan. Rather than using tongue, lips, and teeth for speaking, Kwan uses her hundred secret senses to communicate with Big ma by a "heart-talk" which is an effective way to relieve her sadness from the sudden death of Big ma (HSS 237). Meanwhile, their heart-talk gives Kwan another opportunity to explain the hundred secret senses of the title. Kwan identifies these mystic senses as "related to primitive instincts, what humans had before their brains developed language and the higher functions—the ability to equivocate, make excuses, and lie. Spine chills and musky scents, goose bumps and blushing cheeks—those are the vocabulary of the secret senses" (237-8). Clearly Kwan reemphasizes that the secret senses are the physical instincts that everyone is born with. Therefore, in virtue of Kwan's explanation and practice, Olivia gradually acquaints herself with the secret senses and is inspired to obtain them.

Besides employing the secret senses to communicate between the yin and yang worlds, Kwan identifies the secret senses as "a language of love" which is "not just honey-sweetheart kind love. Any kind love, mother-baby, auntie-niece, friend-friend, sister-sister, stranger-stranger" (HSS 238). This statement reverses conventional thought

about love which is no longer a way to express our affection to others, but a kind of universal fraternity with the capability to dispel any cultural differences and conflicts. Since Tan herself and many critics claim that love is a dominant theme in the novel,<sup>23</sup> we can find that several forms of love are enacted throughout the novel which include the sisterly love between Kwan and Olivia, the friendship between Nunumu and Miss Banner, the relation between Olivia and her husband, Simon, and the historical love of the earlier couples. As the senses are the embodiment of love, I will discuss how they endow the sisters with the capabilities to fly into the Yin world and bind the community together.

Having already discussed how Kwan uses the secret senses to assist Olivia to resolve her troubles and relieve herself from misery, I will mainly focus on the way in which, inspired to obtain her secret senses, Olivia enters into the world of yin where she reconciles with her sister Kwan and finds her true self. As a child, Olivia was embarrassed by her kinship with Kwan and her Chinese heritage. As an adult, although her embarrassment gives way to guilt about her indifference to Kwan, Olivia still distances herself from Kwan and her tales. However, when Olivia finally visits China and Kwan's native village, she is overwhelmed by the feeling that "Changmian is a familiar land-scape, the setting for the stories that Kwan insinuated into her dreams time and again years before" (Huntley 129). On their way to search for Simon, Kwan rediscovers Miss Banner's music box, herbs and a hand-stitched book, things that jointly witness their previous life together. Seeing these historical things, Olivia is no longer afraid of Kwan's stories but begins to feel her kinship

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<sup>23</sup> E.D. Huntley claims that love is a dominant theme in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. (137). And in a 2015 interview by Gretchen Giles, Tan sates that "[*The Hundred Secret Senses*] answers a question about love, unconditional love...."

with Kwan and to move toward integrating the elements of her heritage into a complete identity. Holding Kwan's hands, Olivia feels that "together we're flying to the world of Yin" (HSS 363). The verb "flying" implies that the hundred secret senses endow Olivia with the capability of flying which surpasses the normal human capacities.

After Kwan vanishes into the cave, Olivia employs her hundred secret senses to remember her and comprehend Kwan's view of the world, ghosts and love. She realizes Kwan's intention to show her that "the world is not a place but the vastness of the soul. And the soul is nothing more than love, limitless, endless, all that moves us toward knowing what is true" (HSS 399). Rejecting the Western idea that there is a material world outside (*res extensa*) and a mental world inside (*res cogitans*), Tan imagines a universe filled with spiritual Qi-things through which the spirits of the living can communicate with people who are already dead. And Olivia understands that besides bliss, love is also present in worry and grief, hope and trust. She also realizes why Kwan believes in ghosts since "believing in ghosts—that's believing that love never dies" (399). Therefore, through the hundred secret senses, Olivia can talk with the ghost of Kwan that is the embodiment of love.

In imagining these supernatural Qi-things—a Chinese girl with yin eyes, yin people and the hundred secret senses—Tan creates a Yin world where humans reconcile with each other; she merges Chinese and American cultures and even entwines life and death to represent the nature of yin/yang balance. Meanwhile, interweaving both Olivia and Kwan's narrative about these supernatural Qi-things, Tan "juxtaposes the yin and yang worlds and layers both rational and irrational elements" in their lives (Zhang "Reading Amy Tan's

Hologram”). Therefore, more than creating the yin world, she also creates a wholistic life-world that reconciles the tensions in America’s multi-cultural society, in the hope of building up a harmonious society in which different races and cultures can coexist peacefully.

### **III. Spirits as Qi-things**

Besides ghosts and Yin people, Tan conjures up some spirits from Asian mythology. Far from being the representation of superstition and religious belief, these spirits are Qi-things since they not only reconcile the conflicts between different cultures but also combine nature with culture.

#### **A. The Agentic Power of the Kitchen God’s Wife and its Statue**

Due to its title, readers can find that Tan’s second novel *The Kitchen God’s Wife* is closely related to a traditional Chinese folktale. In the novel, the mother Winnie narrates the original story about how the rich farmer, Zhang becomes the Kitchen God. According to Winnie’s tale, Zhang abandons his wife and squanders all of his wealth on a passionate affair with pretty Lady Li. Running out of his money, Zhang becomes a beggar and Lady Li breaks up with him. Fortunately, he is taken in by a charitable woman who is his discarded wife. When realizing that he is saved by his wife, he is so ashamed of his earlier treatment of her that he burns to death. In heaven, the Jade Emperor realizes that Zhang has shown his capacity for shame and rewards him by making him the Kitchen God, responsible for judging the behavior of mortals each year. “In the traditional version of the tale, the wife disappears from the narrative after her husband has been elevated to the divine pantheon” (Huntley 85).

When narrating her traumatic past in China, Winnie compares herself to the Kitchen God's Wife, whom nobody worshiped or credited with charity toward an evil husband.

By contrast, "in Tan's version, Weili, the wife who endures her husband's abuse and philandering, is rewarded for her forbearance with another chance to experience happiness, and she becomes Winnie, the survivor, the beloved wife of a good American man, the mother of an accomplished daughter, and the grandmother of two American children" (Huntley 85). With an appropriate move beyond Chinese lore, Winnie creates her own watchful deity, "Lady Sorrowfree," and makes up a new story about the supernatural female who will protect Pearl. Winnie confides to her daughter that "when you are afraid, you can talk to her. She will listen. She will wash away everything sad with her tears. She will use her stick to chase away everything bad. See her name: Lady Sorrowfree, happiness winning over bitterness, no regrets in this world" (KGF 414-5). Therefore, the deity and her statue that Winnie creates are spiritual Qi-things since they reconcile the mother-daughter relation and cultural differences. In her dissertation entitled *Encountering Spectral Traces: Ghost Narratives in Chinese America and Taiwan*, Wu states that "[a]fter the recollection of ghost haunting accompanied by danger, misfortune and suffering, Tan envisions a ghost-free world with hope and happiness" (69). My study suggests that Tan's world cannot be ghost-free since ghosts and spirits are important Qi-things. Rather than exorcising their ghosts, the characters find ways to coexist with them harmoniously.

## **B. Nats: Balancing the Relation of Humans and Nature**

Besides creating Bibi Chen, an omniscient ghost narrator as a spiritual Qi-thing who

is able to enter the minds of the travelers and the dream of the tour guide, Tan adopts the Burmese belief in Nats—“the spirits of nature” to present how nats employ their agentic power in the interaction between American tourists and the Karen tribe, between culture and nature or even in the development of the plot.

With the help of Walter, their tour guide, the American tour group crosses the Chinese border into Myanmar. When the bus rolls down the Burma road, Walter asks the driver to pull into a small dirt road off the highway and introduces the traditional Burmese belief in Nats, which are believed to be “the spirits of nature—the lake, the trees, the mountains, the snakes and birds” (SFD 168). Meanwhile, Walter states that Nats are “everything and everywhere” (169). They exist in many forms and are invisible forces that influence human affairs. Without regard to religion or tribe, nearly all Burmese still worship them vigorously and believe that Nats can bring luck and prosperity to those who worship them or bring danger and misfortune to those who do not respect them or don't believe in them. What Walter states corresponds to the Burmese animistic tradition that everything has a spirit or Nat. According to this tradition, each Nat should be given a shrine where people can make offerings. Walter claims that there were accidents on the old road until people realized a Nat was here and placed a shrine for it. However, in the American tourists' eyes, the shrine looks like “a bamboo birdfeeder, decorated with Christmas tinsel, placed in the cranny of a tree” and they disregard it on their bathroom break (168). Since Walter further states that whether you believe in Nats or not, it's traditional to give an offering, some Americans honor the animistic tradition, but most members of the tour group ignore it. Obviously, as the rational

tradition is deeply rooted in their heart, some of American tourists cannot take the Burmese animistic tradition seriously.

What's more, there is another example of some of the American tourists disregarding the Burmese animistic tradition. While the bus climbs up the Burma road into Lashio, the exhaust system on it malfunctions. So, Walter orders the bus to pull over for fresh air. At that point the driver, Mr. Joe, claims that he has seen a Nat riding toward him on a white horse. Rupert, Moff and Bennie hurry off to search for privacy. However, they encounter "the highly unfortunate coincidence that what Rupert takes to be an ideal outdoor toilet is what some Nats—perhaps the one who died of intestinal malaise—consider to be home sweet holy home, in this case, a small grove of jacaranda trees, still leafy in winter but missing their magnificent mane of lilac-colored blossoms" (SFD 180). Therefore, ignorant of Burmese spiritual culture, Rupert unintentionally makes a mistake. Although these American tourists have known of the Burmese animistic belief in Nats, some of them still ignore or even desecrate it. Through the American tourists' attitude and behavior towards Nats, Tan suggests that the binary opposition between the animistic and the rational tradition is hard to reconcile.

While the American's disbelief in Nats reflects the impassable gap between different cultures, the Karen's belief in Nats is conducive to the development of the plot. When waiting for their luggage to be unloaded in the dock in Nyaung Shwe Town, one of the American tourists, Rupert feels tired and makes use of a deck of cards to perform conjuring tricks which attracts the attention of many passersby. When three boatmen view his magic performance, they believe that Rupert is "the lord of Nats" who could save them with his

invisible power. These boatmen are the Karen, members of an ethnic tribe that has to hide in deep jungle to escape from the tragic oppression of the Burmese Junta. As the original people of Burma, the Karen believes in “the Younger White Brother,” “Lord of Nats” who had “the power of invisibility” (SFD 277). Believing that Rupert is the Lord of Nats and other American tourists are the Lord’s army, the Karen design a trap and misdirect these American tourists to their tribe. Under the lead of the Karen people, these American tourists start their adventure journey to the aboriginal jungle. Therefore, the original itinerary is changed and the plot develops into narrating the American tourists’ adventure experience in the deep jungle. So, as spiritual Qi-things, Nats play an essential role in the development of the plot.

In depicting Burmese people’s animistic tradition and the American tourist’s ignorance of it, Tan seems to suggest that it is difficult to bridge the gap between different cultures. Nevertheless, the Karen people’s culture is not static. In describing the aboriginal life that the American tourists live in the Karen tribe, Tan conjures up a TV Nat which further shows the different attitudes towards nature and culture held by the Americans and the Karen. As a spiritual Qi-thing, the TV Nat not only takes part in the development of the plot, but also it shows that, unlike those Americans who divide culture from nature, the Karen’s culture is intimately tied to nature.

After being abducted into “the no name place,” the American tourists gradually adapt to the aboriginal life style since the Karen people not only provide them with their material needs but also satisfy their mental needs by allowing them to watch TV. The first time when the Karen invites their American guests to watch TV, they view a reality show about humans’

adventures in the waters. When Bennie joins the Karen people and watches the reality show, he sees a news crawl floated along the bottom of the screen and it reports their mysterious disappearance in Myanmar. He shouts to other tourists to watch the report. While the Americans only regard the TV as a machine for them to get information, the Karen people take it as a “cyborg” that combines its body with its spirit-Nat. Since the place is their territory, their views prevail.

The narrator Bibi Chen explains that the American tourists do not realize that “in the jungle a TV is not just a TV. It is a Nat. You must watch it continually, or it will get angry and change the story” (SFD 420). Due to personification, the TV Nat is anthropomorphic and filled with human nature. Since the TV Nat has been talking and no one has been listening to it, it is irritated and stops reporting about the missing tourists in Burma and flies to New York and GNN headquarters. Bibi Chen claims that “...the twins forgot to turn him off so he could sleep and be less mischievous” (424). Like humans, the TV Nat also needs to sleep or else he is subject to moods.

Besides, the TV Nat is endowed with agentic powers since it is able to determine the news, “calling out prophecies, changing fate, creating catastrophes, then retracting them in the next update” (SFD 424). Indeed, as a Qi-thing, the TV Nat affects the development of the plot, changing both the Karen and the American tourists’ fate and even bringing catastrophes to the Karen tribe. TV not only lets the Americans know of the report about their disappearance but also makes the Karen visible around the world, although they believe that it is “the White Young Brother” who makes this miracle. Since the TV reports that the

American tourists are missing, one of the Karen members, Black Spot, realizes that it can also make the tribe visible and expose the cruelty the military regime exercises upon them.

Driven by the agentic power of TV, Black Spot intends to provide the American tourists' companion, a TV show reporter, with some news materials. So he steals a tape from one of the Americans, Roxanne, who has recorded the coexistence of the American tourists and the Karen in the deep jungle, and he sends it to Harry. However, a reporter from the GNW pretends to interview Harry and sneakily copies this tape. Without Harry's permission, the GNW anchor makes the tape public and fabricates the news that the missing Americans are playing their roles as freedom fighters for democracy rather than reporting about the American's harmonious coexistence with the Karen. Therefore, through the magic power of TV, the GNW creates public opinion through the news they reported, triggering international rallies and denunciations of the military regime. Under this great pressure from the globe, the military region has to speak in public and promises to guarantee the safety and freedom of the Karen tribe and the Americans.

However, the same force that aids the Karen can also destroy them. After the American tourists are rescued and sent back to their homes, rather than escaping their oppressed fate, the Karen are forced to leave the No Name place. Since their hidden place is exposed to the public, it attracts the attention of many western explorers. They strive to explore the jungle and make full use of its natural resources. So, actually, the TV and the Americans are not the Karen's saviors but the intruders who drive the tribe into exile. Black Spot explains that "the tribe's desire was simply to find a scrap of land where they could

plant their crops, preserve their stories, live in harmony, and wait for the Younger White Brother to find them once again” (SFD 440). Although they are forced to leave their original hidden place, they find another refuge. The narrator calls it “Somewhere Else, a split that divides Life from Death, and it is darker and deeper than the other ravine” (440). Readers are left with the ominous suggestion that the Karen do not survive their contact with Americans.

Unlike the American who consider the TV as an inert machine and make full use of it to attain their own purpose, the Karen respect it and take it as a Qi-thing with “disturbingly lively” spirit (Haraway, *Cyborg Manifesto* 163). So, the episode of the TV Nat suggests that the Karen are not primitive people but cyborgs whose culture is nonetheless intimately tied to nature since they combine modern technology with the animistic tradition.

## **Conclusion**

In virtue of the interaction between humans and spiritual Qi-things, we can find that Tan's novels move toward the subversion of our rational perception of life, elaborating on the question of life continuing beyond our ordinary senses. Tan creates plots, atmospheres and characters that are not based on the rational western idea of a world that is governed by physical laws and that has no place for spiritual or supernatural causes. On the contrary, she writes about a world in which the living and the dead can communicate and ghosts and other spiritual things can intervene and interfere with the destinies of the living. She refuses the dichotomy between spirit and matter and instead elevates spiritual things as equally important forms of existence as humans.

## **Part Three: The Interactions of Qi-things in The Textual World**

In her essay, “Mother Tongue,” Tan claims that as a writer, she is fascinated by language in daily life. She admits: “I spend a great deal of my time thinking about the power of language—the way it can evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea, or a simple truth. Language is the tool of my trade. And I use them all—all the Englishes I grew up with” (OF 271). In making a plural out of the word English by adding an –es, Tan accords equal validity to standard and non-standard forms of English. Among the variety of Englishes Tan grew up with, her mother’s English is probably most significant to her. Tan considers it as her “mother tongue, ...the language that helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world” (273). To emphasize the significance of her mother tongue, Tan employs maternal story-telling as the main narrative strategy in her first two novels.

At the same time, she claims that “..., my mother’s limited English limited my perception of her” and “almost had an effect on limiting my possibilities in life as well” (OF 274). Perhaps because she realizes the limits of the immigrant voice, she gives up the oral

narration of the Chinese mother and turns to other narrative strategies in her next works. In Chapter Six, focusing on how these non-human Qi-things supplement the limits of human narrators in their interactions and play active roles in shaping the text's own narrative and aesthetic expressions, we can see Tan not only redefines the concept of narration but also questions the relation of words and images. Besides non-human narrators, to Amy Tan, writing is also an alternative mode of expression. When characters speak or write, their Qi is transmitted into the words that they produce. So, spoken and written texts become animate Qi-things. In Chapter Seven, paying attention to the interaction or transmission between spoken and written texts and the interaction between human characters and different texts, we can see how as Qi-things, these written texts display their privilege and cooperate with oral texts and how different writing modes affect human characters in virtue of their vibrant materiality or even how different texts and human characters co-define each other in the process of their interactions.

## Chapter Six: The Narration of Other-than-Human Qi-things

A number of scholars have commented on the importance of oral story-telling in Tan's novels, rightly linking it to the Chinese tradition of the talk story. In her study of Amy Tan, Huntley argues that,

[b]y crafting her novels as records of the act of storytelling, Tan is working in an honored and ancient Chinese tradition called talk story (*gong gu tsai*), a felicitous combination of genres from Chinese oral tradition articulated in local vernaculars in narrative form. The tradition provides Tan with the ideal medium for bringing to life the inhabitants of a fictional universe that encompasses two centuries, two cultures, two nations, and multiple generations-separated by space, time and language. (18)

Like Huntley, many critics of Tan's works focus on the "talk-story" narrative patterns, which stem from the Chinese oral tradition in Tan's works. Snodgrass states that like other feminist authors, Amy Tan has "recovered the talk story culture as a means of reclaiming women's history and of gauging how far women have come from the dark ages of patriarchy and feudal marriage" (164). Apart from reclaiming mothers' traumatic past, the mother-to-daughter storytelling endows women with "an opportunity to speak freely without being censored or stifled" (Snodgrass 164). So, for Tan, the talk-story offers "a form of

self-expression and empowerment” (Wong 10-11). It is a kind of “talking-cure” or “a healing narrative therapy between generations” (1). Thus, obviously, most critics appreciate Tan’s employment of oral narration since it is an effective way for female characters to gain self-expression and to bridge the gap between Chinese mothers and their descendants.

While reflecting on the overemphasis of the function of oral narration in Tan’s works, other critics illustrate the limits of the oral narration in Tan’s works. Dunick claims that “Throughout Tan’s novels, talk-story promotes multiple levels of misunderstanding between both Chinese-speaking mothers and English-speaking daughters and between persons who speak different Chinese dialects” (5). Likewise, “...Yuan yuan recognizes the limits of talk-story in Tan’s novels by arguing that they embody a distinct aspect of loss” (5). Depending solely on the mother’s memories, these talk-stories “do not represent a stable text” but “often signal an erasure or loss of China as referent for the American-born listeners” (Yuan 5-6). Based on this factor, Yuan yuan calls attention to “the inability of oral talk-story in Tan’s novels to establish and maintain an intergenerational cultural memory of China as a cultural homeland...” (6). Furthermore, Dunick illustrates that “talk-story cannot function properly for these Chinese mothers and American daughters without a source of mediation” (8). Through the lens of *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001), Dunick has realized that “literacy in the form of writing and written texts represents an important and often more effective means of transmitting cultural memories and cultural identity across generational lines than talk-story” (4).

I agree with Dunick and Yuan yuan that Tan indeed realizes the limitations and unreliability of “talk-story” narration since these oral narrators in her first three novels are usually Chinese mothers who hold the limited knowledge of first person narrators and narrate depending on their unreliable memories. To supplement the limited knowledge of first-person narrators, Tan also creates other-than-human narrators.

In a new-materialist perspective, besides humans, non-human things are able to narrate. As Tan endows those non-human things with the power of narration, they are no longer inert objects but Qi-things. Like humans, they exhale and inhale Qi when they narrate. In this chapter, I plan to focus on how non-human things narrate, specifically how they move the plot forward, express characters’ views and affect characters’ behavior. In Tan’s works, non-human narrators supplement the limits of human narrators in their interactions and play active roles in shaping the text’s own narrative and aesthetic expressions.

