

**Studying the Hyphen: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Selected Works by  
Amy Tan**

**MA (by Research)**

**Nicola Adcock**

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**Contents**

Abstract	4
Introduction	5
Chapter One- Mothers and Mothering	21
Chapter Two- Words and Language	39
Chapter Three- Mirrors and Reflections	49
Conclusion	65
Works Cited	72

**Abstract**

It has been said “to be hyphenated is to be American” (Barber 614); however, the hyphen presents many different issues. For Chinese-Americans, what part of a person is Chinese, and what part American? Maxine Hong Kingston raises these ideas in her novel *The Woman Warrior*, where on one hand her protagonist embraces her Chinese heritage, and refers to herself as a “Chinese girl” (Kingston 25), yet she dismisses certain parts of Chinese tradition: “And I don’t want to go to Chinese school anymore. I want to run for office in an American school...” (Kingston 180). This cultural difference is best exemplified using the theme of mother-daughter relations. Amy Tan’s novel *The Joy Luck Club* explores the relationships between four generations of women: the grandmothers, the mothers, the daughters and the grand-daughters. Each generation considers Chinese-American life differently; this leads to conflict and resolutions in various relationships. This thesis aims to explore these relationships in light of feminist criticism, to provide a close reading of the novel focusing on the themes of conception, language and reflections and mirrors.

### Introduction

“...I love my daughter. She and I have shared the same body. There is a part of her mind that is part of mine. But when she was born, she sprang from me like a slippery fish, and has been swimming away ever since. All my life, I have watched her as if from another shore. And now I must tell her everything about my past. It is the only way to penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved.” (Tan, *Joy* 242)

The distance between mother and daughter within this extract from *The Joy Luck Club* is apparent. The mother (Ying-ying St. Clair) has faith in her power and influence over her daughter. She is desperate to renew her relationship with her daughter, Lena; Ying-ying believes this will save her daughter from her impending divorce. Within *The Joy Luck Club* there are clear tensions between mother and daughter, and Tan’s novel explores this complex relationship. This complex relationship has long been examined by both critics and novelists alike. A number of scholars have argued that by becoming mothers, women jeopardise their individual identities. For example, in the classic second wave feminist text *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich defines motherhood as falling into two categories: motherhood as institution, a role constructed by the men for the public domain; and motherhood as experience. She argues that this constructed view of motherhood does not do justice to the act of being a mother. She argues that while the act of fathering is the act of fertilization, “to ‘mother’ a child implies a continuing presence” (Rich, *Born* 12); fatherhood does not, thus confining women to the mothering role.

However, there are problems with Rich’s text. She has come under fire because she represents a middle-class, White America, much like another of her contemporaries, Nancy Chodorow. Marianne Heung criticises Chodorow for “[u]sing a paradigm that is White, middle class and Western,” and argues that as a result,

“Chodorow’s analysis is not universally applicable” (Heung 601). Chodorow and Rich both criticise the Western nuclear family; however, they fail to offer an alternative structure (Grice 40). The American-born characters in Tan’s novels live within the nuclear structure; those characters who have lived in China have experienced a family which included multiple generations and multiple matriarchs. There is a clear evidence within the text that shows Tan’s characters are affected by the lifestyle living in a multigenerational household. Tan links her characters by the examination of family structures and the characters’ individual identities. Those characters who have lived in a multigenerational house struggle with their own identities because they are influenced by those they live in close proximity to. These characters only become clear about their identities when they are placed in a nuclear family set-up.

The work of Rich and Chodorow is considered to belong in the second wave of feminism—that is, the period of feminist thought from the 1960’s to, arguably, the present day. The second wave of feminism, like the first (1860-1920), saw the production of feminist knowledge. The difference in the second wave of feminism is that this information was disseminated widely, and feminist thought became mass-produced. In addition to this, the second wave of feminism coined the term “matrilineage”, which will be explored in this thesis. Feminist thought played a larger role in universities and other learning institutions, areas that had formally been male dominated. This male domination was a central theme of feminist theory. The classic feminist texts that were produced at this time include Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* and Juliet Mitchell’s *Women’s Estate*. Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* is one of the core texts used within this thesis, alongside Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born*, Nancy Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of*

*Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, and *This Sex Which is Not One* by Luce Irigaray. Although these feminist texts are not recent, they still have significance in relation to Amy Tan's work. These are the feminist ideas which would have had significance during Tan's formative years, and thus have had an impact on Tan's own life and novels.

Other contemporary critics, such as Wendy Ho, have drawn on the period in which Greer, Rich, and Chodorow were producing these texts as significant in considering the work of Amy Tan. Ho argues, "Race, ethnicity, and class factors, at varying times, need to be considered in examining women's diverse nurturing and caregiving practices in American society" (Ho 39), and she uses examples of work from second wave feminists to support her discussion of Kingston, Tan and Fae Myenne Ng. Like Ho, I will draw on these critics, and this period of "caregiving in American society". In addition to this, Greer's latest text, *The Whole Woman*, is also core to this thesis, and I utilise it to draw an interesting contrast between these older texts and contemporary thought.

These works concentrate on women's oppression and liberation. One of the key areas this oppression was taking place was in the home. With male domination of the public sector, such as education, knowledge, law and business, women were relegated to the private sphere of the home. Women's "natural" roles were considered to be with the family, in raising children, and marriage. As women gave birth to children, it was considered their social role to look after their children. During the second wave of feminism in particular, scholars began to deconstruct this role and consider a woman as more than a wife and mother.

Despite the passage of over 30 years, Rich's theories are still being discussed in feminist works; particularly those on mothering. Feminist literary theory today



focuses some importance on considering the history of feminism, and a majority of feminist anthologies and teaching aids will often give a background of the history of feminism featuring works by critics such as Rich, Greer, Millet and Friedan. The reflective nature of feminist theory, looking back before looking forward, is somewhat similar to the approach of this thesis. This thesis looks reflectively at Tan's work so far, considering the work that has influenced Tan's approaches to writing. In taking a reflective role, this thesis also looks back at criticism from early in second wave feminism and looks forward to more contemporary feminist and Chinese-American literary theory.

Many cultural changes have occurred since these key texts were produced in the late 1970s, and feminisms have adapted to accommodate this changing social climate. At the beginning of the second wave of Western feminism, some feminists "want[ed] to deconstruct the prevailing status quo completely, as to transform the existing order of reality" (Morris 5). Feminism has achieved this to some extent. Revolution has occurred in the workplace, with legislation seeking to ensure that women who do the same or similar jobs to men are paid comparable wages to them. In addition to this, the status quo has changed in the classroom, too. A number of feminists felt that art and literature were important for change, and thus they wanted a re-evaluation of women's place in the literary canon. Now academic syllabuses have radically changed; feminists dreamed of "perhaps including Aphra Behn alongside Shakespeare, Caryl Churchill alongside Ibsen, Alice Walker alongside William Faulkner" (Goodman ix), and now this has become reality. These authors are common place on both school and university syllabuses.

In achieving some of the aims they set out in the late 1970s feminists' ideologies have changed. With women now facing a new role in society, new

problems have emerged. Women have been able to take control of their lives in the office; however, a new problem in the home has materialised: the rise of the working mother.

The issue of the working mother is one which dominates contemporary discussions of mothering, appearing, for example, as a major cause for concern in Linda M. Baum's essay, "Mothers, Babies and Breastfeeding in Late Capitalist America: The Shifting Contexts of Feminist Theory", as well as for Germaine Greer's *The Whole Woman* and Jo VanEvery's *Heterosexual Women Changing the Family: Refusing to be a 'Wife'*. It is possible to see this change of female life within *The Joy Luck Club*. Waverly is the only daughter in the novel who has children, and she is raising her child as a working, single mother when the book opens. Waverly's mother, Lindo, judges her daughter because of this: "The hallway was littered with Shoshana's toys...She looked around the room, toward the hall, and finally she said, "You have career. You are busy. You want to live like mess what can I say" (Tan, *Joy* 169). Lindo judges Waverly because of her career; as Lindo never had a career, a division occurs between mother and daughter.

The changing approaches adopted by feminist reflect a constantly changing society. Suzanna Danuta Walters argues personal experience is the touchstone of many feminist scholars. It can be argued, therefore, that feminist thought develops as the experience of women changes; feminism will continue to evolve as women's experiences become more varied. The daughters that Rich and Greer had previously discussed are now mothers themselves. The school of thought has therefore developed with their experiences. The women who are mothers now have been raised in a very different society to their own mothers. This is reflected in Tan's work. Tan's novel aims to give both mothers and daughters a voice, but as the daughters become

mothers themselves, their thoughts and ideas change. Tan addresses a changing female society by placing her characters within it. Waverly is a working mother; she also moves away from the exclusively Chinese society her mother lives in and enters college: mixing with the wider American community.

By reflecting on their own experiences, feminists are constantly developing their ideas on mother and daughter relationships. Walters argues that the continuing interest in the relationship between mothers and daughters is because of the link between mothers and identity. The daughter's identity is so much part of her relationship with her mother that this has been a continued point of discussion for scholars. However, Walters argues that one crucial part of this relationship has neglected by scholars: media representation of the mother-daughter relationship, and this became the focus on her 1992 book, *Lives Together/Worlds Apart: Mothers and Daughters in Popular Culture*. The media has always been a central focus for feminists; they have looked to this medium to display the cultural focus of the female for many years, and therefore the nature of female representation in the media is an important area of discussion. Walters suggests that there is a very narrow vision of the mother-daughter relationship in the media, focused either on "bonding" or "separation", which doesn't do justice to this complex relationship. Walters also found a majority of mother daughter relationship portrayals in the media are through literature; Walters argues this is because of literature is the least corporate media outlet (Walters 19).

As mothers' and feminists' perspectives change, the focus of the feminist scholars moves. Hirsch argues that feminists have in the past taken a "daughterly perspective", thus causing a separation of the two roles. Hirsch argues, "Only a probing scrutiny of what separates feminist discourse from maternal discourse can

free feminist thinking to define some of the shapes of maternal subjectivity and to study the articulation of specifically *maternal* voices” (Hirsch 163). Hirsch emphasises that both sides of the relationship and consideration of both roles is vital in understanding how this relationship works. Hirsch concludes her argument by stating, “The greatest tragedy that can occur between mother and daughter is when they cease being able to speak and listen to each other” (Hirsch 199). The focus for Hirsch is not to alienate the mother, but to bring mother and daughter together in communication and understanding. This book was published in 1989, the same year as *The Joy Luck Club*. Within Tan’s novel the reader sees these two dialects coming together in the form of fiction. In concluding her novel, Tan’s mothers and daughters finally begin to understand each other, and begin the process of effective communication; this is Hirsch’s hope for future feminism.

Traditionally, a large part of the feminist movement has focused on the study of psychoanalysis and feminism, dealing with, among other things, the idea of that women experience “phallic jealousy”. These feminists have worked to reconsider the writing of Freud and Lacan, among others. However, there are experiences some women will have and others will not, and are not universal to all women. This has seen a development of different branches of feminist theory, for example lesbian feminism, of which Rich’s essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” is a key example.

Most importantly to this thesis is the emergence of Asian American feminist theory. Like many women of multi-cultural backgrounds, Asian American women’s experiences have been different in many ways from the experience of the White, middle class, feminist scholar. In exploring her experiences, Amy Ling identifies that she is concerned by the view taken that Asian American, or more specifically Chinese

American, writing is overlooked as third rate and third world. In the essay “‘I’m Here: an Asian American Woman’s Response’”, Ling discusses her concern that Asian American writing is not recognised as a category; rather it is indexed in texts as “other”. Ling argues for the reclaiming of lost work, and considers herself as part of a group of feminist theorists working to uncover lost texts: “we may each be working in separate corners of the garden, but we are all working in the same garden” (Ling, *Here* 744). The garden in which Ling and other feminist scholars are working blossoms in the late 1980s and early 1990s with a surge in publications from Asian American writers, thus bringing this category from the category of “other” into its own. Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong explores this surge in publications in her book *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. Wong’s book dedicates space to “developing a reading practice appropriate for Asian American literature” (Wong 13); this is an issue earlier addressed by Amy Ling, too. Ling argues that in reading Asian American literature, critics should stretch outside of themselves, and move inside somebody else’s skin and experiences (Ling, *Here* 740). This is the approach I favour in this thesis; what follows is a close reading of a novel that demonstrates an experience which readers may only have partial experience of, if any. Thus, this thesis explores Tan’s novel from the many different perspectives it offers: a different family structure, a different cultural background, a different mother daughter relationship.

