Adapting Traditional Chinese Culture in Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

Amy Tan's first novel, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), is considered to be her most successful work and has received extensive attention from critics. In many ways, she has been seen as representative of Chinese-American authors, perhaps because she uses a large number of Chinese elements in her work while maintaining a perspective that is distinctly American. This paradox is one that Tan both works within and objects to. She once wrote “I would have to say I am a American writer, I believe that what I write is American fiction” (Darraj 66) and yet has persistently populated her novels with Chinese characters and located large sections of them in China. This essay analyzes some of the Chinese elements that appear in *The Joy Luck Club* in an attempt to evaluate the author from both sides of the above paradox. It opens with a short introduction to Amy Tan and the background to *The Joy Luck Club*. From there it turns to the contextualization of *The Joy Luck Club* within traditional China culture. This section, the main body of the essay, is divided into two parts: firstly, Tan's use of Feng Shui, secondly, her understanding of Wu Xing. The essay turns to an examination of Tan's adaptation of a number of traditional Chinese folk tales, showing how she sometimes ingeniously rewrites them to suit an American context. It is therefore possible to conclude that by creatively mainpulating elements of Chinese culture, Tan consciously represents and misrepresents her own Chinese past and that of her characters.
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Introduction

In the 20th century, and especially after the wide-scale civil rights movement of the 1960s, Chinese Americans began to find a new voice. With the rise of feminism and multiculturalism, increasing protests against US involvement in Vietnam and other Asian countries, it could be said that Chinese-American Literature entered a golden era of development. In particular, a group of female writers of Chinese origin won a good deal of attention. As Xiao Huang Yin puts it in *Chinese American Literature Since the 1850s*: “More Chinese Americans were led to participate in creating literature that had expanded readership, a broadened scope, and reshaped thematic concerns. As a result, Chinese American literature entered a distinctively new phase of development” (229). By recording and recreating their own lives and those of their parents and grandparents, Chinese-American writers reflected on the experiences and mentality of first and second Chinese-American within American culture.

Among these female Chinese-American writers, Amy Tan has a compelling voice that has moved and enchanted so many readers. Yet, Tan's works, despite having been thoroughly studied from many different perspectives, have left critics and scholars divided as to their real worth. Most of them tend to lump Amy Tan together with other writers of Chinese origin. Yet some Chinese-American writers have refused to accept this. For example, Maxine Hong Kingston, another outstanding American writer of Chinese origin, has always rejected this label as hasty over-convenient and. Amy Tan also strongly rejects being categorized as simply a Chinese-American writer and has repeatedly insisted that her works are typically American novels. In her biography, she solemnly declares that she is “an American writer, and what she writes is American fiction” (OF 310).

It is true that in Tan's novels Chinese elements are frequently applied, and these elements range from Chinese history and society to cultural symbols like Chinese food, Mahjong, superstition and so on. Therefore, it is natural that the description and introduction of so many typically Chinese elements contribute much to classifying Tan as a Chinese-American writer. However, the existence of these Chinese elements in Tan's novels means much more than just presenting China and Chinese culture to Western readers in order to meet their desire for exotic charm. Tan ingeniously weaves them into her stories for the development of plot or for reflecting the characters’ features. Besides, these elements also help disclose themes like
conflicts between mothers and daughters and the absence of love. Such themes are not characteristic of Chinese-American literature even though they have been popular in Western literature for a long time. In addition, to make these elements serve better for her novels Tan often reshapes them in accordance with her arrangements of plots. Furthermore, as an American, she even brings “wrong” or misleading information about Chinese culture to her readers.

It seems that Tan's identity as a writer cannot be determined either by her obviously Chinese physical appearance or by the frequently applied Chinese elements in her novels. Instead, she has claimed she has “the freedom to write whatever she wants” (OF 208).

The Author and Creative Background of The Joy Luck Club
This chapter contains two sections: the first is a general introduction to background of The Joy Luck Club and looks at Tan’s motives for writing the novel. The second part offers an overview of Amy Tan and her works and hopes to show how an understanding of the author's life experiences and intentions are necessary to a successful interpretation of her work.

Amy Tan was born in Oakland, California in 1952 to immigrant Chinese parents and grew up in the San Francisco Bay area. She graduated from high school in Montreux, Switzerland and received her master's degree in linguistics from San Jose State University. The creative background to this novel draws heavily on Tan's childhood. Constantly moving house and changing schools, she had find ways to establish contact with new people all the time. Susan Muaddi Darraj, for example, notes that “Tan and her brothers resettle[ed] at 11 different schools, where they were always the 'new kids' who would have to then find a new circle of friend” (Darraj 26). Tan was deeply influenced by her mother and her own multicultural environment. She liked to go to the library with her father and was clearly sensitive to language at an early age. She also became increasingly interested in literature. A lot of reading has laid a solid foundation for her future writing. In 1960, when she was in third-grade, she has an essay published in the Santa Rosa Press Democrat. At the outset, Tan demonstrated ability to write intelligently and creatively and wanted to “become a writer when she grew up” (Darraj 29).

