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LIBERATE THE ASIAN AMERICAN WRITER:

EMBRACING THE FLAWS OF AMY TAN'S *THE JOY LUCK CLUB*

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

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ABSTRACT

LIBERATE THE ASIAN AMERICAN WRITER:

EMBRACING THE FLAWS OF AMY TAN'S *THE JOY LUCK CLUB*

BY ASHLEY LEUNG

An Asian American bestseller and a required reading in many classrooms, *The Joy Luck Club* by Chinese American author Amy Tan has prompted substantial debate—some zealously laudatory of its rich narratives and cultural insights, some seethingly critical of its Orientalist motives, some neutrally analytical of its cultural symbols—over its representation of Chinese and Chinese Americans in the literary mainstream. Unfortunately, few scholars have considered detaching representational power from ethnic texts and alleviating the burden on ethnic writers to represent their communities. This thesis uses cultural criticism and reception theory to examine three things: the novel's cultural and linguistic inaccuracies, the role of shame in forming the Chinese American identity, and the cumulative influences of popular reviews, educational guides, and public commentary on readers' tendencies to attach representational value to the novel. I find that the novel functions as a subjective (fictional) Chinese American experience more so than an all-encompassing Chinese cultural and linguistic lesson; there *is* potential for Chinese Americans to transcend the "Chinese" and "American" binary and exist with nuance and without dual alienation; it is the novel's reception, *not* Tan herself, that has constructed its representational power. These findings suggest that the experiences and identities of American ethnic minorities are multifaceted and nuanced, and therefore incapable of being comprehensively represented and dichotomously regarded. To prevent absolute dependence on media for developing multicultural awareness, readers must consume critically and introspectively, maintaining the awareness of our reader subjectivity and of the limits of literature—especially fictional literature.

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Additionally, Professor Gregory Toy has my utmost respect for being one of the most engaging and compassionate instructors I've met. Having had the privilege of taking two of his courses, I continue to be amazed by the effort he puts into his lectures, presentations, and feedback. I hope the field of Asian American literature will flourish in academia with the support of dedicated scholars and instructors like him. Thank you so much for listening to me (strenuously) explain my project and (stressfully) rant about existential crises.

To my parents, who immigrated all the way here just for their daughter to read books (I joke about that a lot), I am forever grateful for their acceptance and understanding of my passion—even when the objects of my passion do not fully translate through. At times when I compared myself to colleagues who were seemingly much more successful and composed, my parents countered my self-deprecation and encouraged me to live life at my own pace. As for Mom, whom I've seen sprinkled throughout the pages of Tan's novel and in myself, I hope to always grow under her unconditional love.

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Introduction

"A running dog whore sucking on the tit of the imperialist white pigs" is among the extremities of literary criticism—bordering personal attack—that Amy Tan has garnered following the publication of her canonical Chinese American novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). An empath would perhaps deduce that the source of this explicit line—an Asian American writer—was dissatisfied with Tan's portrayal of Chinese and Chinese Americans and even more so with the mainstream recognition it achieved (Tan, "In the Canon" 28). Monumental fame, for any medium, warrants comparable censure, so despite selling 275,000 hard-cover copies upon publication, being on the *New York Times*' best-seller list for seven months, being translated into seventeen languages (including Chinese), and orienting itself in the American high school curriculum, *The Joy Luck Club* has been condemned and critically analyzed within the Asian American community by scholars like Frank Chin, Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, Jing Yin and by general readers (Rozakis 7-8). While there are praises for the novel being culturally rich and setting a precedent for Chinese American representation in the literary mainstream, there are also accusations of it contributing to Chinese stereotypes and abiding to the concept of Orientalism[1], a Western invention that both romanticizes and distorts the East as exotic, uncivilized, backward and pushes Chinese and Chinese Americans into a passive Otherness role. The Dragon Lady, Charlie Chan, and Fu Manchu are examples of such ostracization. One criticism about *The Joy Luck Club* is its portrayal of China as backward and chaotic and Chinese people as oppressed and effeminate (Wan 667). The recurrence of food and exotic cooking throughout the novel has also been criticized for creating a false impression that Chinese people revolve everything around

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[1] Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) helped instigate a critical, postcolonial interpretation of the term.

food (Wan 667). And even when Tan has persistently clarified her intentions of writing a story rather than a pronouncement about Chinese people or mothers and daughters, readers continue to assume Tan's credibility as an omniscient Chinese American (Tan, "The Joy Luck Club Reader's Guide").

This paper seeks to acknowledge the novel's flaws as a representative figure while arguing for the liberation of the Asian American writer. Melanie McAlister, one of the few scholars to question the representational burden of ethnic writers, notes that "this tendency to view literature primarily in terms of its function as a 'window on the world' seems strongest in reference to 'ethnic' writers" (McAlister 106). Meanwhile, the "literariness of [other canonical] texts is assumed: their interest is supposed to lie in both their formal, stylistic qualities and their themes and content, but not primarily in their usefulness as information about a sociological group" (McAlister 106).

Building off of the minimal research on the problematic representational power attached to ethnic writers, I dissect the novel *and* its reception to clarify the role of literature in shaping intrapersonal identities, societal images of ethnic communities, and rigid stereotypes. The first two chapters of this paper unveil how the novel perpetuates Otherness through formal and linguistic choices; the pinpointed flaws are meant to build reader awareness rather than accuse Tan of ignorance. The last chapter employs reception theory[2] to highlight reader subjectivity and the limitations of literature (and media) as representation. In addition to criticizing a flawed text—which all texts are—we must also criticize the public championship of selective media being capable of representing an entire ethnicity and culture. Attaching ethnographic and

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[2] Reception theory in literature, popularized by German academic Hans Robert Jauss, emphasizes the reader's role in creating textual meaning.

representational power to ethnic texts by default reflects a larger issue, which even ethnic minorities contribute to, of our inclination toward palatable media rather than personal interaction as a way of learning about a culture and its people.[3] Ultimately, I urge the general public to alleviate the ethnic writer's burden and allow, for once, their creativity and expression to flow freely.

The Joy Luck Club revolves around the inner thoughts of four mothers and four daughters; divided into 16 chapters, each character—with the exception of the late Aunt Suyuan whom her daughter Jing-mei speaks for—narrates two chapters. For clarity and out of filial respect, the mothers (Suyuan Woo, Lindo Jong, An-mei Hsu, Ying-ying St. Clair) will be addressed as "Aunt." The daughters are respectively Jing-mei "June" Woo, Waverly Jong, Rose Hsu Jordan, and Lena St. Clair. The reflective, first-person narratives nostalgically and painfully remember the past, cope with the present, and pave way for the future.