Once the initial problem of being heard was overcome by the increased publication from Asian American writers, Asian American criticism has continued in various directions. Jinqi Ling has continued criticism in the direction Amy Ling initiated, by retrieving lost works and providing a critical background to these works. Jinqi Ling’s book *Narrating Nationalisms: Ideology and Form in Asian American*

*Literature* focuses on works published between 1957 and 1980. Other Asian American critics have followed feminist thought into the exploration of mother/daughter relationships, including Wendy Ho. This has provided a huge topic of focus for Asian American critics who see the added cultural boundaries between mother and daughter as an area of exploration. Amy Tan's novel embeds both of these concerns within its text. As Ho identifies, Tan and her Chinese American contemporaries explore both the neglected stories of their heritage, and "the complex negotiations that Chinese immigrant mothers and their Americanized daughters perform daily in dealing with diverse and often interpretive systems and cultures" (Ho 39). To Ho the negotiation between mother and daughter is concluded when there is an acceptance of identity; only when the women can name and define their multiple social responsibilities can they fulfil these roles effectively (Ho 189). The realisation at the end of *The Joy Luck Club* that mothers and daughters have more in common than they thought comes when each woman sees her role in the family and in her own life clearly. When she can identify these roles, she is more effectively able to fulfil them. In addition, Tan has developed the art of telling her stories through the rediscovery of lost stories, and draws her inspiration from her own family's secret past. Tan has developed as an author and an individual by being able to accept these hidden truths, and pass these stories on so they do not remain lost.

As I have shown, the discussion of the mother/daughter relationship in women's writing is a major theme in related Asian American criticism and in contemporary feminist theory. With mothers playing such an important role in both areas of criticism, it is fitting to explore the women who have acted as literary mothers to Amy Tan, and how the relationship between these women influence Tan's novels. To construct a matrilineage is to establish the critical and creative origins of a

writer, and to better understand her works in context. A matrilineage demonstrates a clear origin of thought, and a progression of this thought. In this case the constructed matrilineage will focus on women writers of similar cultural origins to Amy Tan, who address the same thematic concerns as Tan. Although I recognise that matrilineages are constructed and cannot be definitively proven, I nevertheless find the construction of a Chinese-American matrilineage essential because it helps to place Tan's creative negotiations into a larger context. In considering writers who act as "mothers" to Tan, by construct not biology, I can explore the resonances of the mother-daughter relationship more fully, which is the main subject of this thesis. There are two writers in particular who can be explored in relation to Amy Tan: Edith Maude Eaton and Maxine Hong Kingston. Ho quotes the significance of Kingston to the work of Amy Tan citing "Amy Tan drew inspiration from *The Woman Warrior*" (Ho 44)

In terms of considering "mother texts" for Tan, this thesis will look to the Chinese-American influence on Tan's work. To support the Chinese-American aspect of this thesis, and provide the feminist core argument with context, focus will be placed on the work of Helena Grice, specifically *Negotiating Identities: An Introduction to Asian American Women's Writing*, and Bella Adams' author-centred work *Amy Tan*. Grice argues that the role of women in Chinese-American literature is significantly more dominant (Grice 156) than the position of women writers in Western culture, which has traditionally been marginal (Goodman xi). Grice notes: "Asian American women currently have a rather popular room in the house of fiction. In particular the success stories of Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan and Joy Kogawa come to mind" (Grice 224). Within Grice's "house of fiction", space is set aside for Asian American women, just as Tan herself sets aside space for each of her female characters. It is important that this thesis considers the room that Tan shares in this

“house”, and how these writers influence those they share a “room”. With this in mind, part of the conclusion to this thesis will consider the work of Gish Jen, because it is as important to consider Tan’s contemporaries as it is to consider those who wrote before her.

In *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* Amy Ling argues that Eaton is the first Chinese-American female writer, and she is therefore a starting point for this matrilineage. Published under the pseudonym Sui Sin Far, Eaton addressed issues of racial perception. In her short story “Leaves from a Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian”, Eaton explores stereotyping according to cultural origin. The perceptions of Chinese living in America at this time was largely negative, as one dinner guest in her story comments: “I cannot reconcile myself to the thought that the Chinese are humans like ourselves” (Eaton 838). This quotation comes following a dinner party, where the host is making racist comments against the Chinese. This is a racism which is reflected also in Kingston’s work. In *The Woman Warrior* Kingston’s protagonist experiences racism from a boss who refers to a paint colour as “Nigger Yellow” (Kingston 50). In addition to the racism experienced from White Americans, Kingston demonstrates to the reader tensions within the Chinese community. At school Kingston’s protagonist is segregated from her Caucasian classmates, and the Chinese girls speak only to each other. One girl remains silent during school and this leads Kingston’s character to bully another Chinese girl.

Within Eaton’s work there is evidence of an “Asian kinship nexus”, which is the idea that within Chinese American Literature and thought, Chinese people are united (Grice 28). Kingston challenges this idea, showing obvious conflict between mother and daughter, and between different Chinese characters. Critics argue, however, that the cultural frictions written by Kingston are aimed primarily at a



White American audience (a criticism that has been extended to Tan). Amy Ling also echoes this criticism in regards to Eaton. She criticises Eaton's choice of pseudonym; the name Sui Sin Far is used to confirm the ideas of the exotic East, and therefore enables the presentation of Eaton in stereotypical fashion. The main argument against these criticisms is that Eaton's work was as much embraced by the Chinese population as it is by a White audience (Ling, "Perspective" 79).

If Eaton is considered as a literary grandmother to Tan, then Maxine Hong Kingston can be seen as a mother. Kingston's work acts as a bridge between Eaton and Tan. *The Woman Warrior* reinforces the themes of cultural prejudice; however, Kingston also introduces a new theme, mothering. In particular, Kingston looks at the relationship between mothers and daughters raised in different cultures, as well as the conflict and reconciliation of these characters. This has become a major thematic concern for contemporary Chinese American writers, including Amy Tan and Gish Jen.

As with each generation, the ideas of earlier writers are taken by a new generation, expanded and added to. Despite the similarities that can be drawn between Tan, Kingston and Eaton, there are clear differences in certain ideas as the works become more recent. Eaton's ideas can be seen and are demonstrated by Tan, but their presence is less obvious than the presence of Kingston's influence. Where Kingston and Eaton's characters tend to have little communication with non-Chinese characters, Tan places two of her characters in a romantic relationship with a White American. In one example, Waverly's story occurs at a time when she meets and falls in love with Rich. Waverly tries to find a way of telling her mother that she is to marry a White American, and she believes her mother will find fault with their relationship. One of the main things that worries Waverly is that Rich is "not

Chinese” (Tan, *Joy* 177). This is a perfect example of the changes that occur within different generations in this matrilineage.

Essentially, *The Woman Warrior* is about a girl with Chinese parents growing up in America and trying to find her place somewhere between two cultures:

Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies? (Kingston 13).

A similar series of questions are asked by critics of both Kingston and Tan, and indeed Tan has been criticised for not accurately representing China. However, Bella Adams argues, using as support quotations from Tan herself, that Tan’s work should not be judged on whether it is a realistic portrayal of Chinese culture; rather it should be considered by its literary merit, not its cultural or historical accuracy (Adams 10-11). This thesis will approach Tan’s work acknowledging that it is not historically accurate, but rather a literary creation.

As well as thematic similarities between the writers, it is also possible to draw similarities between the structure of *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club*. Both novels are broken into distinct sections rather than chapters. *The Woman Warrior* has five sections: “No Name Woman”, “White Tigers”, “Shaman”, “At the Western Palace”, and “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”, whereas Tan’s novel has four sections, each of which is a narrative space dedicated to an individual character. *The Joy Luck Club* is the story of June Woo. Following her mother’s death, June takes her mother’s place in The Joy Luck Club. The Joy Luck Club is a group of four women who meet once a week to play mahongg. Following June’s initial introduction, each character has two chances to tell a story, two rotations of the

mahongg table. Both novels are concerned with cultural identity and finding a place within this culture.

Tan's own cultural identity, and that which is represented in her novels, can be described as Chinese-American. That is to say, Tan is American born to Chinese parents. In order to define the term Chinese-American, as I will be using it in this thesis, I call upon Max Weber's definition of an ethnic group:

We shall call ethnic groups those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or of both, or because of memories of colonization or migration...it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists (Weber 18).

Here Weber identifies one key issue: "subjective belief". In a text where daughters are American born, but are of Chinese origin, this subjective belief is essential. Weber considers that in order to belong to an ethnic group, there must be an acknowledgement of belonging. Tan herself proclaims to be Chinese-American and thus writes from this perspective. The daughters of the text are also easily placed into this category. In the novel the American-born daughters consider themselves of American nationality; they also struggle with their Chinese background. As Waverley observes:

Over the years, I learnt to choose from the best opinions. Chinese people had Chinese opinions. American people had American opinions. And in almost every case, the American version was better (Tan, *Joy* 191).

Although in this extract, Rose considers the American opinion the better version, she has the choice between the two opinions because her background is both Chinese and American. The mothers of the text also live in America, and due to having children there, or marrying Americans, they have been granted citizenship. Despite this, there is a clear case to suggest that the mothers consider themselves Chinese, and distance themselves from Chinese-American identity. This creates a tension in Tan's texts.

Unlike those writers before her, Tan gives her reader a unique perspective; she shows the reader both sides of the mother-daughter relationship. It is for this reason that Tan's work is the subject of this thesis. This thesis aims to explore Tan's work fully by offering an in-depth thematic consideration of *The Joy Luck Club*. The overarching theme of mothers and daughters can be broken down into key areas, each of which is essential to the mothers' and daughters' creation of identity and the bond that links the two generations of women. The first chapter focuses on conception in the novel. The way in which the mothers conceive their children is important to the novel and helps explain some of the mothers' reactions towards their daughters. It is argued that one reason mothers find the role difficult is because of the difficulty in defining the role; Walters argues that one of the problems with the terms mother and mothering is that these terms do not acknowledge the difference between mothering sons and mothering daughters. That mothering is such an active role mothering creates a burden not associated with fathering, "daughtering" or "sonning" (Walters 9-10). In the case of this thesis, mothering refers exclusively to the mothering of daughters.

As mothering is an active role, the daughters interpret these actions in different ways, at times causing tension in the relationship. The daughters' interpretations of their mothers' actions happen through out the novel. There are two key themes which accompany the interpretation of each female's actions; these themes are the character's self-image shown through mirrors and reflections, and the use of language between characters. In the novel mirrors and reflections demonstrate self-realisation, often resulting in an understanding between the characters. The use of language, however, is more complex; language is used by characters to include or exclude others. This is at times through choice, otherwise it is because of the cultural

differences between generations. These two key themes will be explored in depth in chapter two and three of this thesis.

This thesis will conclude by focusing on Tan's most recent work, the work of her contemporary Gish Jen and the future identity of Chinese American women's writing.

## **Chapter One- Mothers and Mothering**

She said I must concentrate and think of nothing but having babies.  
(Tan, *Joy* 62)

The circumstances of conception are vital to the relationships within *The Joy Luck Club*. Tan's novel aims to create an opposition between the circumstances of conception and maternal love. It is important to consider conception and mothering at an early point in this thesis because the events surrounding conception play a large role within the mother-daughter relationship. The mothers and daughters are born and raised on different continents, with the mothers spending their childhoods in China and the daughters being raised in America. The physical distance between these two continents also acts as a metaphorical distance between the women. Across these two continents there is a distinct opposition between life styles and consequently an opposition in the treatment of women. The daughters raised in America experience the freedom granted to them by the second wave feminist movement. These daughters judge their mothers' actions based on their American lives; however, the life experienced by the mothers raised in China is somewhat different. Within the novel China not only represents the exotic and the unknown, but also the oppression of the mother. In China, characters are often forced to take on the role of mother, against their own wishes. The oppression experienced by the mothers affects their later relationships with their daughters.