In the 1960s, the rapid development of science and technology saw western culture undergo a media evolution. At the same time, different kinds of minority movements began to spring up in the United States, such as like the black civil rights
movement, the women's liberation movement and the students’ movement. Tan was a product of these changes and when she began to write at university, she was naturally affected by these powerful culture shifts.

After obtaining her master's degree in linguistics in 1985, Amy Tan began to write her first novel, mostly to prove to herself her ability to master the English language. Another important reason for writing the book was that her mother, being a first-generation Chinese immigrant, meant that Tan was naturally close to China and Chinese culture. As Darraj puts it: “She employed much of the material learned from conversations with her mother” (60). She thus has some unique advantages from her mother's Chinese traditional culture. Further, after her mother suffered a heart attack and was admitted to hospital while Tan was on holiday in Hawaii, she felt she needed to do something for her mother and the two of them went to China, where Tan put a great deal of time into writing The Joy Luck Club. It seems that her mother's sudden illness made Tan look at herself and ask a series of questions about origins, memory, hope, fear and the like.

Many of Tan’s novels are about mother-daughter relationships. In 1967, her family suffered a disaster--both her father and one of her brothers died of a brain tumor within a short time of one another and her mother chose that moment to tell her about her former marriage in China and the fact that she had other three daughters. This came like a bolt out of the blue to Tan. To make matters worse, Tan's mother moved the family to Switzerland (where she finished her high school education) because she believed that they were suffering from extreme bad luck in the United States. After Tan’s marriage to Louis DeMattei, she began to study for Ph.D in linguistics and then went to work with developmentally disabled children and finally decided to stop studying and to write fiction instead.

Tan’s mother told her many Chinese stories, which she claims seemed uninteresting at the time. However, these stories later had a substantial influence on her. After her mother had fully recovered her health in 1987, she and Tan went to China, where Tan's mother was reunited with the daughters she lost before the liberation in China, and Tan met her half-sisters for the first time. This experience is reflected in The Joy Luck Club, which was published in 1989. The novel received enthusiastic reviews and remained on the New York Time's bestseller list for seven months (Rozakis 3). Later that same year, it won the L.A Times Book Award and National Book Award and, in 1993, the novel was adapted into a commercial film which also achieved great success. It has since been translated into 25 languages.

*The Joy Luck Club* described both the closeness and the distance between four pairs of immigrant mothers and American-born daughters, including their miserable experiences while seeking safety from the Japanese during the Sino-Japanese War (1937-45). These four Chinese immigrants move to San Francisco, California, and start a club known as “Joy Luck Club,” playing the Chinese game of Mahjong for money while feasting on a variety of foods. The connecting thread of the novel is Jing-mei’s experience, including her trip to China to meet her half-sisters, who were left behind in China during the war. The book is structured somewhat like a mahjong game, with four parts divided into four sections to create sixteen chapters. The three mothers and four daughters (Jing-mei’s mother, Suyuan Woo, dying before the novel opens) share stories about their lives. Each part is preceded by a parable relating to the game. The sixteen interwoven stories in *The Joy Luck Club* mainly tell about conflicts between Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-raised daughters.

**The Embodiment of Traditional Chinese Culture in the Novel**

One of the reasons for *The Joy Luck Club*’s popularity is its highly evocative description of traditional Chinese culture. As Susan Muaddi Darraj has pointed out, Tan “has often directly used the experiences of her mother to create her plots and characters” (Darraj 70). She also puts her American life in the context of Chinese stories. Using Feng shui and the theory of the five element combined with Chinese folklore, Tan not only vividly describes the Chinese cultural elements in the novel but also creates a mysterious oriental atmosphere that holds readers curiosity and interests.