Although critics now pay attention to the importance of things in fiction, they tend to maintain the Western separation between subject and object. Tischleder argues that: “...Literary narratives are not always, as we may assume, organized around the lives, quests, or trajectories of human characters, but follow, in some cases at least, the paths of inanimate objects” (26). The term “inanimate” does not correspond to the definition of Qi-things, even if Tischleder suggests movement in the term “paths.” More than following the paths of inanimate objects, Tan endows some other-than-human things with narrative powers. So, I will focus on how these narrative Qi-things interact with human narrator and readers.

## I. Narrative Bones in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*

Tan carries on her investigation of the theme of mother-daughter relationship in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. Exploring the complicated and entangled mother-daughter relationship of three generations, this novel received numerous comments and much praise immediately after its publication. St. Louis Post Dispatch comments that “[t]his is a novel about many things—how the past shapes the present, how family and cultural history influence the direction of our future. It is about the importance of language and memory, the relationship of words and perception and experience. But is it, most of all, about mothers and daughters” (1 March 2001). This comment focuses on what we associate with human culture, ignoring the material dimension of existence, exemplified by the bones that figure prominently in this novel. Bones play a role in the stories of both the American daughter, Ruth, and her mother, Luling. The dragon bones, oracle bones, and the bones of Peking men organize the skeleton of this novel; they have stories to tell for those who know how to interpret them. Interacting in Precious Auntie and Luling’s stories, these bones are animate Qi-things with narrative powers. More than a story about mother-daughter relations over three generations, the novel is about “negative and positive bone tales” (Lux 173). I will focus on how these narrative bones assist characters to tell about their stories and “speak” to the characters in the sense of signifying something to them.

Illustrating the narrative function of bones in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Lux states that “[w]hile bones frequently evoke images of death; they also may evoke resilient images of life, vitality and regeneration” (121). Throughout the novel, exerting their power, bones

inspire negative and positive actions in Luling and her daughter, Ruth's stories. I will discuss how bones exert negative force to reveal human greed and cruelty, to represent Precious Auntie's miserable fate and to record the origin of human civilization and Japan's cruel invasion of China during the World War II. As a bonesetter, Precious Auntie's father uses dragon bones to heal people's broken bones. Once the bonesetter cures the broken bones of Mr. Chang, the coffinmaker's son, the dragon bones have demonstrated their secret power and aroused Chang's desire to obtain them for himself. To obtain these dragon bones, Mr. Chang proposes a marriage to the bonesetter's daughter. However, this marriage proposal is rejected since Precious Auntie falls in love with the youngest son of the LIU family and prepares to marry with him. Enraged by the refusal and disguised as bandits, Mr. Chang and his friend attack the bonesetter and her daughter on their way to the wedding ceremony, killing Precious Auntie's father, accidentally causing the death of her beloved bridegroom and stealing her dowry of dragon bones. The precious medical and economic worth of the dragon bones impels Mr. Chang to strive for them at the expense of human lives.

When Chang arrives at the funeral of Precious Auntie's bridegroom, she accuses Chang of being the killer. But no one believes her, treating her as a madwoman who has lost her reason through grief. Although Precious Auntie cannot make anyone believe her, those dragon bones that Chang obtains reveal later what he has done. After being proven to be Peking Men's bones with a high price, those bones make Chang become famous and very rich overnight. Meanwhile, they let the Liu family suspect Chang's bad behavior since Big Aunt claims that "what a peculiar coincidence" (BD 175) that Mr. Chang passed by and

stopped his cart to help after Baby Brother was killed by the Mongol bandits. So, both the bones Chang obtained and characters' expressions reveal Chang's criminal behavior.

Because of Luling's childish ignorance, she confides to Chang that she know the secret location where the bones are buried. To obtain these bones, Chang tries to get Luling within his grasp and asks her to be his daughter-in-law. While Luling is delighted with this marriage proposal, Precious Auntie sees through Chang's trick and prevents Luling from getting married at the expense of her own life. When Luling refuses to take her advice, she kills herself and becomes a ghost haunting the Liu family and forcing them to cancel the marriage. Therefore, apart from the death of her father and her groom, Chang's greed for bones even causes the death of Precious Auntie. And as a result, Luling becomes an orphan and is sent to an orphanage.

However, the violation of ancestral bones provides another explanation of the miserable life of Precious Auntie's family. One day, Precious Auntie's father appears in her dream and tells her the truth that bones that he used to cure patients' bones are not dragon bones but actually their ancestor's bones. Digging out and adopting ancestors' bones to cure patients, the bonesetter blasphemes against their ancestors' spirit. So, both the bonesetter and his family are cursed to death. To Precious Auntie and readers, the curse from the ancestors' bones tells about Chinese sacrificial culture that requires people to worship their ancestors. Descendants should hold funerals for them and well bury their bodies well after their deaths. Otherwise, their ghosts will haunt and curse their descendants. Scared of the curse from her ancestors, Precious Auntie returns the bones to the cave.

The bones tell different stories to different characters in the novel. To scientists, they are humans' ancestors' bones with archaeological value. Chinese and foreign scientists who do researches in the Dragon Bone Hill prove that these bones are pieces of skullcap from humanity's oldest ancestor and they name these bones as "Peking Man's bones." As human ancestor's bones, these bones can preserve the past and tell the scientists about what happened long ago and the evolutionary process of human beings. So, scientists strive to search for them. With the outbreak of Sino-Japanese war, Precious Auntie's husband, Kaijing and two other scientists still carry on their inspection of Peking Man's bones in the quarry while most of scientists have stopped their excavation. Their consistent excavation of ancestors' bones brings them disaster and curses them to death. One day, when they excavate in the quarry, they meet the Communist troops and are forced to join them. And then they are killed by the Japanese officer since they refuse to confide the place where the Communists are hiding. It seems that those scientists' consistent excavation is not right since their action desecrates human ancestor's spirit. So they are cursed to die like Precious Auntie's family members. Besides, to carry out the research of Peking Man's bones, scientists encourage the village people to bring out the dragon bones that they own. If the dragon bones they own are proven to be Peking Man's bones, they could receive a reward. Thus, to the village people, these bones have huge economic value, driving them to dig up them here and there so as to destructively turn the village into ruins. In a word, humans have their own purpose to search for the Peking Man's bones. However, as Qi-things, these bones have the agency to decide their own fate. During the war, those bones that had been carefully extracted from the End of

the World are lost. They are said to have been smashed by train or sunk the bottom of the sea. As Qi-things, these ancestor's bones choose to be buried where no one can unearth them and be left in peace.

Besides exerting negative actions, bones are regard as beneficial: "positive bone imagery in Tan's novel suggests hope for human healing, including physical and spiritual healing, deliverance from curses and healing across generations" (Lux 132). With positive narrative force, bones are able to shape character's personality, excavate family name and history or even reconcile generations.

Acting as the thread to string together the loss, the search and the recovery of the family history and name, bones are vital to the excavation of identity. At the beginning of the second part of the novel, when narrating Precious Auntie's life experience and her family history, Luling tells about her experience of digging with Precious Auntie in the hidden cave for the best dragon bones. Crossing "the End of the World" and many other places, Precious Auntie and Luling finally arrive at the secret location for finding the best dragon bones, a place called "the Monkey's Jaw" (BD 156). The hidden cave and the bones Precious Auntie find from the cave assist her to narrate her family history to Luling. What Precious Auntie said is imprinted in her heart. "The secret of the exact location was also a family heirloom, passed from generation to generation, father to son, and in Precious Auntie's time, father to daughter to me" (184). Thus, the hidden cave and bones excavated from it explain the reason why her family had become famous as bonesetters even if Luling does not know her true identity at that time.

However, with the elapse of time, Luling loses her memories and suffers from the guilt of forgetting her family name. “Precious Auntie, what is our name? I always meant to claim it as my own” (BD 6). To readers’ surprise, the oracle bone which Luling encounters in the Asian Art Museum opens the pathways to her mother’s past and inspires her to think of her mother’s name. Mr. Tang brings them to stand in front of the display of a bone. To Ruth, the bone is inert object since she saw it as “an ivory-colored spadelike object, cracked with lines and blackened with holes” (330). While Ruth wonders what is the function of this object, to her surprise, her mother Luling gives the answer in Chinese: ‘Oracle bone.’ The oracle bone tells the missing part of Luling’s story since it inspires LuLing to recall her mother’s given name and the Chinese pronunciation of her family name ‘Gu’ for ‘bone’ although she cannot remember how to write it in Chinese. So, exerting its positive power, the oracle bone in the museum awakens LuLing’s memory of her family name.

Bones assist both Luling and her daughter Ruth to search for their identity. After the death of Precious Auntie, Luling is sent to an orphanage where she re-encounters the bones that Precious Auntie leaves for her. In an abandoned storeroom of the orphanage, Luling stays alone and thinks of Precious Auntie. She unfolds the blue cloth that holds the letter which Precious Auntie wrote to her before she committed suicide. Besides the letter, Luling finds two wondrous things: “an oracle bone” and “a small photograph of a young woman” in a little pocket which Precious Auntie had sewn into the cloth. The idea that the bone conveys a message is implicit in Precious Auntie's declaration that “I could have it when I had learned to remember” (BD 227). The bone assists Luling to commit an idea or words to memory and

also literally re-assemble the past. The small photograph of a young woman represents what Precious Auntie looks like before her face burnt. It makes Luling realize how she is familiar to her mother as she claims that “Her face, her hope, her knowledge, her sadness - they were mine” (228). As the bone and the photograph are bound up in the cloth with the letter, these three Qi-things allow Luling to go further into her quest to know who she is and who her mother is.

What’s more, bone imagery and the Chinese word ‘gu’ fulfill Luling and her daughter, Ruth’s search for family name and their own identity. Lux claims that “The fulfillment of LuLing’s quest and then Ruth’s quest to discover the birth name of Precious Auntie is connected to bone imagery and to the subtleties of the word ‘gu’” (124). The oracle bone inspires Luling to think of Precious Auntie’s family name “gu” in oral Chinese, but she cannot exactly remember what is the Chinese character of her family name. Her mother’s bewilderment about the family name pushes Ruth on a quest to find it. She asks for Auntie Gaoling’s help. Auntie Gao has no idea about it at first, but finally she finds out and explains the complex meanings of the family name to Ruth:

Gu as in “gorge.” It’s a different gu. It sounds the same as the bone gu, but it’s written a different way. The third-tone gu can mean many things: “old,” “gorge,” “bone,” also “thigh,” “blind,” “grain,” “merchant,” lots of things. And the way “bone” is written can also stand for “character.” That’s why we use that expression “It’s in your bones.” It means, “That’s your character.”

(BD 335)

Based on Auntie Gao's explanation, the word 'gu' not only lets Ruth learn that it has multiple meanings through its composite ideographic characters but also understand that her mother and her grandmother are part of her own skeleton and shape her character, as later she claims that "These are the women who shaped her life, who are in her bones" (BD 338). Under the inspiration of the oracle bone and the Chinese word bone, 'gu', Precious Auntie's family name is recovered. With the excavation of the family name, Luling no longer talks of the family curse, and instead she only recounts the happy parts of the past and recalls "being loved very, very much. She remembers that to Bao Bomu she was the reason for life itself" (337). And to Ruth's surprise, her mother begs for her forgiveness for hurting her. So, Ruth and her mother reconcile with each other after discovering their family name and history. Ruth no longer struggles in two cultures but uncovers her own identity. She finds the reason to write "for her grandmother, for herself, for the little girl who became her mother" (339). So, she decides to move from a ghostwriter of other people's books to a writer of her own book.

Although bone images do not literally speak, exerting their negative and positive power, they convey both haunting and healing in the novel. They do signify to the characters and they supply parts of the story that the characters cannot otherwise know.

## **II. Photographs as Qi-things**

In Amy Tan's memories and many interviews, she reveals that the old family photos sitting on her desk in her writing room inspire her a lot in her creation of fiction. The particular force of these Qi-things lies not simply in themselves, but in their power to evoke other, absent things whose trace they bear. In the introduction of *Phototextualities*:

*Intersections of photography and Narrative*, Alex Hughes and Andrea Noble point out that “The notion of indexicality, as the contributors concur, is the founding element of photographic representation” (5). Treating photo images as indexes, essays in this book investigate “narrative practices that are seduced or invaded by, or rely on, photo-images” (Hughes and Noble 6). Rather than negatively “seduce” or “invade” her narratives, photo-images fertilize or nourish Tan’s narrative practices, specifically to inspire her to trace her mother’s and her grandmother’s past or even their family’s history. And as Batchen succinctly puts it, ““As an index, the photograph is never itself but always, by its very nature, a tracing of something else”” (Hughes and Noble 5). But I disagree with Batchen’s view since as a Q-thing, a photograph is also itself. The proof is they move Amy Tan to invent stories that are not merely traces of what is absent. The photographs also give birth to new (albeit fictional) lives, and this is especially the case in *The Valley of Amazement*. The moment Tan views these photos; they are not inert objects but animate Qi-things. So, I will firstly focus on how, as Qi-things, these photos actively affect Tan and her characters’ fiction writing and creation of other art products. Then, I will discuss the interaction of visual and verbal representation in her works, especially how these photo images and characters’ narratives actively affect and complement with each other. Based on these discussions, I will disclose Tan’s skepticism about the truth-telling possibilities intrinsic in photos and her attitude towards the connection of photos to memory and the complementary relation between verbal and visual representation in her works.

### **A. Photographs in Fictional and Artistic Creation**

Barthes argues that “Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory..., but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory” (*Camera Lucida* 91). When

Barthes states that the photograph blocks memory, he seems to hold a western idea of memory, imagining that the self is already there and memory is a store of images in the remembering mind. On the contrary, rather than blocking memory, the old family photos that Tan engages with produce a new memory, in Tan's words, "an emotional memory," which assists her to "draw upon the emotional truth of her past experiences but never on the actual factual truth"<sup>24</sup> in her creation of fiction. Focusing on the interaction between Tan and her family photos and between characters and photo images in her works, I will discuss how photos, as Qi-things, actively affect Tan and her characters' fiction writing and creation of other art products while their memories and selves are coming into being in these interactions.

In a communication with Molly Giles about her creation of *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Tan reveals that she "was drawn by two images. One is the photograph of my grandmother, which always sat on my desk." In the photo, her grandmother "is around seventeen and in winter garb, to judge by the fur-lined high-neck collar. And she has on a remarkable hat! I am a hat person. Hats overflow and fall from the shelf of my closet, so I was drawn by this trait that she and I share." Intriguingly, it is the hat that allows Tan to connect with the young woman in the photograph. The hat in the photograph is what Roland Barthes called the "punctum," which "pierces" the observer: Amy Tan (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 146). As the "punctum," the hat is "an affective force that makes the photo breathe with a feeling of life" (Massumi 57). Through the "real but abstract force of life-likeness"

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<sup>24</sup> After her publication of *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Amy Tan expresses this view in a conversation with Molly Giles.

intrinsic in the hat in the photo, Tan feels that her and her grandmother's common susceptibility to the charm of those items of dress seals their bond of kinship (Massumi 57). So, inspired by this photo, Tan re-investigates the mother-daughter relation of three generations. As a Qi-thing, the grandmother's photo not only inspires Tan creative motivation, but also lets her pass on to her character Ruth, in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, the urge to create family stories. In the novel, the heroine, the American daughter, Ruth is a ghostwriter. However, after reading the translation of her mother's draft and inspired by the picture of her grandmother, Ruth finally finds out who she is and learns the common trait that her grandmother, her mother and her share. "Through [the picture of her grandmother], she can see from the past clear in the present" (BD 337). Exchanging with the photo, Ruth forms memory in a forward-moving trajectory rather than moving backward to something stored up in her head. It helps Ruth to produce a new memory that effaces the boundaries between subject and object as well as past and future. So, for Tan and her character, a photograph does not block memory by replacing a mental image with a concrete physical one that would then be "a counter-memory." The picture inspires her return to the past in order to think about the past experiences of her grandmother and her mother. What's more, the picture of her grandmother endows Ruth with a sense of togetherness as Ruth stares at the photo and senses that "These are the women who shaped her life, who are in her bones" (338). The photo not only brings Ruth a sense of reunion but also stimulates her own creative motivation. Looking at the photo, Ruth gradually forms a relational self and senses that her grandmother sits next to her and together they write stories of things that were and shouldn't have been, or could

have been, or might still be. They write of a past that can be changed and can choose what they should remember. So, interacting with the photo, Ruth decides to be a writer and writes stories about her grandmother, her mother and herself.

What's more, as a Qi-thing, Luling's photo can help Mr. Tang to draw upon the emotional truth of Ruling's past experiences when he translates Luling's draft. When Ruth requests Mr. Tang, a Chinese writer who has lived in America for many years and excels in both Chinese and English, to translate her mother's drafts, Mr. Tang asks Ruth to give him one of Luling's photos. No matter what Luling looks like in this photo, snapped in an instant, it holds the Qi which is her essence. Reading Luling's photo, Mr. Tang senses her Qi and her personality, which is essential for him to translate what was in Luling's heart: her better intentions and her hopes, rather than translating the words and their precise meanings.

Besides *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, photographs nourish Tan's creation of her new fiction: *The Valley of Amazement*. According to Amy Tan "the story behind the story" of *The Valley of Amazement* derives from the inspiration she felt from viewing a photograph entitled "The Ten Beauties of Shanghai" when she visited the Asian Art Museum to see an exhibit on Shanghai. The moment she saw the photo, she was stunned, as women in this photo are dressed in the same clothes that her grandmother wears in one of Tan's favorite photographs of her. The photograph stimulated her to reconsider her family history and her grandmother's true identity. She indulged in wondering whether her grandmother was a traditional, virtuous woman as her relatives said or a courtesan because of her dressing. What's more, she contemplates the possibility that her grandmother might indeed be a courtesan. The anecdote

suggests that the second photograph both revealed something about the grandmother and deepened the author's fascination with the lost story. So the photograph tells a part of that lost story that Tan has then to continue in her fiction. Obsessed with the mystery of the similarities in the two photographs, Tan abandoned the book she had been working on and began a novel about courtesans.

Comparing her process of reading family photographs with her writing process, Tan claims that reading family photographs "in microscopic detail" is crucial to her fiction writing. When "work[ing] through it [old family photographs] pixel by pixel," she could discover "crucial, overlooked details that are important to her family's story."<sup>25</sup> Those crucial details that Tan traces from the photos provide her "an emotional memory" rather than "the photographic memory." So, combining the emotional memory about her family history with her imagination, Tan creates works which "draw upon the emotional truth of her past experiences but never on the actual factual truth." And in virtue of this point, Tan claims that her works are fictions rather than autobiography and memoir. I will discuss how these photos fertilize the creation of *The Valley of Amazement*, especially how they assist the author to fix her work's emotional tone, how images in the photos effect the arrangement of geographic, cultural and historical backgrounds and the physical and mental details of character images in this fiction.

In *The Valley of Amazement*, the photo of ten beauties of Shanghai and her grandmother's photo inspire Tan to "spotlight questions of geographic, cultural, historical,

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<sup>25</sup> Joe Fassler interviewed Amy Tan for *The Atlantic* in Dec. 10, 2013.

physical, and personal place” (Hughes and Noble 6). The photograph entitled “The Ten Beauties of Shanghai” determines that part of the novel will happen in Shanghai, especially in courtesans’ houses with the historical background of the end of Qing dynasty and the early republic of China. Besides, those courtesans’ and her grandmother’s ways of dressing inspire Tan to research clothing history at that period and design clothes, shoes, head-wear and ornaments for her courtesan characters. After visiting Tan and viewing the photo of “ten Beauties in Shanghai,” The NPR correspondent, Karen Grigsby Bates describes how these ten courtesans dress.

There, staring solemnly at the reader, were 10 young women, half of them dressed in similar outfits - sung silk jackets with high, fur-lined collars and three-quarter-length sleeves that displayed long, white sleeves underneath. Several of the women were wearing tight headbands embroidered with pearls. The shape of the headbands brought the wearer’s forehead to a comely V shape, and the tension pulled the eye upward, into the much-desired Phoenix eye shape. The wardrobe and the look were all part of the courtesan’s official ensemble.<sup>26</sup>

Inspired by the similarities between these women’s and her grandmother’s dress, Tan has her fictional courtesans dress in the same way. And, to some degree, the expressions revealed in these photos are helpful for Tan to imagine and sketch her characters’ psychological states as courtesans. Therefore, microscopically observing the details in these photos, Tan creates a

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<sup>26</sup> This reference is from a NPR correspondent, Karen Grigsby Bates’ interview about Amy Tan’s latest novel: *The Valley of Amazement*.

story about courtesan's lives in Shanghai in the early twentieth century.