When Aunt Suyuan came to San Francisco in 1949, she started the Joy Luck Club that was reminiscent of her lavish lifestyle in pre-WWII China. It became a weekly communal space for the four mothers to play mahjong, the fathers to discuss and trade stocks, and the kids to mingle (until adulthood steered them away). Jing-mei is the more prominent narrator that weaves the narratives together with a purposeful trip to China to meet her mother's twin daughters she'd lost while fleeing from a war zone in China.

Aunt Lindo is a willful character who cleverly escaped an unhappy arranged marriage and oppressive mother-in-law in China. Waverly was a chess prodigy who eventually lost her

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[3] See Jinqi Ling's "Critical Negotiations: Issues in the Asian American Cultural Studies" in *Narrating Nationalisms: Ideology and Form in Asian American Literature* (1998) for a comprehensive analysis of the dangers of assuming ethnic writers' authenticity and credibility.

talent and is now a tax attorney dating a colleague after an unsuccessful marriage. Both are competitive and established an unspoken rivalry with the Woo's, competing over cooking skills, non-academic and academic achievements, and careers.

Aunt An-mei grew up in a wealthy family whose patriarch raped and forced her mother into concubinage, and her mother's suicide freed her to come to the U.S. She lost her four-year-old son to a freak accident at the beach and rescinded outward faith in God. Rose develops passivity after her marriage (potentially tied to her guilt over her brother's death), despite being headstrong before, and leaves all the decision-making to her husband. Her mother intervenes and nurtures Rose's sense of self, allowing Rose to attempt to save her marriage.

Aunt Ying-ying's fatalism binds her to a marriage with a treacherous man whose infidelity drives her to abort her first child. She later marries a white man whom she neither hates nor loves, and her sense of autonomy remains dormant until she sees herself in her daughter. Lena inherited her mother's adherence to superstitions, believing she was fated to marry her husband who insists on keeping their earnings and expenditures separate; her story ends with the beginning of autonomous revival.

The immigration experience is rooted in hope for a better future—for both oneself and one's family. The four mothers express these sentiments through strict parenting and lofty expectations in the form of piano lessons, chess competitions, ideal husbands, and lucrative careers. The novel is a gradual and vulnerable unraveling of generational trauma, misunderstanding, and nostalgia. The differences and miscommunication between the Chinese immigrant parent and Chinese American child persist until the end, but the gap seemingly closes *just enough*.

To initiate a critical lens through which we will analyze the novel, my first chapter looks at Tan's italicization and romanization of Chinese words and phrases. Reviewing editors and writers' debate over the power and intention behind italicization, I find a balance in which the foreignness of the Chinese terms can be positively viewed as a genuine Chinese American experience. What warrants more reproach is Tan's inaccurate or unidiomatic Chinese phrases and translations that disclose a certain degree of ignorance. However, I conclude that such mistranslations are perhaps reminders of the novel's fictional and aural basis; it is more so creative expression than educational biography.

In the second chapter, I critique how the novel further estranges Chinese and Chinese Americans from the dominant American culture and from each other through the theme of shame. The daughters inflict a neoconservative view of communist China and struggle with their mothers' supposed dissatisfaction with and disappointment in them. The mothers withdraw from—or rather, reject—the Anglo-American mainstream and culture, unintentionally alienating their assimilating daughters. The rejection of differences from both ends of the Chinese and American binary muddles the Chinese American's in-between state. After visualizing the binary spectrum in which Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants exist, I propose remedies for the dual alienation and the rigid definitions of national identities ("American" and "Chinese"). Redefining "American" to fully include ethnic minorities and immigrants would resolve many familial conflicts and cultural clashes, enabling the melting pot image the U.S. strives to uphold.

The final chapter, and arguably the most crucial one, diverts our critical attention from the novel to its readers and reception, hence mitigating our previous criticisms of Tan's inaccuracies and antagonisms in an effort to hold readers accountable and allow writers to revel in and despite their "flaws." I ponder on the scathing criticisms of Tan's improper representation,

few of which discern what *is* “proper” representation. Noreen Groover Lape has asserted that “while scholars should by no means disregard issues of authenticity or eschew the analysis of stereotypical representations, a too strict attention to the ‘real’ and the ‘fake’ is potentially paralyzing for writers and critics of any ethnic literature” (Lape 151). Rather than focusing on the debate over which ethnic writer and text deserves mainstream recognition, I offer the potential of detaching representational power from mainstream media. Scrutinizing the language of *The Joy Luck Club*’s reception, in the form of editorial reviews, educational guides, classroom instruction, and reader reviews, I conclude that reception has inflated Tan’s fictional narratives to become biographical and literature to become all-encompassing.

The three distinct focal points of each chapter interdependently endorse the radical—and sadly improbable—ideal of dismantling representational power. I first inflate the novel’s flaws to show the dangers of assuming the accuracy of an ethnic text, but I emphatically deflate the flaws to argue that Tan, as well as any ethnic writer, is not responsible for producing “accurate” representations. The term “representation” is inherently rooted in gaps of knowledge, ignorant generalizations, and superficial efforts; “every representation exacts some cost, in the form of lost immediacy, presence, or truth, in the form of a gap between intention and realization, original and copy” (Mitchell 21). This paper relies on readers’ selfless and vulnerable introspection, and I invite you to help actualize this improbable ideal.

Otherness: (Mis)translation

Italicized and romanized Chinese words are sprinkled throughout both the daughters' and the mothers' narratives, often attached with accessible English translations. These Chinese words appear in the daughters' narratives as residual Chinese language they've acquired from their upbringing and in the mothers' narratives as a mother tongue that infiltrates their verbal pidgin English or internal thoughts. This chapter will analyze both the form of italicized, non-English words and Tan's mistranslations of those words.

Among ethnic writers, debate has formed around whether non-English words and phrases should be italicized in published works. On the one hand, italicized words disrupt the natural flow of dialogue and emphasize the foreignness of the text. On the other hand, such formal distinction can be valuable in presenting the sense of foreignness (of both English and Chinese) that is a significant factor in Chinese Americans' self-perception, and therefore better encapsulating and humanizing the fictional characters.

The English translations and Chinese phrases in the novel have occasionally been inaccurate or unidiomatic, which poses the risk of presenting a "flawed" Chinese culture and language to readers who are not fluent enough in spoken and written Chinese to discern such mistranslations. We must ponder whether such mistranslations are merely flaws of the novel or whether they enrich the fictional and aural nature of *The Joy Luck Club*—both aspects being important reminders for readers of the inability of media to fully represent ethnic communities. Therefore, I argue that while these italicized, romanized Chinese words problematically inflate the novel's credibility as direct access to Chinese culture and language and contribute to the sense of Otherness, they also possess authenticity and merit in capturing the Chinese American

experience—something I want to reshape as an intersectional occurrence rather than as the privileged access to binary cultures and languages.