**Feng Shui**

Feng shui, a Chinese term meaning “wing and Water, predates Confucianism and Taoism, and has been practiced for over three thousand years in China” (Collins 1).
The term itself only became common during the Song dynasty that lasted from 960 - 1179 (Bruun 11). In *The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary*, *Feng shui* is defined simply as a particular location (e.g. of a house, a grave, etc.) within a given set of geomantic features, such as nearby hills and waters. It was believed that such situating could affect the fortunes of a family and its descendants. Naturally, this simple definition is one-sided and narrow but it has been expanded by some to apply to even larger contexts, such an entire environment and its buildings and even to the stars. It is a huge system. One feng shui expert, Rodika Tchi, has pointed out that the I Ching (known in Chinese as Yijing) is one of the oldest known texts of philosophy and divination. It is the complex body of knowledge at the foundation of Taoism. As such, the wisdom of the I Ching has influenced numerous ancient philosophies and disciplines, including feng shui. Therefore feng shui is based on the complex set of profound theories and calculations derived from the I Ching, it implied the profound Chinese culture background and scientific knowledge system. Amy Tan never makes such wide claims for feng shui in *The Joy Luck Club*, but she does use it with relationship to the location of houses and the placement of objects within them as well as linking it to people's fortunes. Used with some seriousness as well as humorously, Tan has it both ways. She manages to make the women in the novel who believe in it look ignorant and superstitious but also wise and slightly mysterious. Her Chinese mothers are therefore both naïve and informed at the same time.

As Patricia Hamilton has suggested feng shui “plays a pivotal role in Lena St. Clair’s story (*The voice from Wall*) which chronicles her mother Ying-ying's gradual psychological breakdown and withdrawal from life” (136). In the novel, when Lena was ten, her family could afford to buy a new apartment, which lay in an Italian neighborhood on a steep hill of North Beach on the north of the bay of San Francisco. It is clearly a good thing to be able to move from poor living conditions in Oakland and the family is very happy, but Ying-ying is not. At the same time, Ying-ying is seen as being justifiably dissatisfied with the new apartment because she thinks the house feng shui is bad and everything else in the new building suffering from imbalance. She believes firmly in feng shui, and whenever she feels dangerous or nervous she changes the position of the furniture and other items. She also worries about the new apartment being located at a “wrong” site that might bring about danger or misfortune to her family. She fears that “[t]his house was built too steep, and a bad wind from the top blows all your strength back down the hill. So
you can never get ahead. You are always rolling backward” (JYC 121). According to feng shui, a static thing is regarded as Yin, and it seems that a hill is motionless. Therefore there would be too much Yin destroying the balance between Yin and Yang, and disaster would come if a house were built on the steep hill (Li 2001). At the same time, the wind at the top of the hill is very strong so that anything beneficial is blown away. In ancient China, the ideal location for a building was under the shelter of hills that would protect it from bitter northerly winds (Hamilton 138). So it is unsuitable to build a house on a height. Used to the thinking of traditional Chinese culture, Ying-ying was sure to know that and her concern with psychic rather than physical danger is consistent with modern applications of feng shui, while her notion of an ill wind sweeping down the hill, although metaphorical, is based on traditional lore.

By the Han dynasty, the use of feng shui was extended to the selection of dwellings for the living (Hornik 73). The basic idea is to attract and channel ch'i, or beneficial energy, and “accumulate it without allowing it to go stagnant” (Skinner 21). Ch'i encourages growth and prosperity; a wise person will consider how to manipulate it to best effect through feng shui, the study of placement with respect to both natural and man-made environments (Hamilton 137). Since Ying-ying feels “things not being balance” (JLC 120), she begins to rearrange everything possible to correct her family's bad feng shui, except for the poor location of the new apartment and the doorway to her apartment, which she could do nothing about. She first redecorates the sitting room by moving “a large round mirror from the wall facing the front door to a wall by the sofa” (JLC 121) According to the principles of feng shui, the front door is the entrance to attract Di ch'i (beneficial energy from earth), and mirrors are used to suppress demon, so it cannot be placed to face the front door because Di ch'i is believed to enter a dwelling through the front door, but mirror hung opposite to the front door may deflect it back outside again. Mirrors require careful placement so as to encourage the flow of ch'i around a room. Furniture must be positioned according to the guidelines that allow beneficial currents of ch'i to circulate without stagnating (Hamilton 137). Through properly placed furniture, “every opportunity can be taken to correct whatever defects may exist, and to enhance whatever positive qualities there are” (Walters 46). Therefore, after moving the mirror away, she starts to move the larger pieces: the sofa, chairs, end tables, a Chinese scroll of goldfish. Actually she almost rearranges everything. “Strategically placed aquariums containing goldfish are often prescribed for structural problems
that cannot be altered, in part because acquires symbolically bring all five elements together into balance” (Collins 21).