In a slightly different fictional deployment of photographic image-making, a camera and photographs help a character to record her thoughts and takes her back to the past. In *Hundred Secret Senses*, the heroine Olivia, is an American photographer who is persuaded to accompany her Chinese half-sister Kwan to visit China and her village, Changmian. The camera helps Olivia to explore the Changmian village. Photographs are a form of note-taking, as she explains: "I click off a half-dozen shots with my camera, so I can remind myself later of what I was thinking at the moment" (HSS 266). More than being simply objectifying visual captures of an instant in time and space, photos are capable of recording the photographer's human thoughts and bringing them back at a later time.

The moment they arrive in the village, in Olivia's first sight, Changmian is a rustic and uncultured village which "has avoided the detritus of modernization" (HSS 229). However, looking through the viewfinder of her camera, Olivia feels that Changmian is "a fabled misty land, half memory, half illusion" (230). The camera makes Changmian seem like a familiar place to Olivia and reminds her that it is "the setting for Kwan's stories, the ones that filter into my dreams" (230). The very act of framing the village in the camera's viewfinder takes Olivia back to the past.

What's more, as a Qi-thing, the camera changes the way people interact with other Qi-things. When requested to take a picture of the dead Big Ma, Olivia seems to be able to talk with her through the medium of her camera. After preparing her camera equipment, Olivia cannot help saying, "Ok, Big Ma...don't move" (HSS 272). And then she reflects that

she seems to be losing her mind since she talks to Big Ma as if she believes she can hear her. So, like a different sort of eye, comparable to Kwan's yin-eyes, the camera can make Olivia communicate with the dead. Similarly, as a Qi-thing, the camera changes Du Lili's way of killing a chicken. For Olivia's photos, Du Lili remarks: "I usually cut off the head right away. But this time I let the chicken dance a bit... For your photos!" (239).

### **B. The Complementary Relation of Photo Images and Characters' Narratives**

Photographic theory often reflects on a series of issues allied to the relationship between the photo-images and the written text and between the verbal and the visual. When employing photo images in her work, like the critics,<sup>27</sup> Tan also reflects on these questions. As Qi-things, photo images and characters' narratives actively affect and complement each other.

Adams argues that photographs have the agency to effect American-born narrators' sense of identity: "references to photographs are found throughout Tan's fiction, often at so-called epiphanic moments when American-born narrators in particular are about to discover 'chineseness' is not reflected in but effected by photographs" (Adams 107-8). Rather than discussing how photo images sketch American-born daughters' Chinese stereotype, I will discuss their positive agency upon American-born narrators, specifically how these photos assist them to quest for themselves, endow them with a sense of reunion and actively complement their narratives.

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<sup>27</sup> About the relation of photo-images and the written text, see Alex Hughes and Andrea Noble. *Phototextualities: intersections of photography and Narrative*, (3). And Clive Scott. *The Spoken Image: Photography and Language* (13).

Focusing on the scene where Jing-mei meets with her sisters in the airport, I will discuss how the photo that Jing-mei takes with her sisters effects their sense of togetherness. The narrative of the American-born daughter, Jing-mei, has “highlighted the undesirability and impossibility of intergenerational /intercultural reconciliation...” (Adams 63). Her narrative not only reflects the cultural gap and conflict between her and her mother but also “the exoticist/tourist gaze” that she holds towards whatever she views in China. After the death of her mother, she has to represent her mother at a meeting with her abandoned twins sisters in China. The moment Jing-mei meets her sisters in the airport, she declares that she sees “no trace of my mother in them” (JLC 325). However, “her inability to trace her mother is quickly passed over via the reference to family and blood” (Adams 68). Next comes the taking of the photograph: “The flash of the Polaroid goes off and my father hands me that snapshot. My sisters and I watch quietly together, eager to see what develops” (JLC 325). Significantly, togetherness develops in terms of a representation: “The gray-green surface changes to the bright colors of our three images, sharpening and deepening all at once” (325). The image in, or more properly, on the photograph develops “all at once,” and it does so before Jingmei’s unspoken proclamation of togetherness outside the photograph. So, the photo image has the capacity to complement the language in Jingmei’s narrative and apparently affect her sense of togetherness. As Adams points out: “The photograph promotes a sense of unity not only between siblings but also between them and their dead mother: ‘Together we look like our mother’ ” (67).

Clive Scott has considered “the capacity of the photograph to match, complement and

even supplant language in narrative enterprises” (13). As Qi-things, photo images in Tan’s works are also capable of complementing the narratives. Accompanying Kwan to visit her village, Olivia and Simon first arrive in Du Lili’s house where they find “a picture of Mao is next to a portrait of Jesus” (HSS 262). To western visitors, like Simon and Olivia, it seems ridiculous to put a picture of Mao next to a portrait of Jesus. However, the eclectic juxtaposition of these two pictures reveals that people in Changmian village have no orthodox beliefs. Du Lili confides to Olivia later that “I believe whatever is practical, the least trouble. Most people here are the same way” (268). So, obviously images match and complement the narration.

What’s more, characters’ verbal representation can reveal the limits of photographic representations in their mutual interactions. Hughes and Noble suggest that photographs have the ability to represent reality: “What distinguishes the photo-image from any other form of representation is its inextricable, material link to reality” (Hughes and Noble 5). However, Tan questions the truth-telling possibilities of photos and the relation between photo and memory. After Olivia takes a photo of the dead Big Ma, Du Lili asks her to take a photo of herself. As soon as Olivia pulls the paper off the Polaroid print, Du Lili snatches it from her hands. Her expression speaks of reverence for the miracle of photography. While other people around her look at the snapshot, they compliment its accuracy as “very true to life,” “Exceptionally clear,” “Extraordinarily realistic” (HSS 274). However, Du Lili’s photo does not capture reality although it does seem to “seduce” the crowd into thinking that it does. When the Polaroid comes around to Du Lili again, she bewails how ugly and stupid-looking

she is. Her self-image does not match the snapshot. Her complaint reveals Tan's skepticism about the truth-telling possibilities intrinsic in photography. Based on Du Lili's wan voice, Olivia and Kwan realize that the image in the photo wounds her. At the same time, Olivia's narration reveals the limit of camera and photo images. As a photographer, she admits that "The camera is a different sort of eye, one that sees a million present particles of silver on black, not the old memories of a person's heart" (274). Olivia's narrative demonstrates that the silver and black reduces true life. Photos can only snap and frame an instant which is neither the truth to life nor the old memories of one's past. The photograph extracts an isolated moment from the flow of time and space that is vital to Qi.

Through Winnie's comments on the photographs that her American husband Jimmy kept in his scrapbook, Tan further questions the truth-telling possibility of photos and the relation between photography and memory. This chapter of the book, ironically entitled "Sincerely Yours Truly," shows that neither Winnie's memory nor those photos are adequate to tell the truth about the past. To truly narrate her past life to her daughter, Winnie has to bring together her words with the images in the scrapbook.

Turning to the first pictures in which she figures, Winnie claims, "Here is where I begin. Here is where I sometimes think my whole life began" (KGW 364). Actually, the pictures in this scrapbook efface a large part of her past, only keeping her life with Jimmy. Repeating the deictic "here," Winnie's claims reveal how the indexical feature of speech can attribute presence to the image. However, her first representation of several pictures of herself reveals the limit of photographic representation and human memory. The first pictures record

her youthful looks as Winnie claims, “This was how your father always saw me, young and fair, he said. Even when white hairs started to come out, your father said I looked the same” (364). This comment suggests that the relation of the looker to the thing looked at counts more the thing “in itself.” Like the camera, Jimmy freezes Winnie in time. He does not notice the passage of time but only remembers Winnie’s young looks as in these pictures. So, the first several pictures remind Winnie of the past, but they are not the truth or reality but only a moment of her youth. Besides, due to these pictures of herself, Winnie further reveals the limits of human memory. Indulging in the illusion fabricated by these pictures, Winnie has a dream that “[Jimmy] did not really die. He lived around the corner and just forgot to tell me...But then I forgot to be mad...” (365). After the dream, Winnie realizes the truth about how old she really is the moment she looks at herself in the mirror. Through the mirror, Winnie talks with her true self and blames herself for forgetting the truth of her husband’s death and her old age.

After revealing the inadequacy of photos and human memory to tell the truth, Winnie combines the images in the photos with her words to narrate part of her past to her daughters. One picture shows “[her] smile, [her] puffy eyes” (KGW 365). In itself, this photo is limited, so Winnie illustrates its “special meaning” by words. She demonstrates that this photo records the time when Winnie has run away from her bad marriage with Wen Fu and has begun to live with Jimmy. After Jimmy persuades Winnie of his seriousness in wanting her to live with him, he takes this picture to record this significant moment. Winnie turns to another picture which she initially represents as an enigma. She tells her daughter that she does not

understand why Jimmy put this picture in the book: “Why take a picture of me in a nightgown, my hair all messy like that” (365). Gradually, though she reveals the significance of this particular photograph. Jimmy’s words to her complement the information that the images cannot demonstrate. He states that “it was his favorite picture” since it symbolizes that “Winnie and the sunshine wake up together” (365). This claim that his wife’s presence is like the sun’s show much Jimmy loves her. Winnie further explains to her daughter how Jimmy loved her with a true heart, by delicately explaining that the photograph is a reminder of their first love-making. Unlike her violent former husband, Jimmy always touches Winnie gently and never forced her to make love until Winnie felt well prepared. His favorite photograph was a reminder of that first moment.

Turning to the next picture, Winnie still indulges in memorizing her happy marriage with Jimmy. In the picture, her expressions truthfully reflect her happiness since “[her] eyes look as though they can’t stop smiling” (KGW 366). Winnie further demonstrates that that period when she and her son lived with Jimmy was the happiest she has ever been in her life. She remembers how Jimmy would lift them high in the air when he came back from work, treating them like pearls in his palm. Another picture from the same day reminds her how she sent messages about her happy life to her friend. Winnie remembers that “[she] make an extra copy, wallet-size, and sent it to Hulan” (367). Meanwhile, inspired by the details reflected in this picture where her son is playing with the landlady’s dog, Winnie thinks of the miserable fate of the landlady whose husband deserted her and went back to America and married someone else. The landlady’s fate seemed to predict that Winnie might suffer a similar

abandoned fate if later Jimmy was forced to do the same. Even that unhappy memory reinforces her luck in finding Jimmy.

Although some of the photographs capture the emotions of the moment, others suggest the gap between appearance and reality. Winnie turns to another picture which she defines as unnatural as well as “natural” since the image does not correspond to her inner state of mind. The picture seems to have glorious significance since it looks as if it is taken in springtime, and there are flowers on the trees in back. Nevertheless, although Winnie looks happy in this picture, actually, she explains that she was worried whether the lawyer could successfully help her to divorce Wen Fu. What’s more, Winnie reveals the inauthenticity of another picture in an ironic tone: “[t]his is a funny picture. See the apron I wore...Actually, in the picture, I am not really cooking anything, only pretending” (KGW 368). Winnie’s words remind us that photographs are often posed. Hence, the truth is situated elsewhere, between the photos and the commentary. She points out that “this picture is natural” since “[Jimmy] liked to take natural pictures, not just posed” (368). Jimmy asks her to smile but not to look at the camera. What Winnie claims means that the photo is already not indexical since Jimmy wants to tell a story. Through commenting on the natural and artificial nature of the picture, Winnie tells her own story, combining images with oral explanations.

After that, Winnie views many pictures in which she appears with her son, Danru. More than remembering how she once made her son happy based on his happy looks in these photos, Winnie thinks of something else which her daughter can never observe in the photos. Once she views these pictures, she remembers they were taken before she sent her son to stay

with her friends in north in order to save him from Wen Fu. She also thinks of how her son shouted that he never wanted to be apart from her and she comforted him that she would come to get him as soon as she was free. Winnie then confides how she later regrets sending her son away. A later picture of Winnie with Auntie Du proves her regret and evokes her sadness at losing her son who died from a fast-moving epidemic carried by rats and fleas during his stay with Winnie's friends in Harbin.

The last photo Jimmy takes for Winnie is her birthday photo. In the photo, Winnie wears a dark red color sweater bought by Jimmy as her birthday gift. Based on how skinny she looks in the photo, Winnie thinks of her grief for the death of her son. Although that day is Winnie's birthday, she confides to her daughter that she was still very sad and the photo naturally records her misery since Jimmy did not ask her to smile.

Clearly, as Qi-things, photographs have the agency to prompt humans to remember something beyond the fleeting images that they capture. Although they are not always true or indexical, they have their own vitality. Through Winnie's interaction with those pictures in Jimmy's scrapbook, she produces her memories of her life in the present. Narrating her past by virtue of these pictures in Jimmy's scrapbook, Winnie combines words and images to memorialize Jimmy's true love of her and narrate her past happiness and sadness to her daughter. The pictures in Jimmy's scrapbook are not inert objects, but Qi-things endowed with their own dynamic lives that prolong the past into the present.

### III. Ekphrastic Narration

On seeing the women in the photograph entitled “The Ten Beauties of Shanghai” dressed in the same clothes that her grandmother wears in one of Tan’s favorite photographs of her, Tan abandoned the book she had been working on and began a novel about courtesans. The photograph prompted her to reconsider her family history and begin a quest for her grandmother’s true identity. In Tan’s latest novel, *The Valley of Amazement*, the power of images to stimulate the imagination comes across in characters’ visual and verbal representation of a painting entitled “The Valley of Amazement.” The painting is so important, appearing many times in the novel, that the novel bears the same name. Consequently, we have to consider why Tan places the painting in such a crucial position and what functions it has.

In my view, the original painting is not a static object, but a Qi-thing with a dynamic life. Through characters’ visual and verbal representation of it, the original painting inspires new creations. It lives on in the copies and gives life to new expressions. Rather than “the copy of the copy” that a Platonic theory of art would make it,<sup>28</sup> the imitations of the original painting made by one of the central characters, Lu Shing, a Chinese painter, are his interpretations transmitting the painting’s Qi to new creations. These in turn have the power to move both Lucia Minturn, who becomes his lover, and their daughter, Violet. Through their verbal representations of the painting, Lucia and Violet illustrate the particular ways in which the painting affects them. The novel contains many passages of verbal “ekphrasis,” a

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<sup>28</sup> This is Plato’s characterization of images, as described by Peter Wagner (76).

concept defined by Heffernan as “the verbal representation of graphic representation” (“Ekphrasis and Representation” 299). Through the characters’ ekphrastic narration, I will argue, Tan consciously employs the conventions of literary ekphrasis so as to reconsider the relation between the copy and the original, between verbal representation and visual representation, and between words and images. As the multiple plots of this novel are shaped in part by the verbal representations of the graphic art, the novel itself can be regarded as an ekphrastic text that reveals Tan’s views on art and art criticism.

### **A. The Relation of the Original Painting and its Copies**

In the novel, the Chinese painter, Lu Shing’s imitations of the painting “the Valley of Amazement” raise questions about the relation of the original and the copies. Two characters reveal the conventional western view about the original and its copies, an American collector, Danner and Violet’s daughter, Flora who grows up in America. After accompanying her grandmother Lucia, on a visit to the art gallery, Flora expresses her contempt for Lu Shing’s paintings. In Flora’s eyes, Lu Shing is a “phony artist” who draws a copy of what someone else had done: “It felt like all the truth got whitewashed with fake happiness” (VA 572). In contrast to Wordsworth’s definition of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” Flora sees the painting as emanating from a fake emotion. For her, as an imitation, Lu Shing’s adaptation of a European painting cannot express the truth of the works of art. Likewise, the American collector, Danner also fails to appreciate the alteration of the painting by Lu Shing. The art collector bought the original painting of “The Valley of Amazement” in

Berlin for pennies. It was the work of an obscure artist who died young. Rather than appreciating Lu Shing's imitations of this painting, Danner states that he prefers the original since "it had a dark beauty, a quavering feeling of uncertainty" (494). Lu Shing's version turns this mystery into certainty by adding "A golden vale in the distance" (494). Thus, what Flora and Danner state express the traditional western view that privileges the original.

However, in opposition to the conventional view, Tan's novel shows that the original painting is a Qi-thing, interacting with human characters. By copying the painting Lu Shing revives it, since his imitations have effects on other agents, like Lucia and her daughter Violet. Unlike Danner, who dislikes Lu Shing's alteration of the original painting, Lucia appreciates the element that Lu Shing adds and states, "I had wanted certainty and that painting had made me feel I was on the verge of finding it. I was glad he changed it. The golden vale he had added was original" (VA 494). The characters' views of the original and Lu Shing's adaptations suggest a concept of art which is accordant with Massumi's view that each encounter with a work of art is a new event: "All arts are *occurrent arts* ... another phrase from Susanne Langer (1953, 121). All arts are *occurrent arts* because any and every perception, artifactual or 'natural' is just that, an experiential event. It's an event both in the sense that it is a happening, and in the sense that when it happens, something new transpires" (Massumi82). As a Qi-thing, the original painting inspires a new event (Lu Shing's copy) and the copy inspires other events (Lucia and Violet's responses). The Qi passes on from one transformation to another. Therefore, considering both Lu Shing's visual representations of the original painting and other characters' verbal representations of Lu Shing's copies, I will

focus on how the original passes its Qi to the copies and how these continue to act in the fictional world.

### **B. Characters' Becoming through Ekphrastic Narration**

Heffernan traces the ekphrastic tradition as far back as *The Iliad*, to the famous passage on Achilles' shield. He notes how it provides the opportunity to demonstrate how storytelling animates a scene that an image can only represent as static: "Homer animates the fixed figures of graphic art, turning the picture of a single moment into a narrative of successive actions. From Homer's time to our own, ekphrastic literature reveals the narrative response to pictorial stasis, the storytelling impulse that language by its very nature seems to release and stimulate" (Heffernan, "Ekphrasis and Representation" 301-302). Just as Tan's response to the photograph of the Shanghai courtesans illustrates this impulse to elaborate on an image, extending its life through narration, in a form of *mise en abyme*, her characters also respond to the painting within her novel. However, rather than prompting them to invent a story, the painting inspires them to reveal something about themselves. Lu Shing's attribution of the title to his work seems to be the first of a series of interactions in which the paintings help characters articulate their personal struggles. In Lu Shing's case, it has to do with his desire to paint, his intimidation by other painters and his doubts about his art. In turn, the paintings allow the two women to voice their conflicts.

Born in a feudal Chinese family, Lu Shing does not give in to his parents' expectation to "achieve a high level of scholarship and pass the imperial examination" (VA 493), but

strives instead to be a painter. He spends hours copying the paintings in Danner's gallery. He imitates the works of famous artists, including the one that inspired "The Valley of Amazement," a painting created by Friedrich Leutemann, an obscure artist who died young. By selling his imitations, Lu Shing collects enough money to travel to America to study landscape painting. One day, he is invited to have dinner with other guests in Lucia's parents' house. Like those guests who speak highly of Lu Shing's work, Lucia is captured by his work, but she also pays attention to its title and asks for its origin. Her question prompts a revelation that furthers the narration. Heffernan points out that: "A picture title is a verbal representation of the picture. Yet much shorter titles can also serve a narrative function" (303). In Amy Tan's novel, the title both narrates the scene of the painting and impels the novel's plot. Although brief, the painting title "The Valley of Amazement" reveals the doubts that the painter, Lu Shing, has about his art.

He explains that "the Valley of Amazement" is derived from a Sufi poem, "The Colloquy of the Birds" (VA 448), which is an epic about thousands of birds, setting out to find a king for their country. They cross seven valleys and each has particular significance. On the road, some birds die, and some give up. Finally, only thirty birds reach the end and they realize that the king or simorgh they came to look for is merely a reflection of themselves. However, "in the Sixth Valley, the Valley of Amazement or Bewilderment, the seeker (is) struck dumb by the beauty of God; the seeker becomes conscious of the vastness and glory of creation, and discovers the inner mysteries of God's revelation. Being led from one mystery of creation to the next and the seeker continues to be astonished by the works of

God” (Rehnuma). Like those birds who are dumbfounded by the beauty of God, Lu Shing is so astonished by the greatness or immortality of famous artists’ works that he dares not create his own painting but chooses to imitate their paintings all the time. When imitating a painting, sometimes, he makes a few alterations. But he often suspects that his alteration is not as good as the original painting. Like the birds in the Sufi poem, he does not realize that he has the same potential to be great. As a painter, Lu Shing is not only afraid to create his own work but also doubtful about his imitation. So for him, “the Valley of Amazement is not a pleasant way station. It’s a place of doubt, and doubt is dangerous to a painter” (VA 448).