Italicization is a common form for writers to incorporate non-English words, but it is not the *only* way for multiple languages and cultures to appear in text. Although we cannot dictate the superiority of a writer's choice, we can explore the effects of the various presentations of multilingualism. Since all four daughters have varying but minimal fluency in spoken and written Chinese, the appearance of Chinese words and phrases are followed by much reflection, as if the words are familiar through their mothers but foreign due to the lack of daily usage. While reflecting on her mother, Lena concludes, "I believe my mother has the mysterious ability to see things before they happen. She has a Chinese saying for what she knows. *Chunwang chihan*: If the lips are gone, the teeth will be cold. Which means, I suppose, one thing is always the result of another" (*The Joy Luck Club* 149). Then, when Rose grieves over her broken marriage, she thinks to herself, "Lately I had been feeling *hulihudu*. And everything around me seemed to be *heimongmong*. These were words I had never thought about in English terms. I suppose the closest in meaning would be 'confused' and 'dark fog'" (*The Joy Luck Club* 188). In Lena's narration, the Chinese phrase is presented in a term-definition format. In Rose's narration, she forms sentences with the Chinese phrases, showing a more natural incorporation of the language. However, both insertions are succeeded by a clear English translation that the daughters inform readers of through a humble "I suppose."

In contrast, the mothers' incorporation of Chinese words and phrases are understandably more natural. One example is when Aunt An-mei narrates her own mother's story: "'Come back, stay here,' murmured my mother to Popo, '*Nuyer* is here. Your daughter is back'" (*The Joy Luck Club* 45). The italicized word is only a reminder that Aunt An-mei's mother is speaking in

Chinese, and Aunt An-mei expresses no doubt in what the word means. However, Tan still maintains her pattern of translating all the Chinese words by covertly translating "nuyer," meaning "daughter," in the next sentence. This shows that although it would've been natural for the mothers to use the Chinese language without navigating through English translations like their daughters do, Tan still finds a way to inform readers of the English definitions. We can conclude that Tan's form for bilingualism is italicized, romanized Chinese succeeded by an English translation.

To emphasize how this is only *one* way of writing with two languages, we can compare Tan's tactic with Maxine Hong Kingston's incorporation of Chinese in *The Woman Warrior* (1976). Unlike Tan, Kingston opts to only paraphrase, translate, or describe the Chinese terms rather than to insert any italicized, romanized Chinese words. She informs the reader, "There is a Chinese word for the female *I*—which is 'slave.' Break the women with their own tongues!" (Kingston 47) Kingston seems to mediate much more between the readers and the Chinese language, assuming that non-Chinese speakers do not need access to the actual Chinese word to either conduct outside research or check her accuracy. Tan's insertion of actual Chinese words, then, allows for a more direct access to the language, as if inviting readers for a mini Chinese lesson. However, such italicization and translation often interrupt the narrative, preventing the Chinese language and thought from seamlessly weaving through the text. We are constantly reminded that a phrase is foreign, a word is obscure, and a thought is incapable of English reproduction.

Such alienation of the Chinese language prompts the question of whom this novel is written for. In an article summarizing the ongoing debate over italicizing non-English words, Thu-Huong Ha compares perspectives from multicultural authors and editors like Junoz Díaz,

Daniel José Older, Cheryl Klein, and Ru Freeman to emphasize the power behind ctrl + i. Díaz, a Dominican American writer, garnered attention for the lack of italics in his later works. He justifies, "'I write for the people I grew up with… I took extreme pains for my book to not be a native informant. Not: "This is Dominican food. This is a Spanish word." I trust my readers, even non-Spanish ones'" (Stewart). Through this perspective, Tan's careful clarifications surrounding the Chinese terms cater to non-Chinese speakers—including Chinese Americans who have lost contact with the language. This partially justifies the accusation of Tan writing for a white audience, but since Tan and the novel's daughters are not fluent in Chinese and clearly struggle with the language, we cannot assume that Tan's italics establish her as a "native informant."

Italics, though, might not always be harmful or alienating. When editing Anne Sibley O'Brien's *In the Shadow of the Sun*, "the team decided to use italics only for characters who speak Korean as a foreign language, showing that they spoke Korean haltingly. For native Korean speakers, non-English words are unformatted" (Ha). This usage redefines the italics in American novels as indication of what is foreign to the *character* rather than anything that is non-English. Character expression and humanization are then prioritized over readers' convenience. Editor Klein explains:

> It asks readers who only speak English to be comfortable being in somebody else's shoes, to be comfortable not knowing all the words that are presented for them and having to navigate around those… Many readers who only speak English are not used to that experience. They're not used to a book being not exclusively for them and accommodating them at every moment. (Ha)

Rather than shouldering all the responsibility of explaining the Chinese terms, Tan could've relied on readers' efforts to discover the definitions—especially for the mothers' narratives that realistically would have treated English rather than Chinese as the foreign language.

The assertion that Tan is writing for an English-speaking audience who has minimal knowledge of Chinese can be reinforced by another author's justification of italicizing; Ru Freeman says, "'I choose to italicize the Sinhala words in my writing precisely because I want to draw attention to them… I have chosen to write in the English language, thereby addressing a primarily English-speaking audience, one less familiar or entirely unfamiliar with Sinhala'" (Ha). If Tan truly is writing for an English-speaking audience, then the novel's balance between four daughters' and four mothers' narratives may fall short because the mothers are speaking—teaching, rather—to an unfamiliar audience rather than connecting with those sharing similar struggles and experiences in and out of the U.S. Therefore, despite the crucial presence of the mothers' thoughts and dialogue, Tan's audience is mainly Chinese Americans and the larger English-speaking public.

Delving beyond the italic font, Tan's romanization of Chinese words allows for a more readable Chinese language that suppresses the artistic, ideographic value of the Chinese language but counters the idea that *The Joy Luck Club* is a Chinese linguistic and cultural lesson for readers. Although some Chinese American works have referenced the ideographic aspects of the Chinese language, often emphasizing the structural contribution to the word's meaning, they rarely experiment with the insertion of actual Chinese characters. When Jing-mei's father explains Aunt Suyuan's Chinese name, he says:

> "The way she write it in Chinese, it mean 'Long-Cherished Wish'… But there is another way to write 'Suyuan.' Sound exactly the same, but the meaning is opposite." His finger creates the brushstrokes of another character. "The first part look the same: 'Never Forgotten.' But the last part add to first part make the whole word mean 'Long-Held Grudge.' Your mother get angry with me. I tell her her name should be Grudge." (*The Joy Luck Club* 280)

Readers must depend on his description to visualize the placement of the Chinese characters, and true understanding of those two characters (宿愿 being "Long-Cherished Wish" and 宿怨 being

"Long-Held Grudge") is only accessible to those fluent in written Chinese (Pleco). This is an instance in which adding the Chinese characters would've clarified the father's wordplay, although his lengthy explanation suffices. It would've also increased the credibility of Tan's (limited) bilingualism and the sense of "otherness" (both visually and aurally since non-Chinese speakers are unable to sound out the characters like they can with romanizations). Tan's, along with other Chinese American writers', choice to not experiment with this more extreme presentation of the Chinese language suggests that this novel is not a "Chinese 101" for readers. The flow of the narrative is still more important to Tan than opportunities to flaunt knowledge of and access to the Chinese language. The incorporation of Chinese characters might've maximized the depth of the language and created better understanding of its visual aspects, but there are also limitations to viewing Chinese as merely ideographical and overlooking the aurality that Tan chooses to emphasize.