It is the purpose of this chapter to explore the issues which surround Tan's characters and the conception of their children, in order to identify existing family structures within Tan's novel and determine how identity is established within these structures. In order to do this, it is important to divide this chapter into geographical location and explore in detail the treatment of women, in this novel, in both China

and America. The subsequent chapters will concentrate on the shared space between these characters.

### China:

In terms of textual space, Tan gives equal space to China and America. There are, however, key differences between Tan's depiction of these nations. Where Western feminist critics have argued that the mother-daughter relationship is a distinctly difficult relationship in which women strive to find their own identities, and find it difficult to do so because of their biological and emotional ties to each other; feminist critics from the People's Republic of China have looked upon this relationship differently. Xiaomei Chen identifies Feng Yuanjun and Bing Xin as modern women writers who "construct an unprecedented mother/daughter bonding that contrast[s] sharply with an antagonistic father/son relationship" (Chen 111-2). Tan's novel falls significantly between these two different perspectives, creating a novel where "residual patriarchal values" are present, but, after a long struggle, mothers and daughters find the bond that holds them together.

Tension arises when the mothers seemingly accept patriarchal power, whereas these values are rebelled against by the daughters in the text. At the same time, there are instances where the mothers can also be considered rebels. Within their original country the mothers stand up to the social restraints that have been placed upon them; for example, Lindo leaves her marriage, and Ying-ying works to earn her own wage. The daughters do not see this rebellion, however, and as a result, consider their mothers to be old-fashioned, unable to accept the change of American culture. It is in this failure to understand that Tan creates tension between the mothers and the daughters.

The mothers within *The Joy Luck Club* must work hard to have children, and look after these children into adulthood. Adrienne Rich challenges traditional ideas of mothering and questions the idea that “a ‘natural’ mother is a person without further identity...that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless” (Rich, Born 22); rather she argues a mother must work at being a mother, since this does not come naturally. The mothers within *the Joy Luck Club* must prove themselves worthy before they are able to take up the mother role. They cannot take up this role for children who are unplanned or unwanted, and this fits in somewhat to Ann Snitow’s argument in “Feminism and Motherhood: An American Reading”. Snitow asks the question: what about the women who do not want to be mothers? “And what about the women who had children against their will? Are they in a position to complain? Not really, once again: it will hurt the children to know they are unwanted” (Snitow 33). Just as these critics question the status quo of society and mothering, these mothers also rebel against the society in which they live.

Despite their rebellions, the mothers cannot protect themselves from becoming victims of men’s violence whilst they are in China. The effects of this violence haunts the mothers throughout the text, and it is only by telling their stories that these women are able to find power in letting go of the past. Female power in 20<sup>th</sup> century China is explored by Maria Jaschok and Suzanne Miers in their book *Women and Chinese Patriarchy: Submission, Servitude and Escape*. Jaschok and Miers’ book is a selection of case studies of women who lived in China over the past century combined with a number of academic essays. Jaschok and Miers aim to “contribute to the academic debate of recent years on the accuracy of long-held perceptions of the subordination of the Chinese women” (Jaschok and Miers 9). They acknowledge that long-held perceptions of Chinese women may be stereotypical and



formed by an ignorance of Chinese culture in the West. Jaschok and Miers argue that Western perceptions of Chinese women and culture have remained static; critics fail to account for the cultural changes of Chinese society (Jaschok and Miers 8). Tan's book, however, explores both subordination and power of her Chinese-born characters. To do this, she explores oppression not to provide a historically accurate view, but to offer a contrast between places. Indeed, there are varying types of oppression going on in the text. The time and place in which Tan sets her novels is a male-dominated world. When the female characters of Tan's novels are in China, they are little more than objects to their husbands and their family. As objects, these women are subjected to the will of their husband. It is shocking, however, that in a world where men have such power that this power is exerted over these women through sexual violence.

It is the case that conception, within Tan's novels, often occurs through acts of sexual violence and harassment. The act of rape is core to the sexual power and control that men have. Acts of sexual violence occur within the Chinese space in the novel and happen to Tan's material characters. Rape is not just an act that occurs within *The Joy Luck Club*, but it is also a continuing thematic concern and takes on further relevance in Tan's second novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Bella Adams considers the rape within this text to take on additional significance. Adams argues that the rape of Winnie Louie (Jiang Weili) represents the Chinese women of Nanking:

...all of them suffering under the patriarchy and/or imperialism...Guo's unfaithful husband, Zhang, and Winnie's rapist husband, Wen Fu, are effectively rewarded with immortality and longevity respectively, their bad behaviour toward their wives officially forgotten (Adams 73).

It is the case for all of Tan's women who are subject to sexual abuse that there is no official means of punishing these men, and so the burden of the crime remains with

these women for a significant period of time. These acts of rape and violence do not stay within the boundaries of China; rather they travel to America with the mothers. It is within America that the mothers must face the past. Because of this, I have considered the act of rape from an American feminist point of view.

The account of rape within fiction has been considered by Ellen Rooney, who argues that there is a model that can be applied to narrative accounts of rape:

The textual sign of sexual violence is often no more than a long passage of sexual mourning. Discourse withdraws from the scene of the violent encounter to grieve or to ponder questions in philosophy and ethics (Rooney 1269).

Rooney describes common textual practice where sexual violence is depicted, but it is significant that Tan does not follow this model. Rather than taking her text into a philosophical or ethical consideration of rape, Tan deals with a character's emotions and feelings, concentrating on the event, not the ideas which surround it. It is through the event the reader is brought closer to the characters within the novel. Because the rape that has occurred is an emotionally difficult event for the character, the reader feels that they have shared in something very personal and feels an affinity with the character.

Rooney argues that when rape is depicted in literature, there are a series of binary oppositions to accompany the rape. In Tan's case these oppositions include East/West, dominance/submission and active/passive. Most significantly, Rooney analyses the opposition of rape and seduction, both of which are evident in the text (Rooney 1271). The opposition of rape and seduction play an important role within Tan's novel: whereas daughters are seduced by American men, the mothers are raped by Chinese men.

Rape for these mothers is made even more difficult by the restrictions it places on the victims. Not only have these women been subjected to the humiliation of rape,

but they are also now socially ruined. Women within *The Joy Luck Club* who are subjected to rape are thrown out of home and socially stigmatised. Horrifyingly, in some cases, this leaves them with little choice but to marry their rapist. Tsun-Yin Luo notes:

The cultural practice of rape-induced marriage, in reinforcing the cultural fetish for female chastity and the social emphasis on sexual implications of rape, may function to worsen the resulting trauma among the survivors... (Luo 591).

Again, it is identified that these victims have no help from authority; they must live with both the social and emotional implications of rape with no support. In addition, they must live with the man that committed the crime.

A close reading of the text will give a clearer indication of how this theory can be applied and how these critics are useful in considering *The Joy Luck Club*. The theories that have been explored in this thesis so far can be applied to An-Mei's mother. An-Mei's mother is an extremely important character within the novel, telling her story of rape and humiliation through her daughter, An-Mei.

During her dialogue with the reader, An-Mei tells the story of her mother's rape and subsequently her death. This story has an extreme effect on An-Mei, who still cannot forget after all these years, and shows the reader the harsh reality that faces a woman who has no other options. During a trip to her dead husband's grave, An-Mei's mother is raped:

...when your mother awoke to find him touching her beneath her undergarments, she jumped out of bed. He grabbed her by the hair and threw her on the floor, then put his foot on her throat and told her to undress. Your mother did not scream or cry when he fell on her (Tan, *Joy* 237).

Following the rape, An-Mei's mother is considered in lower social standing than a prostitute, and this is how she becomes a Fourth Wife. Tsun-Yin Luo discusses the implications of rape when the victims are Chinese women, identifying some of the

key responses and concerns of rape survivors as guilt and family honour; the two feelings are powerfully linked. Within *The Joy Luck Club* An-Mei's mother has little choice but to accept the marriage to her attacker because of the social structure she lives in. Luo's research goes some way to explaining both why An-Mei's mother would have felt pressure to marry her rapist and also why she is so deeply traumatised by the event. The event also affects the relationship between An-Mei's mother and her children.

After the rape takes place, An-Mei must leave her home in disgrace, which means leaving her children. The children are now raised by another matriarch, An-Mei's grandmother. In the novel there are often issues of jealousy when the mothering role is taken on by another woman. When An-Mei recalls her childhood in China, she states that she lived in "my uncle and auntie's family house, where I lived with Popo [An-Mei's grandmother] and my little brother" (Tan, *Joy* 42). The use of the term "family house" suggests that the Aunt and Uncle's family live there, too, that the house is a multi-generational home to more than the five characters stated in the quotation. This is not a nuclear family construct. Tan uses the family construct in her text to indicate to the reader areas of importance. In An-Mei's house there is a matriarch in the form of An-Mei's grandmother. During this time it is not clear to the reader what has happened to An-Mei's father, but he is portrayed by a painting which hangs in the main hall. This painting "watched me [An-Mei] for any signs of disrespect" (Tan, *Joy* 43). Although An-Mei's father is not present, he still has a small amount of control over her actions. An-Mei's mother, on the other hand, is described as a "ghost": "This did not mean my mother was dead. In those days, a ghost was anything we were forbidden to talk about" (Tan, *Joy* 42). Like in *The Woman Warrior* there is a power in silencing female characters, and it is the women

around them who are enforcing this silence. When An-Mei's mother returns to the family home, there is a struggle for power. Popo is dying; to save her, An-Mei's mother makes a soup using her own flesh. An-Mei's mother gives her flesh to Popo because "the pain of the flesh is nothing" (Tan, *Joy* 48). This is a sacrifice of a daughter for the mother. It is also the case that the daughter possesses power here; she has the ingredient that can help her mother recover. Power in this case moves quickly, however, and An-Mei's mother is soon powerless again: "but she did not even speak back when my aunt cursed her. Her head bowed even lower when my uncle slapped her for calling him brother" (Tan, *Joy* 216). An-Mei has both her grandmother (Popo) and her aunt trying to gain power over her and control her: "'Don't look at that woman' warned my aunt" (Tan, *Joy* 216). However, the mother-daughter bond cannot be broken and even though it means leaving her brother and the farm on which she was raised, An-Mei goes to live with her mother; the bond between women is strong within this novel.

There are more difficulties, however, for An-Mei's mother. Not only is her daughter being raised by another woman, but she has also had a son, the product of rape, taken away from her. The child is raised by Second Wife, who has more power in the household than An-Mei's mother. Second Wife works to gain power by "pretend-suicides" (Tan, *Joy* 235), that is by eating enough opium to make herself ill so that she can be granted what she wants from her husband. The only thing she is missing to be the top of the hierarchy within the household is a son. In fact, it is Second Wife that encourages Wu Tsing to rape An-Mei's mother, persuading him with the hope of a son. In a text that often narrates a world where women bond, and over time form close relationships, Second Wife is a distinct outsider. She does not hold sympathy for the other wives for their situation; rather she aims to equal or

eclipse her husband's power, through the accumulation of money and a position of sexual dominance. In taking the son, Second Wife takes on the role of mother. This role, as feminist critics argue, is defining in terms of identity. Although there is no critical agreement around the extent to which mothering should form identity, there is no doubt that the role of mother is part of a more complex structure of identity. To be a mother and not take on the mothering role is detrimental to An-Mei's mother's identity, and plays a significant role in her suicide.

In *Second Wife* the reader sees the power that women hold over each other; the action of one woman can mean life or death for another. Whereas this novel offers a reading of the mother-daughter relationship that shows female unity, there are still female rivals. Women who have a common standing within the family, for example different wives, or women who are not blood relations, for example in-laws, still fight amongst themselves for power and status. In the quest for female power women are often cruel and unfeeling to each other. Within this novel there is a distinct opposition between women who are supportive of each other and those who look to humiliate other women. In An-Mei's mother's house these characters are evident in the characters of Yan Chang and Second Wife. Whereas Yan Chang is supportive of An-Mei and her mother, providing help and stability, Second Wife claims An-Mei's mother and her body. An-Mei's mother is the subject of Second Wife's harassment. An-Mei's mother is not treated as a person here, rather both her family and her husband treat her as an object. Her feelings do not matter as long as others gain what they need from her.