Lu Shing’s explanation of the title motivates Lucia to help him conquer his doubt. The painting of “the Valley of Amazement” and the revelation of the artist’s vulnerability move Lucia to accompany him to China after she is pregnant with his baby. As a Qi-thing, the painting helps reveal that Lu Shing is a person living in-between. It is a site of his struggle between the western and traditional Chinese culture. The painting shows his lack of confidence in his own power. That weakness translates into acts when, though cowardice and incompetence, he does not dare to break Chinese feudal ethics and choose his own marriage. Submissive to his parents’ arrangement, he finally abandons his American lover, Lucia and their daughter Violet.

In developing her novel from the Shanghai photograph, Tan follows the prosopopoeial impulse that is defined by James Heffernan: “Ekphrasis is narrational and prosopopoeial; it releases the narrative impulse that graphic art typically checks, and it enables the silent figures of graphic art to speak” (“Ekphrasis and Representation” 304). Like the photograph,

the painting of “The Valley of Amazement,” generates a narrative, becoming a Qi-thing that helps shape Violet and her mother’s life story. In the various ekphrastic passages contained in the novel, Violet and her mother Lucia represent the painting imitated by Lu Shing, and, in the process, shape their identities.

Represented by Violet at every turn of her life, the painting prompts her to give voice to her life story. Violet views this painting for the first time when she is kidnapped into a courtesan house. She finds the painting in the valise that her mother leaves behind. In her depiction the painting shows a valley, “viewed from the edge of a cliff” (VA 106). This perception of the landscape reveals that Violet is in a state of dilemma. Having been kidnapped and brought into the courtesan house, she is confused about her destiny. Her description of ragged mountain ridges and their shadow silhouettes lying on the valley floor paints a gloomy and horrible scene. The color and movement of the pendulous clouds conjure up contradictory visual images that appear ambiguous to Violet, making it impossible for her to distinguish whether the scene is set at dawn or dusk. She is unsure whether it is meant to depict a feeling of hope or hopelessness. However, she chooses to regard the painting as an omen signifying a sense of hopelessness and her miserable life in the courtesan house. Thus the painting allows her to express her fears concerning her future life.

Violet encounters the painting once more when she abandons her role as a courtesan and lives with her American lover, Edward as his wife. In the bedroom of the house which Edward’s associate has lent him, she views a painting which looks familiar. Describing the painting as depicting “the shadowed land, the sharp-toothed mountains, a false glow of life

that would soon be extinguished” (VA 263), she again attributes to it a sense of misfortune or even death, signifying that doom will befall her. The fate suggested by the painting is borne out when misfortunes arrive one after another. Magic Gourd falls sick with Spanish influenza. Fortunately, she recovers. But to Violet’s desperation, Edward is also infected by influenza and dies of it. Later, without a certificate to attest to Violet’s identity as Edward’s wife, Violet loses her daughter Flora, who is taken away by Edward’s American wife. Verbally represented with words like “shadowed,” “sharp-toothed,” the painting’s ominous images foreshadow for both readers and Violet that misfortunes will happen.

Subsequently, on the road to the Moon Pond village, where she is traveling to take her place as Perpetual’s wife, Violet encounters a setting that she compares with the painting. In this comparison, the scene gives her an ominous feeling that once again foreshadows the tribulations she later experiences in her husband’s household. The scene in the painting reappears a final time in Violet’s narrative when Violet, Magic Gourd and Pomelo run out of Moon Pond village and are on their road to the top of the mountain, to “Buddha’s hand” (VA 418). Gazing at the view, Violet remembers Lu Shing’s painting: “The sun lowered and Buddha’s Hand turned golden. I was walking in a place that was strange and familiar. I thought of the painting that had belonged to my mother, *The Valley of Amazement*. This place did not look like the painted one. But it held the same feeling, a riddle about myself....But immediately, I wavered between doubt and certainty” (431). The view on the road to Buddha’s hand makes Violet doubt whether the road forward is worse than what she has left behind. She looks to the landscape to reveal her destiny. She obtains a sense of certainty the

moment they arrive at Buddha's hand and observe "Mountain View" which endows them with confidence to take their first steps together and begin their new life. All in all, Violet verbally represents the painting whenever she begins a new journey in her life. In this way, it acts as a Qi-thing that has the power to open the way to the future and to move the narrator to communicate her life experience to readers.

Like Violet, Lucia also represents the painting ekphrastically, but the impression she creates in her section of the narration is very different. The first time she views the painting, she feels that she is transported into the long green valley. Her verbal representation demonstrates her involvement with the Qi-thing; she even sees herself as "the long green valley" and "the five mountains are part of her as well." Rather than functioning as an omen, the valley and the five mountains in the painting endow her with "a strength and courage to face whatever entered the valley" (VA 447). The interplay between Lucia and these Qi-things that infuse her with their force and strength makes the young woman confident and brave enough to conquer whatever difficulties she has to confront. She gives up everything in her homeland and goes with Lu Shing to begin her new life in China. When s Lu Shing's family rejects her, she opens her own business to make a living. Besides obtaining strength and courage from the painting, she sees in it hope, love and purity, and even immortality. So, Lucia's representation projects her into the painting that she reveals to be an empowering and envoicing Qi-thing. Her encounter with the painting and its painter changes her fate.

To conclude, Violet and her mother's ekphrastic narration shows that rather than being a static object, "The Valley of Amazement" interacts with the characters to give

expression to the ups and downs in their lives. The Qi passing between them and the painting gives impulse to the narration. Meanwhile, through the characters' verbal representations of the painting, Tan critiques the western idea of a detached, solitary individual who is master of his or her own fate. The quest for true self-being turns out to be a false direction for the characters, since they are entangled with networks of Qi-things that harmonize together in processes of becoming.

### **C. The Cooperation of Words and Images**

Qionglin Tan discerns four stages in the development of ekphrastic English poetry: “classical, neo-classical, romantic and modern; and now it is entering its postmodern period” (301). In each of these stages, ekphrasis always concerns the relation of words and images. Traditional theorists hold that there is a rivalry between words and images in verbal representation of visual artefacts. Among them, Heffernan's view is the most representative. In *Museum of Words*, he views the relationship between ekphrastic poetry and visual art as a “contest between rival modes of representation: between the driving force of the narrating word and the stubborn resistance of the fixed image” (Heffernan 6). At the same time, he conceives of the rivalry between words and images as a contest that is “powerfully gendered: the expression of a duel between male and female gazes, the voice of male speech striving to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening” (Heffernan, *Museum of Words* 1). However, unlike classic ekphrasis, postmodern ekphrasis does not regard the relation of words and images as competitive but mainly focuses on their interconnectedness. Thus,

Qionglin Tan speaks of “a marriage of the verbal and visual emblems as two complementary languages within the verbal art” (301). Following the postmodern ekphrastic trend, Tan holds that ekphrastic dialogue is characterized by a move away from representational rivalry toward “intertextual interpretation.”<sup>29</sup> In Lucia’s and Violet’s verbal representations of Lu Shing’s paintings and of the landscapes on the road, we see how words and images cooperate with each other to recover an uncertainty which is the Qi of the original painting, and we thereby realize the intertextuality of verbal and visual arts.

Comparing verbal art with graphic art, Wangner states that “Ekphrasis, it has been argued, cannot convey pictorial effects such as the distribution of light and shade, or the nuances of color, or the handling of paint, which are the painter’s distinctive means of expression” (74). However, Tan attempts to overcome these restrictions of the verbal mode through Violet’s first verbal representation of the painting, which conveys both pictorial and spatial effects. The nuances of the clouds’ colors are suggested through evocative metaphors: “the pendulous clouds were the shade of an old bruise. The upper halves were pink, and the clouds receding in the back-ground were haloed in gold” (VA 106). The ekphrasis adds complexity to the colors by evoking touch in the word “bruise” and spiritual transcendence in the word “haloed.” With words conveying the movement of the gaze from high to low or from near to far, the landscape of the valley is spatially represented as it is “viewed from the edge of a cliff, facing the scene below. The mountain ridges on each side were ragged, and their shadow silhouettes lay on the valley floor” and “at the fat end of the valley, an opening

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<sup>29</sup> In *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, Mieke Bal advocates a dialogue between words and images via intertextual interpretation of the two art forms (18).

between two mountains glowed like the entrance to paradise” (106). So, when verbally representing the painting, Violet adds to the temporal unfolding of her words a spatial dimension expressed in the prepositions and other terms of location. Her description makes clear that space and time are not experienced separately, but unfold together. Thus this description of the painting reveals Mitchell’s concept of “ekphrastic hope” (154). Through imagination or metaphor, the free exchange between visual and verbal art is realized as Violet conjures up “a sutured synthetic form, a verbal icon or imagetext” (Mitchell 154). Violet’s verbal representation of the painting realizes all the goals of “ekphrastic hope,” “of achieving vision, iconicity or a ‘still moment’ of plastic presence through language” (156).

Besides, through her verbal representation of the painting, Violet endows it with uncertainty as she claims that we do not know whether the painting depicts “a feeling of hope or (was it) hopelessness?” (VA 106). Lu Shing’s painting becomes dynamic and active since it inspires Violet to imagine her desperate fate in the courtesan house. So, Violet’s depiction of the painting achieves “the utopian aspirations of Ekphrasis—that the mute image be endowed with a voice, or made dynamic and active, or actually come into view...” (Mitchell 156).

Words and images not only cooperate with each other but also engage in an infinite dialogue with each other. By examining Violet’s depiction of the landscapes that she views on the road and her comparison of it with the painting, we can find how this dialogue unfolds. On her road to the Moon Pond village, Violet is struck by the mountainous landscape. In a moment of hypotyposis, her description is so vivid, that it develops: “before the eyes of the viewer” (Louvel 46). The beautiful scene before Violet’s eyes evokes Lu Shing’s

painting. Her words produce what Louvel describes as: “The *painting-effect*, which results from the emergence within the narrative of painting-images, produces an illusionistic effect so powerful that painting seems to haunt text...” (90). Like Lu Shing’s painting, the scene before her eyes also gives her an ominous feeling and makes her doubt whether she is destined to come to the Moon Pond village. Besides, the views on the road bring Lu Shing’s painting to mind and inspire Violet to compare them. In so doing, she pays attention to their differences: “Here the valley was longer, and the hills were terraced with rice paddies. The mountains in the other were more jagged along the ridge. In fact, other than the five mountains, a river valley, and stormy clouds, it hardly looked the same. In the painting, there was something at the back that glowed. Here there were just the mountains” (VA 360). Violet creates an “iconotext”<sup>30</sup> which she believes will save her from the omen of the painting and endow her with a new hope. As she views it, “The valley gradually took on its own shape and coloring” (VA 360). Violet tells herself the real scene before her eyes is not gloomy and she projects her own story onto it, imagining that, “Dusk would bring a close to my past and leave it behind as a secret. Tomorrow would be a bright beginning. I would be a wife. Perpetual would be there to welcome me, and we would live the serene life of scholars in repose. We would walk in the mountains, and we would both be inspired to write poems” (360). Viewing the scene before her eyes, Violet projects herself forward in time through the use of the modal “would,” which underlines her own desire for change. Her fantasy reflects her desire for a harmony between the environment and the new couple so great that their

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<sup>30</sup> See Nerlich: “Qu’est-ce qu’un iconotexte?”; and Louvel’s *Poetics of the Iconotext* (105).

surroundings would inspire them to write poems. Rather than regarding nature as an object, like a painter who views and then copies it, Violet views the landscape as an animate Qi-thing which can actively interact with humans.

So, we can consider Violet's depiction of the views on the road and her comparison of the views with the painting as a "constant see saw movement between text and image" showing how, "...between pictorial works and human discourse there is an infinite dialogue" (Louvel 41). In this movement, images and texts are not simply representations of the world; rather, all Qi-things, including humans, are in an infinite exchange with each other.

In all, Amy Tan's novel redefines "ekphrasis" through many verbal representations of the painting "The Valley of Amazement." Ekphrasis is not simply the verbal representation of graphic representation; instead it triggers a continuous process of conversion and reconversion of verbal and graphic artifacts in which the Qi of painting and painters blends with the Qi of language and speakers in an endlessly creative process. Through characters' discourse on the painting and a real scene, Tan shows that art and fiction act not to pursue the truth but to create an openness for readers to respond, interpret and imagine.

#### **D. Winnie's Representations of her Father's Paintings**

Besides ekphrastic narration in *The Valley of Amazement*, there are Winnie's representations of her father's paintings in *The Kitchen God's Wife*. The Qi of the paintings works to help Winnie define herself and to inflect the direction of her life. While asking Winnie to talk about her dowry in his study, her father points to her "an old-style painting that

stretched from one end of the wall to the other. It showed one hundred different people: men, women, and children. And they were doing one hundred different things: working, eating, sleeping, all brief moments in life captured forever” (KGW 144). In capturing these fleeting human actions, the painting assembles the Qi of one hundred vivid images together. Whenever Winnie views this painting, she communicates with its different figures which transmit their unique Qi to her. When she was a little girl, Winnie was attracted by a small figure, “a lady looking over a balcony” in the corner of the painting (145). Since Winnie cannot be sure the lady singing a happy or a sad song or carrying a heavy load was beginning her journey or ending it, this image transmits the Qi of ambiguity to her. She fixes on this particular figure since it expresses her own equivocal emotional state.

However, while asked to voice her opinion about this painting again, the older Winnie wants to please her father rather than expressing what she is actually feeling. Rather than receiving the Qi naturally flowing from the image of “a man pleading before a magistrate” in the painting—an expression of her own suppliant state—she invents the response that she believes her father would like. She has learnt what to say about paintings and speaks as an art critic: “This part I like very much...The proportions are good, the details are very fine. And this part of the painting I don’t like at all. You see, it’s too dark, heavy at the bottom, and the features are too flat” (KGF 144). As she assumes the role of an art critic rather than spontaneously communicating with the image itself, her interpretation does not please her father since he has a stern look after listening to Winnie’s reply. The failed exchange between father and daughter suggests to Winnie that she should conform to Chinese traditional

convention on getting married. In a patriarchal society she has to submit to her husband's opinions rather than cultivate her own. This is the lesson she draws from the exchange.

Winnie continues to play the dutiful daughter when her father asks her what she needs for her dowry. She gives the reply that she thinks he wants: "Something simple" (KGF 145). And then her father further wonders whether she is like her mother in "always wanting something simple....Always wanting something else" (145). Her father's question makes Winnie project herself as the lady in the painting who feels confused and cannot choose her own fate. She finally confesses that she is "the same" as her mother. Her confession that she is undecided about her choice seems to be a prediction that like her mother, she will be unsatisfied with her marriage and will run away from it. So, Winnie's representations of the painting gradually helps her understand who she is and through the rich passages of ekphrasis alerts readers to the difficulties to come.

When Winnie returns to her father's house trapped in her miserable marriage and longing to run away, her interaction with her father's paintings of four seasons allows her to find a way out of the trap. Her initial description predicts a new beginning: "The painting showed the springtime, pink flowers blossoming on trees, the trees growing on a mountain, the mountain rising up out of a misty lake" (KGF 360). As Winnie has found a way to leave her miserable marriage, the images in the painting predict a renewal. After depicting the images in the painting, Winnie observes that close to it, there are "only three empty spots hung on the wall, like ghost paintings" (360). These three empty spots remind Winnie of the paintings of other three seasons which are sold by her husband, Wen Fu. The only one of the

set remaining has been ruined by a tea stain made by her father. All four together are symbolic of Winnie's unhappy marriage. The other three seasons signify the past time that Winnie has sacrificed to Wen Fu; the remaining one suggests that she is stuck in a situation that has spoiled. Although Winnie has decided to run away from this marriage, she thinks that the unhappy time will haunt her forever like ghosts. And then she becomes pessimistic as she reflects that: "My life has been like that painting nobody wants, the same season, every day the same misery, no hope of changing" (361). Here, the ruined painting projects Winnie's estimate of her miserable situation. To her husband, Wen Fu, like this ruined painting, Winnie is a useless object.

However, the painting has the power to reverse the situation. To Winnie's father, this ruined painting is not an inert object but a Qi-thing since it conserves his precious gold. After hearing about Winnie's wish to escape, her father's response is beyond our expectation. Winnie describes how "His two trembly hands were now fighting with the black lacquer rod. I thought he wanted to pick up that rod and strike me over the head" (KGF 361). Winnie thinks he will play the authoritative role of patriarch and punish her for her decision to run away from her marriage. However, to Winnie's surprise, her father pulls the knob off the rod and pours out three little gold ingots. And then, pressing the gold ingots into Winnie's hand, her father seems to support her decision or express his love to her. Employed by her father to store these gold ingots, the ruined painting regains its Qi and can express her father's support of Winnie's decision and open the way to her future.

#### IV. A Metafictional Consideration of the Narrator's Power

Besides endowing bones, photographs and paintings with the power of narration, Amy Tan conjures up a ghost-narrator to self-consciously reflect over fictional writing and to draw attention to narrative strategies in her works. Through creating a ghost-narrator whose abilities and functions remind us of the omniscient narrator, and behind that omniscient voice, Tan offers a metafictional consideration. In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, she creates a ghost narrator, named Bibi Chen who is comparable to an omniscient or heterodiegetic narrator since she has the power to enter the minds of all the characters and to direct the unfolding of the plot. Therefore, I will discuss how the ghost, Bibi Chen's Qi interacts with characters or even creates characters and moves the plot toward a harmonious resolution.

Bibi Chen narrates from a place that would be impossible in a conventional novel, beginning her story in the days after her death. Her description of the moment in which she expires illuminates one of the principles of Qi: "I was stuck in these thoughts, unable to leave my breathless body, until I realized that my breath was not gone but surrounding me, buoying me upward" (SFD 4). When expressing this state of leaving her body, Bibi Chen reveals a Chinese belief that when a person dies, her body becomes breathless and the Qi of the body disperses and transmutes into spirit form, a ghost. Creating Bibi as a ghost narrator, Tan makes her retain her breath while she narrates, but it is no longer confined to her body. Her Qi can mingle with that of other characters, giving her the power to know their thoughts. Employing her Qi, Bibi is capable of playing her role as a first person narrator to narrate her own story as well as becoming an omniscient narrator with a keen insight into other

characters' minds. In conventional narratives, the conflation of a first person narrator and a third-person omniscient narrator is impossible. Bibi's double narrative mode is a metafictional consideration which allows Tan to play or reflect on the conventions of fiction and make them apparent to us. So I will specifically elaborate how Bibi shifts between a first-person narrator and a third-person omniscient narrator.

At the beginning of the novel, Bibi speaks for herself and tells her shortened life story with the first-person point of view. Everything is focalized through the first person narration so that readers have access to her experience of events. While depicting her funeral, she comments on some of her friends who were attending the last rites. In passages of stream of consciousness, she shifts into recalling her family members and her childhood in China. She confesses that she has not found true love in her whole life and attributes her deficient feeling to the early death of her mother and to her father's first wife who raised her but never told her how to express love, happiness and other emotions. Bibi's first-person narrative thus shares her inner thoughts with readers, even if they are not available to any of the other characters in the novel. Her friends cannot know her past experiences in China.

The opening chapter thus reveals the central character and narrator to be emotionally reserved, enjoying fairly distant relations with others. In life, she would not have been qualified to tell of other people's adventures. Death liberates Bibi Chen, allowing her spirit to join the group of friends on the journey she had planned for them. Accompanying her friends on their travels to China and Burma, the ghost of Bibi Chen has the power of a third-person omniscient narrator. She has access to everything both inside and outside of all the characters;

she becomes omniscient, capable of focalizing through other characters. Bibi can move into characters' heads and give a sense of their voices or even tell readers about characters' thoughts.