Referring back to Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, its presentation of Chinese words as artistic ideograms is much more prevalent: "I learned to move my fingers, hands, feet, head, and entire body in circles. I walked putting heel down first, toes pointing outward thirty to forty degrees, making the ideograph 'eight,' making the ideograph 'human'" (Kingston 23). Kingston extracts meaning from the appearance rather than the aurality of Chinese characters. Unlike Tan, Kingston does not acknowledge the value of character placement—how the combination and relocation of individual characters can form different meanings isolated from the characters' individual definitions. Scholars have noted the limitations of Kingston viewing Chinese as a purely ideographic language:

> The ideograph suggests that characters are images of the world that have one-to-one correspondences with objects in the world, when in fact characters correspond to tonal linguistic units that are connected to meanings… Gu unfolds each principle, demonstrating the complexity in the presentation of a single character and later mapping

> relations between characters to show how diverse positioning between them can impact overall meaning. His essay affirms that describing characters as ideographs is a very limited way to convey their range of functions in the Chinese language. (Ch'ien 124)

Therefore, Tan's emphasis on romanized (aural) Chinese and the placement of Chinese characters (through Jing-mei's father) seems to be more effective at valuing the Chinese language system. There is then some value attached to the lengthy translations, descriptions, and romanization of Chinese words; we are exposed to the organizational and aural value of the language. What might've contributed to the sense of Otherness in the novel can also be viewed positively as an (imperfectly) effective recognition of the multiple layers of the Chinese language.

However, the previous interpretation falls short once we discover Tan's lack of distinction between the four mothers' spoken Chinese. Aunt Suyuan, Aunt Lindo, Aunt An-mei, and Aunt Ying-ying come from different regions of China, but their dialects and accents (e.g., Shanghainese and Shanghai accent) are lost in Tan's romanized words—either due to Tan's limited knowledge or the challenge of encapsulating tonal and manneristic differences on paper. Mandarin is spoken by all characters, making them a "distinct minority in the Chinese American community which is made up of about eighty-six percent speakers of Cantonese" (Sondrup 37). Tan briefly acknowledges Aunt Suyuan's Shanghai dialect when Jing-mei says, "I think my mother's English was the worst, but she always thought her Chinese was the best. She spoke Mandarin slightly blurred with a Shanghai dialect" (*The Joy Luck Club* 29). This is a rare instance in which the heterogeneity of Chinese is displayed. However, the Shanghai dialect is not further expressed in any of Aunt Suyuan's dialogues or Jing-mei's reflections.

Tan does clarify which region of China the mothers come from throughout the novel, which at least diverges a little from the Orientalist view of China that fails to consider its diverse geography and communities. Aunt An-mei reveals that she and her family are from Ningbo (or

Ningpo) when she remembers, "My mother was a stranger to me when she first arrived at my uncle's house in Ningpo" (*The Joy Luck Club* 216). Assuming that a family native to Ningbo would speak Ningbo dialect on a regular basis, Tan's presentation of the family's dialogue fails to give a more accurate transcription. Aunt An-mei recalls, "'An-mei!' I heard my aunt call piteously from behind, but then my uncle said, '*Swanle*!'—Finished!—'She is already changed'" (*The Joy Luck Club* 219). "*Swanle*" (*suànle* in pinyin) sounds like the Mandarin pronunciation of the phrase, meaning "forget it" (which Tan translates as "finished") (Pleco).

Chinese is currently divided into seven dialect groups: Mandarin, Wu, Gan, Xiang, Min, Yue, Hakka (Xiao). Ningbo is part of the Zhejiang province, so it falls under the Wu group of dialects:

> The Wu group of dialects is spoken south of the Yangtze in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and in a few districts in the eastern part of Jiangxi. It is characterized by the preservation of the ancient voice stops, etc., as aspirated voiced consonants and by the preservation of the 'entering tone' as a short tone with the loss, however, of the final -p, -t, -k (or rather, substituted by the glottal stop). It often has six or seven tones. (Li 4)

In contrast, the dialect used throughout the novel is standard Chinese (or Northern Mandarin) that is based in Beijing (part of Hebei province):

> The Northern Mandarin group occupies a large area in North China, in the provinces of Hebei, Shanxi… It is characterized by the invoicing of the ancient voiced stops, affricates, and fricatives, and by the disappearance of the "entering tone." There are as a rule only four tones: "ying-ping," "yang-ping," "shang," "qu." Further division into subgroups is possible. (Li 3)

As shown, there are significant differences between the two dialect groups, especially with standard Mandarin having four tones and Wu dialects having six to seven tones. Since the official romanization system for Chinese, known as "pinyin," is based on standard Mandarin, it would be difficult if not impossible to distinguish the mothers' various dialects through pinyin. As Hua Zhu explains, "The widely used Hanyu pinyin 汉语拼音 (phonetic alphabet for Chinese) is a scheme for spelling the sounds of Chinese characters rather than their shapes, a scheme for

spelling Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese) rather than dialects and a scheme for spelling vernacular rather than classical Chinese" (6). However, Tan does *not* use pinyin for her romanizations, but rather uses a custom romanization system based on her aural experiences (something we will delve into later on).

The word "*swanle*" would've been spelled very differently if Tan were accurately and actively recording the heterogeneity of Chinese. Comparing the Mandarin and Ningbo pronunciations of Chinese phrases like "Have you eaten?" and "I'm going now" shows that the transcriptions are very different:

> 你饭吃过了? (Have you eaten?)
> Standard Mandarin: "nǐ fàn chīguòle?" (Pleco)
> Ningbo dialect: "Ng vae chioh-kou-lah?" ("The Sound of the Ningbo Dialect")
> 我去了噢 (I'm going now)
> Standard Mandarin: "wǒ qùle ō" (Pleco)
> Ningbo dialect: "Ngo chi-lah-ghau" ("The Sound of the Ningbo Dialect")

Both phrases have the character "了" in them (as does "*swanle*"), and it's pronounced and spelled as "le" in Mandarin and pronounced as "lah" in the Ningbo dialect. Such standardized Mandarin throughout Tan's novel suggests that she either received her knowledge from sources spoken/written in standard Mandarin, wanted to abide to a more standard and recognizable Chinese dialect, or found it difficult to transcribe all aspects of a language that is somewhat foreign to her and many Chinese Americans. Therefore, Tan still denies some heterogeneity of the Chinese language (and the regions and people reflected by the dialects) and opts for convenience and readability.