Within *The Joy Luck Club* women become commodities. They are bought and sold, given to other families in exchange for wealth or possessions. Important decisions are made for these women. Matchmakers decide a suitable husband for

them, and they do not see their chosen husband until after the wedding ceremony; this is what happens to Lindo Jong. Within *The Joy Luck Club* Lindo experiences the full authority of her mother-in-law. Lindo's mother-in-law pressures her into having babies. The older woman is forceful and harsh in her treatment of her daughter-in-law: "She said I must concentrate and think of nothing but having babies" (Tan, *Joy* 62). There is pressure here for Lindo to have sexual relations with her husband, which she dreads: "I would always become sick thinking he would someday climb on top of me and do his business" (Tan, *Joy* 61). The mother-in-law places pressure on Lindo to use her body in a way in which she does not feel comfortable. The mother-in-law thus asserts an assumption of intimacy, assuming Lindo should be intimate with her husband and pressuring her to do so. Lindo does not have control or ownership of her body.

It is often difficult for the daughters within the novel to cope with the lessons their mothers are trying to teach. Often these lessons can be hurtful or shocking, and the daughter has to deal with her mother's past humiliation and regret. June finds it very difficult to accept that her mother would let her twin daughters come to harm. However, it is a matter of survival for June's mother, Suyuan, when she has to leave her babies by the side of the road during the evacuation of her city as a result of the Japanese invasion. When Suyuan tells this story, June is shocked: "I gasped at the end. I was stunned to realize the story had been true all along" (Tan, *Joy* 26). The abandonment of a child is still considered a taboo subject, even when this abandonment is to save the mother's life. In this novel Suyuan does not sacrifice herself as a 'natural' mother should, and, as Rich argues, by Western cultural standards this is a shocking thing to do, as is demonstrated by June's reaction. It is up to June to travel to China and find the daughters that have been abandoned by

Suyuan. The initial act of leaving the children at the side of the road is considered horrific, in the West. Surprisingly, this is not the feeling of the children who were abandoned. Suyuan's Chinese daughters are just glad to meet with June, their sister. It is society, not the daughter, that places judgement upon the actions of the mother. The extended family that June finds in China create a positive experience for June. In finding out about her newly found family, June is able to understand her mother, and finally understand her identity.

A majority of the pregnancies disclosed to the reader within Tan's novel result in the mother being unable to assume their role; this is either because of the death of the child, the abandonment of the child or the child being raised by another woman. Some of these children can be placed into the unwanted category. For example, the relationship between Lena and her mother is affected by the loss of an unwanted child. Ying-ying married in China, long before Lena was born. At the beginning of the marriage, Ying-ying loves her husband and "hopes of conceiving a son" (Tan, *Joy* 247), the ultimate gift she can give him. Before she becomes pregnant, she does everything to please her husband: "If I put slippers on my feet, it was to choose a pair I knew would please him" (Tan, *Joy* 247). When Ying-ying becomes pregnant, hope turns to hate as she discovers that her husband has left her for an opera singer. At this time in China a pregnant women abandoned by her husband would be considered "abandoned goods" (Tan, *Joy* 248). With this in mind Ying-ying considers herself to have few options: "...I thought of drowning myself in the lake like the other ladies of shame" (Tan, *Joy* 248); instead, Ying-ying decides to abort the baby:

And I will tell her of the baby I killed because I came to hate this man so much.

I took this baby from my womb before it could be born (Tan, *Joy* 248).



As this example demonstrates, giving birth is a key way in which women hold any power. It is not until Ying-ying aborts her son that she has any power over her own life. It is only after Ying-ying has gained her revenge on this man by destroying his baby, that she is able to become independent. Ying-ying now becomes self-sufficient; she takes a job in a shop and earns her own wage.

Ying-ying is able to determine her own future, however this is not the case for all these women. Once they are married, these women must obey their mothers-in-law. The mother-in-law in Chinese society has authority over the daughter-in-law, because of this there is a power struggle between the two generations of women in *The Joy Luck Club*. It is the case that these matriarchs assert authority over the wives' bodies, telling them when they must have children and punishing them severely if they do not produce sons. The relationship between daughter and mother-in-law is far more severe than that between mother and daughter. The struggle for power between females is of vast importance to the novel and works in opposition to the growing bond between mother and daughter. The actions of the mothers-in-law offer a contrast to the growing understanding between mother and daughter. Within *The Joy Luck Club*, rape is a moment of realisation for the daughters and the reader. It is at the point when the daughter begins to understand her mother's past, that communication between generations really begins. It is through the daughters that the abuse is depicted. Through June we learn of Suyuan's abandonment of her children and through An-Mei we learn of her mother's rape. The reader and the characters share this moment.

The theme of rape and sexual violence, and seduction with devastating consequences continues in Tan's second novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife*. In *The Joy Luck Club* there is a culture of rape victims' lives becoming ruled by sexual violence.

These women find it difficult to accept the past and cannot tell those closest to them. The fate of these women is broken in *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Pearl Louie Brandt is the product of her mother's rape, by her husband back in China. Often women of this era who have been raped have only one option, commit suicide: "that was what people did back then. They had no choice. They could not speak up. They could not run away. That was their fate" (Tan, *Joy* 241). Winnie, however, is offered a way out, by Jimmy Louie, an American soldier of Chinese origin, who falls in love with Winnie and raises her child as his own. *The Kitchen God's Wife* not only breaks the fate of the Chinese rape victim by offering her salvation, but also approaches the question of whether these children should be told about the circumstances of their conception.

*The Kitchen God's Wife* chronicles the moment when Winnie's daughter, Pearl, finds out where she came from, and how. Tan here continues to place the reader at the point of communication between mother and daughter, just like she did in *The Joy Luck Club*. Winnie causes Pearl pain by telling her the truth. However, this confession resolves the text. By confronting the past, Pearl, is able to understand her mother better. Pearl can now communicate with her mother and she can make confessions of her own.

### **America:**

Pearl's life in America is not free of problems. Although, America is not a solution for these women, it does not have the hardships of China. In China the problems are family orientated, and they stem from husbands, lovers, mother-in-laws and wives. In America the problems are not person-centred, rather they are given to the characters by fate. Tan here creates a paradox between the materialistic American

culture and the fatalistic Chinese culture in the novels. It is within the materialistic culture that fate plays a significant role. In China, Winnie is raped, and this is her husband's violent act; in America Pearl develops MS, and this is fate's action. Tan develops this idea making the daughters critical of their mothers' beliefs in fate and superstition. The daughters are unable to see how fate affects their lives, which increases the void between mother and daughter. It is only once a daughter has heard her mother's story that she recognises the mother's belief in fate and how this has shaped both of their lives.

In America, as in China, the mothers' lives are under scrutiny; their mothering skills are judged by society. As Adrienne Rich argues there are socially acceptable ways to mother, and anything other than this socially acceptable approach to motherhood is considered "wrong". Rich's text was written over thirty years ago; however, recent research and publications enforce these theories still. *U.S Society and Values: The American Family* is an electronic journal produced by the U.S Department of State that supports Western social ideals. The journal acknowledges that:

Families are the bedrock of all societies. They can comprise anywhere from a small group to scores of individuals, and range from simple structures – such as a married couple and one child under one roof – to intricately complex, multigenerational combinations, living in one or more households (Springer 2).

However, the contents of the journal tend to favour the nuclear family set-up over any other family structure. This small quotation is this publication's only acknowledgment of alternative family structures.

The family structures in China are immensely different than those in America, and the women have different options. The best example of this, within the novel, is abortion. Abortion is a widely debated feminist topic and both Greer and Rich discuss

novel it is family which helps to form identity, and this identity can often be as confused as the family structures these characters are living in. In the novel the family structure in China is extremely different to what the mothers experience in America. Firstly, children are often raised by another women, without the birth mother's consent and secondly, pressure is put on the women to produce sons, which is something that is beyond the woman's power. There is little regard in these traditions for the mother's personal choice of when to have a child. This difference in family life is difficult for the mothers to adjust to; they often embarrass their daughters because they are not familiar with some aspects of Western culture.

In China it is the men who oppress and restrict the female characters; this is not the case when the characters move to America. In America the Chinese mothers find themselves "trapped in a land of Diaspora for being different" (Chen 113). This time the mothers are trapped by society because of their differing beliefs and traditions. In America, the men support their wives. Not only is The Joy Luck Club a reserved time in the week when the women meet to play cards, but the club also makes money. The men support their wives by running the financial matters of the club:

Uncle George puts on his bifocals and starts reading the minutes:  
"Our capital is \$24,825, or about \$6,206 a couple, \$3,103 per person...Respectfully submitted, George Hsu, president and secretary" (Tan, *Joy* 29).

There can be little doubt that the women in the text are treated better by the men in the West than they are in the East; however, there is still a large amount of male dominance in the text. Men hold financial control; the president of the society established by women is a male, and it is the men's role to take care of the money. The males still maintain a traditional role as head of the household; however, this

novel creates a space where female characters construct their own society and are placed within its hierarchy. Tan creates a space for her female characters which “subvert[s] male culture by creating their own way of life” (Chen 116). Here is created a private female world that men cannot enter. The only way in which men can enter the text is as a creator of children, and after this conception they are again banished from this space. This novel does not consider a full family unit, just the female family roles.

The major difference between female space in China and America is the woman’s ability to make their own decisions. For example, Waverly becomes pregnant during her first marriage, the pregnancy is unplanned and Waverly considers a termination:

I almost aborted her, though. When I found out I was pregnant I was furious. I secretly referred to my pregnancy as my “growing resentment,” and I dragged Marvin down to the clinic so he could suffer through this too. It turned out we went to the wrong kind of clinic. They made us watch a film, a terrible bit of puritanical brainwash (Tan, *Joy* 174).

Waverly never says that she doesn’t want children; rather she is considering the welfare of her unborn child and the implications of her current life on the child’s welfare. Within this paragraph the reader sees a character giving in to social pressures, deciding to keep the child; despite her negative feelings about the pregnancy, Waverly becomes a willing and able mother. Waverly acknowledges that her daughter was “a miracle. She was perfect” (Tan, *Joy* 175).

It is worth noting that in the novel none of the babies conceived and born in China make the journey to America with their parents. Once the mothers move to America, they have gained their freedom; it is this freedom which allows them to have “intended” children. Past experience of the mother’s own childhood and of the babies left in China have a negative effect on the way the mothers raise their children.

Despite the love the mothers have for their daughters, there are often issues of jealousy which arise between mother and daughter. The mothers within this text characteristically find it difficult to express themselves in a language their daughters can understand. Where language fails them, the mothers resort to physical expressions of their love for their daughter, for example cooking a meal or giving a gift. These actions are also misunderstood because of the culture difference between mother and daughter. The daughters in the text consider their mothers' actions as harsh. If they understood the treatment the mothers had lived through they would not consider it so.

The past is what divides mother and daughter. It is through confessing the secrets of the past, no matter how difficult, that the generations are able to discover the identity of their mother/daughter and thus they are able to work out the identity of themselves. The difficulties in the past mean that mother and daughter are able, finally, to communicate. The novel places significance in the transition from past to future and from pregnancy to motherhood. The nature of conception is vital to see how the mothers are able to build their strength and pass this on to their daughters when the time is right. With such a massive gap that falls between these two generations, finding common ground that these women share could be the answer to understanding their relationships, and for the women understanding each other.

## Chapter Two- Words and Language

If we keep on speaking the same language together, we're going to reproduce the same history. Begin the same old stories all over again. Don't you think so? (Irigaray, "Speak" 205).

Within the text of *The Joy Luck Club* many different stories are being told in many different languages. It is Irigaray's argument that by speaking the same language, people are speaking a language which can be ignored: "...if we speak to each other as men have been doing for centuries, as we have been taught to speak, we'll miss each other, fail ourselves" (Irigaray, "Speak" 205). It is only by changing habit and speaking differently that we can hear each other. This is an idea that Tan uses within *The Joy Luck Club*. Here there are many different stories to be told, and Tan uses language to establish the identity of each character: each character's language is exclusive to them. The mothers and daughters do not speak the same language. Within these relationships, language acts as a barrier, preventing full understanding of the relationship or the woman. It is only when characters realise, as Irigaray has, that speaking a different language is the best way of being heard, that relationships come to fruition.