Bibi has the power to serve as guide to readers, commenting on the things that the official guides omit:

Walter did not tell them that the road had been rebuilt by one of Burma's tribes, which I shall not name here, but whose resume includes such feats in past years as headhunting....The Burma Road and its tollbooths, the major airlines, and some of the hotels my friends would be staying in were under the control of this entrepreneurial tribe. (SFD 167-8)

As Walter only tells characters that the road from Mandalay to Ruilin has been completed, Bibi complements his discourse. Through her complementary narration, readers are acquainted with the current political situation in Burma, which is unknown to characters in the novels. What's more, Bibi has the power to comment on or even correct what the official guide, Miss Rong thinks. On their road to the temple, while western tourists express discomfort about this scene in which a water buffalo's eyes are covered while it plows its Sisyphean route, to ease their discomfort, Miss Rong attributes the water buffalo's suffering to Karma and explains that "It's an accepted way of thinking in China, a pragmatic way of viewing all the misfortunes of the world" (SFD 77). While she enjoys this opportunity to inform her charges of Buddhist ideas, Bibi reveals the truth that "She did not realize that the Buddhism the Americans before her loved was Zen-like, a form of not-thinking, not-moving,

and not-eating anything living, like buffaloes” (77). Bibi not only comments on Miss Rong’s thought but also compares cultural differences. She lets readers recognize that this “blank-minded Buddhism “practiced by Americans is quite different from “the buffalo-torture and bad-karma Buddhism found in China” (77). At the same time, she confides to readers the truth that American pet lovers have great sympathy for animals in misery. Besides, Bibi offers some information which Miss Rong cannot understand since the old man who she meets at the entrance to the temple park speaks in Bai. As Miss Rong cannot understand what the man said, she believed “he was just reminding her that as an official tour guide she was required to take her tourists to the state-approved souvenir store” (80). However, as an omniscient narrator, Bibi can understand the Bai dialect and translate the old man’s voice to readers when he reminds the tourists to be careful of the thundershower and stay off the high ridge. And another important matter is that “the foreigners should avoid going to the main grottoes between the hours of two-thirty and three-thirty, because a television crew from CCTV will be filming a documentary there” (80). As Miss Rong fails to transmit this matter to these tourists, Harry, Marlina and her daughter Esmé intrude into the main grotto and encounter the television crew. So, playing her role as an unofficial tour guide, Bibi compares cultural differences and translates the Bai dialect which is unknown to the official guide. Her role of unofficial tour guide can be read as a reminder of one of the narrator’s functions.

Besides complementing characters’ discourse, Bibi is capable of expressing their internal discourse. When Harry fails to reboard the bus and is left on the Burma Road into Lashio, he meets two military-garbed policemen who ask him to show identification. While

Harry fumbles in his pockets, Bibi explains how he hesitates whether to show an American passport or to claim himself as British. Then while the policeman flips through the pages of his passport and examines the various entry and exit stamps, Harry thinks of his mother who was diagnosed with cancer and who would be weeping if her son was killed in Burma in a misunderstanding about a passport. Obviously, as a ghost narrator, Bibi has the power to look into characters' inner thoughts and express them to the readers. What's more, when Rupert plays a card trick at the dock in Nyaung Shwe Town, Bibi not only depicts his trick but is able to reveal his audience's responses and inner thoughts. She observes that three boatmen discuss Rupert's magic power and regard him as the Younger White Brother who could save their family. And then she introduces the family background of a boatman, Black Spot, and his tribe, the Karen people, who suffer from the government's purges and have to flee into the jungle. Based on her ability to know the thoughts and histories of all the characters, Bibi plays her role as a third-person omniscient narrator capable of handling multiple plot threads simultaneously.

Besides, taking Harry and Marlina's love affair for example, we can see how Bibi's ability to enter into characters' thoughts and express their inner voices provides the occasion for comedy. While her daughter, Esmé takes a shower, Marlina slips into Harry's bungalow. When Harry and Marlina lie naked together, Bibi vividly depicts how Harry flirts with Marlina. When the burning candle ignites the mosquito netting and catches the bed on fire, Bibi depicts how Harry and Marlina's romantic interlude degenerates into slapstick. While Marlina scrambles to her feet and flings open the door and shouts fire, Harry has

“transformed into heroic mode” to put out the fire with Marlena’s dress, leaving her naked and embarrassed when four Burmese men rush in to put out the fire followed by the couple’s friends (SFD 224). The fire of their passion is extinguished along with the flames ignited by the candle.

Obviously, as an omniscient narrator, Bibi has the flexibility to know what everyone is thinking. The omniscient third-person narrator is not supposed to have her own point of view but has to be objective. However, as a character in the novel, Bibi Chen oversteps the boundaries set by literary conventions by expressing her personal point of view. Two examples will illustrate how she expresses her own opinions while she retains omniscient powers. First of all, accompanying her friends cross the border into Burma, she senses that “all had become denser, wilder, devouring itself as nature does” (SFD 145). Then, even if she initially states that readers will have no interest to know the political situation in Burma, she still reveals how the local military regime tyrannically rules the Burmese people: “Naturally, we all have great sympathy, but who wants to read stories like that? Memoirs of sacrilege, torture, and abuse, one after another—they are so difficult to read, without a speck of hope to lift you, no redeeming denouements, only the inevitable descent into the bottomless pits of humanity” (146). While she claims that political commentary is misplaced in a novel, she offers it anyway. In a second example, when accompanying her friends to visit the Stone Bell Temple, Bibi teaches readers a lesson about the complex features of Chinese culture:

Stone Bell Temple lay ahead. I had hoped my friends might learn about the importance of its holy grottoes and their carvings, many created in the Song

and Tang dynasties....By seeing a medley of ancient Nanzhao, Bai, Dai, and Tibetan images, they might have sensed how streams of minority tribes' religions had joined the dominant—and often domineering—Chinese river of thought. (SFD 75)

Abandoning for the moment her focus on the group's activities, Bibi expresses her own opinions, making her narrative instructive for readers. Employing words like “had hoped” and “might,” she expresses regret that her friends failed to pay attention to the complexity of Chinese culture. Those western tourists just focus on their own adventures in the temple. With limited attention, they ignore or desecrate the local culture of the Bai minority so as to be cursed and expelled from that town. The ghost narrator takes the opportunity to explain local beliefs to readers, supplying the details that her friends fail to understand. In this way she not only makes the plot more coherent but also makes the reader more sensitive to cultural differences.

Ironically, even though Bibi has the powers of an omniscient narrator, when it comes to her own story her point of view is limited. Although she knows what everyone else is thinking, there are blank spaces in her own history. For example, she does not know how she died. At the end of the story, she needs a character, a police detective to explain the circumstances of her death. The dialogue between the police detective and Vera, the trustee of her estate reveals the reason for her death and allows her to complete a chapter of her personal history. The detective has a hypothesis that while Bibi mounts the stool and puts up some Christmas lights on her altar table, she loses her balance and falls straight onto a

haircomb. He speculates that a stranger walks by and sees Miss Chen bleeding in the display window. While he breaks open the door and jumps onto the platform, he pulls out the comb from her throat and is so shocked by the amount of blood spurting out that he runs away. Although the detective reveals the truth of Bibi's death, he has no idea about who the intruder is. However, inspired by the detective's statement, Bibi remembers her death scene. Her follow-up narration complements the information with a detail that is unknown to the detective and readers. She points out who the stranger is and explains where the haircomb comes from and its significance to her. Therefore, inside the ghost narration, we have other narrations. Other voices combine with the narrator's to complete the novel.

Creating the paradoxical figure of an omniscient narrator with a limited point of view, Tan seems to claim that no one voice can tell the whole story, not even this kind of semi-omniscient narrator. Her breath needs to join with that of other Qi-things. In the example from the end of the novel, the story emerges from the voice of the detective, the haircomb, the letter that enfolds it, all of which inspire the ghost's memory.

## Conclusion

Different from the western tradition in which narration is regarded as human speech, Tan emphasizes the importance of non-human narration. As Tan endows non-human things with the power of narration, they are no longer inert objects but Qi-things. Like humans, they exhale and inhale Qi when they narrate. In her works, these non-human Qi-things, such as: narrative bones in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, photographic representations and verbal representations of paintings, not only supplement the limits of human narrators but also play active roles in shaping the text's own narrative and aesthetic expressions. Focusing on the interaction between human characters and those other-than human narrators, we can see Tan not only redefines the concept of narration but also questions the relation of words and images, which are no longer in a state of competition but cooperation. In the perspective of Qi-things, narration has to be acknowledged as a new form of Bakhtin what terms: "polyvocality," "heteroglossia," or "heterodiegesis" in Tan's works. It is a weaving together of many different expressions that unsettle the hegemony of the human in Western literature.

## Chapter Seven: Writing as a Qi-thing

Lisa Dunick first recognizes “the importance of written texts and the literacy of Chinese women” in Tan’s novels (4). While other critics emphasize the function of the talk-story in Tan’s novels, Dunick points out that “talk-story cannot function properly for these Chinese mothers and American daughters without a source of mediation” (8). And she believes that “In Tan’s novels, often the source of that mediation comes through the vehicle of the written text” (8). Dunick not only realizes the importance of writing in Tan’s novels but also regards it as the agency for characters to articulate their own stories. She argues that “Though Tan asserts the voice of Chinese immigrant women through her own writing, the written texts that appear throughout her works endow Chinese and Chinese-immigrant women the agency to write themselves, an agency that critics have not yet recognized in the over-emphasis on talk-story” (10). According to Dunick, it is obvious that besides oral narration, writing is an alternative mode of expression. Turning from oral narration to the written texts as the main narrative strategy, Tan aims to dissolve the binary opposition between ethnic literature—characterized by “talk-story”—and canonized western literature. And she also questions the relation between speech and writing as modes of expression, allowing readers to consider whether writing is superior to speech or whether oral and textual discourse can complement each other to narrate.

Before my elaboration of how written texts execute their narrative powers in Tan’s work, I will briefly illustrate the western debate in philosophy and linguistics about writing

and speaking which has great effects on Tan's thought about the relation of writing and speaking. Since she obtained her bachelor's and master's degrees in linguistics, she probably always thinks about this issue. Because of the western tradition of dualism, philosophers and linguists tend to take the binary opposition between speech and writing for granted. Comparing the relation between written and spoken language, Chafe states that "Some of the most influential linguists of the first half of this century, including Saussure (201), Sapir (200), and Bloomfield (33), went out of their way to emphasize the primacy of spoken as opposed to written language, relegating the latter to a derived and secondary status" (383). Like Saussure, structuralist linguists hold the phonocentric view that "speech is primary; writing secondary" (Johnson 43). With the overemphasis on the primacy of spoken language, linguists and philosophers have been concerned with issues related to it for almost the whole of the twentieth century. However, Derrida deconstructs the priority of speech over writing. "According to Derrida, (like binary oppositions between mind and body, man and woman, presence and absence in western philosophy), the opposition between speech and writing has been structured similarly: speech is seen as immediacy, presence, life, and identity, whereas writing is seen as deferment, absence, death and difference" (43). He breaks this binary opposition and "calls this privileging of speech as self-present meaning 'logocentrism'" (43). What's more, "In his three volumes of 1967, Derrida gives rigorous attention to the paradox that the Western tradition (the "Great Books") is filled with *writings* that privilege speech" (43). So, to Derrida, the priority of speech is paradoxically affirmed through writing. He sees little difference between the two forms; neither one is more essential than the other: "even

when a text tries to privilege speech as immediacy, it cannot completely eliminate the fact that speech, like writing, is based on a *différance* (a Derridean neologism meaning both “deferment” and “difference”) between signifier and signified inherent in the sign” (43). Like Derrida, who discerns a similar structure in both speech and writing, Tan breaks down the binary opposition between the two since she employs both oral and written discourse as modes of expression. Being treated equally, spoken and written words in Tan’s works are never in a state of competition but collaboration. And she probably believes that “Speaking and Writing both have their own validity” (Chafe 383). When characters speak or write, their Qi is transmitted into the words that they produce. So, spoken and written texts become animate Qi-things. As Qi-things, “writing and speech are each privileged in specific ways, and ... they depend upon each other for identification and clarity” (Ong 165-166). So, I will focus on how written texts execute their privileges and how writing cooperates with speech to narrate.

### **I. The Privileges of Written Texts and their Cooperation with Speech**

Deconstructing the priority of language, Derrida argues that “speech suffers from many of the same inherent flaws as writing” (Hogan 249). Apart from their flaws, in Tan’s novels, speech and texts bring their own qualities to the task of expressing human emotions. Sometimes, it seems that speech is superior to text or vice versa. With their own flaws and privileges, in some cases, speech and writing can complement each other in allowing humans to express love. Through written letters, Jing-mei’s mother finds her lost twin daughters in

China. However, the Aunties from the Joy Luck Club cannot tell the truth of their mother's death to the lost daughters by letter. It seems that they think that "Writing can be perceived as colder and more impersonal than speech."<sup>31</sup> So, instead of writing a letter, they require Jing-mei to go to China and tell her half-sisters about the truth of their mother's death and her life stories. When talking with her half-sisters face to face, Jing-mei can use her body language and her expressions to show how she feels sorry about the death of their mother. So, in this case, it seems that spoken language remedies the limits of written language.

In Old China, people are inclined to express their love in an implicit way rather than speaking out directly. So, writing letters is their primary choice. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Peanut and Wen Fu conduct their courtship in writing. Winnie becomes the go-between to carry their love letters back and forth, and she complements the written word with her speech. Winnie claims that "Each time I delivered a letter to Wen Fu, I used my words to carry a picture of Peanut to him" (KGW 130). But what she expresses is not her cousin's feelings but the product of her own imagination. So, her words project her own expectations for romance. Once Winnie refuses to deliver letters, Wen Fu finds a professional go-between, a woman matchmaker who could "deliver not only letters but a marriage proposal" (134). So, besides expressing love directly by written language, Wen Fu invites a matchmaker to speak of his love by making a marriage proposal. So, infused with the Qi of the interlocutors, written and spoken language work together for humans to express love.

Besides writing letters, reading texts is also an indirect way to express love. In *The*

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<sup>31</sup> Willian Bright holds this view when he compares the difference between speech and writing.

*Bonesetter's Daughter*, while others think they speak of school lessons, LuLing reveals the truth to readers that Kai Jing speaks of love. By virtue of a book of brush paintings entitled “*The Four Manifestations of Beauty*,” Kai Jing express his feelings for LuLing. When Kai Jing lyrically expresses his love through some images of bamboo in the text, we can see how he communicates with each image and transmits each of their unique Qi to Luling. Kai Jing turns the pages of the book and speaks the words that express the purity of his feelings: “With any form of beauty, there are four levels of ability. This is true of painting, calligraphy, literature, music, dance. The first level is Competent” (BD 233). Then, “a page that showed two identical renderings of a bamboo grove” is a representation of the first level of “Competence” (233). In Kai Jing’s view, as this painting only shares common traits with other artistic forms, he regards this kind of beauty as ordinary. Although it expresses a kind of beauty, this painting with an objective view of the landscape cannot bring out their emotional resonance. Looking at another painting of “several stalks of bamboo,” Kai Jing claims that “Its beauty is unique” (233). It is unique because it places more emphasis on the leaves and less emphasis on the stalks. And it represents the second level of ‘Magnificent.’ Then, he turns to the painting of “a single stalk of bamboo” which represents the third level of beauty, “Divine” (233). Kai Jing states that “The Leaves now are shadows blown by an invisible wind, and the stalk is there mostly by suggestion of what is missing. And yet the shadows are more alive than the original leaves that obscured the light” (BD 233). The painting works by suggestion, illustrating how the flow of natural forces effects the Qi of the bamboo’s leaves. Finally, Kai Jing turns to the painting called “Inside the Middle of a Bamboo Stalk” in which

a simple oval shape arouses Kai Jing and LuLing's emotional resonance. Kai Jing explains: "it is the simplicity of being within, no reason or explanation for being there. It is the natural wonder that anything exists in relation to another, an inky oval to a page of white paper, a person to a bamboo stalk, the viewer to the painting" (BD 234). This painting implies that all entities spontaneously interact with each other in a harmony of complementary differences where the unique Qi of each entangles with the other in the simplicity of being. Employing this painting, Kai Jing illustrates the fourth level of "Effortless," the key concept of Daoism which advocates that "one must place their will in harmony with the natural universe" (Faching and deChant 35). Thus, just as "two stalks of bamboo bent toward each other by the chance of the wind" (BD 234), Kai Jing persuades LuLing of the rightness of their falling in love with each other without intending to. So, combining words and texts, bringing these two animate Qi-things together, Kai Jing effortlessly expresses his love to LuLing.

Besides, written texts contain their own privilege which speech never has. In contrast to spoken language, written words seem to be more effective to reveal the hidden truth. While Winnie wonders and asks her husband, Wen Fu why he introduces himself as Wen Chen, his dead brother's name, he finds many excuses to cover up the truth. However, a diploma and an application for the Air Force let Winnie know the fact that "they were papers for Wen Chen, (her) husband's dead brother, who had graduated with top honors from a merchant seaman school" (KGW 171). To become a member of the Air Force, Wen Fu alters his name and pretends to be his dead brother. So, the written words provide evidence that helps Winnie to accuse her husband of being an imposter and hypocrite.

In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, there is another episode about how a written text displays its agentic power to reveal a hidden reality. A personal letter that Bibi CHEN receives the morning before she dies reveals that “the murderous metal comb” is a precious souvenir from Bibi’s birth mother. It is one of the occasional letters written by her cousin from Shanghai. In the letter, her cousin explains how she has retrieved souvenirs of Bibi’s family from the daughter of Gatekeeper Luo, the corrupt servant who once stole Bibi’s family’s gold and jewels. Those family souvenirs that her cousin mentions inspire Bibi’s curiosity. So she unwraps the package immediately and views her true mother’s haircomb, which becomes the lethal weapon that kills Bibi when she falls from the stool in shock.

Although the text has its own agentic power to reveal the hidden truth, in some cases, it achieves this aim with the collaboration of speech. In *The Joy Luck Club*, when the American daughter Lena invites her mother, Yingying to have dinner at home, a list stuck on the refrigerator door attracts Yingying. The list records things that Lena and her husband should share half and half. Reading it carefully, Yingying points to “ice cream” on Harold’s list. It is an item whose cost Lena shares all the time even though she never eats it and has hated it since an incident in her childhood. So, the words on the list expose the marital discord between Lena and her husband. As a result, Yingying confronts Lena’s husband with the truth that her daughter has never eaten ice cream since her childhood. So, with the cooperation of Yingying’s speech and the list on the refrigerator, readers realize the inequality and oppression that Lena suffers in her marriage.

What’s more, the power of writing works in transmitting messages between people

who are far apart from each other. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, with the historical context of anti-Japanese war and the coming civil war between the Communist and Nationalist Party, telegrams are an effective way to send urgent messages. There are two examples in which the urgent words in the telegram demonstrate their vibrancy in expressing human emergencies. Winnie sends two telegrams to Shanghai, "one to (her) bank instructing them to withdraw four hundred Chinese dollars and give it to Wen Fu's sister, the other to Wen Fu's sister telling her where to send the money" (KGW 207). At the end of the telegram to Wen Fu's sister, Winnie adds, "Hurry, We soon taonan" (207). With the significance that people do not care about anything but escaping day or night when terrible danger or a fear comes, the Chinese word "taonan" points out how urgently Winnie needs the money to escape before the Japanese conquer the city of Nanking. Winnie believes in the power of words since the words that she added make her sister-in-law send the money as soon as possible. But her sister-in-law does not send it to Winnie but to her husband, Wen Fu, who spends all the money himself. Because of this misdirection, Winnie paradoxically claims "how useless my words had truly been" (209). Nevertheless, the urgent words work when Winnie sends the telegram to her American husband, Jimmy. After being released from jail, Winnie sends a telegram asking for Jimmy's help to bring her to America before the Communists conquer the city of Shanghai. In the telegraph office, Winnie meets Wan Betty who once helped her to send urgent messages to ask for the taonan money. Because of the words "Hurry, We soon taonan" that Winnie had written in the previous telegrams, the money was sent out immediately, though Winnie herself never received it. Instead, Wan Betty received Winnie's

dowry money the day after Winnie leaves, and she spends this money to support herself and her son while they are under the control of the Japanese army. So, Wan Betty believes in the power of these urgent words and automatically adds them to the telegram that Winnie writes to Jimmy. To Winnie's surprise, Jimmy sends back his answer right away to prepare her U.S. visa. He provides the papers and seven hundred U.S. Dollars for Winnie to leave China and begin her new life in America. So, the urgent words in the telegram execute their agentic power and make Winnie believe in the power of the written text again.

Realizing the power of written texts, Winnie strives to get the divorce paper from Wen Fu before she goes to America. Wen Fu once put a gun to Winnie's head in Kunming and made her write and sign the divorce paper. With this text, Winnie thinks she finally can leave her cruel tormentor. However, this divorce paper is unofficial since there is no witness when they sign it. So, when Winnie claims she has obtained a divorce from Wen Fu in the newspaper, he not only refuses to admit their divorce but also dispatches two bandits to tear up the divorce paper. Without the text, Winnie cannot prove their divorce and her husband's accusation puts her in jail. After this case, Winnie realizes how important an official divorce paper is and she strives to get it before she begins her new life with Jimmy in America. So, she sends an urgent telegram to Wen Fu and his new wife to trick them into signing the divorce paper in the telegraph office. Wen Fu and his new wife arrived at appointed time. Before they mark the receipt with their name seals, Wan Betty poses some questions about his marriage to Wen Fu and lets him orally claim that he has broken off his marital relation with Winnie and that his legal wife is another woman. The oral assertion paves the way for

the signature of the divorce paper. After orally admitting his divorce with Winnie, Wen Fu has to sign the divorce paper when Winnie leaps out and hands it to him. With the witness of Auntie Du, Hulan and everyone in the office, Wen Fu signs and marks his seal on the divorce paper which is a legal and official recognition. Therefore, with the collaboration of these conversations and the signed official divorce paper, Winnie finally successfully breaks off her martial relation with Wen Fu.