The function of pinyin and standard Mandarin is mainly to increase the unity of the language and country:

> Official organizations, such as the language planning institutions of the Chinese government, along with famous scholars have all been concerned about the prospects of these new schemes, which enable distinct writing of different dialects. In their opinion,

> this could destroy the uniformity of written Chinese or even the unity of China as a nation-state. (Zhu 6)

Such unity allows for deeper communication nationally and internationally. Tan's choice also allows more Chinese Americans speaking and learning Chinese to relate to the novel. However, it does forgo the opportunity to present the Chinese language as rich and diverse rather than monolithically foreign.

Another concerning aspect of the novel is its mistranslations—both phonetically and vernacularly. As mentioned earlier, Tan's romanized Chinese does not follow the pinyin system; the words sound like standard Mandarin, but they diverge from the phonetic notation of pinyin. There were previously two romanization systems for Chinese: Wade-Giles and Yale, created in mid-nineteenth century and mid-twentieth century, respectively. Both systems catered to non-Chinese speakers and have now been replaced by the pinyin system, which is what native Chinese speakers and Chinese learners use. The Yale University Library states, "The pinyin system has replaced the Wade-Giles system as the standard in the U.S. libraries for creating Latin script readings for Chinese characters" ("Romanization Guide for Chinese"). Sondrup points out that Tan's romanization "does not adhere to any one of the major systems but appears to be principally a combination of the Pinyin and Yale systems, with occasional forms that belong to neither" (40).

For example, Rose's mother labels Rose's boyfriend as a "*waigoren*," meaning a foreigner (non-Chinese) (*The Joy Luck Club* 117). "Wai" is spelled the same in pinyin, Yale, and Wade-Giles ("Mandarin Chinese Romanization"). "Ren" is spelled the same in pinyin and Yale, but spelled as "jen" in Wade-Giles ("Mandarin Chinese Romanization"). "Go" is the character that does not abide by any of the three systems: "guo" in pinyin, "gwo" in Yale, and "kuo" in Wade-Giles ("Mandarin Chinese Romanization"). Another instance is when Jing-mei's aunt

meets her in China and says "*jandale*," which Tan translates to "so big already" (*The Joy Luck Club* 274). "Le" is spelled the same in all three systems ("Mandarin Chinese Romanization"). "Da" is spelled the same in pinyin and Yale, but spelled as "ta" in Wade-Giles ("Mandarin Chinese Romanization"). The character that "jan" refers to should be spelled "zhang" in pinyin, "jang" in Yale, and "chang" in Wade-Giles ("Mandarin Chinese Romanization"). Tan seems to have formed her own phonetic notation that she deems most accurate to her aural experience.

The vernacular mistranslations have been more unsettling because it's akin to native English speakers reading a conversation from an "English as a Second Language" textbook—it simply sounds unidiomatic and culturally out of touch. One such mistranslation occurs when Jing-mei and the three aunties are playing mahjong, and Tan writes, "Auntie Lin says '*Pung!*' and '*Mah jong!*' and then spreads her tiles out" *(The Joy Luck Club* 34). It would take some background knowledge of mahjong to know that "in a real situation, people generally say '胡了' (Hu le) rather than 'Mah jong!' (Zhu 18). According to Zhu, this mistake has led several Chinese translators of the novel to subconsciously change the word "*Mah jong!*" to the correct phrase "Hu le!" based on their personal judgment, which leads to a mistranslation of the novel but an accurate rendition of the game (18).

Another unidiomatic usage occurs when Rose explained how confident her parents were in their ability to accomplish anything prior to their youngest son's death. She says, "My father… believed in his *nengkan*, his ability to do anything he put his mind to. My mother believed she had *nengkan* to cook anything my father had a mind to catch. It was this belief in their *nengkan* that had brought my parents to America" (*The Joy Luck Club* 121). Nengkan ("nénggàn" in pinyin) is actually an adjective that means "capable" or "competent" (Pleco). However, Tan treats the word like a noun, translating it as "ability." This would be analogous to

English-speakers saying, “She believed in her competent to cook anything.” The adjective “competent” here is ungrammatical and unidiomatic, and we would instead use a noun like “competence.”

In “‘Sugar Sisterhood’: Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon,” Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong points out several other mistranslations in the novel:

> The mother-in-law’s rebuke to the young bride Lindo, “*Shemma bende ren!*” rendered in English as “What kind of fool are you!” sounds like a concoction by some first-year Chinese student and necessitates a quiet emendation by the Chinese translator of *The Joy Luck Club*; the warning Rose Hsu Jordan remembers from her mother, shortly before her younger brother’s drowning, likewise sounds gratingly unidiomatic in Chinese—”*Dangsying tamende shenti*,” translated by Tan as “Watch out for their bodies.” (91)

Both Tan’s non-standardized romanization and mistranslations are not necessarily “wrong,” but they do show that Tan does not seek to research or present the most idiomatic and standardized Chinese to her readers; she presents her personal knowledge and interpretation of the language. Fiction alleviates the pressure to present supported facts and elaborate citations, so it truly is Tan’s freedom to exercise her creativity. However, the danger of such mistranslations lies in Tan’s reinforcement of the reader’s tendency to view her and her novel as a direct access to the Chinese language and culture. Unlike the Chinese American daughters who are explicitly humble in their knowledge and usage of Chinese, the Chinese mothers are portrayed with an authority enabled by their first-person narratives of experiences in China. We feel closer to all the characters through the narrative shifts, but we also tend to forget that Tan is the mediator for *all* the characters—even the mothers who speak to us in pidgin English and fluent Chinese. Therefore, for readers (specifically non-Chinese speakers) who expect the novel to be a Chinese lesson or an accurate representation of Chinese people, they are unknowingly applying Tan’s mistranslations to their perceptions of the Chinese language and culture. Wong asserts:

Whether “gratuitously” deployed or not, whether informed or not, the very insertion of

> italicized words in a page of roman type, or of explanatory asides about what the Chinese do and think in a story, is a signal that the author has adopted a certain stance toward the audience. She is in effect inviting trust in her as a knowledgeable cultural insider and a competent guide familiar with the roles of the genre in question: quasi ethnography about the Orient. ("'Sugar Sisterhood'" 96)

Beyond the inaccurate presentation of the Chinese language, Tan's non-standardized romanizations and unidiomatic reiterations actually emphasize the orality of her experiences:

> The unsystematic and nonstandard romanization probably has no impact on the reader unfamiliar with the various systems of romanization, but for the reader able to take part at least to a degree on both the Chinese as well as the American side of the cultural dialogue, the effect is arresting. In its effort to recreate in presumably the American ear the sound of what was said, it stresses the underlying orality of the experiences being related. (Sondrup 40)

