



AMY TAN AND LITERARY SPECIFICATION OF HER WORKS

Kiyasova Ra'no Malikovna

Senior Teacher Tashkent State Transport University
Department of Foreign Languages.

Sidiqnazarova Zulfiya Mirsharapovna

Senior Teacher Tashkent State Transport University
Department of Foreign Languages.

Abstract

There are many of Chinese American authors who did great contribution to the literature but among them Chinese American writer Amy Tan plays an important role. Her works mostly explore mother-daughter relationships. Moreover, the connection of the past and the present is typical of Tan's style. "The Joy Luck Club" is one of her the most famous novels which focuses on the relationship between an immigrant Chinese mother and her American-born daughter.

Introduction

The aim of this article describes and analyzes the main tendencies in mother-daughter relations in "The Joy Lock Club" the theoretical discussion about concepts of identity and belongs in Asia America, as well as their reflection in literature. Special attention will be paid to the Amy Tan's novel "The Joy Luck Club" from the standpoint of a traditional culture, values and rituals in Chinese culture.

In order to accomplish this aim, we have put forward the following tasks:

- To study up the phenomenon of Chines American literature and its development
- To identify main themes and motifs in Chinese American literature
- To find out the essence of Amy Tan and literary specificity of her works.

The theoretical value of the present article is that the theoretical part of the work can be used in delivering lectures or other researches in this sphere.

The practical value of the present article is that the practical results gained by investigating the given problem may be used as examples or mini-tests in seminars and practical lessons on American Literature.

Amy Tan — one of American literature's energetic Asian-American superstars has successfully allied herself with two driving forces in the book market of the late twentieth century: feminism and cross-culturalism. This favorable union of themes and style, however, doesn't spring from a calculated attempt to manipulate the fiction market, but from Tan's internal wars with society, self, mother, and the past.

Tan herself resembles the first-generation Chinese-American characters who people her best-selling inter-generational tapestries, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), and *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995). Inspired by the stories of memorable women throughout her mother's



life, Tan has in these books honored a sisterhood whose power and vitality are as influential to her writing as is her unique cultural background.

Born An-Mei Tan on February 19, 1952, in Oakland, California, Amy Tan was the second of three children and the only daughter of John Tan and Daisy Tu Ching Tan. John was a Beijing-born electrical engineer and volunteer Baptist minister, and Daisy was an industrial nurse and medical technician from Shanghai. The Tans had immigrated to California in the late 1940s, when post-war China was remolding its society to fit its concept of communism.

Amy challenged parental authority, yet met John and Daisy Tan's expectations of high achievement by studying piano and excelling in science and math. Amy's emotional rootlessness led her to distance herself from Daisy, who chose Amy's careers — concert pianist and physician — instead of a vocation in one of the less remunerative liberal arts.

Family relationships were severely strained by two agonizingly slow deaths — in 1967, Amy's seventeen-year-old brother, Peter, and in 1968, her fifty-four-year-old father, John — both victims of brain tumors. Amy's normal adolescent stresses, heightened by intense grief, pushed her into serious rebellion. Daisy Tan felt it necessary to leave California, so the family moved to Montreux, Switzerland, where Amy and her younger brother John were enrolled in a private school. Despite the foreign setting, Amy's rebelliousness flared up and she enjoyed a brief flirtation with a German involved in crime and drugs before her mother helped the police take him into custody in a risky trap at the border.

When the family returned to San Francisco, Amy's scholarships and part-time work at a pizzeria paid her tuition at Linfield, a small Baptist college in McMinnville, Oregon. She pursued a medical degree on her way to a career in neurosurgery, a choice that met Daisy's standards.

Amy's need to rebel and to shock her mother lessened after she gave up scruffy overalls, stopped dating hippies, and settled on Lou DeMattei, a pre-law student and likely husband material. The romance flourished during six months of silence between mother and daughter. Then, transferring in her sophomore year to San Jose State University to be with Lou, Amy encountered a new adversary — a disapproving future mother-in-law. This relationship required the intervention of Daisy, a tenacious, eighty-pound scrapper, who defended her daughter and won.

No longer certain she wanted to be a doctor, Amy switched majors and received a degree in English in 1973, followed by an M.A. in linguistics from San Jose State and groundwork for a doctorate at the University of California at Berkeley. In 1974, she left graduate school, married Lou, a tax attorney, and settled in a San Francisco condominium.

Four years later, after Daisy returned from a trip to China, Amy and her mother patched up their differences as adults — woman to woman — having survived the worst of their alienation. For the first time, Amy Tan could acknowledge the double strands of Chinese and American traditions embellishing her past.

As an employee of the Alameda County Association for Retarded Citizens, Amy worked as a language consultant to the mentally handicapped before becoming a journalist in 1979. For three years, she wrote and edited news, and then launched and helped publish a professional journal, *Emergency Room Reports*.



During this period, her mother divulged the hard facts of her previous marriage in China, of a son who died in infancy, and of three daughters she had left behind and never mentioned to her American children. Amy began a sisterly correspondence. In 1991, she helped one sister, a nurse, emigrate from China to Wisconsin with her surgeon husband and their fourteen-year-old daughter; the couple found work managing a Chinese restaurant. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Tan includes as one of the main characters a half-sister born in China and brought to the U.S. to be part of her father's second family.