Language within the text is closely linked with characters and their identities, as both individuals and as members of a family unit. Identity within the text is created on two different levels: a sense of physical identity through the image of the individual and identity through language. As Patricia Hamilton suggests, "Language takes on a metonymic relation to culture in Tan's portrayal of the gap between mothers and daughters in *The Joy Luck Club*" (Hamilton 125). Thus, it is through language that the generation gap between mother and daughter is portrayed. This gap is wider than just generational, since the gap encompasses cultural and linguistic

differences between the characters; it also represents the mothers' distance from their Chinese upbringing.

The change in Chinese culture since the mothers left China in the 1940s is huge, most notably the changes made to Chinese language. Chinese writing has no alphabet; it started as a series of drawings which represented words. These pictures became more complex as the writing evolved. Eventually, Chinese writing was made up of thousands of individual characters, each representing a word. Because of the complexity of the pictures, and the amount of time it took to learn and memorize them, writing became a skill practised by educated scholars, officials and merchants. The ability to read and write became, as in most cultures, associated with class. This changed when a Communist government took power. The government simplified the characters, and taught reading and writing to schoolchildren, which spread literacy (Gamer 3). Because written language changed after the arrival of the Communist regime, it can be concluded that the language familiar to the mothers of the text is no longer the written language of China. The Mandarin the mothers knew is now outdated. In this way we can see the instability of language; this coincides with the instability of identity. As Hamilton argues, language and identity are strongly linked within the text.

From the cover of the book onwards, the theme of identity through language is present. The titles of Amy Tan's books often appear to have a 'Chinese' quality to their Western audience. This is reflected in the way there is often something mystical about the titles: *The Opposite of Fate* and *The Hundred Secret Senses*. The words "Fate" and "Senses" suggest an unseen, uncontrollable force. Words like "fate" fit into a stereotyped view of Chinese culture. In Western culture, traditional Chinese beliefs are frequently portrayed using these words. Hamilton argues that the reader



faces the same “problematic relation to the text as the daughters do to their mother’s native culture” (Hamilton 127). Tan uses language to distance the reader; in doing this she is able to give her reader the same sense of isolation as the daughters feel. Tan uses language to include and exclude both the reader and the characters.

In the beginning of the novel, the relationship between mother and daughter is distant and unfamiliar. It is feature of the text that the daughters are excluded by their mothers’ use of language. The mothers in the text often switch between Chinese and English; this is a conscious move to say something which cannot be translated or to emphasise a point. The language difference between mother and daughter is emphasised in Tan’s opening paragraphs. The unnamed mother of the opening talk-story sees American-English as a status symbol: “Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English” (Tan, *Joy* 17). This symbol of status and a better life divides the two generations of women, who fall into the categories of “Swan Feather Mothers” and “Coca-Cola Daughters”. This division signifies loneliness within both generations; Bella Adams draws on changes between this opening vignette and the final two vignettes. In these closing talk-stories the tone changes to create a sense of hope and a united future: “Tan’s text thus seems ‘to end...on a happy note’ despite all the earlier generational disputes over language and culture” (Adams 36). Adams continues to argue that it is this ending of reconciliation that invokes connection between the reader and the text. The appeal of Tan’s novel lies in the subtleties of language, and how the words communicate feelings experienced by the characters and the reader. Just as words create barriers between characters, they also unite characters.

Tan uses translation and mistranslation to demonstrate confusion and misunderstanding. The use of language is not just significant in its spoken form,

which I will discuss later in this chapter; language also plays a role in its written form. Language acts as a symbol within the text. In the chapter “Best Quality”, June describes the day when Suyuan gives June her “life’s importance” (Tan, *Joy* 197). This is a jade pendant engraved with Chinese characters. June does not understand these characters; she feels it is only her mother who can translate her “life’s importance”. Suyuan dies before she can translate the “life’s importance”, and because of this June must explore its meaning on her own. June does not understand the language upon the pendant. Despite this, the pendant brings June close to her mother. The actual translation is inconsequential here; language acts as a symbol to the reader. This pendant represents a family space, occupied only by these two women. Towards the end of this chapter Suyuan tells June in Mandarin:

For a long time, I wanted to give you this necklace. See, I wore this on my skin, so when you put it on your skin, then you know my meaning. This is your life’s importance. (Tan, *Joy* 208)

On hearing this, June realises that it is the physical presence of this necklace that is important. This necklace was worn by June’s mother and then passed to her daughter; this necklace is another way of emphasising the physical bond between these women. This bond is sealed through language. Adams argues that “significantly, Jing-Mei’s [June’s] questions go unanswered” (Adams 63). The significance here is not that these questions are unanswered, as Adams suggests; rather, the significance lies in June’s realisation that she does not need these answers. The “life’s importance” is enough. As Suyuan explains the “life’s importance”, she speaks to June in Mandarin; this transition between languages is of huge importance. Throughout the text June is unsure about the accuracy of her translations. June constantly questions her mother’s meanings. It is not until she is given the necklace that June begins to understand her mother’s meaning. After her mother’s death June understands this conversation, and

its relevance to her life. Although the language on the pendant fails to make sense, June realises her worth to her mother; the family tie is strong in spite of death.

As Adams observes, the tensions between mother and daughter are resolved over the course of the novel, and the use of language changes accordingly. In the beginning of the novel, language is a way of holding power. Power, like identity, is fluid. It moves between characters, and once they have power there is no way to guarantee they can hold on to it. An-Mei uses language to maintain her control over her daughter. These mothers want the best for their daughters; they want them to be able to speak “perfect American English” (Tan, *Joy* 17). However, the mothers realise that in speaking English, the daughters will have power over them; they will be able to communicate outside of the family unit. Because of this, An-Mei uses Mandarin to scare her daughter into submission.

The daughters cannot read Chinese characters; they have to rely on their mothers’ translations: “It is written in Chinese. You cannot understand it. That is why you must listen to me” (Tan, *Joy* 87). Here An-Mei uses the imperative “must” to enforce her authority over her daughter. In the section entitled “Without Wood” (appropriately placed in the “American Translation” quarter of the novel), An-Mei uses language to protect her role as matriarch of the family. When Rose is young, An-Mei tells her that it is only her mother that she should listen to. An-Mei tells Rose that if she listens to others, she will be turned in the wrong direction, a direction in which her mother cannot go. An-Mei also tells Rose about Old Mr Chou, the dream keeper. Whilst Rose’s sisters are given good dreams by Old Mr Chou, Rose is given bad dreams. Rose’s bad dreams can be associated with Rose’s belief that her mother controls Old Mr Chou. Through story telling An-Mei has asserted her authority over her daughter. An-Mei feels that she needs to control Rose because she fears the

outside world that she cannot access and her daughter can. Grice argues that this feeling arises from the mother being “othered as she is simply not present or accounted for as a subject in her own right” (Grice 38). Here, the mother feels the need to defend herself and her family from dangers she cannot understand. Many years later, when Rose is divorcing her husband, An-Mei again uses language as a weapon. Rose confides in her mother that she is seeing a psychiatrist; however, An-Mei does not trust this form of therapy and believes that “a mother is best. A mother knows what is inside you” (Tan, *Joy* 188). To demonstrate her disapproval for psychiatry, An-Mei undermines the word by failing to pronounce it properly, “Psyche-atric” (Tan, *Joy* 188). In this way An-Mei rejects the practice by rejecting the word. The tension arises here because Rose is trapped between two cultures:

The daughter’s situation as a ‘hyphenated’ ethnic subject often alienates her from her mother, more rooted as the mother often is in the ancestral/‘mother’ culture. The daughter’s differing social and cultural embeddedness thus often results in a barrier between mother and daughter which needs to be traversed in order to receive mother-figure and mother-culture (Grice 45).

Within the problem Grice raises there is another major issue, a barrier created by language. This barrier not only creates tension between mother and daughter, but also sees the mother excluded from a wider community. Rose speaks American-English; she can communicate with a wide range of people. An-Mei’s English is not as good as Rose’s. Instead of communicating with the outside world, An-Mei is restricted because of communication. This is not something that is new to the Chinese mothers. Chen argues that “...in China – ...literacy did not necessarily lead to a distinct voice of one’s own – and also in the West – ...the English language itself functioned as an agency of suppression for these how could not possibly master it” (Chen 114). Chen’s argument reminds the reader that this oppression is not new to the mothers; they are stuck between two languages, neither of which allows them to have a voice. This goes

some way to explaining An-Mei's desire to assert power over her daughter. This is the first time in the novel that An-Mei is empowered by the use of words, and there is a fear that this power could be lost should her daughter begin to communicate outside the family. Ultimately, Rose goes to school and college and establishes a life outside of the family unit. As Rose moves beyond the family, she embraces American life, forgetting her cultural identity: "In addition, the very process of mastering...English is often accompanied by the daughters' resisting and forgetting their mother tongue, if not also much of their mothers' stories and sorrows" (Chen 118); An-Mei's fears are realised, and tension is created between mother and daughter.

Language holds an-Mei tightly within her family structure. Greer argues that it is negative for a woman to be restricted within the family structure. The mothers move from a multi-generational family structure, to a nuclear family structure, which has a negative effect on the characters and causes isolation:

The wife is only significant qua wife when she is bearing and raising small children, but the conditions under which she carries out this important work and the confusion which exists about the proper way to perform it increase her isolation from her community... (Greer, *Eunuch* 251-2).

Greer also raises these concerns in her more recent work, *The Whole Woman*. Greer's observation of female isolation within the nuclear family is demonstrated within Amy Tan's novel. Here women struggle to find a place in the world, outside of the family, just as Tan's own mother had struggled to do.

In her essay "Mother Tongue", Tan analyses her role as a writer; she states that it is her role to think "about the power of language – the way it can evoke an emotion, a visual language, a complex idea, or a simple truth" (Tan, *Mother* 271). Acknowledging the importance of language within her work, she goes on to discuss different kinds of "Englishes": the English she uses at home with her mother and the

English she uses to address literary colleagues. Tan discloses, “my mother has long realized the limitations of her English as well. When I was a teenager, she used to have me call people on the phone and pretend I was she” (Tan, *Mother* 274). In revealing this, Tan concludes that it is better for her to work in an English that is accessible to her audience, rather than an English that is deemed ‘proper’. The women in *The Joy Luck Club* suffer, just as Tan’s mother did, with lack of understanding. Tan’s resolve to write in an accessible English opens up her work, making it understandable to the audience she is aiming at: “...the reader I decided on was my mother...” (Tan, *Mother* 278). Within this novel, language displays the isolation of these mothers, whilst at the same time giving them a voice.

Language here works in two contradicting ways; it isolates the characters from each other and the outside world, but it also brings the characters together. This can be seen by Ying-ying’s relief when she first meets An-Mei: ““Eh, *Syaujye*,” she called to me over the loud noise of the machines. I was grateful to hear her voice, to discover we both spoke Mandarin, although her dialect was coarse sounding” (Tan, *Joy* 262). When Ying-ying meets An-Mei, it opens up a whole community with whom she can communicate. It is through her friendship with An-Mei that Ying-ying meets her husband.

As Adams argues, Tan’s novel ends “on a happy note” (Adams 36), with a reconciliation between mother and daughter. This reconciliation takes place through image and language. As previously discussed, images and facial features help the mothers and daughters identify that they are similar, despite their differences. It is language that finally shows the daughters they have gained acceptance; it is through language that characters begin to understand each other. This unity often happens

suddenly; take, for example, an exchange that occurs between Lena and Ying-ying when Ying-ying knocks over a vase in Lena's spare room:

“Fallen down,” she says simply. She doesn't apologize.  
“It doesn't matter,” I say, and I start to pick up the broken glass shards. “I knew it would happen.”  
“Then why you didn't stop it?” asks my mother.  
And it's such a simple question. (Tan, *Joy* 165)

In these few lines a moment of realisation occurs between mother and daughter. Events previous to this quotation illustrate Lena's marriage problems. When her mother asks, “Then why you didn't stop it?” (Tan, *Joy* 165), Lena realises it is not too late to act, and save her marriage. Here Ying-ying asks such a simple question, and it is through this question that Lena can see the way forward. This conversation prompts Lena to realise she still needs her mother's guidance.