As official documents, passports and birth certificates have great power to change humans' fate or even endow them with new identities. There are many episodes showing how these official documents carry out their legal effect. Firstly, in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Kwan tells her half-sister, Olivia the truth about how some official documents concealed in the lining of a suit coat change their father's fate. As Kwan narrates, on his way home from his studies, their father defrauds a drunkard of a suit coat that hides "a stack of papers - official documents for immigrating to America!" (HSS 179). With these official documents that include "certified academic records, a quarantine health certificate, a student visa, and a letter of enrollment to Lincoln University in San Francisco, one year's tuition already paid...., a one-way ticket on American President Lines and two hundred U.S. dollars" (179), Kwan's father gives up his original identity as a college student studying physics at National Guangxi University and becomes another person named Yee Jun who will go to study in America and later have a new family there. So, far from being inert objects, these official documents are powerful Qi-things that can change humans' fate or even redefine their identities.

In *The Valley of Amazement*, there are also examples about how official documents

change characters' fates. Receiving notice that her little son has gone to America, Lucia decides to bring her daughter, Violet to America to reunite her with her brother. But to purchase steamship tickets to America, Lucia and her daughter are required to show a legal document, such as a passport or an official birth certificate to prove their identities as American citizens. Lucia thinks that all her important documents, including her daughter's birth certificate are locked in a drawer, but she fails to find it. At this time, Lucia's boyfriend, Fairweather, promises to get both Violet's birth certificate and a passport issued by the consulate the next day. But as Lucia misspells Violet's given name, Fairweather fails to find her birth certificate in the consulate. He proposes that to obtain the birth certificate and passport for Violet, he will bring her to the consulate and register her under his name. To Violet's surprise, her mother believes in Fairweather and lets him take Violet away. But rather than bringing Violet to the consulate, Fairweather sells her to a courtesan house and changes her fate. Without a passport or a birth certificate, Violet cannot prove her identity as an American citizen. Instead of accompanying her mother to America, she becomes a courtesan. In a similar another episode in which Violet lacks official papers, she has her daughter, Flora stolen by Edward's legal wife, Minerva Lamp Ivory. With the marriage certificate as the wife of Bosson Edward Ivory III and the birth certificate for Flora Violet Ivory, Minerva claims that she is Flora's legal guardian. Even if these legal documents endow her with this guardianship, Violet's speech expresses the truth that Minerva is not qualified to own this right since she became Edward's legal wife through lies and manipulation. It seems that although documents have legal status, they cannot always reveal to the truth to readers. We

still need speech to discover the truth. So, neither texts nor speech are superior, as Qi-things, they complement each other in the task of narration.

## II. The Vibrant Materiality of Writing

Besides emphasizing the privileges of writing in her novels by having different written texts act to move the plot forward, in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Tan represents many writing modes, such as Chinese writing, sand writing and ghost writing. Based on these writing modes, we can see how characters interact with the vibrancy of writing materials so as to seek the harmony of body and mind or even endow writing with new significance.

In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, “beyond the genetic relationship, three generations of women seem to be mysteriously connected by the burden of being silenced” (Limpár 147). However, they are able to regain their voice through their writings. Through Chinese writing, Chinese mothers not only assert their own identities but also communicate with their descendants and teach them the essence of Chinese culture. Chinese characters and writing materials are not inert objects but animate Qi-things which interact with the Qi of the writer. In the novel, there are many spoken discourses to emphasize the vibrancy of Chinese characters. Having lost her voice by drinking the hot ink, Precious Auntie, Lu Ling’s birth mother, has to communicate with her daughter by writing. She therefore teaches her Chinese characters. In teaching Lu Ling how to write the Chinese word “heart (心),” Precious Auntie draws the character and explains it at the same time: “See this curving stroke? That’s the bottom of the heart, where blood gathers and flows. And the dots, those are the two veins and

the artery that carry the blood in and out” (BD 147). This spoken discourse not only points out the pictographic trait of Chinese character but also implies how Qi and blood, as human’s vital energies, transform each other in humans’ organs. Besides, Precious Auntie confides to Lu Ling that while a man writes, he should think, especially “should consider how things begin” (147). In contrast to Western ideas that the thinker expresses his ideas in writing, Chinese philosophy endows the character with its own power: “the figure engenders thoughts” (Yee 35). In writing the Chinese character ‘heart’, Precious Auntie depicts vivid images which can move Lu Ling’s thought and imagination beyond the character itself. Moreover, this Chinese word ‘heart’ engenders Lu Ling’s recollection about her past life in her birth place: the Immortal Heart village.

While successfully grasping the essence of Chinese thought through Chinese characters and Chinese calligraphy, Lu Ling attempts to pour Chinese logic into her American-born daughter, Ruth’s mind in the same way. When Lu Ling teaches Ruth Chinese writing, she sets an example about how to gather the free flowing of Qi in the process of writing. In writing the Chinese character ‘heart’, Lu Ling demonstrates the vibrancy of the Chinese character, carrying on from her mother’s lessons: “See? Each stroke has its own rhythm, its balance, its proper place. Bao Bomu said everything in life should be the same way” (BD 50). Chinese writing imparts the Chinese philosophy of Qi to Lu Ling’s American-born daughter, showing that Qi adheres to everything and endows all things with liveliness. What’s more, while helping Ruth to remember Chinese characters, Lu Ling explains their origin: “Each radical comes from an old picture from a long time ago” (50).

Although Lu Ling's statement about the origin of Chinese characters cannot inspire Ruth's interest in them, it reveals to readers how in its evolution from a picture, a Chinese character not only displays its meaning clearly through its appearance but also engenders thoughts of the thing it represents. To point out the vibrancy of Chinese characters, Lu Ling practices each stroke and explains the complex web of associations it inspires: "Each character is a thought, a feeling, meanings, history, all mixed into one" (50). When Lu Ling's writing of Chinese characters still fails to stimulate Ruth's interest, she asks Ruth try to write the same character and teaches her how to effect her Qi so as to reach balance in the process of writing.

If the Chinese characters produce effects, the writing materials also endow the writing with a vibrant materiality. Dunick points out how *The Bonesetter's Daughter* insists: "on the permanence of written texts and writing's most basic materiality through the recognition of ink's physicality. The connections between the physical nature of ink, the process of writing, and the lasting nature of text resonate throughout the narrative" (11). Dunick recognizes the importance of the physical nature of ink, but she never demonstrates how it works. So, I will specifically focus on what Chiang Yee calls the "The Four Treasures, of the Room of Literature" (Yee 134)—writing brush, inkstick, ink-stone and paper interact with the writer in his or her writing process.

Born from a family that works on ink-making, Lu Ling is very familiar with the inherent characteristics of inksticks. When Lu Ling visits her family's ink shop in Beijing, she views how her father exhibits some inksticks decorated with carved designs and animal shapes to a customer. As "the most characteristic medium for calligraphy and painting" (Yee

134), the ink can decide the quality of calligraphy. Lu Ling's father

pointed to a stick with a top shaped like a fairy boat and said with graceful importance, Your writing will flow as smoothly as a keel cutting through a glassy lake. He picked up a bird shape: Your mind will soar into the clouds of higher thought. He waved toward a row of ink cakes embellished with designs of peonies and bamboo: Your ledgers will blossom into abundance while bamboo surrounds your quiet mind. (BD 189)

Carved with auspicious patterns, each inkstick has the magic power to assist the writer to write smoothly and fluently. Apart from the carved shape of the ink, through her father's spoken words, Lu Ling learns how the color, the scent and the ingredients of the ink decide its quality. With the color of "the right hue, purple-black," the balanced scent of strength and delicacy, and the very fine soot of Immortal Heart wood, the ink made by Lu Ling's family endows the calligrapher with visual, olfactory and writing enjoyment. Therefore, as a vibrant Qi-thing that brings harmony to the writer's gesture, the inkstick is essential for calligraphy.

Besides, her father's speeches let Lu Ling think of Precious Auntie who once taught her that "everything, even ink, had a purpose and a meaning: ..." (BD 189). Recognizing the ink's purpose and meaning, Precious Auntie understands it to be a vibrant Qi-thing. Then, she distinguishes Chinese ink from modern ink from a bottle. With the latter, "you simply write what is swimming on the top of your brain....But when you push an inkstick along an inkstone, you take the first step to cleansing your mind and your heart" (189). Through this living movement of grinding the "stick upon the ink-stone..." (Yee 135), the vibrant Qi of the

stick and the inkstone moves harmoniously with the Qi of the writer, forcing “the writer to be conscious of her true purpose, rather than the immediate feeling of the moment” (Dunick 11). Interacting with vibrant writing instruments in the writing process, the writer can realize the reunion of body and mind.

There is another episode that emphasizes the movement between the ink and the inkstone. On being married with Kai Jing, Lu Ling receives a precious gift, the “duan inkstone” from her father-in-law, Teacher Pan. When Teacher Pan sends his duan inkstone to Lu Ling, he points out how the writer interacts with the Four Treasures of the Study so as to express his or her true heart. What’s more, Teacher Pan’s spoken words let LuLing remember that Precious Auntie once expressed similar words when Lu Ling first learned to grind ink and when she was angry with Lu Ling since she could not prevent her from accepting the marriage proposal from the son of the coffin maker. Precious Auntie tells her daughter: “You should think about your character. Know where you are changing, how you will be changed, what cannot be changed back again” (BD 248). Here, the word “character” has a double meaning. Besides meaning the Chinese word that Lu Ling writes, it also represents Lu Ling’s personality. It seems that in teaching Lu Ling how to write, Precious Auntie actually also teaches her how to take her life seriously. Just as words written in ink cannot be changed, so a life changing decision changes one’s future. Another episode further demonstrates how the characters that writers write embody their personalities and intentions. When teaching students in the orphanage, Lu Ling recalls for them what Precious Auntie has taught her about writing characters: “a person must think about her intentions...how her ch’i flowed

from her body into her arm, through the brush, and into the stroke. Every stroke had meaning, and since every word had many strokes, it also had many meanings” (226). In the Chinese writing process, as the writer’s body and writing materials enters the network of Qi, they produce a result that reveals not only the materials but also the personality of the writer. Dunnick rightly emphasizes the writer’s agency: “each stroke, then becomes representative of the energy and character of the writer, and the words on the page can signify more than the ideas that the shapes represent; they come to signify the intent and character of the author” (12). Yee confirms this insight: “It is commonly believed in China that calligraphy expresses the personality of the writer. An individual’s character, disposition, and propensities, as well as his good or bad fortune, are said to be accurately ascertainable from his handwriting” (11). Nevertheless, the writing process involves more than just the writer.

Gathering the Qi of writer and the Qi of different writing materials together, Chinese calligraphy becomes a vibrant assemblage which has agentic power to positively affect the writer’s disposition. When Lu Ling practices calligraphy, she becomes “calm, organized, and decisive” (BD 50). Lu Ling thus benefits from Chinese writing. Moreover, Lu Ling is able to teach other students how to write in the orphanage, passing on its positive effects to others. Thus she declares: “I also helped the students improve their calligraphy and their minds” (226). This illustrates the belief that practicing Chinese calligraphy does more than reflect one’s mind; it actually improves it. At the same time, Lu Ling’s good handwriting makes her attractive and helps her to obtain a marriage proposal from the geologist, Kai Jing. Through Chinese writing, Kai Jing expresses his affection for Lu Ling: “He used almost the same

rhythm, so that we were like two people performing a dance. That was the beginning of our love, the same curve, the same dot, the same lifting of the brush as our breath filled as one” (233). Communing through the vibrant materiality of the brush, coming together in the same strokes and same characters, the Qi of Lu Ling and the Qi of Kai Jing interact with each other so as to reach harmony. What’s more, after moving to America, Lu Ling depends on “bilingual calligraphy, Chinese and English” to supplement her income and earn herself a reliable reputation. Because of cultural differences and her deficiency in English, Lu Ling cannot fully articulate herself through her voice but expresses herself through her writing (49).

Consequently, in terms of Chinese writing, Tan not only illustrates the importance and power of writing but also redefines writing. She accords with the material ecocritics’ idea that the text

encompasses both human material-discursive constructions and nonhuman things: water, soil, stones, metals, minerals, bacteria, toxins, food, electricity, cells, atoms, all cultural objects and places. The characteristic feature of these material configurations is that they are not made of single elements, isolated from each other. Rather, they form complexes both natural and cultural, and in many cases human agency and meanings are deeply interlaced with the emerging agency and meaning of these nonhuman beings. (Iovino and Oppermann 83)

“Taking matter ‘as a text’” (Iovino and Oppermann 83), Iovino and Oppermann question the

very idea of text in a much larger sense. They move away from the “linguistic turn” by overcoming “the chasm between cultural constructionism and the materiality of natures and bodies” (76). As Tan shows that writing itself involves some of the non-human things that the authors list, writing is no longer an inert; instead, characters are Qi-thing which “connect these two levels—the material and the discursive—in a non-dualistic system of thought” (76).

Different from her mother, Lu Ling, who demonstrates the importance of writing through Chinese calligraphy, Ruth “had developed a respect for writing’s importance as a child through her sand writing and her diary” (Dunick 12). As a child, Ruth resists her mother’s Chinese ways. Shamed by her mother’s command in front of her classmates, Ruth throws herself down the slide and breaks her arm. Apart from rebelling against her mother’s order through action, Ruth chooses to keep silent whenever her mother asks questions. Nonetheless, “the sand-and-chopstick method” invented by her mother helps Ruth to become articulate (BD 71). Employing the chopstick to write in “a large tea tray filled with smooth wet sand gathered from the playground at school” (70-1), Ruth regains her voice and is able to answer all the questions from teachers, classmates and her mother. The hybrid writing materials represent a compromise between American and Chinese identities. According to Dunick, “the novel emphasizes the importance of intent in writing and indicates that the type of writing important to the characters in the novel is not the unthinking act of recording immediate thoughts but the conscious and deliberate act of preserving and communicating specifically selected messages” (11). Thanks to the Qi of the materials and the persons coming together in the writing act, Ruth consciously expresses both her mother’s and her

own opinions and thoughts through “sand-writing” (BD 71). When Luling asks her daughter’s opinion about the taste of the bean curd dish, Ruth writes the word “Salty,” which exactly expresses “what her mother always said to criticize her own food” (72). So, it seems that sand-writing endows Ruth with the ability to deliberately express in her mother’s tone. As the word that Ruth writes on purpose accords with her mother’s opinions, it helps Ruth to get trust from her mother. And from then on, Lu Ling asks Ruth’s “opinion on all kinds of matters” (72). Thus, Ruth experiences the power of words through sand-writing.

Besides deliberately expressing the answers that Lu Ling wishes, Ruth attempts to express her own wishes through sand-writing. As she always longs for a little dog, she “scratche[s] in the sand: Doggie” (BD 72). However, to Ruth’s surprise, since Precious Auntie called Lu Ling “Doggie” in Chinese as a way to express her love, this word touches Lu Ling’s inner heart. Readers might see this evocation of Lu Ling’s nickname as just a coincidence, but Lu Ling believes that Ruth is able to communicate with the ghost of Precious Auntie through sand writing. Thus, Ruth’s sand-writing becomes a medium for Lu Ling to talk with the ghost of Precious Auntie. Once Lu Ling requires Ruth to ask Precious Auntie whether the curse is over. As Ruth have no idea what the curse means, she never knows how to answer but “[draws] a line and another below that. She [draws] two more lines and made a square” (73). The image of a “square” that Ruth draws in the sand generates new meanings. To Lu Ling, it is equal to the Chinese character “mouth” which engenders her memory that once she accompanied Precious Auntie to return her ancestor’s bones to the Mouth of the Mountain, to the Monkey’s Jaw. Thus, probably, in Tan’s view, the written text

is not “a closed, finished, reliable representational object” but “an open, infinite process that is both meaning-generating and meaning-subverting” (Johnson 40).

However, unwilling to play the role as her mother’s ghostwriter, Ruth finally makes a sound to refuse her mother’s questions about Precious Auntie. Although Ruth gives up expressing opinions and thoughts by sand-writing, her childhood experience influences her choice of profession. Because of sand writing in her childhood, the adult Ruth becomes a ghost writer. As a ghost writer, Ruth still attempts to express others’ opinions and thoughts in her own words. She channels their Qi with hers in the act of writing. However, Ruth finally abandons this secondary form of authorship. As Dunick points out: “Ruth eventually comes to recognize the importance of original authorship through the discovery of her mother’s autobiography. Just as Precious Auntie saved LuLing through writing her autobiography, LuLing’s writing replicates that rescue through her autobiography’s effect on Ruth” (Dunick 13). Realizing the power of autobiography and the importance of original authorship, at the end of the novel, Ruth decides to write stories for her grandmother, her mother and herself. Thus, after moving through the intermediary stages of sand-writing and then ghost-writing, Ruth can finally reach harmony of body and mind through writing her own stories.

### **III. The Intertextuality of Texts**

Besides its vibrant materiality, a written text becomes agentic in its relation with other texts. In almost each of Tan’s works, there are texts transformed from another text or different texts juxtaposed within a network. Transforming one text into another, Tan employs

intertextuality, which is a literary term first applied in Julia Kristeva's *Séméiotikè: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (1969). "The concept of intertextuality that [Kristeva] initiated proposes the text as a dynamic site in which relational processes and practices are the focus of analysis instead of static structures and products" (Alfaro 268). Focusing on the way in which texts relate to one another or transform into another in Tan's novels, we find that Tan redefines texts so that they are "not as self-contained systems but as differential and historical, as traces and tracings of otherness" (268). More than relating one text to another or weaving different texts together, Tan constructs a world of texts where the boundaries between fact and fiction are blurred and characters understand how they become who they are through their interaction with different texts.

Given Tan's Chinese roots, it is common to see some Chinese elements in her novels. In her first two novels, "various references to Chinese myths appear within the mothers' narratives. *The Joy Luck Club* alludes to the myths of the Moon Lady and the Queen Mother of the West. *The Kitchen God's Wife* addresses the myth from which Tan took her title: the myth of the Kitchen God" (Conard 31). Many critics pay attention to Tan's references to these Chinese myths. Some critics feel that she employs Orientalism to reinforce stereotypes while others think she reconstructs the myths, creating new stories for displaced Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters. In "'Sugar Sisterhood': The Amy Tan Phenomenon," Sau-ling Cynthia Wong "formulates Tan's misrepresentation of a Chinese myth as Orientalist" (Adams 17). Nunes believes that rather than reinforcing Western caricatures of China through misrepresenting Chinese myths: "Tan appropriates, subverts and

rewrites Chinese myths...so as to create the aforementioned positive female figures that challenge patriarchal rules” (2). Meanwhile, Conrad feels that “[Tan] has re-mythologized the Asian-American experience by drawing upon the old tradition and rewriting the folktales to make them more realistic and more applicable to the characters and to readers” (31). Based on these critics’ research, I will further discuss the interrelationship of Chinese myths and Tan’s texts, specifically how Tan’s references to Chinese myths reveal social realities, allow characters to project themselves, and refashion a hybridized mythology to illustrate Chinese Americans’ hybridized identity.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, with the death of her first husband who seriously hurts and abandons her and her immigration to America with her second husband, Ying-Ying St. Clair claims that she became “a tiger ghost” or “an unseen spirit” who “willingly gave up [her] chi” (JLC 305). And she claims that as “the daughter of a ghost, [her daughter, Lena] has no chi” (306). To leave her spirit or her Qi to her daughter, Ying-ying decides to gather together her past and look and tell her daughter everything. It seems that her past stories are Qi-things through which Yingying could gather her chi and transmit it to her daughter. Therefore, according to Yingying’s recounting of the story about the Moon Lady, we can see how she passes her Qi to her daughter.

Yingying recalls an experience in her childhood when she comes upon a play about the tale of the Moon Lady while she and her family celebrate the Moon Festival in the Tai Lake. According to Ying-Ying’s recollection, the play shows that the Moon Lady or Chang’e is the wife of Houyi, the Master Archer of the skies who shot down nine suns, leaving just

one sun. He is given the elixir of immortality as a reward, though he does not consume it immediately but hides it at home. However, his wife steals the elixir and tastes it alone. To punish her selfishness and her disrespect for her husband, the Moon Lady is exiled to the moon.