"So easy to read!" was Daisy Tan's reaction to her daughter Amy's stories. Tan's style is deliberately transparent and neat. Her writing captures the different "Englishes" with which she grew up—her mother's "broken English," her own "watered-down" translation to English from Chinese, and the "simple" English used by the generations to communicate with one another. Tan crystallizes these forms to capture Chinese imagery and rhythms. She strives to give accurate voice to the characters, expressing the immigrant experience by borrowing the unique characteristics of the melded languages. Tan's much-anthologized essay "Mother Tongue" illuminates how she developed this unique writing style.

The themes of *The Joy Luck Club* include family, heritage, assimilation, and fate. Many of Tan's characters struggle to reconcile American individuality and freedom of choice with Chinese wisdom and respect for tradition. Tan excavates the bones of human relationships through singular characters, quick pacing, and sharp storytelling.

Tan transforms family history to serve "emotional memory." As depicted in *The Joy Luck Club*, her grandmother was a fourth wife, a concubine who ended her life by swallowing an overdose of opium. Tan's mother was the small child who witnessed the suicide. Tan has said, "When I place that memory in a fictive home, it becomes imagination. It has the power to change my memory of the way things really happened."

The Opposite of Fate: Memories of a Writing Life (2003) is a collection of essays, speeches, and articles. Here Tan writes that her mother told her, "For many years, I carried this shame on my back, and my mother suffered, because she couldn't say anything to anybody." Tan's joy-luck stories grew out of the will to give her mother back her voice.

Tan's first four novels feature generations learning to understand one another and the clash between cultures. In *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), Winnie tells her daughter Pearl the stories of war-torn China in the 1940s.

The Moon Lady (1992) and *Sagwa, The Chinese Siamese Cat* (1994) are illustrated children's books. *The Moon Lady* retells Ying-ying St. Clair's story of the Moon Festival from *The Joy Luck Club* for children. The second book, inspired by Tan's favorite cat, was later turned into *Sagwa*, children's cartoon series for PBS.

Ghosts are a prevalent symbol in Tan's third novel, *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995). Olivia, the first-generation American protagonist, meets Kwan, her Chinese step-sister, who can see "yin people"—or ghosts. In *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), the heroine translates her Alzheimer's-afflicted mother's journal in an attempt to understand their shared past.



Most of the action in *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005) takes place in the present, as twelve American tourists travel to Burma. The narrator, Bibi, is a travel-agent ghost. True to Tan's style, the depiction of the characters' lives is deeply convincing, as if channeled from the chorus of many ghosts.

"Rules of the Game" Amy Tan's writing style is about the Chinese-American culture integrated with life stories. She gives the reader an opportunity to gain knowledge about the way of life her family, friends, and even herself have had. Tan's main purpose of writing is to educate people about growing up as a minority. In her stories, "Tan is handing us the key with no price tag and letting us open the brass-bolted door." (Gillespie.365). The focus of "Rules of the Game" was on the culture of the Chinese-Americans but it was weaved into a story to catch the reader's attention. She introduces the readers to the way of life of the Chinese-Americans, "it's like being invited into a dusty room full of castoffs, and being given a chance to re-apprehend them in their former richness" (Gillespie.365). Tan wrote about her experiences, her relative's experiences, and fellow Chinese-Americans living in America. In the story "Rules of the Game" Tan included experiences she had known from her life. In all of Tan's stories and novels "Tan wrote about what she had seen herself and what she hadn't- her own experience and her mother's" including in the short story "Rules of the Game" Tan's stories give a "lucidity of vision" (Chang. In "Rules of the Game", she uses her experiences about learning to play chess as the theme of the story. This is an example of Tan "demonstrating fundamental faith in invisible forces which pervades traditional Chinese culture and that this, too, divides the first and second generations" (Chang. In "Rules of the Game", the Chinese-American lifestyle is shown by describing how the family went to church, where their house was, and how they lived in Chinatown, where they were around other Chinese-Americans that had the same morals, standards, and values as they had. Waverly did not want her mother to make a spectacle of her so she was upset when her mother told everyone of her success. Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* shows that Olivia was shaped by American values, materialism, self-centeredness, rationality, skepticism, and rejection of the traditional ways of China. The major complicating factor is, of course, the influence of her sister Kwan. Their very names suggest this division, one American, the other Chinese. As much as Olivia wants to throw off forever her ethnic past, Kwan is always there as both sister and surrogate mother to remind her of the roots of which Olivia is ashamed.

Conclusion

Chinese Americans have been contributing to U.S. literature for over a century, but their role did not gain recognition in mainstream culture or academia until the 1970s. Since then, over 50 Chinese American studies programs, centers, and institutes have been established on university campuses, and organizations such as Undemand and the Chinese American Writers' Workshop, presses, and journals have helped to further cultivate Asian American literature. As a result, Asian American writers may no longer feel compelled to write in particular traditional or protest modes or represent the external cultural labels pressed upon them. Chinese American writers have captured the power of the past but have ventured into new territories and discovered, created, and revealed new voices and styles.



Investigating main themes and characteristics of Chinese American literature has helped us to know better about authors' works, their style and new vocabulary. All in all these works helped us to imagine the whole picture of Chinese American literature.

Studying Amy Tan's literary career and her personal life we had known that she is patriotic, kind and faithful. She tried to show the relationship between immigrant Chinese mother and her American-born daughter in most of her famous novels. Moreover, we understood that many of her novels are based on Tan's own experiences from this point of view we can say that her works are autobiographical.

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