The mothers are willing to help their daughters and as the novel progresses, this becomes increasingly obvious to the reader. The mothers go from considering their daughters materialistic and selfish—“She sits by her fancy swimming pool and hears only her Sony Walkman, her cordless phone, her big, important husband...” (Tan, *Joy* 67)—to realising that they need their mothers' help and support. This realisation inspires the mothers to pass on their strength to their daughters: “But I will win and give her my spirit, because this is the way a mother loves her daughter” (Tan, *Joy* 252). The tone of the language moves from a sour, bitter tone to a voice of strength and inspiration. This is the transition Adams identifies as an ending “on a happy note” (Adams 36). Adams argues that as the mothers' and daughters' relationships improve, the novel sees “Chinese mothers teaching their American-born daughters about how to “multiply [their] peach blossom luck' and ‘to lose [their] innocence, but not hope. How to laugh forever’” (Adams 36). Strangely, as the mothers become closer to their American-born daughters, the language they use

becomes more traditionally Chinese in sentiment. This is an act on Tan's part to ensure that reconciliation does not mean letting go of Chinese tradition. In reconciliation the mother-culture and mother-tongue become prominent; daughters become more willing to embrace their Chinese heritage: "My daughter wanted to go to China for her second honeymoon..." (Tan, *Joy* 253). Language plays a huge role here, as the daughters "becom[e] Chinese" (Tan, *Joy* 267), they begin to understand both culture and language: "'Meimei jandale,' says one sister proudly to the other. 'Little sister has grown up.'" (Tan, *Joy* 287). In this quotation June translates her sister's meaning perfectly; she finally understands Chinese language. In embracing her Chinese roots June is able to begin understanding her family—even those she has never met before.

Just as Adams, Hamilton and Chen observe, language within this novel is vital to the relationships formed. It is through the use of language that the reader can trace the relationship between mother and daughter. Language acts as a barrier which must be broken, and, in breaking this barrier, mother and daughter are able to accept both their similarities and differences. Daughters begin to realise that it is not the translation which is important, but the meaning, and with this realisation they can begin to understand their culture and their mothers. Language holds together these strained families, and helps define each character as an individual. As Adams concludes, Tan's focus lies in the "preservation of the individual", and sees characters learning to "speak for themselves" (Adams 70). In this way language ultimately provides each of the characters with a voice, and thus an identity.



### Chapter Three- Mirrors and Reflections

Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long cherished wish (Tan, *Joy* 288).

Desire is key to the relationships within *The Joy Luck Club*. Women crave the experience of motherhood and they desire their daughter's acceptance. When June Woo meets her half-sisters for the first time, she is shocked and delighted to discover that they all hold a family resemblance. This realisation fulfils her mother's desire. Mother and daughter have been separated and through physical image they are connected again. Luce Irigaray considers the idea of female separation in her essay "The Looking Glass, from the Other Side", where Alice is faced with the consideration of her own identity:

Listen to them all talking about Alice: my mother, Eugene, Lucien, Gladys... You've heard them dividing me up, in their own best interests. So either I don't have any "self", or else I have a multitude of "selves" appropriated by them, for them, according to their needs and desires (Irigaray, *Other Side* 17)

As Irigaray observes through Alice, identity is not a singular concept. Rather each individual has a number of "selves". The search of the self that is important to this thesis is the search for identity within the family structure, as identity that is appropriated for mother or daughter. Carolyn Burke provides a close reading of Irigaray's essay in "Irigaray through the looking glass" and argues that "Irigaray is trying to imagine a realm—at once emotional and intellectual—in which woman is no longer defined in relation to man as his negative, other, or as lack" (Burke 296). In this respect Irigaray's work has a similarity to Tan's. Both of these writers envision a world where a woman's voice can be heard; a woman's place. Both of these writers do this by using mirrors to reflect on the self and find identity. The looking glass is essential to Alice's identity, just as it is within the text of *The Joy Luck Club*.

Irigaray argues in her criticism that identity is a group consciousness, that women form a “we” identity, rather than an “I”, joining mother and daughter. Irigaray, and in turn her critic Margaret Whitford, argues that the reason for this is “women...are the material of which the mirror is made” (Whitford 34). Rather than reflecting in the mirror women act as a mirror in which men can find and establish their identities. Irigaray extends this idea to the mother; she suggests that the mother supports the male search for the ego. The mother is not granted the quest for identity herself. Irigaray herself is a feminist and psychoanalyst, a critic of Freud and Lacan. There is some debate on the issue of whether Irigaray’s work should be considered as feminist. Whitford acknowledges that Irigaray has her critics, those who argue that she is not really feminist, that “certain kinds of theory may act as a positive break in action” (Whitford 4); in other words the main criticism here is that the work of Irigaray endangers any move forward in feminist practice, because her work is reflective. Whitford dismisses this reading of Irigaray, claiming that her work on the subject of feminism is “too important to ignore” (Whitford 5). Thus Irigaray has a valuable place in this thesis alongside other feminist critics. It is Irigaray’s work in Lacanian theory that is of interest here.

The theories of Jacques Lacan centre around the establishing of identity and a theory he puts forward known as “the mirror stage”. This is an idea that suggests when an infant of between six and eighteen months looks into a mirror, s/he realises for the first time that s/he is an individual. Up until this stage, the child would have believed he or she is an extension of the mother. It is upon seeing his/her reflection that s/he is able to establish an “I” (Parkin-Gounelas 6). Lacan fails to acknowledge the effect on the mother in this process; his theory concentrates on the effect on the child. However, Lacan also states that part of the “Mirror Stage” is that the subject

becomes aware that the image he/she is observing isn't real; rather it is an illusion. Within *The Joy Luck Club* it is through the act of looking in the mirror that these characters can identify the difference between their mental processes and their physical being. As Oster argues, "The examples I find in bicultural texts, are that the view in/from the mirror dramatizes a difference between a mental self-image and the 'external' mirror image" (Oster 60). The mirror for these characters acts as a point of realisation. As identity is fluid, so is the image reflected in the mirror:

With new stages in life, we suddenly become what we have never been before: a schoolchild, a lover, a parent, a published author, a mother-in-law, a widower. Such jolts whether joyful or traumatic, or both, can seem to confer new identities (Oster 61-2).

This fluid identity is the result of frictions between mother and daughter. As the older women look at their faces in the mirror they can see the women they were and the old women they have become. In addition to this, they are suddenly aware that their daughters are now taking on the roles of power and control they previously held. This is the origin of mother/daughter jealousy.

Of course, it is not the first time mirrors have symbolised such concepts in literature; the use of mirrors can be traced back to oral traditions and fairytales. The themes and concerns of these fairytales can be translated and applied to *The Joy Luck Club*. The mirror is a confirmation of identity for the Wicked Queen in the tale "Snow White". As the Queen looks into the mirror, she searches for a confirmation of identity; she is looking to the mirror to proclaim her "the fairest of them all". This is arguably what the daughters in Tan's novel are looking for, too. Waverly looks in the salon mirror in "Double Face". As she does this, she is looking for a confirmation from her mother that she is "fair" by Chinese standards, but she does not get the response she desires (Tan, *Joy* 256). The similarity between these two women is in their facial features, notably their noses, as Waverley observes: "...Our nose isn't so

bad,' she says. 'It makes us look devious.'" (Tan, *Joy* 266). In realising this Waverly is taking on the role of the older woman. Within fairytales contrasts can be drawn between "the innocence and helplessness of the young heroine, ...[and] the cunning and malice of an older woman" (Hallett and Karasek 51). The advancing of age is an inevitable aspect of this story; "Snow White" "deal[s] with the rites of passage between generations...some effort is made by a parent (or step-parent, or surrogate) to prevent the inevitable" (Hallett and Karasek 52). As the daughters begin to follow their mothers into womanhood, there is a degree of defiance from the mothers. Snow White's Step-Mother tries to prevent her daughter from growing up and taking her place in the world, as do Tan's mothers. There is a large amount of jealousy within *The Joy Luck Club*. The mothers become jealous of the life the daughters lead; they are embraced by American culture, whereas the mothers can feel isolated. This jealousy is part of the human process: "All human knowledge stems from the dialect of jealousy, which is a primordial manifestation of communication" (Lacan, "Other" 39). The struggle between two generations is confused by the inevitable Americanisation of the daughters. No matter what lengths the mothers go to, they cannot stop their daughters from developing a "sour, American look" (Tan, *Joy* 253). As the communication between mother and daughter moves to a higher level, the "dialect of jealousy" turns into common understanding and acceptance. The daughters even begin to acknowledge their mothers' traits in their own appearance. In this case the jealousy is apparent to begin with and jealousy becomes a positive emotion in the duration of the novel; it is not the negative that Lacan suggests.

Lacan's argument of "the mirror stage" considers that the child goes through a total separation from the mother; this idea is contested by feminist critics. Adrienne Rich argues that the mother can never truly separate herself from her daughter. In this

moment when the daughter looks in the mirror and realises she is an individual, there is a friction created between mother and daughter. The mother cannot separate herself, and the daughter believes she is separate from her mother. Within Tan's novel, the distance that subsequently occurs between mother and daughter can often be attributed to the daughter's failure to realise that her mother is still linked to her; therefore she cannot separate herself. Understanding is reached when the daughter finally understands this connection.

The theories put forward by Lacan and Irigaray can be illustrated using examples from Tan's novel, specifically "The Moon Lady". Within this section Ying-ying falls in the lake, and the water acts as a mirror showing Ying-ying her reflection. Ying-ying introduces her story by telling the reader that there is something missing in the relationship between herself and her daughter, Lena: "And I want to tell her this: We are lost, she and I, unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others" (Tan, *Joy* 67). When Ying-ying is lost, she looks back to an early childhood memory to help her find her way; a memory, I would argue, that represents Ying-ying's "Mirror Stage"- a memory of self-discovery. When Ying-ying is aged four, admittedly older than Lacan's subjects, she attends the Moon Lady festival with her parents. When no one is watching her, Ying-ying falls from the boat.

This begins a nightmare-like journey to find the Moon Lady, and be reunited with her parents. Ying-ying's fall from the boat occurs because Ying-ying is distracted; she is looking into the water staring at her reflection. In the water Ying-ying sees her reflection quite clearly, and behind her appears the Moon Lady. She appears to share this reflective and narrative space. Lacan's research suggests that the child places a reliance on the reflection, and the subject is constantly searching to be unified with the image it sees. In Western culture this sequence can be likened to

Peter Pan losing his shadow and trying to reunite himself with it, and the surrounding illusion is similar to Alice's adventures when she goes through the looking glass. In the case of this story, it is Ying-ying's unity with the Moon Lady which assists Ying-ying in her quest to get home; Ying-ying is reliant on the Moon Lady. Ying-ying's separation from her mother means that she is looking to other women for female support. As this thesis argues, female identity depends on the support of a family structure. Here Ying-ying has lost her family and seeks comfort elsewhere. As fireworks are set off, Ying-ying is frightened and falls into the lake. She falls through the mirror and is consumed by her own reflection. The outcome of this is that Ying-ying enters a non-reality; when she tries to find her own boat again there is a girl aboard it:

"*E!*" called the woman up to the boat. "Have you lost a little girl, a girl who fell in the water?"

There were some shouts from the floating pavilion, and I strained to see the faces of Amah, Baba, Mama. People were crowded on one side of the pavilion, leaning over, pointing, looking into our boat. All strangers, laughing red faces, loud voices. Where was Amah? Why did my mother not come? A little girl pushed her way through some legs.

That's not me!" she cried. "I'm here. I didn't fall in the water." The people on the boat roared with laughter and turned away (Tan, *Joy* 79).

Ying-ying sees a reflection of herself on the boat, and it is now unsure, whether she is living reality or not. At this point Ying-ying is desperate for her mother's comfort:

I had truly expected my mother to come soon. I imagined her seeing my soiled clothes, the little flowers she had worked so hard to make. I thought she would come to the back of the boat and scold me in her gentle way. But she did not come" (Tan, *Joy* 77)

Ying-ying believes she needs her mother's help to get her out of this situation. However, this time she must find a way back to her family on her own. In order to do this, she must discover "the charge is to look into the mirror and see not the image but the mirror itself" (Gallop 62). Ying-ying is still unable perceive what is real; she

cannot see the mirror. It is only when Ying-ying is able to see the fiction behind the perceived reality that she can return to her family.