That the kitchen faces the toilet room was against the principle of feng shui. Being aware of the bad feng shui of the new apartment, Ying-ying is wary of any possible dangers or misfortunes that might befall her family. Ying-ying proceeded to rearrange Lena's bedroom. She moves Lena's bed from by the window to against a wall “in accordance with the principles of good feng shui, which indicate a bed should be placed against a wall, not a window” (Walter 53). Furthermore, she begins to bump into things; into table edges as if she forgot she was carrying a child. Perhaps, she thinks, it was such a series of mistakes violating the principles of feng shui that caused her other son to be stillborn and she suffers doubly as a result, repeatedly blaming herself for not having taken a good enough care of him: “My fault, my fault. I knew this before it happened” (JLC 124). “I had given no thought to killing my other son! How I had given no thought to having this baby! ” (JLC 125). This might sound strange to westerners because her baby's death was due to hydrocephalus and spina bifida, both unavoidable. But Ying-ying's obsession with feng shui drives her to believe that she is responsible for the miscarriage. This seems to be a distinctively Chinese way of thinking about ill fate or bad luck and gives the novel a special complexion. Semi-autobiographical, ironic and critical but also sensitive and sympathetic to her root culture, Tan leads her readers into a world where they both identify with and blame her characters who are themselves caught between two distinct cultures.

Some say that feng shui is a science and comprises more than just superstition but it nevertheless underwent a shock after the Chinese Revolution. Originating in the idea that “everything in the universe can be divided from chaos into two opposing forces-the Yin and the Yang” (Collins 16), it sees Yin and Yang as the shady and sunny sides of a mountain but has them represent much more than darkness and light. Yin, the dark, feeble, female and maternal element, was related with the earth, whereas Yang, the strong, male and creative power, was associated with the heaven. Yin is the complicated feminine intuitive intellect while Yang is the clear and rational male intellect. Yin is the quiet, contemplative stillness of the sages while Yang is strong, creative action of kings (Collins 16). The food that people eat is also classified in two types: those contacting elements of Yin and those of Yang. In all, the Yin and Yang thought permeates into the traditional Chinese culture and features its way of life. For example, traditional Chinese medicine is based on the balance of
Yin and Yang in the human body, and an illness is considered as a disruption of this balance. The human body is divided into Yin and Yang, so it is with the internal organs. The balance between all the organs is maintained by a continuous flow of chi (vital energy), along a system of channels. When the flow between Yin and Yang is blocked, the body falls ill. Therefore, the doctor is to help the patient balance his or her Yin and Yang in various ways like acupuncture and herbal medicine. “Yin and Yang have always been in a state of incessant changes. Taijitu (the Grand Terminus) is the best presentation of the movements of Yin and Yang, with the black for Yin and the white for Yang. The two dots in Taiji Tu symbolize the idea that when one of the two forces reaches its extreme, the seed of its opposite has already been born” (SinoGuider). The simple dialectics in the philosophy of Yin and Yang provided the geomancers with a theoretical guide. One of the classical books about Feng Shui appeared in the earlier days of the Tang Dynasty and indicated that the house is the axis of Yin and Yang, an orbit for human relations. “Yin is the mother of life, nature and feeling; while Yang is the father of life, nature and feeling. Yin and Yang are the ancestors of heaven and earth, the producers of life” (Liu 4).

Chi thought, one of the highlights in the theoretical system of Taoism, is the result of the further development of Yin and Yang thought by some Taoist thinkers. In the later days of the Western Zhou Dynasty, Yang Fu, a historiography, used the chi from Yin and Yang to explain earthquakes and other disasters, saying that “the chi of the world and earth must be kept in balance, or men will be in riots. Either the Yang suppressed or the Yin is constricted, the earthquake will happen” (Li 1990). Chi thought became one of the most important theoretical pillars in the feng shui theory, which sees it sometimes as an invisible but flowing material like human blood.

However, as Mary Ellen Snodgrass has suggested, the use of such traditional Chinese elements in The Joy Luck Club is “comforting to whites in its reproduction of stereotypical images [...] and oriental fantasies of Old China” (Darraj 65). Including a mixture of the Yin-yang school, Confucian and Taoist thought and feng shui, the novel appears to support a biased perception of China that looks very much out of place in mainstream American culture.

The Five Elements
The Chinese term Wu Xing, also know as “the five elements,” was developed by Tsou Yen about 325 B.C. As Holmes Welch notes, Tsou Yen “believed that the
physical processes of the universe were due to the interaction of the five elements of earth, wood, metal, fire and water” (Hamilton 131). The elements correspond to certain organs of the body and physical ailments, as well as to particular geometric shapes and “an extended array of correspondences including seasons, directions, numbers, colors, tastes, and smells” (Lam 32). Amy Tan appears to characterize all her protagonists according to the five elements.