Through retelling this folktale, “Ying-Ying identifies with the Moon Lady as a child and as an adult” (Conard 34). As a child, Ying-Ying feels like the Moon Lady as both of them receive punishment after they challenge or even subvert the patriarchal system. Born in the year of tiger, Ying-Ying yearns for wildness in her childhood. Unlike her sisters who follow the advice to stand still and be quiet, she longs to run freely like the boys. On the day of the Moon Festival, well dressed and boarding the boat in the Tai Lake, Ying-Ying cannot stay quietly with Amah, her servant, but runs here and there. When she encounters some boys who play at the back of the boat, she envies them and is caught in the dream of this kind of freedom. While waking up from this dream, she finds that her new clothes have been stained by a sullen woman who had sliced open the fish bellies and chopped off chickens’ head in front of her. As she expected, her servant scolds her and even abandons her as a punishment for her disobedience.

Learning a lesson from this childhood experience, as an adult, Ying-Ying attempts to obey feudal ethics and rites. After being married, she strives to play her role as a good wife. She declares: “I was pretty for him. If I put slippers on my feet, it was to choose a pair that I knew would please him...” (JLC299). However, she can no longer remain in this submissive role when she is abandoned by her husband who regularly has affairs with other women and

finally elopes with one of his lovers. Unable to bear this great shame, Ying-Ying takes revenge on her husband by killing their baby son before his birth. Therefore, Ying-Ying's reference to the Moon Lady's tale indicates the gender conflict between her and her first husband. "The Moon Lady's tale and its connection to Ying-Ying's personal history indicates to readers how the tale and traditional female roles are being challenged" (Conard 40). Both the Moon Lady and Ying-Ying challenge patriarchal authority, and as a result, they are banished into indifferent places. While the Moon Lady is exiled to the moon, Ying-Ying is displaced into a foreign land.

Besides, through the Moon Lady's tale, Ying-Ying suggests that women should not repose their wishes in the Moon Lady since she is unable to escape from the constraints of patriarchy. To break the didactic power of the Moon Lady's story, Ying-Ying consciously switches the character of the Moon Lady in the play into a man by drawing on the conventions of Chinese theatre. To confide her wish to the Moon Lady, Ying-Ying walks closer to her and sees the face of the Moon Lady: "shrunken cheeks, a broad oily nose, large glaring teeth, and red-stained eyes. A face so tired that she wearily pulled off her hair, her long gown fell from her shoulders. And as the secret wish fell from my lips, the Moon Lady looked at me and became a man" (JLC 89). Rather than a beautiful woman, the Moon Lady is revealed as a man. Her story turns out to be an illusion produced in the theatre of patriarchy. "The gender transformation at the end of the Moon Lady drama indicates a reversal, visually, of what Ying-Ying is expected to do" (Conard 40). In showing the Moon Lady to be a man in disguise, the text challenges the illusion that the mythical figure can realize women's wishes.

In retelling the Chinese folktale about the Moon Lady, Ying-Ying passes the Qi of the intertext through her experience of theatre and transmits the revised story to her daughter. The tale lets her comprehend that it is an illusion to count on others for help and that only she herself can solve her marital problem.

Many critics have discussed how Tan bases her second novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife* on the Chinese folktale of the Kitchen God. Conard states that “In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, re-mythologizing occurs not only within the text, but also with the title of the novel” (46). In the second chapter of the novel, there is a scene in which Winnie tells her granddaughters, this traditional Chinese folktale about how the rich farmer, Zhang, becomes the Kitchen God.

According to Winnie's tale, Zhang squanders all of his considerable wealth on a passionate affair with pretty Lady Li. He forces his wife to cook for his paramour, and when Lady Li chases his wife out of the house, he does not protest or intercede for his wronged wife. When Zhang's money is gone, Lady Li abandons him. Reduced to beggary, Zhang is taken in by a charitable woman who is—he realizes in horror—his discarded wife. Ashamed of his earlier treatment of his wife, Zhang tries to avoid a confrontation by jumping into the fireplace. He burns to death and his ashes float up the chimney to heaven. In heaven, the Jade Emperor decides that Zhang, who has shown the capacity for shame, should be rewarded with deification. Zhang becomes the Kitchen God, responsible for judging the behavior of mortals each year. (Huntley 85)

Winnie projects her past experiences in China into this tale. Like the Kitchen God's Wife, she also endures her husband, Wen Fu's abuse and philandering. She claims that "I was like that wife of Kitchen God. Nobody worshiped her either. He got all the excuses, He got all the credit. She was forgotten" (KGW 322). Identifying herself with the Kitchen God's wife, who is a marginal figure in the myth, Winnie condemns the patriarchal oppression in traditional Chinese society. However, unlike the Kitchen God's wife who obediently accepts her misfortune, Winnie finally rebels against her husband's authority and runs away from home. Because of her rebellion, she gains a happy marriage with her American husband.

Through retelling the Kitchen God's tale, Winnie acquaints her descendants with Chinese male-dominated tradition. However, replacing the Kitchen God in Auntie Du's altar temple with an unknown goddess, Winnie challenges patriarchal authority. In the original story, the farmer, Zhang is elevated as a deity; however, his wife still has no identity apart from being his helpmate. She is forgotten at the end of the tale. However, at the end of the novel, Winnie deconstructs the original myth to question the male-dominated oppression. She purchases a flawed statue and claims an identity for the forgotten Kitchen God's wife. Rather than calling her Mrs. the Kitchen God, Winnie gives her a name: "Lady Sorrowfree, happiness winning over bitterness, no regrets in this world" (KGW 415). In naming the flawed statue as Lady Sorrowfree, Winnie creates a goddess who is able to protect her daughter. Representing neither any traditional Chinese immortal nor any American deity, this goddess is a hybrid image that celebrates Chinese American women's newly liberated identities. Winnie's reconstruction of the Kitchen God's tale produces a new Qi-thing which

gives her the power to deconstruct the patriarchal authority and to reconcile with her American-born daughter.

Apart from the intertextual references to Chinese myths in those first two novels, Tan references a Chinese fable in *The Valley of Amazement*. The story of “Peach Blossom Spring” that Magic Gourd teaches Violet is an example of intertextuality. Being abducted into the courtesan house, Violet meets Magic Gourd who once was an experienced courtesan working for her mother and who teaches Violet the etiquette for beauties of the boudoir, including how to create “a world of romance and illusion” through their storytelling (VA 140). To help her protégée participate in the party hosted by Loyalty Fang, Magic Gourd teaches Violet how to use special talent in performing an oft-told tale, “Peach Blossom Spring” which originates from a Chinese fable by Tao Yuanming. The original fable describes how a fisherman occasionally sailed into a river in a forest made up of blossoming peach trees. When he reaches the end of the river, he finds there is a grotto. Though it is narrow at first, he manages to squeeze through, and the passage eventually reaches an ethereal utopia where the people lead an ideal existence in harmony with nature, unaware of the outside world for centuries. Magic Gourd’s version is almost accordant with the original one except for the ending. In the ending of the original story, the fisherman sails for home after staying in this harmonious place for several days. He marks some notes on his way home and intends to bring his friends and family sailing back toward the grotto. However, he fails to find Peach Blossom Spring again. Written during a time of political instability and national disunity, the original story expresses the author’s pursuit of a harmonious life that is only a utopia, as

both the fisherman and other people try to find it repeatedly but in vain. With the same significance, Magic Gourd's representation of the story probably ironizes the historical context that the overthrow of the Qing dynasty by the New Republic is just a utopia rather than the beginning of a harmonious society. In the New Republic period, the society is still unstable and people live in a state of emptiness and misery, so they can only visit the brothel to enjoy immorality and immediate pleasure.

What's more, Magic Gourd's retelling infuses the story with new significance. Turning the ending into a happy one, Magic Gourd shows that the story is not a fixed, self-contained structure but a Qi-thing that has the power not only to express the teller's longing but also to mirror the desires of the listeners. The story can imply "the desire for immortality" since the protagonist escapes death (VA 146). Rather than failing to find the Peach Blossom Spring again, in Magic Gourd's version,

The fisherman is about to drown himself when he spots the same pretty maiden on the riverbank, eating a peach so enormous she has to use both hands to bring it to her cheery lips. She waves to him, and together they sail through the grotto to Peach Blossom Spring. Nothing has changed. The maidens. The peach trees. The weather. The contentedness. (VA 144)

With this happy ending, Magic Gourd creates a utopia of love where men can imagine transgression and "immediate pleasure". The topology of the narrow passage and the grotto suggest sexual intercourse, and the peach suggests the satisfaction of sexual fulfillment. At

the same time, this quest story can also mirror the courtesans' quest for happiness, since the women may find that their dreams of contentment are utopian.

When reciting this happy ending, Magic Gourd teaches Violet how to seduce men and enhance her attractiveness. She initially mentions the details of the erotic pleasures which she does not advise Violet to recount while she is still a virgin courtesan. Then, she teaches Violet how to give a superior performance with the cooperation of the musical instrument and the gestures of her face and body. As Magic Gourd suggests, far from recounting the story word by word, the piece that Violet delivers should be synchronous with the melodies of the zither, "a bit of glissando to signal the surprise arrival, tremolo for mounting passion, a sweep over all twenty-one silk strings for the return to the past" (VA 144). And she suggests that Violet "deliver every word with precise gestures of [her] face and body while still looking natural and spontaneous, as if the story is unfolding before [her], as if all [her] emotions are genuine and unexpected" (144). Therefore, when performing the story, the Qi of the zither and the Qi of the performer's body and mind are harmoniously "Floating Together in Ravishment" so as to evoke every man's "nostalgia for his ideal self" (146). With the collaboration of the musical instrument and the gestures of face and body, Violet is to make the story into a Qi-thing that is capable of touching the listeners' feelings.

However, when Violet is required to perform in the party hosted by Loyalty Fang, she cannot recount the story of "Peach Blossom Spring" as she is supposed to. As it is her first performance, she speaks too quickly to follow the zither's music. Because of her nervousness, she fails to harmoniously combine her words with her facial and body

expressions. And she even creates her own version of the story's ending in which "The fisherman finds his wife still alive two hundred years later... Even though everyone else is dead...and also the village is burnt to the ground. They get in the boat and return to paradise together, where virgin maidens greet him and provide him with immediate pleasure..." (VA 182). Although Violet's performance fails to evoke men's emotional resonance; the words that she unintentionally delivers seduce men and inspire their sexual desire. They understand "immediate pleasure" as erotic pleasure even if Violet explains that "the pleasures were delicious peaches and wine—and that the fisherman shared those with his wife, too" (182). Therefore, the women's retelling shows how the story of "Peach Blossom Spring" is a vibrant Qi-thing which can engender unlimited significance.

Besides referencing Chinese literary works, Tan's novels quote American literary works. In *The Valley of Amazement*, when Violet's American lover, Edward Ivory meets her for the first time, he recites the following lines from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself":

Not I, nor any one else can travel that road for you,

You must travel it for yourself.

It is not far, it is within reach,

Perhaps you have been on it since you were born, and did not know,

Perhaps it is everywhere on water and on land. (VA 224)

Completely appreciating the significance of Whitman's appeal to readers to take to the road, Edward claims that he takes the American author as his travel guide. Neither following his family's arrangement to be acquainted with business in Shanghai nor being guided by any

guidebooks, Edward prefers to discover China in a spontaneous way. Walt Whitman's poem expresses Edward's own longing for freedom and independence. Meanwhile, this poem provokes Violet's emotional resonance, as she interprets it in a very personal way: "...I had lived the heartache of those words - the loneliness, being on a road to an unknown place, set there with no understandable reason" (VA 224-5). Like the painting "The Valley of Amazement," this poem endows Violet with a sense of loneliness and puzzlement that is different from the manly call for independence that Edward hears. Both the poem and the painting predict that she is destined to travel an unknown road alone. Since this poem can arouse their emotional response, it is a Qi-thing which can spontaneously tie Edward and Violet's hearts together.

Besides, arousing characters' sympathy, this poem mirrors the author, Amy Tan's own life and her writing. In a 2014 interview with Joe Fassler, Tan states that this poem reflects what the character is about...what my writing is about...what my whole life is about. Tan's discussion of this section reminds us that we travel along a private road, a shifting path we continually seek. Besides, Fassler points out that the poem touches on the theme Tan tries to embody through her work: openness, lack of judgment, scrutiny, surprise. Like Whitman, through creating a literary work, Tan opens a way for herself and readers to search for who we are.

Through intertextuality, texts are never self-contained but always open to dynamic relations with other texts. More than transforming texts through their retelling, Tan weaves different texts together in her novels. Taking the example of *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, *The*

*Valley of Amazement* and *Saving Fish from Drowning*, I will discuss how different texts interact with characters in a network.

With the theme of the mother-daughter relation of three generations, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* is often regarded as Tan's autobiographical novel. "As her most autobiographical novel to date, it should come as no surprise that theories of writing and matters related to language generally preoccupy *The Bonesetter's Daughter*" (Adams 150). Weaving different texts together, such as Precious Auntie and Lu Ling's autobiography, Ruth's sand writing, ghost writing and her diary, Tan not only illustrates the mother-daughter relation of three generations but also expresses her concept of writing and matters related to language. So, I will focus on how these different texts interact with characters so as to elaborate Tan's theory of writing.

The autobiography of Chinese immigrant mother, Lu Ling, plays an essential role in the novel by explicitly transmitting the family's history and Chinese culture to the American-born daughter, Ruth. Deeply touched by her mother's story, Ruth describes it as a "torn-up quilt" (BD 297), "a figure used by women writers especially, often ethnic minority women writers in North America, as well as some post-colonial writers, to emphasize, among other things, the intertextuality of writing. Writing thus understood involves, as Tan phrases it, 'force[s] greater than oneself'" (Adam 150). Realizing the power of writing, Tan weaves different texts together in order to explore matters related to identity, history, reality and, most crucially, writing itself. Tan, herself also uses the figure of a quilt to describe the process of her own writing: "It is a crazy quilt ... Pieced together, torn apart, repaired again and again,

and strong enough to protect us all” (OF 266). Taking Precious Auntie and Lu Ling’s autobiographies as examples, we can see how the quilt of the text executes its power of protection. In the novel, as Precious Auntie cannot persuade Lu Ling to refuse the marriage proposal from the coffin maker, Chang, she writes her stories to Lu Ling to reveal her true identity and the truth of Chang’s prosecution to her family. Meanwhile, she writes a threatening letter to the Chang family, warning them that if they do not cancel the marriage proposal to Lu Ling, her ghost will haunt and curse their family throughout all time. Because of her letter, Lu Ling knows the truth that Precious Auntie is her birth mother and that Chang is her father’s killer. Frightened of the curse, Chang cancels the marriage proposal after Precious Auntie’s suicide. Therefore, Precious Auntie’s quilt of texts is a vibrant Qi-thing which has the power to protect her daughter from the fraud that Chang makes up.

Similarly, as a Qi-thing, Lu Ling’s autobiography has positive effects on Ruth. It acquaints Ruth with her mother’s and her grandmother’s stories which endow her with an emotional impulse to write her own story rather than being a ghost writer. In this turn from ghost writing to her own stories, Ruth’s writings can be seen as metatextual figures of Amy Tan’s work, inspired by and addressed to her Chinese mother and grandmother. Combining the emotional truth from her grandmother, her mother and her own past experiences with her imagination, Tan creates her own texts. In an interview with Molly Giles, Tan confides that “writing is like bonesetting or excavation, through re-configuring bits and pieces of our own past and those of our ancestors, we understand who we are.” In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, as Qi-things, each text in the network exerts its own agentic power to bring to light bits and

pieces of characters' past or those of their parents and ancestors. In new configurations these fragments assist characters to understand themselves by knowing how they come to be who they are.

*The Valley of Amazement* also juxtaposes different written texts and verbal representations such as commentary on paintings, Whitman's poems, Edward's diary and letters. As I have discussed in the narrative part, through verbal representations of the painting "The Valley of Amazement", Violet and her mother, Lucia, quest for their true identities. However, each time they verbally represent the painting, they always endow it with different significance. Therefore, their quest does not uncover a fixed identity but one that is always in flux. Their recurring representations of the painting reveal the fact that the meaning of intertexts is never exhausted, so that the characters who express themselves in texts will never fix their identities. The fragments of text are always available for new compositions. In the same way, no reader will ever interpret them in exactly the same way.

Besides, weaving different texts together, Tan also questions the agency of the network of texts. In *The Valley of Amazement*, we can see how the juxtaposition of official certificates and personal letters blurs the boundaries between truth and fiction. Official certificates are normally required to prove characters' true identity, but actually, they sometimes cover up the truth. Falling in love with an American, Edward Ivory, Violet becomes his wife. However, after the death of Edward, without the marriage certificate and their daughter, Flora's birth certificate, Violet cannot prove her identity as Edward's legal wife and Flora's mother. However, with her own marriage certificate and the birth certificate

for Flora Violet Ivory, Edward's American wife is able to prove herself as Edward's legal wife and legally grabs Flora from Violet. Although the official documents have legal effects, they are unable to tell the truth. At the end of the novel, through her father's letters and the letters from Uncle Loyalty, Flora discovers the truth about who she is and who her real mother is. Juxtaposing official documents and personal letters in a network, Tan makes characters float in the entanglement of truth and fiction.

What's more, in *Saving Fish from Drowning*, through the interactions of a fictional preface and a real reader's guide at the end of the novel, we can further see how Tan makes readers become entangled between fiction and truth. Tan adds a real reader's guide entitled "A CONVERSATION WITH AMY TAN," in which she declares that

[i]n writing *Saving Fish from Drowning*, I blurred fiction and non-fiction. The book begins with a section called "A Note to the Reader," words that usually denote this is not fiction. But what follows is hyperbolic fiction - a Hollywood fanfare of lightning and thunder, and a series of amazing coincidences, the kind only found in fiction, an excess of famous people, gruesome deaths, mysteries, disappearances into the jungle, and a cause célèbre that grabbed international headlines for weeks, "*as readers no doubt recall....*"(SFD 492)

Although fiction masquerades as truth in the preface, Tan also explains that

...there are parts of that preface that are indeed based on the facts, as near as I can verify them by multiple sources, and that is the information regarding the Myanmar military regime. All true: its ban on reporting losing soccer scores

and bad weather, the existence of a myth about a younger white brother, and the persecution of a tribe called the Karen. (SFD 492-3)

Apart from those fictions and facts that Tan exposes, we can observe many more fictional and nonfictional intertexts in the preface and question how these fictional and nonfictional intertexts exert their agencies when they are juxtaposed in a network.

In a 2005 interview with Amy Tan, a NPR correspondent, Lynn Neary reports:

In a note to the reader at the beginning of the book, Tan claims to have discovered the story of Bibi Chen and 11 American tourists who went missing in Burma in the Archives of the American Society for Psychological Research. Tan also includes a supposed news clipping about the missing tourists. All of this is presented as if it were true, but it is not. Tan says she thought the story was so obviously farcical that no one would ever believe it.

But when reviewing the book for the Chicago Sun-Times, Sharon Barrett was initially fooled by Tan's introduction as "she found herself writing that Tan's introduction purports to tell the reader about the real events that led to the book" (Neary 20 Nov. 2005). Then viewing her own words, Barrett suddenly realized that "Tan used a clever twist on the literary device which she refers to as 'the manuscript in the attic ploy,' where a narrator finds a real document on which the story is supposedly based." The seemingly factual nature of the kidnapping story, combined with real newspaper reports of the difficulties and dangers of traveling in that country blur the distinctions between the fantastic and the real. Also the fact that fictional elements appear in the preface unsettles the usual distinction between the

authorial voice and the narrative voice as well as between reality and fiction.

Through references to two types of automatic writing in the prefatory note to the reader, we can see how Tanis seriously playing on her readers' desire to suspend their disbelief. Tan's reference of Pearl Curran's automatic writings is a really fascinating mix of truth and fiction. Tan writes:

I was especially impressed with the transmissions received from 1913 to 1937 by an 'ordinary homemaker' in St. Louis, Pearl Curran, who had no formal education past the age of fourteen, and was the recipient of stories from a garrulous ghost named Patience Worth. Patience purportedly lived in the 1600s and wrote of medieval times. The results were volumes of antiquated prose, with intimate knowledge of colloquialisms and social manners of olden days, a language that was not quite Middle English and yet contained no anachronisms past the seventeenth century. (SFD xii)

Readers perhaps think that Pearl Curran is a fictional character and her ability to produce automatic writing is Tan's imagination. But, actually this character is not fictional but really exists. In the article "Patience Worth: Author From the Great Beyond," Gioia Diliberto, a biographer and novelist explicitly illustrates how Pearl Curran, a St. Louis housewife, channeled a 17<sup>th</sup>-century spirit to the heights of 20<sup>th</sup>-century literary stardom. In his text, Diliberto reveals the fact that

Speaking through a Ouija board operated by Pearl Lenore Curran, a St. Louis housewife of limited education, Patience Worth was nothing short of a

national phenomenon in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though her works are virtually forgotten today, the prestigious Braithwait anthology listed five of her poems among the nation's best published in 1917, and The New York Times hailed her first novel as a 'feat of literary composition.' Her output was stunning. In addition to seven books, she produced voluminous poetry, short stories, plays and reams of sparkling conversation - nearly four million words between 1913 and 1937.