When Ying-ying encounters the Moon Lady at the shadow theatre, she moves forward to have a wish granted. As Ying-ying gets closer, she is able to see that the Moon Lady has “[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” (Tan, *Joy* 82). Ying-ying has been fooled by the mirror and the perceptions she previously held are shattered:

And I remember everything that happened that day because it has happened many times in my life. The same innocence, trust, and restlessness, the wonder, fear, and loneliness. How I lost myself” (Tan, *Joy* 83).

It is during that day Ying-ying begins a quest for identity, a quest which will continue for many years: “the longing for unity and identification with its own image remains a passion which dogs the ego (*le moi*) throughout life (Parkin-Gounelas 7)”. As Parkin-Gounelas suggests, this is just the beginning of Ying-ying’s search for her identity. In becoming a mother Ying-ying’s search becomes not only for her own identity, but also for that of her daughter, Lena. It is possible to link Tan’s exploration of identity to Lacan’s theories. However, Tan raises issues Lacan fails to address. Tan challenges the idea that it is only the child who is affected by the mirror stage; Tan places the mother into this equation. Within this novel it is also possible to see that being separated from the mother is a negative, supporting Irigaray’s argument.

Irigaray’s criticism can be applied to Ying-ying’s childhood. Ying-ying remembers her own mother’s pain as she watched her daughter grow up. Ying-ying’s mother can see her future pain; however, Ying-ying has found her individual identity and begins to travel her life’s journey on her own, unaware of her unbreakable bond

with her mother. It is not until Ying-ying experiences this relationship as a mother that she feels the pain of watching her daughter grow up. As she watches Lena grow up, Ying-ying acknowledges, “She will fight me, because this is the nature of two tigers. But I will win and give her my spirit, because this is the way a mother loves her daughter” (Tan, *Joy* 252): this is a moment that Ying-ying sees that in searching for her own identity, Lena will eventually come back to her mother; Ying-ying is linked to her daughter even if Lena cannot see this.

The bond between mother and daughter here is strong, and not controlled by a patriarchal presence. The male within the text is not given a voice; this novel is women’s voices talking to other women. Instead the mothers support the daughters; a sacrifice is being made by the mothers. They are giving up their individuality for the welfare of their children. Some feminist critics, such as Rich, would argue that this is negative, that women should have their own individual identity. However, these characters chose to make these sacrifices for their children and this is a positive experience. Within *The Joy Luck Club* the women find themselves, and each other, within the mirror. Here women do not support the male. Instead they support each other in finding their identity and looking forward to a better future.

The women in *The Joy Luck Club* are “uncover[ing] the buried mother”, and are beginning to prove support for each other. However, Lacan’s theories and Western feminism fail to identify these systems. Cultural identity is important in reading this novel in terms of Lacan and Irigaray. The Chinese characters within the novel experience extremely different living environments. In China they have lived in a multi-generational environment, and in America they live as a nuclear family. The massive cultural differences between American living and Chinese lifestyles affect the way in which these characters interact with each other. In addition, the novel is



written by a Chinese-American author, and the characters portrayed are Chinese, Chinese-American and American. Because of these elements, cultural identity within Lacan and Irigaray's criticism needs to be explored.

Lacan and Irigaray both write from a Western perspective and so it is important to identify the significance of this cultural difference, using the example of Ying-ying. At this point in the novel Ying-ying has not witnessed a Western culture; she has yet to discover her cultural identity. During preparations for the Moon Festival, Ying-ying constantly questions Amah (her nanny) about what is going on: "What's that stinky smell?...What is a ceremony?...What kind of punishment?" (Tan, *Joy* 68-9). It is these questions that enable the conclusion to be drawn that Ying-ying is not aware of her cultural surroundings. Her lack of understanding regarding what a ceremony is leads to the conclusion that if she is not aware that a ceremony exists, she cannot be influenced by it. In this case, then, Lacan's theories can be considered when approaching Tan's novel, since cultural identity comes after the discovery of individual identity. In the consideration of Lacan's work cultural orientation is of little importance. Ying-ying is older than the subjects discussed by Lacan; however, she does still show signs that she does not understand her cultural identity, thus Lacan's theories are applicable despite cultural identity.

The discovery of the self happens to these characters at different times of their lives. The moment of discovery happens very young in Ying-ying. However, for some characters the journey of self-discovery is a long and difficult journey. Once the daughter has perceived a separation from her mother, she must then journey to find a way to re-establish the link to the mother that has rarely been broken. This process occurs in all the daughter-mother relationships, although sometimes the daughters do not realise they are going through this process until the journey is complete.

In terms of cultural identity, mirrors and physical appearance are extremely important to the Chinese-born characters of the novel. In Chinese culture, facial features determine fortune in later life; the appearance of a Chinese face is therefore hugely relevant. This is even more significant when mothers and daughters in this text bond over their shared mis/fortune. Interestingly, the realisation of a character that they have these physical similarities can also help free them from a past they have not been able to escape. It is physical resemblance that ties these characters to their families.

Inclusion and exclusion of the family group, and the outside world, plays a significant role in *The Joy Luck Club*. Within the novel appearance is fluid; similarities can be drawn between this and the ever-changing role of the characters. The theme of physical appearance is a subject which Tan reflects on in her collection of non-fiction *The Opposite of Fate*. In the essay "Mother Tongue" Tan recalls her struggle to find a sense of belonging because of her physical appearance. Tan's mother claimed that she was not beautiful to the Chinese, that she looks American. This is described as a "sour American look" (Tan, *Joy* 253) by Lindo in *The Joy Luck Club*. Tan dreams of looking like Marilyn Monroe. However, she believes that she is not beautiful in American eyes, either. Tan's experience of trying to find comfort with her physical self is reflected within her novel.

As Tan tries to find her physical identity, she spends hours in front of the mirror looking at her face. It is the symbol of the mirror which takes on a significance. Mirrors are frequently referred to in *The Joy Luck Club* and other forms of reflection are used, too, such as water and instant photographs. These reflections symbolise a change within a character's identity; as Hamilton argues, "A persistent thematic concern in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* is a quest for identity" (Hamilton

125), and it is often the case that the search and discovery of identity is connected with a mirror or reflection.

Within *The Joy Luck Club* mirrors are arguably more important to the mothers of the text than they are to the daughters. Mirrors are significant to some of the Chinese superstitions that the mothers were raised with, including fortune telling through the features of the face and Feng Shui. The confusion between these two very different ways of thinking is portrayed by Tan, who "...uses the contrast between the mothers' and daughters' beliefs and values to show the difficulties first-generation immigrants face in transmitting their native culture to their offspring" (Hamilton 126). The daughters are an "American Translation". In the preface to "American Translation" the reader is introduced to a mother who is insistent that a mirror is placed at the end of her daughter's bed to ensure that "[a]ll your marriage happiness will bounce back and turn the opposite way" (Tan, *Joy* 147). In this preface the mother looks into the mirror to reveal the future, but all the daughter can see in the mirror is "her own reflection". Mirrors in Chinese tradition are "regarded as symbols of a long and happy marriage" (Walters 55), and on this basis Hamilton concludes that "[l]acking an understanding of the cosmological system to which her mother's omens belong, the daughter simply views them as evidence that her mother has a negative outlook on life" (Hamilton 144). I would not argue against this point. In this section Tan shows the reader the difference between the Chinese women and their American-born daughters. The mirror is used as a symbol of distance between characters and, later, a symbol of reconciliation.

Lindo's memory of her life in China is prompted when she sees her reflection in the hairdresser's mirror. As Lindo looks into the mirror, she is able to see how her face fits into that of her mother. It is more difficult for Lindo to see how her

daughter's face resembles her own. Lindo still sees the Chinese qualities in her face; she cannot see the changes that have occurred over time. This is demonstrated by Lindo's visit to China, where she is identified as an American and charged foreign high prices. Mirrors have a significant effect on Lindo Jong's early life. Just before her marriage in China, Lindo questions, "What is true about a person?" (Tan, *Joy* 58). She is encountering a moment of realisation, when she can see "the power of the wind" (Tan, *Joy* 58). As she considers these thoughts, Lindo's gaze falls to a mirror that is in front of her. Lindo's reflection in the mirror can be seen as "an image whose beauty and bridal purity served, on one hand, to conceal her thoughts, and on the other hand, to symbolize them" (Oster 62). In other words the mirror shows things to Lindo which are not visible; Lindo's knowledge of herself is constructed from this reflection, but can not be seen in this reflection. The mirror constructs two identities for Lindo, the mother identity in "Double Face" and the bride identity in "The Red Candle". Sitting in front of Mr Rory's mirror, Lindo is able to see the changes of her role in life. Lindo questions "which one [face] is American? Which one is Chinese?" (Tan, *Joy* 266). The mirror does not provide clarity. Rather, it forces Lindo to question her identity. Along with this a resolution between mother and daughter is reached; as Lindo concludes, "I will ask my daughter what she thinks" (Tan, *Joy* 266).

Waverly considers appearance differently. The idea of appearance is not as linked to nationality and belonging for her as it is for her mother. Waverly does not have the knowledge that Lindo does regarding the way that she will be viewed by people when she visits China on her honeymoon; Waverly believes that her physical appearance is Chinese, and even asks, "What if I blend in so well they think I am one of them?" (Tan, *Joy* 253). This is something that worries Waverly, who considers

Chinese people ‘others’ she is scared she will be mistaken for “one of them” (Tan, *Joy* 253). Lindo, however, knows better: “They already know that you are an outsider” (Tan, *Joy* 253). Waverly wants to look Chinese because it is considered “fashionable” (Tan, *Joy* 253), not because the Chinese origins link with her identity. Waverly has yet to understand the significance of physical identity: “her empowerment...depends on an adherence to the assimilationist stereotype of the ‘model minority’” (Adams 49). However, Waverly’s character is stronger than Adams suggests. When Waverly begins to see in the mirror that she and her mother have similar physical features, she begins to see that the two characters are more alike than they think. Waverly begins to refer to her facial characteristics as “our”; they are now a shared feature between herself and her mother. Oster argues that the mirror, in bicultural texts, is about establishing the concept of “I” and a unique identity. Within the section “Double Face” the characters are not establishing an “I”; rather, they are establishing a “we”. The mirror creates a link between mother and daughter; it does not give them each individual identity. The mirror is joining the two faces together, that of mother and daughter. The mirror acts as memory within the novel; not only does it separate mother and daughter, but it also reunites them by reminding the women of their bond. From initial conflict comes peace and understanding.

If mirror acts as memory within *The Joy Luck Club*, then it is only fitting the June is able to realise her dead mother’s memory and desires through the mirror. It is when her mother dies that June realises she is searching for a way to reattach her identity with that of her mother. June considers herself to be a bad daughter. Following the death of her mother, June concludes, “What will I say? What can I tell them about my mother? I don’t know anything. She was my mother” (Tan, *Joy* 40). June’s aunts reprimand her for this, claiming “your mother is in your bones” (Tan,

*Joy* 40). It is not enough for June to simply be told her identity is linked to that of her mother; she must discover their connection for herself.

June's search begins with a story about her own childhood, "Two Kinds". The title of this story refers to June's mother, Suyuan, and her belief that there are two kinds of daughters, "Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind" (Tan, *Joy* 142). It can also be interpreted that this title refers to June and Suyuan, "Two Kinds" of personality sharing the same physical construct. Within this section Suyuan puts pressure on June to become a child prodigy. By looking in the mirror that June can see this prodigy:

And then I saw what seemed to be the prodigy side of me- because I had never seen that face before. I looked at my reflection, blinking so I could see more clearly. The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. This girl and I were the same. I had new thoughts, wilful thoughts, or rather filled with lots of won'ts. I won't let her change me, I promised myself. I won't be what I'm not (Tan, *Joy* 134).

Within this extract June finds an identity. She discovers the part of herself that has her talents. The mirror enables June to see a part of herself she has never seen before, and significantly this moment of realisation occurs because of June's mother. June becomes committed to rebelling against her mother's pushing; within the mirror June is separating herself from her mother. This separation happens when June is a child, and continues right up to her mother's death. Without Suyuan's determination June will do well musically, June never would have confronted herself in the mirror and searched for the prodigy side of her personality. It is when Suyuan dies that June realises she spend so much time separating herself from her mother she did not take the time to learn about her mother. June's search moves from searching for herself and her own identity to looking to find her mother within herself. In searching for her mother June finds her in their shared physical appearance, which is found by looking at a photograph.