Although *The Joy Luck Club* is fictional and should not be treated as an autobiographical work, Tan acknowledges that the stories and characters were significantly inspired by her mother's storytelling. In a 2006 interview, Tan said:

> Then, of course, there was my mother, who told stories as though they were happening right in front of her. She would remember what happened to her in life and act them out in front of me. That's oral storytelling at its best. The stories were based on her life, so the emotions there were real. They were what happened at the time and experienced as freshly as they happened at the moment. (Gioia)

The awareness of the value and transience of oral storytelling is not instilled in every reader of the novel. Such awareness, as Sondrup suggests, might only be accessible to those who know the Chinese language and can distinguish and value Tan's mistranslations. This "insider knowledge" does not function to attack Tan's cultural and linguistic ignorance nor to affirm readers' cultural awareness. Rather, Tan's relationship with oral storytelling sheds light on why a Chinese American writer chooses to write the way she does. Understanding the forces influencing Tan's writing style dissuades readers and critics from assuming that her goal is to appeal to a broader audience—a white audience.

The Telephone game is a popular team game in which one person whispers a phrase to their neighbor and their neighbor whispers what they heard to the next person, and so on. At the end of the game, the last person says the phrase out loud to show how much it has changed. The amusement of the game is not in the reiteration of the original phrase; it is in the absurd phrases warped by the power of orality. The original phrase is essential for setting the foundation, but each rendition adds its own (comical) value. We can view Tan's reiteration of her mother's stories as an ongoing process of a Telephone game. The stories get warped once as Tan's mother navigates through her memory, once as they are orally disclosed to Tan, once as Tan creates fictional characters and narratives, once as Tan transcribes them onto paper, and once again as readers interpret the printed words. They will experience further changes as readers and scholars publicly praise, condemn, or interpret the stories, further shaping how the public receives the novel. This concept, known as reception theory, will be examined in the last chapter. The Telephone game analogy reminds us that the Chinese mothers in the novel (and Tan's mother) are *not* the first players. These mothers have lived more than half their lives in the U.S., so even their knowledge of the Chinese language and culture has been influenced by Americanization. Memory, as mentioned earlier, is another factor if not barrier. Therefore, when we argue that Tan's novel is "inaccurate," what do we define as "accurate"? An accurate transcription of the mothers' words? The mothers' accurate recollection of their past? What had *actually* happened at the time? Once we consider how the mothers in the novel all learned English and spoke it with their children to assimilate them into the U.S., we must shift our view of these mothers—mediated by Tan or not—as completely accurate sources of the Chinese language and culture.

In addition to expressing humility through the Chinese American daughters' broken Chinese, Tan also exerts some awareness that the limits of orality could create mistranslations in

the novel. When Waverly's mom was praising her birthplace Taiyuan, Waverly thought that she meant "Taiwan" instead of "Taiyuan," and their brief bond immediately broke:

> And just like that, the fragile connection we were starting to build snapped.
> "I was born in China, in Taiyuan," she said. "Taiwan is not China."
> "Well, I only thought you said 'Taiwan' because it sounds the same," I argued, irritated that she was upset by such an unintentional mistake.
> "Sound is completely different! Country is completely different!" she said in a huff. (*The Joy Luck Club* 183)

Aunt Lindo's incensed reaction emphasizes the importance of accuracy in storytelling, especially when that story pertains to herself and how she is viewed by her daughter and the rest of the world. Waverly, as well as other Chinese Americans like Tan, are seemingly ignorant of the weight of a single mistranslation or mishearing. Tan's insertion of this scene does not explicitly warn readers that there will be mistranslations sprinkled throughout her text, but rather shows that mistranslation and miscommunication are inevitably part of the dividing factor between Chinese immigrants and their children. While this reminds readers of the shortcomings of oral storytelling and of Chinese Americans' interpretations of the Chinese language, it further adds credibility to the four mothers. Aunt Lindo's confident correction makes it seem like the mothers are Chinese characters written by a Chinese writer and that the daughters are American characters written by Tan. Therefore, when the presence of a Chinese American mediation is not evident (as it is with the daughters' narratives), we might still be inclined to view the mothers as knowledgeable counterparts to the ignorant daughters and Tan, forgetting that the mothers are still mediated by Tan. Waverly's mistake does not undermine the problematic credibility possessed by the mothers, but it does normalize mistranslation as a part of the Chinese American aural experience.

Another way to recognize Tan's mediation is by treating her as a translator. Tan's role as a translator would still be a faulty one considering her multiple mistranslations, but this role

would justify her italicization of the Chinese language. The comparative literary field often studies the contributive role of translation in translated texts, and such recognition of the translator keeps readers from taking translated text for granted—as direct access to the original. Contrary to the increasing aversion to italicized foreign words, there are arguments that translators should preserve the foreignness of the language.

Lawrence Venuti, an American translation theorist, has argued against transparency and fluency in literary translation because "translation must be a visible place where different cultures come into view" (Zhu 7). Foreignizing, rather than assimilating, the translation is essential "to preserve the difference and otherness in literary translation" (Zhu 7). Ideally, translated texts are a form of communication between two languages and cultures; we would prefer to view *The Joy Luck Club* as a connection between Chinese-speakers and English-speakers. However, Venuti claims that translation is "ethnocentric in essence" and bound to a commercial restriction; "a bestselling translation is expected to lead to further revelations in the domestic culture, for which it was produced, rather than in the foreign culture, which it is deemed to represent" (Zhu 8). The reality of Tan's translated Chinese is its illumination for the American public—not the Chinese public that the mothers represent. I argued earlier on that Tan's italicization of Chinese words adds to the sense of Otherness that alienates the Chinese language even for the mothers whose native language is Chinese. Positioning Tan as a translator allows us to now recognize some value in her italicization. Tan's in-text translations for the italicized words is a "domestication translation strategy" that acts as a "resistance targeting the awareness of difference and cultural other through language discontinuity" (Zhu 9). Therefore, rather than deducing Tan's translations to alienation of the Chinese language, we can view them as reminders of the translator's presence and role in the novel.

Zhu even argues that Chinese translators of the novel should preserve the romanized Chinese and the mistranslations instead of rephrasing them with their deeper knowledge of the Chinese language and culture:

> Other Chinese translators rarely try to challenge the convention of written Chinese to keep the Romanized Chinese or achieve resistant reading. Instead, other Chinese versions pursue "transparent reading," merely using single or double quotation marks and sacrificing the in-text translations. The utilization of paraphrasing in Chinese versions also decreases the heterogeneity of these foreign terms. (18)

Tan's mistranslations do not warrant correcting by the novel's Chinese translators, and the foreignness of the Chinese language to Tan and some Chinese Americans should be preserved. Therefore, while the italicizations and in-text translations further present Chinese as a foreign language that requires effort to demystify (simplifying the Chinese culture as a confusing Other), they also leave the necessary space for a translator to facilitate that process. This awareness of there being a translator at all times is paramount for readers to critically approach the text and to avoid a passive reception to the text based on the false cushioning of a *Chinese* American author being the source.