An-me Hsu, who “has too little wood,” bent too quickly to listen to other's ideas, unable to stand her own. And An-me admits to having listened to too many people when she was young. She almost succumbed to her family's urging to forget her mother, and later she was nearly seduced by the pearl necklace offered to her by her mother's rival. Jing-mei Woo's father, who “has too much fire,” and a bad temper, shouts at Suyuan when she criticizes him for smoking, saying that she should keep her thoughts to herself. Jing-mei herself, “had too much water,” which flowed in too many directions. This, it is said, is why she started a degree in biology and stopped and a degree in art and stopped, finally going off to work for a small ad agency, as a copywriter. According to the Five Elements theory, flaws can be amended and balance re-attained by symbolically adding the element a person lacks. The “rose” in Rose Hsu Jordan's name, for example, “is supposed to add wood to her character” (Xu 11). Conversely, elements can be removed to create an imbalance. When Lindo Jong did not become pregnant in her first marriage, the matchmaker examined her closely, looked up her birthday and the hour of her birth, and then asked her mother-in-law about her nature. Finally the matchmaker claims that “[i]t is clear what happened. A woman can have sons only if she is deficient in one of the elements. Your daughter-in-law was born with enough wood, fire, water and earth, and she was deficient in metal, which was a good sign. But when she was married, you loaded her down with gold bracelets and decorations and now she has all the elements, including metal. “She is too balanced to have babies” (JYC 64). Although Lindo knows that the direct cause of her failure to become pregnant was not her having too much metal but the simple fact that her husband refused to sleep with her, she accepts the matchmaker's reading about the Five Elements. Years later Lindo comments, “see the gold metal I can now wear. I gave birth to your brothers and then your father gave me these two bracelets. Then I had you buy another bracelet. I know what I'm worth. They are always twenty-four carats. All genuine” (JYC 68). The implication here is that the gender of Lindo's male children corresponds to her natural deficiency in metal. Adding metal back into her composition through the
bracelets makes her next child a female. More significantly, Lindo like Suyuan, believes that the elements affect character traits—"after the gold was removed from my body, I felt lighter, more fee. They say this is what happens if you lack metal. You begin to think as an independent person" (JYC 64). Lindo begins to plot her escape from marriage. Her feeling lighter and freer without Metal corresponded to her assertion of her true identity. Though as a girl she had determined to honor the marriage contract made by her parents, even if it meant sacrificing her sense of identity, her decision to pursue her own happiness could also be interpreted as her holding on to her unique Chinese belief.

The Five Elements (metal, wood, water, fire and earth) are also distinctly Chinese. Originating in the early days of the Xia Dynasty, and first formerly mentioned in the The Book of History, one of the Confucian classics, the Five Elements theory holds that "the physical processes of the universe are due to the interaction of the five elements of earth, wood, metal, fire and water, and that wood generates fire, fire generates wood, while wood destructs earth, earth destructs water, water destructs fire, fire destructs metal, metal destructs wood, wood destructs earth" (Liu 34-35). The Five Elements theory also them as "stimulat[ing] and shap[ing] all natural and human activity." According to the Five Elements theory, wood generally symbolizes all life, feminine, creativity, and organic material; Fire is the Elements of energy and intelligence; Earth, the Element of stability, endurance and earth itself; Metal, in addition to its material sense, also encompasses competitiveness, business acumen, and alcohol as well as water itself, consequently also symbolizing transport and communication (Collins 20-21).

Stressing the idea that all things on earth are the results of the balance and interaction of the five elements, which reflects a Confucian worldview of seeking common ground while reserving differences. What is more, it also embodies the Taoist worldview of constant change and transformation. In The Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan describes how an imbalance in the five elements affects the characters’ personalities and consequently leads to conflict.

Retelling and Transplanting Chinese Mythology
At the beginning of The Joy Luck Club, Tan intentionally presents "fake" Chinese folklore to her readers: "[t]hen the woman and the swan sailed across an ocean many thousands of miles wide, stretching their necks toward America. On her journey she cooed to the swan: ‘In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there
nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow! She will know my meaning, because I will give her this swan—-a creature that became more than what was hoped for” (JLC 5). In this part, Tan, makes it clear that what really counts in her country is power and position and that both are “determined in large part by an individual's ability to speak correct English with one of the approved accents” (Huntley 61).Tan also tells her readers at the outset that the woman “had a daughter who grew up speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow” (JLC 5). The two icons, namely Swan and Coca-Cola, represent a symbol for each culture.