When June arrives in China to meet her sisters, June's father takes a Polaroid photograph of the three sisters together. The photograph here acts as a mirror; it is an illusion of one's image. Lacan's theories on mirror images consider the mirror as a point of separation from the mother:

The ego he [Lacan] treated as that which is seen in the mirror stage, a 'mirage, a sum of identifications'...with an other, whether that be one's own image or that of the m/other (Parkin-Gounelas 10).

Thus when June is looking at her image in the photograph she is seeing both her own image and also that of her mother. In this case, however, June is not separating herself from her mother, but she is connecting with her mother: "And although we do not speak, I know we all see it: together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long cherished wish" (Tan, *Joy* 288). Photography needs to be considered using a different theoretical approach as Lacan cannot be applied here. Lacan's theories rely on the interaction between the subject and the mirror. This level of interaction is different when considering a photographic image. The mirror is not a still image. Within the mirror the viewer is constantly changing as they move or age. A photograph pinpoints one exact moment in time. Lacan, and his critics, have identified that the mirror is an illusion; it is the trick of identifying the illusion that leads to identity and self-awareness. Susan Sontag identifies the issue with the photograph as being entirely different. The photograph is often considered to be something that represents the beautiful. The illusion is not the photograph itself; rather the illusion is created by the photographer trying to create a beautiful image (Sontag 28). Here the illusion is manipulated by the photographer, who controls what the viewer sees. As June takes the photograph of herself and her sisters, she is trying to make sense of her mother's death and the new world around her; this photograph is an illusion created by June. Suyuan's cultural identity stems

from a belief in unknown and unseen forces; in comparison June is part of a culture reliant on visual aids to enforce belief systems. By looking at the photograph and having a permanent image of her and her sisters, June is able to see her mother inside of her. June is able to identify herself with her mother, finally. The novel closes with June finally seeing the image of her and her sisters resembles the image of her mother. The three images are in synergy and finally the tension between mother and daughter is put to rest.

Images within this novel act as a symbol that there is a cohesion between previously conflicting characters (in this case mothers and daughters). The mirror merges faces; it creates bonds and carves identities. As each woman explores herself and her role within the family and the outside world, mirrors act as a guide, helping the characters to discover an identity they struggle to find on their own. The 'mental snap-shot' that Tan places in the reader's mind suggests that there is a happy ending of sorts and that peace is made between the parties. Although conflict is demonstrated between mother and daughter, it is rare that this conflict is symbolised by the use of mirrors in Tan's work. Instead, mirrors represent a bond between the women, and other elements of Tan's text reinforce these bonds. Tan's stories themselves are a bonding process for the women, passing stories through generations.



### Conclusion

Within Tan's novel space and identity are intrinsically linked. The relationship between these elements needs to be examined in order to conclude this thesis. In considering space in the work of Tan, it is vital to look back at Grice: "Asian-American women currently have a rather popular room in the house of fiction" (Grice 224). Grice here imagines a real space which all authors occupy together. In addition to this, she allocates a room to Asian American women. In sharing this room Tan is influenced by those around her, and she is influenced by the room itself. In imagining the room as a dormitory, it is clear to see how this influence works. Each woman has her own space, her own bed; however, they are reliant on each other for some things. This is very much the way in which Tan has approached her work. Within her novel she sets aside space for each woman; however, it is necessary for each of these characters to share the space the author has provided.

In addition to this, the idea of the "house of fiction" can be extended. For the Asian American writers that Grice pinpoints, this room, and indeed this group of women, play an important role in the identity of others. As I have argued, it is these women's influence on each other that is vital to identity. Just as Eaton and Kingston have influenced Tan's identity as a writer, so each of the characters influences the identity of others.

That this identity is established in a "house of fiction" is relevant to this thesis, too. This suggests that this establishing of identity takes place in the home. As mentioned earlier, the role of the home itself is a feminist issue with Greer arguing: "Father was responsible for his dependants; he owned the property, transferred it to his first born son together with his name" (Greer, *Eunuch* 247). In a patriarchal society it is the father who owns the home, whilst it is up to the mother to spend her

time “keeping” the home. It is contested by feminist critics, such as Rich and Greer, that women should be confined to the home. However, by considering this place of self discovery to be a house, patriarchal views of womanhood are being supported. I would argue however, that although these women share a metaphorical space, such as the “house of fiction”, their self discovery occurs in the public domain. Ying-ying falls through the lake at the Moon Lady Festival, Lindo looks into the mirror at the hairdressers, and June finds identity and place in China.

The cultural differences of mother and daughter are the main source of tension within Tan’s mother-daughter relationships. Cultural identity divides these characters; they are unable to understand the distinct differences between their cultural upbringings. As this thesis has argued, through the process of story telling these women are able to identify their cultural differences and more importantly through this process they can pinpoint the similarities that pull them together. These similarities can be physical, for example Lindo and Waverly’s image in the mirror, or they can be reflected in an object, for example June’s pendant. However these similarities are discovered they are vital to the conclusion of the novel. Ultimately, these journeys of self-discovery lead to a “happy ending”. Within *The Joy Luck Club*, group identity is not realised until the closing chapters. Finally, mothers and daughter realise their place together, and reconciliation takes place.

This happy ending can be achieved because the women of the novel find their place within the family unit and are able, finally, to function effectively in these roles. When the mothers are finally able to help their daughters in their lives, they are much more successful and happy as women. For example, Ying-ying finds her role as mother when she is able to help Lena gain control of her life and deal with her marital problems. Feminist theory often challenges the view that women’s identity is

primarily related to their ability to mother. This finding does not go against this theory. Rather, it supports Rich's theory that mothering does not come to women naturally rather it is something they must work at. Each character must work at finding her place within the family structure and the female space that Tan creates.

The search for identity has been explored in this thesis in three important ways. Firstly, what it means, within this novel, to be a mother has been explored. Secondly, motherhood is difficult for these women and they have to overcome difficulties before they are able to raise their own children, and finally, once the mothers have their own children, they must work at the relationship between mother and daughter. Being a mother is a learning process, and mistakes that mothers have made in the past affect the relationship between mother and daughter. This novel breaks down the barriers between these two groups of women. It does this by focusing on the physical similarities between mother and daughter, and looking at how language can work as an including or excluding force.

In order to conclude this thesis it is important finally to consider the effects of the "house of fiction" on the writer. Throughout this thesis Tan has been considered a literary daughter to Eaton and Kingston. However, just as Tan has been influenced by the women who share her literary space, so to has she influenced others. Comparisons are often drawn between Tan's work and the novels of Gish Jen. Although Jen's approach to Chinese-American life is notably different to Tan's, some similarities can be drawn.

There is still significant conflict between generations in Jen's novels. However, *Mona in the Promised Land* is a literary space for the daughter alone, and she does not share this space with her mother. Jen also evolves Chinese-American writing by taking on a vastly different style and narrative voice. Jen's narrative voice

is full of the attempts to belong that are explored in Tan and Kingston's novels. However, Jen does this by examining the desire for ownership of a home: "The desire for a home preoccupies Ralph [in *Typical American*] during his first few months in America. 'He missed his home, missed having a place that was home. Home!'" (Grice 204). The home within Tan's work is a metaphorical space, whereas within Jen's novels this space becomes literal. Jen's characters embrace traditionally Western ideals of ownership and consumer culture.

The title of Jen's second novel, *Mona in the Promised Land*, presents the reader with two very interesting ideas. As Kenneth Millard notes, "The very title...suggests the continuity of the ideas of expectation that the United States generates, and also their biblical origins" (Millard 266). Jen explores the idea of the American dream and questions how realistic it is for minority communities, in order to do this she focuses her text on characters from these communities. In *Mona in the Promised Land* the title character is Chinese-American. Mona often forgets her Chinese background and how this affects her life: "Mona realises she needs to find somebody to kiss too. But how? She can't do mascara, her eyelashes stick together. Plus—as Danielle the Great Educator points out—Mona's *Chinese*" (Jen 5). Danielle is quick to point out Mona's origins; however, Danielle is from the Jewish community, another minority. Jen explores the relationships between minority groups using humour, irony and political incorrectness. In addition to the Jewish and Chinese backgrounds that are present in the novel; Jen also includes an African-American character. From this mixture of characters common goals become clear. Both the Jewish American and Chinese-American parental characters focus on educational excellence and Mona observes that Chinese-Americans are the "new Jews" (Jen 3)

Jen here comments that there are distinct similarities in these two cultures' immigration to America, although, the Jewish immigration began much earlier.

Mona believes that she will find her place in America by becoming Jewish. Jen here deals with religion, a subject that Tan doesn't approach. Although at first it seems that Mona is taking on this new religion to fit in with her surroundings, she soon finds that this new found religion can help give her life direction; Mona becomes committed to helping the lives of others, leading her to offer Barbara's house to homeless Alfred, whilst her parents are away. Mona invites Alfred into this home space, that plays such an important part of both Tan's novels, and Jen's earlier work. Alfred's role as a character is to remind Mona that not everybody has the freedom to escape the social constraints of stereotype; he is African-American and "...nobody is forgetting we're a minority, and if we don't mind our manners, we're like as not to end up doing time in a concrete hotel" (Jen 137). Here, Jen is considering the larger issues associated with race in the late 1960s.

By approaching themes that Tan does not, Jen is adding to the Chinese-American room in the "house of fiction". However, Jen often addresses the themes that have previously been raised by Tan, too. For example, Mona is often reminded of her Chinese background when she is embarrassed by her parents' Chinese ways. In addition to this, whilst Mona is committing herself to Judaism, her older sister Callie is embracing the Chinese side of her heritage because it is considered fashionable; just as the mothers criticise the daughters for doing in *The Joy Luck Club*. Jen's work is vital in adding new ideas to the Asian-American "house of fiction", considering gender roles and female friendship alongside religion and social politics.

As well as influencing other writers, Tan herself has progressed as a novelist and storyteller. It is easy to see the progression between Tan's first novel, *The Joy*

*Luck Club* and her latest literary offering, *Saving Fish from Drowning*. In her latest novel Tan has moved away from the mother-daughter narrative that has proved so successful for her in the past, and instead tells the story of a group of American tourists travelling in Burma through multiple perspectives. Most notably Tan is writing substantial male characters for the first time and deals with themes from a male perspective. There are, however, still definite themes that can be identified within most of Tan's work. Tan blends the old themes with the new to move forward as a writer.

In addition to her main characters including a male voice, the characters in *Saving Fish from Drowning* are from a mixture of cultural backgrounds. The novel does include a character of Chinese origins; however, it also includes a mixture of other cultural backgrounds. This is a new move for Tan, whose previous characters have all had Chinese backgrounds. The themes of identity are no longer about a Chinese-American identity; rather they are generic themes of identity. However, it is still the case that the characters Tan writes are dependent upon each other and the group identity present in Tan's earlier works can be seen here.

The main focus of this work is the theme of cultural difference. Where her previous novels have approached this difference by moving characters from East to West, here Tan reverses the roles moving characters from West to East. In making this transition, Tan's novel is far less dark than her previous works, making this a novel of satire. The characters make a series of mistakes often caused by their naive perceptions of the Burmese culture; for a long period they do not realise they are being held captive, rather they are on an excursion. There is, also a sense of arrogance about these characters, they believe that they are visiting places that are authentically Burmese. The only event which is organised for them which is Burmese, a meal, they

do not even eat. Tan's characters consider themselves above the national stereotype, and yet in the Burmese jungle they all conform in some way. The only character who has any idea of the irony of these events is the narrator, Bibi Chen, who dies on the eve of the expedition.

Tan's novels all concern themselves in some way with the spiritual world. Whether it is the ghosts of the past that haunt the characters in *The Joy Luck Club*, the imagined ghosts that Ruth communicates with to hold power over her mother in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, or the spirits Kwan can see with her yin eyes in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Tan's preoccupation with the spiritual is obvious. In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Tan's narrator is dead; once again Tan comes back to themes she has previously explored, and feels comfortable with. She successfully combines these older themes with new thoughts and ideas, and moves forward as a writer. And, as with all of Tan's novels, the story concludes with a happy-ending.

Although she is often dismissed as a "fairy tale, 'female romance' and 'chick lit'" (Adams 35) author, Tan is a vital member of the Asian American "house of fiction"; creating links between the past and future, just as her characters do in her novels.

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