Finally, after having scrutinized Tan's ignorance of certain Chinese colloquialisms and norms, I argue that this sense of Otherness and inauthenticity in her Chinese translations can also be interpreted as authentically narrated. When we look closely at the consistency of mistranslations in the daughters' and mothers' narratives, we see that there has *always* been a mediator between the reader and the "authentic" Chinese language and culture. Rather than viewing this mediator as a means to accessing the Chinese language and culture, we can view the mediator as a means to a Chinese American's experience, which is in and of itself a series of mediations. The next chapter will further discuss the existence of a Chinese American identity distinct from the Chinese or American binary. As a Chinese American whose native language is English, Tan's perception and translations of the Chinese language are expected to be tinged

with foreignness. My insertion of Tan's background in the justification of her mistranslations may raise the debate between an autobiographical reading versus a fictional reading of the novel. Since the novel's release, Tan has explained her intentions and sources of influence, so readers are justified in taking some of those factors into consideration. Many passive readers accept the novel as a direct insight into the Chinese language and culture due to Tan's Chinese American identity, so we must similarly consider her identity when arguing the opposite.

For both autobiographical and fictional readings, we must remain critical of the novel's function. It is not a clear window into every Chinese immigrant's life nor a clear window into every Chinese American's experiences. Rather, it is a window into the fictional lives of fictional characters that share the sentiments and worries of many Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans but still cannot encompass *every* Chinese and Chinese American experience.

It is also important for Chinese-speaking readers of the text to read into Tan's mistranslations—to realize that part of what Tan and many Chinese Americans struggle with is the inability to transfer thoughts between the two languages and to express their feelings in a language they're less comfortable with. What helps shape each Chinese American's experience is how fluent they are in Chinese, and their broken Chinese—just like Chinese immigrants' broken English—are simply part of their Chinese Americanness rather than a deficit. Akin to how Chinese American writers' varying levels of Chinese linguistic and cultural exposure influence the works they create, readers' existing knowledge of the Chinese language and culture affects their reading experiences. Therefore, this act of writing and reading results in multitudinous conversations depending on who the writers and readers are. There is no set formula that Chinese American writers can "teach" all non-Chinese Americans about the Chinese language and culture, and vice versa. The presence of the translator and mediator—

made apparent by Tan’s italicization and in-text (mis)translations—helps offset the problematic credibility attached to the mothers’ narratives. The novel, then, embodies less of a Chinese lesson and more of *a* Chinese American experience.

Otherness: Shame

The term “Chinese American” already presupposes a binary in which Chinese Americans attempt—often unsuccessfully—to form their self-identity and societal position. Tan’s aforementioned italicization and mistranslations cast aside the Chinese language and community as perpetual mystiques, but the implicit and explicit shame and shaming from both ends—Chinese American daughters and Chinese mothers—lead to mutual Otherness in which the American mainstream selectively accepts or wholly rejects Chinese figures and practices while the Chinese immigrant discontentedly latches onto “American” practices and behaviors for the sake of survival. On either side, differences are deplored.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, the four daughters are painfully morphed by what they perceive to be parental discontent, disappointment, shame; the mothers, on the other hand, are fully aware of how backward, shameful, *Chinese* they appear in their daughters and outsiders’ eyes. At times, their daughters *are* the outsiders. Where, then, does the Chinese American exist within this binary, facing this double-edged sword? To identify more with one end of the binary is to negate and alienate the other end, meaning Chinese American’s assimilation into the American mainstream estranges their unassimilated parents while Chinese immigrants’ aversion to (American) foreignness and desire for familiarity (in the form of culture, language, memory) hinder them from understanding and being understood by their American children. This chapter will first analyze the presence of intergenerational and intercultural shame that largely shapes the Chinese immigrant and Chinese American experience in the U.S. I will then propose how we can reconcile such dual alienation and reshape the current “American” and “Chinese” binary to allow for difference and nuance. Only by redefining “American” and American nationalism can Chinese Americans relinquish the grappling of dual identities, opposing cultures, and enclosed

communities. Perhaps there *is* the possibility of being American without having to compromise one's physicality, language, and culture.

Asian Americans have remained in the peripherals of the American mainstream that, although increasingly infiltrated with diverse works and artists, is still largely dominated by and produced for those along the lines of "White, middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied, male" (Yin 150). Thus, critics have argued that for *The Joy Luck Club* to break into the mainstream and inherit a "universal" label is not merely diversifying the field but also perpetuating "existing social hierarchies and power structures" (Yin 150). The U.S. has a growing immigrant population that polishes its global image of a "melting pot," but such "melting" of minority cultures and languages has always been administered by the majority, selectively accepting exotic practices and artifacts that accessorize the open-minded, worldly American individual without threatening the power individualist, hardworking, white Americans have in defining the American identity.

Therefore, being American was "never simply about internalizing the work ethic and values of individualism" (Oyserman and Sakamoto 436-437). This is exemplified in a Boston mayor's description of the Irish as "'a race that will never be infused into our own, but on the contrary will always remain distinct and hostile'" and in the perpetual foreignization of not only Asian but Asian American bodies (Oyserman and Sakamoto 436-437). In the previous paragraph, I described the Chinese immigrants as "unassimilated parents" for this very reason; their pidgin English, Oriental appearance, and mere origin nullify any attempts at assimilation and societal contribution through labor, consumption, and activism. Thus, viewing Asian American as a model minority "suggests that they also are not viewed simply as an indistinguishable part of the mainstream in spite of the overlap between Asian and American

valuation of striving achievement and Asian American attainment of educational, occupational, and income markers of success" (Oyserman and Sakamoto 437). Both the American identity and the American dream are glorified paths paved with premeditated barriers: "If the Protestant Ethic is truly a formula for economic success, then why don't Japanese and Chinese who work harder and have more education than whites earn just as much?… In essence, the American capitalistic dream was never meant to include non-whites" (Uyematsu 13).