*The Joy Luck Club* has been acknowledged as a very good example of the relationship between mothers and daughters. Here, the conflict between them is caused partly by the different cultures in which they have been brought up, and partly by their linguistic inequality. With the reference to Chinese folklore at the very beginning of the novel, Tan hopes her readers will see immediately the novel is about Chinese mothers as well as American daughters. While the mothers clearly feel at a loss that though their daughters grow up speaking fluent English, still there is something missing in their daughter that the the mothers treasured.

The second part of the novel, “The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates,” also begins with a fairy tale, this time told by the mother to keep young children obedient. The mother lists in detail the dangers that might befall her child when she is away from the protection of the home:

“Do not ride your bicycle around the corner...”

“I cannot see you and you will fall down and cry and I will not hear you.”

“How do you know I will fall?’ whined the girl”

It's in a book, *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates*, “all the bad things that can happen to you outside the protection of this house” (JLC 93).

However, the latter part of this fairy tale shifts to a dialogue:

“Let me see the book. ”

“It’s written in Chinese. You cannot understand it. That is why you must listen to me. ”

“What are they, then?” The girl demanded. "Tell me the twenty-six bad things. ”

But the mother sat knitting in silence.

“What twenty-six! shouted the girl. ”
The mother still did not answer her.

“You can’t tell me because you don’t know! You don’t know anything! ” (JLC 93).

First of all, it must be made clear that Tan has invented this book, *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates*. As so often in the novel, she completely creates folkloric tales to suit her own purposes and especially to develop the plot in which mothers and daughters begin to tell how they have been at odds. Arranging her own fairy tale, Tan actually provides a foreground for her readers where they hear (in the first part of the section) the opinions of mothers while the daughters remain passive listeners without any rebelling against this pseudo-Chinese wisdom where mothers give orders and their children obey. However, as an American writer, Tan resisted such hierarchies and she has the daughters begin to rebel and ask why they are supposed to listen to these tales from the old country when their mothers also insist on them not being subservient.

Continuing this throughout, but occasionally using real folklore tapered to her own purposes, Tan has Ying-ying St.Clair tell a story about the night of the Moon Festival when she encountered the Moon Lady. According to Ying-ying, the Moon Lady would listen patiently to the secret wishes of children. It seems that the message of this tale is that the young lady must live alone on the moon as punishment for eating the peach of ever-lasting life. The unusual peach was given to her husband, an archer, by the Queen Mother of the Western Skies for his shooting down the nine scorching suns. At the Moon Festival, held in late September or early October, Chinese people follow the custom of eating “moon cakes” made into the shape of various animals and plants. Old ladies in the family also “mix various herbs and insects to produce a balm” (JLC 74), in order to drive away all the pains and sickness. On that day Ying-ying only wished “to be found” (JLC 89). But it is rather ridiculous that she was stunned to find out that her long-admired and miraculous Moon Lady singing on the stage was actually a man. In the novel, Ying-ying tells the story to her grandchildren who wish the rain would stop so they could go out and play in the puddles. Her real purpose is not as simple as it seems, suggesting that what counts in life is to achieve ones wishes with ones own efforts in a world where even a man could turn himself into a Moon Lady. Therefore, through re-writing of the story of Moon Lady and the custom of Moon Festival, Tan tries to reform the Chinese culture, by replacing its passivity, obedience and self-restraint with something of American features like independence and striving to achieve one’s
purpose. In Ying-ying’s story, she intentionally says that Chinese moon cakes are made in the shapes of various animals and plants. But the fact is that Chinese people have the tradition of making the moon cake into one round cake that symbolizes community and togetherness. Tan’s revision of this custom is clever and conveys something quite profound to the children in the tale. But does she go too far? Tan's revision of Chinese folklore has been severely criticized by Frank Chin who claims that she has “faked the certainly best-known works from the most universally known body of Asian literature and lore in history” (Chin 92). Yet, Chin himself is also guilty of such revisions. Confucius has long been known in Chinese culture as a great teacher and for his advocacy of revering the emperor and discouraging rebellion. But Chin’s writes that “Confucius was not a prophet. He was not religious. He was a historian, a strategist, a warrior” (Chin 34). It is therefore difficult to see how this differs from what Tan is doing. Revision and reconstruction are strategies to transform traditional folklore and myth that Tan clearly thinks fit a contemporary context. In short, she Americanizes Chinese folklore.