Obviously, in her fictional note to the reader, Tan narrates a real story about Pearl Curran which echoes another text. Through referencing that text, Tan seems to resuscitate the ghosts she finds in old books and stories. It seems that intertextuality in Tan's work is a Qi-thing which would be able to channel the dead and make their stories live again.

Besides Pearl Curran's automatic writings, Tan reveals that she is also fascinated by Karen Lundegaard's automatic writings which inspire her to create the fiction, *Saving Fish from Drowning*. Through this reference to Karen Lundegaard's automatic writings, Tan claims to revive the spirit, Bibi Chen, whose stories expose the cruelty of Myanmar junta and also lure readers to consider what the spirit is. In the preface, Tan explains that "While it is impossible to corroborate the thoughts and motives of the Myanmar junta, I have included 'Bibi's report' as fictional imaginings of fictional characters. This may have clouded the line between what is dramatically fictional and what is horrifyingly true" (SFD xv). While she pretends to reuse the stories transmitted by Bibi's spirit as fiction, Tan also reveals that "...the truth of Bibi's story can be found in numerous sources citing the myth of the Younger White

Brother, the systematic killing of the Karen tribe, and even the military regime's ban on reporting losses by its national soccer team" (xv). Although Bibi's stories are fictional intertexts, they contain some elements of truth which derive from Tan's real experience visiting Myanmar with a cultural and arts tour. Tan states that

...I did not depend on someone else's videotapes to write my story, although that is what I said in the fictional 'Note to the Reader.' But I do know this: Had I not gone to Burma, I wouldn't have set the story there. I can do plenty with imagination, but when the setting itself is a major character, I need to have touched the ground that my characters talk. And even having been to Burma, I still did a lot of research. (SFD 486)

Therefore, referencing Karen Lundegaard's automatic writing delivered by a spirit named Bibi Chen, Tan disturbs the dichotomy of truth and fiction so as to lure readers to "suspend their own disbelief when immersed in fiction. We want to believe that the world we have entered through the portals of another's imagination indeed exists, that the narrator is or has been among us" (SFD xiv). Through her play with intertextuality, Tan blurs truth and fiction so that readers have to consider the existence and the nature of spirits and along with the tyranny of the Myanmar junta.

In claiming that her fiction is inspired by Karen Lundegaard's automatic writings, Tan reveals how the medium "drained her energy" when receiving messages from the spirit, Bibi (SFD xiii). Draining her energy means the exhaustion of her Qi. Based on this point, Tan emphasizes the power of Qi through which humans can communicate with spirits. Employing

her Qi to communicate with Bibi's spirit and then transmitting her messages into words, Karen exhausts her own Qi which is transmitted into her automatic writings. Therefore, these writings become Qi-things, combining the Qi of Karen and the spirit, Bibi, so as to have great effects on the first purported reader, Amy Tan, who then creates her own fiction based on these automatic writings. Clearly, for Amy Tan, writing is an assemblage of Qi which gathers the Qi of different discourses and texts.

Besides mixing fictional intertexts and actual intertexts in a fictional preface, in the novel, Tan creates the ghost narrator, Bibi Chen, who represents not only the voice of the fictional spirit who manipulates Karen's automatic writing but also Tan's own mother's voice. Tan states that "I had started writing this book shortly after my mother died. I was sad for many reasons, but also that my mother would no longer figure into my stories. But then my mother said—or rather, I imagined her saying—'I can still tell stories. I can be tour guide'" (SFD 488). Therefore, to Amy Tan, her fiction is a Qi-thing which is able to call her mother back to the world of the living. Through creating a ghost narrator, Bibi Chen who has her mother's personality, Tan allows the fiction to be "told in the voice of [her] mother, with her idiosyncratic views on how the world works, why things happen, and how [Tan or her mother] can make things happen another way" (491). Therefore, in virtue of the ghost narrator's voice, Tan revives her mother as a heroine in her fiction where "she is trying to control not just one ungrateful daughter but a repressive regime" (492). What's more, combining the voice of a fictional spirit with the voice of Tan's mother, areal spirit, the narration of the ghost narrator, Bibi Chen, represents a form of "polyvocality" or

“heteroglossia”, or “heterodiegesis” in Tan’s fiction. And the ghost narrator, Bibi Chen is endowed with the agency to juxtapose truth and fiction so as to move the plot forward and affect other characters and readers.

In the novel, through Bibi Chen’s narration, Tan fictionalizes the Karen tribe’s mythology of the Younger White Brother and a real story about the God’s army. The Karen people trick the whole American tour group into visiting their tribe since they mistake the American boy, Rupert as the reincarnated one, the Younger White Brother who can protect them from the prosecution of Myanmar junta. Bibi Chen tells a story about how an Englishman, named Edgar Seraphineas Andrews pretends to be the Younger White Brother in order to cancel the accusation of him as an impostor and to continue to defraud others so as to satisfy his own desire. According to Bibi,

[h]aving spent a good part of his boyhood in Burma, Seraphineas Andrews was adept at debauchery in two cultures. He took to bedding loose ladies and seducing laced-up ones, smoking opium and drinking absinthe. In Mandalay, he learned from watching illusionists of all nations and stripes, and soon began to defraud even the savviest gamblers. (SFD 274)

Making use of tricks with a deck of cards and people’s religious, mystical, or superstitious beliefs, Seraphineas Andrews pretends to be the reincarnation of God so as to convince women to grant him intimate favors and manipulate “a retinue of young men to carry out his orders, from robbing banks to stabbing to death a man who threatened to expose him as an impostor” (275). To escape discovery, he runs into the Burmese jungle. Then, employing his

usual repertory of tricks and people's belief about the mythology of the Younger White Brother, he masquerades as the reincarnation of that revered figure, the Lord of Nats who could save the Karen tribe from being entirely wiped out by the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) soldiers. In imagining the Younger White Brother as an Englishman who makes use of Karen people's beliefs to make his own profit, Tan exposes the truth that it is Britain's colonization of Burma that is responsible for the civil unrest and that the Karen tribe's belief in the legend of the Younger White Brother is an illusion induced by the country's colonial past. Mistaking Rupert, the American boy, as the reincarnation of the Younger White Brother, the Karen people believe that the young American is capable of becoming invisible and of making them invisible so as to escape from oppression. Quite the contrary, he makes the Karen visible around the world since the news reports of the eleven missing American tourists in Burma exposes the tribe's hiding place to the public.

What's more, Tan references a real story about the Lord's Army jointly led by twin brothers, Johnny Htoo and Luther Htoo who are thought to have magical powers so as to lead the Karen people to rebel against the Myanmar junta. However, in the novel, the twin brothers turn into boy and girl twins who are under the guardianship of a grandmother, a survivor of the Karen tribe. The grandmother "named the boy 'Loot' and the girl 'Bootie,' English words meaning 'goods of great value taken in war'" (SFD 278). And she recounts that "EVERYONE RECOGNIZED Loot and Bootie as divinities" due to three signs that include "their double healthy birth", "no tears" and "the power to both resist bullets and disappear" (278-81). While American tourists and readers doubt that what the grandmother

says can be true, at the end of the novel, after the tourists are rescued from the No Name Place and the Karen tribe are expelled and resurfaced in a refugee camp on the Thai border, Bibi reveals to readers an alternative version of the twins' story:

[i]n doing health checks, doctors in the camp ascertained that the twins Loot and Bootie were not seven-or eight-year-olds, as my friends had thought, but twelve-year-olds stunted by incessant cherrot-smoking. An American psychiatrist visiting the camp diagnosed the twins' grandmother with posttraumatic stress disorder...In the old woman's case, it stemmed from having seen one hundred and five members of her village being killed. This, he said, had led to her 'magical thinking' that the twins were deities. The twins admitted they had gone along with their grandmother's 'make-believe stories' to keep her happy, and also because they were given as many cheroots to smoke as they wanted. (SFD 439)

Through Bibi's narration, Tan reveals the great trauma that the Karen people suffer from the Myanmar regime and the Western democracy. Therefore, through references to the legend of the Younger White Brother and the story about the Lord's Army, Tan mixes truth and fiction to expose the real situation in Myanmar.

In Tan's novels intertextuality covers a range of different possibilities that include real texts quoted verbatim, myths, stories recounted orally and apparently factual documents that are in fact fictions. Tan's recourse to texts from the past does not produce works that are nostalgic or passéist. Instead the old stories are revitalized by being placed in new contexts.

Through recounting or rewriting myths and old stories, Tan reveals social realities and political conflicts, and characters are in the process of seeking for their identities which are hybrid or in flux. What's more, in juxtaposing these fictional and actual intertexts in a network, Tan produces works that are heterogeneous Qi-things containing multiple dialogues and voices.

## **Conclusion**

Taking her distance from the phonocentric view that speech is superior to writing, Tan emphasizes the privileges of written texts and their cooperation with speech. In her works, neither texts nor speech are superior; as Qi-things, they complement each other in the task of narration. Besides different written and oral texts, Tan creates different writing modes, such as Chinese calligraphy, ghost writing and sand writing which are Qi-things because of their vibrant materialities. In their interactions, these writing modes can transmit their vibrant materialities to human characters which assist them to reach the reunion of body and mind. At last, through the intertextuality of texts, Tan not only discusses how text becomes agentic through its references to other texts but also how different texts juxtapose together so as to construct a world of texts where the boundaries between fact and fiction are blurred and characters understand how they become who they are through their interaction with different texts. Therefore, to Amy Tan, writing is no longer subordinate to speech or an inert object but is a heterogeneous Qi-thing which not only has vital force to affect humans but also has the agency of assemblage to contain multiple dialogues and voices.

## Conclusion

Due to her bi-cultural upbringing, Amy Tan has been deeply influenced by both Western and Chinese culture. Through depicting the cultural conflicts between some Chinese immigrant mothers and their American daughters in her first two novels, Tan explicitly reflects her own struggle living in two cultures at the beginning of her literary creation. However, through mediating and contrasting these two cultures, Tan's works gradually move beyond the conflictual phase of living in-between and start to consider the advantages. Inspired by the holistic and harmonious views in Chinese philosophy, Tan reflects on the western dualist tradition. In her works, she attempts to eschew the separation of the subject and the object; instead, both humans and non-humans can be seen as Qi-things, a hybrid concept which includes not only natural things, man-made things, human beings, ghosts, and immortals, but also elements in the textual world, such as words and images. Combining Chinese and contemporary thought on things with interdisciplinary and cross cultural and anthropological studies, this thesis has discussed this hybridized concept of Qi-things and attempted to show how these Qi-things interact with each other in Tan's novels. Focusing on the interaction of Qi-things through living in the wider world as well as in the textual world, this thesis has discussed how these other-than human Qi-things exert their vital forces to affect humans and how they come together as assemblages so as to construct the ecological

return to harmony between humans and non-humans, microcosm and macrocosm, resulting in harmony within the textual world.

Apart from focusing on how Qi-things interact through living and in the natural, spiritual and textual world, I think it is necessary to think about how the Qi-things develop in the course of Amy Tan's whole works. Elaborating on the material dimensions, especially eating and clothing in Tan's first two novels, I find that she begins with a slightly more conventional subject-object duality even though some hybrid food and clothing images work as assemblages to reconcile cultural conflicts and the mother-daughter relation. Besides creating some food images whose distinct vital force can individualize characters, harmonize humans' minds and bodies or even mediate human relations, Tan also creates many food images and discourses on food to reflect the subject/object relation between men and women or between food and humans and to mirror characters' struggle between two cultures. Like food and things related to eating, more than having vital force to individualize characters and make characters' identity come into being through their interactions, clothing and accessory images also mirror the inequality in different social classes in traditional Chinese society and reflect Chinese immigrant mothers' cultural struggle in American society. Then through depicting many solid house images, Tan reveals the inequality between men and women in both traditional Chinese society and American society even though she attempts to search for spatial balance in these domestic spaces.

However, in her later novels, she moves further and further away from conventional novelistic configurations. Through her concern about the natural and spiritual world and her

consideration of narration and writing, we can see how Tan has moved toward giving more and more power and liveliness to all her Qi-things.

When questioning ecological issues in her novels, besides revealing the dualist tradition in which women and everything in the natural world are regarded as other and suffer oppression and discrimination from both the western and Chinese patriarchal domination, Tan strives to break this dualist opposition by emphasizing the vital force of nature and everything in it. As I have discussed in the second part of chapter four, for one thing, Tan's novels refer to many natural Qi-things, such as animals, bacteria and natural tea, all of which have vital force to improve or estrange the human characters' relations and to move the plot into complexity or into harmony. In contrast to binary relations, humans and non-human Qi-things in nature are presented as "companion species" which co-define each other in the process of their interactions. For another, Tan advocates the coexistence of human and natural places. Many natural places and settings in her novels are not inert backgrounds but animated characters or lively Qi-things in interaction with humans. In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Tan depicts a virgin forest named NO Name Place which has the agency to gather the Karen's, American tourists and natural things together and to offer a powerful nexus for their complex interactions. In *Hundred Secret Senses*, more than simply being the hometown of Kwan, Hangman village becomes an agentic assemblage crossing time and space. Specifically, it exhibits its power to narrate the cycle of Kwan's birth and death and rebirth and to urge Olivia to re-connect with her psyche and reconcile with Simon.

Besides exploring the interaction of Qi-things in natural world, Tan questions life

continuing beyond our ordinary senses. To subvert the western rational tradition and the dichotomy between spirit and matter, Tan not only creates many spiritual things such as “Yin people” and “nats,” but also elevates them as equally important forms of existence as humans. On one hand, based on Chinese philosophies about ghosts and spirits, this thesis has discussed how these ghost images, including a ghost narrator, ghost lover and mother ghost execute their spiritual power to haunt human’s dreams, memories and imaginations. Meanwhile, ghosts can still exert their spirit power through those things that they used during their lifetimes or exhumed Qi-things. On the other hand, conjuring up a Chinese sister, Kwan, who has yin eyes, along with other spiritual elements such as: “Yin people” and “hundred secret senses,” in *Hundred Secret Senses*, Tan creates a “Yin world,” namely an agentic assemblage which gathers human characters’ present and previous lives together and so as to overcome cultural conflicts and racial discrimination. Then, through conjuring up a statue of the Kitchen God’s wife and depicting “Nats”—“the spirits of nature” in Burmese belief—Tan still explores the spiritual world beyond ethnicity and nationality.

What’s more, through creating some other-than human narrators and emphasizing the cooperation of writing and speech and the vibrant materiality of writing, Tan further challenges conventional novelistic configurations. She creates many non-human narrators, such as: narrative bones in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, photographic representations and ekphrastic narration to supplement the limits of human narrators and to shape the texts’ own narrative and aesthetic expressions. Endowed with the power of narration, these non-human things are no longer inert objects, but Qi-things which are capable of moving the plot forward

and having effects on humans. Focusing on the interaction between human characters and these other-than human narrators, we can see Tan redefines the concept of narration. In the perspective of Qi-things, narration in Tan's works becomes a new form of what Bakhtin terms "polyvocality" or "heteroglossia," or "heterodiegesis." It is a weaving together of many different expressions that unsettle the superiority of the human in Western literature. Apart from endowing non-human things with the power of narration, Tan treats writing as an alternative mode of expression. She creates many written and oral texts to deconstruct the priority of language. In her novels, these texts are Qi-things which have agencies to express humans' emotions, mediate their relations or even reveal hidden truths with the cooperation of speech. Besides, through imagining different writing modes, such as Chinese calligraphy, ghost writing and sand writing, Tan endows writing with a vital materiality which can harmonize humans' mind and body. These writing modes appear in Tan's fourth novel: *The Bonesetters' Daughter*. More than a work about two sets of mother-daughter relations, this novel represents Tan's thoughts about writing as a mode that is no longer subordinate to spoken language but is a heterogeneous Qi-thing which not only has effects on humans but also has the agency of assemblage to contain multiple dialogues and voices.

In all, focusing on the material dimensions in Tan's novels, this thesis has not only elaborated on Tan's thoughts about human cultures but also her questions of the relation between humans and nature, between humans and the spiritual world beyond our ordinary senses or even her views on narrative and aesthetic expressions. Based on my research about the material dimensions of existence in Tan's novels, I believe that Tan's stories are about

“[her] search for balance in [her] life” (OP 302). Based on two factors, I have approved of her claim that more than a Chinese American writer; she is “an American writer.”<sup>32</sup> For one thing, apart from questioning ethnicity in her literary works, like other American writers, Tan also shows concern about common issues, such as ecological problems, narrative strategies and theories about writing. For another, as Amy Tan’s literary works present the diversity of American culture, it is reasonable for us to take them as a part of American literature. Through her works she “...already has earned herself a berth in the cannon of contemporary American literature” (Huntley 40). I believe my study not only opens up a new angle for readers to study Tan’s novels or even other ethnic American literary works, but also has agency to encourage readers and critics to treat works written by Amy Tan and other ethnic American writers as American literary works rather than stereotypes of ethnic culture, so as to understand them in their wider dimensions.

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<sup>32</sup> In her essay “Required Reading and Other Dangerous Subjects,” Tan claims that “If I had to give myself any sort of label, I would have to say I am an American writer. I am Chinese by racial heritage. I am Chinese-American by family and social upbringing. But I believe that what I write is American fiction by virtue of the fact that I live in this country and my emotional sensibilities, assumptions, and obsessions are largely American” (OF 310).

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### **An Ecological Return to Harmony in Amy Tan's Novels**

**Abstract:** Comments on Amy Tan's novels mainly focus on what we associate with human culture, ignoring the material dimensions of existence that figure prominently in her novels. Influenced by the anthropocentric idea that the human being/the subject is superior to things/the object, critics mainly focus on the mother-daughter relation, the importance of language and memory and the conflicts of Chinese and American culture. However, in the context of the so-called “return to things,” “back to things,” and “turn to the non-human” which has become visible in the humanities since the 1990s, I concentrate on things, specifically on the interactions between humans and nonhumans in her novels. Under the influence of both American and Chinese culture, Tan breaks with the western tradition of binary opposition in which the subject is superior to the object. Qi-things include natural and man-made things, human beings, and even spiritual things and things in the textual world. Bringing the twenty-first century western revision of things into dialogue with Chinese philosophies, especially Taoism, this dissertation discusses the traits of Qi-things and how they interact with each other to foster an ecological return to harmony within the textual world that reconciles humans and non-humans, microcosm and macrocosm.

**Key words:** Amy Tan, Thing theory, Qi-things, Vibrant materiality, Assemblage, Harmony

### **Retour écologique à l'harmonie dans des romans d'Amy Tan**

**Résumé:** La critique de la romancière américaine Amy Tan se concentre principalement sur la dimension humaine de ses romans, négligeant la dimension matérielle de l'existence qui occupe une place prépondérante dans ses romans. Sous l'influence d'une conception anthropocentrique qui privilégie l'être humain ou le sujet, la critique s'est concentrée essentiellement sur la relation mère / fille, sur l'importance du langage et de la mémoire et sur les conflits entre les cultures chinoise et américaine. Néanmoins, dans le contexte de ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler le “retour aux choses” et l'accent nouveau mis sur le “non humain”, mouvement qui s'est mis en place dans la critique des années 1990, je porte mon attention sur les choses, plus particulièrement sur les interactions entre humains et non-humains dans ses romans. Sous la double influence des cultures chinoise et américaine, Tan dépasse l'opposition binaire, qui caractérise la tradition occidentale, selon laquelle le sujet est supérieur à l'objet. Les humains et les non-humains ainsi que les entités naturelles et spirituelles sont tous des choses-Qi dans l'univers textuel. En mettant en dialogue la réflexion occidentale contemporaine sur les choses avec les philosophies chinoises, notamment le taoïsme, cette thèse examine les caractéristiques des choses-Qi et leurs interactions de nature à provoquer un retour écologique à l'harmonie entre les humains et les non-humains, entre le microcosme et le macrocosme dans l'ordre textuel.

**Mots-clés:** Amy Tan, Théorie de l'objets, choses-Qi, Matérialité vibrant, Assemblage, Harmonie