**American Perspectives of Traditional Chinese Culture**

In this section, we first analyze how Tan writes from an American perspective and then how she comments on the cultural identity of Chinese-American writers. Although keeping her eyes on traditional Chinese culture, Tan is still very much an American woman. She was born there and grew up there, and thus she depicts the traditional Chinese culture through a kind of the American eyes. There are a lot of the traditional Chinese culture narration, Amy Tan is just writing an American story. She tries to describe each story in the first person so as to make the narration objective and vivid, but she is absorbed with western values. As Snodgrass remarks, “[s]ince Amy Tan gets most of Chinese Culture from her mother, she forms a subjective understanding of Chinese customs, history, ceremony, etc” (Snodgrass 26). Through American eyes, she examines the mothers' spirits, taking them as “others.” And this kind of American perspective can be found everywhere in *The Joy Luck Club*.

As one critic puts it, “Tan portrays an emotional “tug-of-war” in the daughters between love and hatred, between the awe and the fear they feel for their mothers as they seek to gain a degree of autonomy for themselves” (Ho 89). Actually the “war” between mothers and daughters is caused by the conflicts between two kinds of different cultural values of the East and the West, which is an idea of communication.
For example, in the novel, Suyuan Woo once expects her daughter June can become a prodigy without considering June as an individual. After the failure of that attempt, Suyuan searches for stories about remarkable children, taking examples from them to test June. Since Suyuan is only making all those efforts single-handedly without a deep communication with June to understand her real interest or potential, June often fails the tests and thus disappoints her mother many times. As a result, June develops her antagonism and hates her mother's expectation of her as well as the tests. In spite of all that, Suyuan Woo is undaunted in her pursuit. She discovers a new option and makes June play the piano. In order to gain the piano class for June, Suyuan even promises to clean the house of the teacher everyday. While doing all these, she never considers June's aspiration and feeling. But out of Suyuan's expectation, June believes that all this is not equal for her, and she has the right not to play the piano to please her mother, even though she likes playing the piano. So June refuses to be raised as a submissive Chinese daughter. After that, June launches a battle against Suyuan's domination by sabotaging her mother's every effort to bring out a genius in her. She pretends to be bored with the tests given by her mother, deliberately plays the wrong notes during her piano lessons and fails the “talent-show” concert. At last, June shouts “You want me to be someone that I am not, I will never be the kind of daughter you want me to be, I am not your slave, this is not China” (JYC 164). Like Suyuan, Lindo Jong also seems to be possessive and dominating. Her daughter, Waverly relates a story of how she shocks her mother to show that she is her own person and has her separate existence. A notional chess champion at the age of nine, Waverly is considered to be a prodigy. Her photo appears on the cover of the life magazine. She enjoys all the possible privileges at home. Her brothers have to do all her chores; she has her own bedroom, driving her brothers to sleep in the living room; she can leave half-finished rice bowls on the table once she claims that a full stomach is bad for the brain. However, she also feels uneasy of one thing, that is accompanying her mother Lindo to the market, where Lindo will always proudly boasts her celebrity daughter to everybody. Lindo talks to people as if she devised all the strategies and tries to take all the credits for Waverly's victories. She polishes Waverly's trophies several times a day to satisfy her own sense of pride in being the mother of a prodigy. While Lindo sees Waverly's honor as her own as a traditional Chinese mother regards her daughter as one of her possessions, Waverly sees herself as a separate individual. Therefore, Waverly grows increasingly annoyed by her mother's behaviors, and she tells her mother “I wish you wouldn't do that, telling
everybody I’m your daughter” (JYC 108). The conflict between mother and daughter reaches a boiling point with Waverly shouting at her mother “why do you have to use me to show off? If you want to show off, then why don’t you learn to play chess?” (JYC 109).

The tensions between the two pairs of mothers and daughters—Suyuan and June, Lindo and Waverl—are far more intense than the usual conflicts between mother and daughter. The roots of such tensions are entangled with different ideals about being a parent or a child. As we know, the Chinese mothers expect their children to bring them honor. Suyuan Woo and Lindo Jong are created to represent such stereotypes. Both mothers use their daughters to advance their own interests. But in fact, the two daughters have virtually identical personalities. In the United States, people attach great importance to self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Thus the mother’s good and natural intention is often misunderstood by their daughters.

In the novel, when faced with education and living problems in the current situation, Tan always use the daughters to tell the story. She often takes mother's value and children-raising way as strange and arbitrary. Grown up within the immigrant Chinese communities, Tan is dedicated to dissecting the different cultural values lying behind the mothers and the daughters, that is, the contrast between Confucianism and individualism. And in the novel, Tan intensify the predicaments of mothers unintentionally. Eventually, through Tan’s descriptions of the Chinese mothers, the mother are portrayed as a strange and stubborn “Other” in the eyes of the American-born daughters, thus reinforcing the Chinese mothers as the image of “Other” in the marginal culture. So through the western standard, she depicts and judges the traditional Chinese education method. Amy Tan represents the Chinese culture, but from an American perspective. To a certain degree it is evitable for a Chinese American writer. As Tan said in an interview, "I am an American writer. The Chinese culture I have got is the second-hand information, I write from the American point of view, since I did not grow up in China” (News 2006).

**The Cultural Identity of Chinese-American Writers**

About the writer's cultural identity problem is another problem that needs an accurate description. On the one hand, the second generation of the Chinese-American writers was born and raised in America, they accept American education with the American way of thinking and acting and they can speak authentic American English. On the other hand, in a family environment edify down, they also understand and feel
another country different way of thinking and behavior, although they see themselves as the American consciousness very strong. As the book Asian Americans of Achievement referred “Tan had always struggled to reconcile the two very different parts of that ethnic identity. Tan had tried to assimilate into American culture, which meant that she either ignored or neglected her Chinese heritage” (Darraj 11). The process of growth of Chinese American woman writers is the process of a selection, choice and syncretic. Their literary works imprint the multiplicity of identity confusion. Compared to the other western writers, they are minority writers; with respect to the previous generation of Chinese writers emigrated, they have consciously recognized norms of Western society and culture residence. Especially in the nationalism and racism dominant social atmosphere tonics, they virtually pushed the Chinese people and other people to the opposite of themselves. But when they put themselves as “made in USA” and strive to social identity of the United States, seems to have shown that the descendants of Chinese lost ancestry “roots”, as an immigrant in contact with the cultures of the convergence of cultural change. Amy tan's charm lies in her novel in the process of speech and writing finally got rid himself of double marginalized identity, beyond the constraints of race and racism, from the depth and breadth of human nature to explore multiculturalism in the world of human life. Therefore, though in a lot of image in his works through the conflicts and contradictions between Chinese and Western culture, but the authors concern after the conflict is human common interlinked humanistic spirit and humanistic care, which is standing on the point of view of human nature for the transcendence of racial and ethnic. But can't because of the transcendence to blurs the writer's writing perspective, the writer's writing perspective is totally Americanized, Amy Tan once said "I can't have the Chinese perspective." There is no denying the fact that in the work of the writer finally reveals the approbation of traditional Chinese culture, but this kind of identity is still Americanized, from the broad sense, embody the edge of the mainstream American culture of a kind of tolerance and identity; In a narrow sense, is stand in the perspective of American writers in American society marginalized Chinese mother's a kind of understanding and identity.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, we must say that Tan's perspective is distinctly American, she is an American novelist. Tan ingeniously weaved these traditional Chinese culture elements into her stories for the development of plot and reflecting the character's
features. And that the immigrant culture about which she writes is an important pattern in the great tapestry that is the United States [...] “The fact that The Joy Luck Club have become popular best-sellers suggests that Tan's fiction resonates for readers of all backgrounds; the proliferation of scholarly examinations of the novels points to the literary value of Tan's work” (Huntley 40). A writer's identity is one of the most concerned subjects in contemporary criticism. Judging from her origin, her skin color, and the abundant Chinese elements in her novels, Amy Tan is conventionally labeled as a Chinese-American writer. The adoption of these Chinese elements greatly satisfies the Western reader's novelty-hunting taste as well as rendering Tan's works with distinctive features. By including Chinese elements into her novels, Tan successfully combine the past and the present, the young and the old, the legendary and the reality, Chinese tradition, and American culture. However, Tan's description of China is quite different from what the real situation is in China. Chinese superstitions, folklore, historical events--- all of them are reshaped according to Tan's own understanding and become to a large extent the Chinese elements in an American writer's eyes. Once in an interview, Tan expressed “her wish to write freely as an American writer” (News 2006). Thus readers might at first attracted by exoticism in her book. But when they read on, they will find out that the feelings, the themes and so on are all typical of Americans; the mystical China only provides a misty background. In an essay entitled, “Required Reading and Other Dangerous Subjects,” she addressed this issue. She wrote:

If I had to give myself any sort of label, I would have to say I am an American writer. I am Chinese by racial heritage. I am Chinese-American by family and social upbringing. But I believe that what I write is American fiction by virtue of the fact that I live in this country and my emotional sensibilities, assumptions, and obsessions are largely American (Darraj 67). Therefore, when the critics or academy is trying to identify a writer, they should too much importance to the origin of the writer and what materials they choose to include in their works. What really counts is the overall ideology and theme of the work. Compared with many other acknowledged Chinese-American Writers, Amy Tan has managed to make use of her ancestral origin, but at the same time walks out of the shadow of Chinese culture. In this sense, she is what she insists she is an American writer.
Works Cited


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