Amid the journey toward being more American (but never fully American), the Chinese American daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* grew up with familial and societal shame; their identities and potential were largely constrained between the high expectations and dissatisfactions of first-generation immigrant parents and the narrow standards of the American mainstream. Aunt Suyuan, for example, instilled in Jing-mei's adolescent mind that she had hidden talent just like Waverly, who was a chess prodigy at the time. However, whether it was being a child actor, memorizing state capitals, or playing piano, Jing-mei was at best average. Her self-confidence and aspirations waned:

> And after seeing my mother's disappointed face once again, something inside of me began to die. I hated the tests, the raised hopes and failed expectations. Before going to bed that night, I looked in the mirror above the bathroom sink and when I saw only my face staring back—and that it would always be this ordinary face—I began to cry. (*The Joy Luck Club* 134)

We see that Aunt Suyuan has triggered this self-contempt in her daughter even before Jing-mei was old enough to experience or realize the racial limits that would deem her insufficient on a larger scale. However, while it may seem that Aunt Suyuan is the root of Jing-mei's woes, considering the root of Aunt Suyuan's parental wrath is equally important.

Not only do Confucian ideals like filial piety and interdependence permeate Chinese immigrant parenting, but the lack of control over one's position in the American society, the lack of a larger community, and the pressure to prove themselves worthy of situating within a

predominantly white society also contribute to the controlling behavior—often termed as tiger parenting—that Chinese immigrant parents impose on their children (Chao 1113). We see this when Jing-mei erupts after an embarrassing, failed piano performance:

> "Why don't you like me the way I am? I'm not a genius! I can't play the piano. And even if I could, I wouldn't go on TV if you paid me a million dollars!" I cried. My mother slapped me. "Who ask you be genius?" she shouted. "Only ask you be your best. For you sake. You think I want you be genius? Hnnh! What for! Who ask you!" "So ungrateful," I heard her mutter in Chinese. "If she had as much talent as she has temper, she would be famous now" (*The Joy Luck Club* 136).

There is evident miscommunication between the Chinese American daughter and Chinese immigrant parent; Jing-mei views the trial-and-error as Aunt Suyuan's interminable dissatisfaction with her, while Aunt Suyuan's intentions are to morph Jing-mei into a well-rounded, accomplished individual to maximize her potential and take advantage of current opportunities. Jing-mei admittedly did not try her best:

> So maybe I never really gave myself a fair chance. I did pick up the basics pretty quickly, and I might have become a good pianist at that young age. But I was so determined not to try, not to be anybody different that I learned to play only the most ear-splitting preludes, the most discordant hymns. (*The Joy Luck Club* 137-138)

To cope with her futile efforts of becoming a prodigy and being special, Jing-mei rebelled by seeking conformity. Thus, we can conclude that Aunt Suyuan was not necessarily shameful of Jing-mei's mediocrity but rather frustrated at Jing-mei's squandering of opportunities and innate potential. Jing-mei's shame derives not only from what she believes is her mother's dissatisfaction but also from her mother's immigrant hardships and laborious efforts that culminated into an unexceptional daughter.

Such shame is unique to the immigrant family experience in that maximum productivity is the standard. An American citizenship, a home, piano lessons; they all came from the sacrifices of immigrants as they endured displacement, uprooting, and socioeconomic setback in

the U.S. (considering the four mothers were all middle/upper class in China[4]). Accepting mediocrity and indolence was never an option, and when it *was* an option, it came with overwhelming shame. Asian Americans' work ethic is not merely an attempt to assimilate into the American capitalist society; it is also deeply rooted in the intergenerational cycle of filial piety—the pressure to reciprocate immigrant parents' blue-collar labor with white-collar labor. The label "model minority" is truly fitting as Asian Americans conveniently feed into the economy as a result of generational burden. They are not only trying to impress the white American; they are more importantly impressing their parents. Thus, American society does not "liberate" Asian Americans with ideals of independence and individuality but rather silently feeds off of the cycle of labor that is perpetuated by both Confucian filial piety and immigrant hardships.

Chinese immigrant parents, on the other hand, are shaped by a different type of shame—one that further foreignizes them in American society through the means of their Chinese American children. Aunt Lindo narrates, "My daughter is getting married a second time. So she asked me to go to her beauty parlor, her famous Mr. Rory. I know her meaning. She is ashamed of my looks. What will her husband's parents and his important lawyer friends think of this backward old Chinese woman?" (*The Joy Luck Club* 254-255). Asian Americans, in this case

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[4] McAlister writes, "*The Joy Luck Club* is, after all, a novel centered on economically successful families, most of whom were of the upper class in China and, who manage, despite language barriers and hardships, to become financially secure in the United States" (105). For a more comprehensive analysis of how Tan normalizes the Chinese American middle class and feeds into the model minority myth, see Melanie McAlister, "(Mis)Reading *The Joy Luck Club*," in *Asian America: Journal of Culture and the Arts*.

Waverly, have more autonomy to physically alter their appearances to fit the modern beauty standards; chic salons and beauty magazines are more accessible to the English-fluent, impressionable teenager. Both the youthful and voguish nature of Asian American women allow for easier societal acceptance; therefore, we cannot equate the assimilation of Asian-featured Asian Americans to the complete acceptance of Asian features. The Chinese immigrant parent experiences the intersectionality of racism, ageism, and lookism. As they internalize body dysmorphia through their children's (intentional or unintentional) corporeal alterations, they voluntarily exclude themselves from the societal mainstream.

A poignant scene unfolds as the language barrier between Mr. Rory and Aunt Lindo—but more so between Waverly and her mother—solidifies Aunt Lindo's humiliation:

> "How does she want it?" asked Mr. Rory. He thinks I do not understand English…
> "Ma, how do you want it?" Why does my daughter think she is translating English for me?…
> And now she says to me in a loud voice, as if I had lost my hearing, "Isn't that right, Ma? Not too tight?"
> I smile. I use my American face. That's the face Americans think is Chinese, the one they cannot understand. But inside I am becoming ashamed. I am ashamed she is ashamed. Because she is my daughter and I am proud of her, and I am her mother but she is not proud of me. (*The Joy Luck Club* 255)

Aunt Lindo's true perception of her daughter contradicts all four daughters' presumptions of their mothers' dissatisfaction. Just like how Jing-mei misunderstood Aunt Suyuan's parental intentions, Aunt Lindo overthinks Waverly's behavior. Although Aunt Lindo is seemingly hypersensitive, the discomfiture she experiences is justified by the beauty parlor's physical and linguistic unfamiliarity. Waverly is burdened with the task of mediating these differences, but the more she aligns with the trendy, American Mr. Rory, the more she forsakes her mother.

However, Waverly is not to blame. Her mother *intended* for her daughter to feel this sense of belonging (albeit through assimilation): "I named you Waverly. It was the name of the street we lived on. And I wanted you to think, This is where I belong. But I also knew if I named

you after this street, soon you would grow up, leave this place, and take a piece of me with you" (*The Joy Luck Club* 265). In a way, Chinese immigrant parents accepted the terms of the Asian American identity the moment their children were born. Compromising one's culture, language, and familial connection was the precursor to American-born ethnic minorities. Therefore, Waverly's code-switching is warranted, although wounding. The larger issue remains the lack of societal acceptance of foreign extremities in forms like the Chinese immigrant parent. Even with reconciliatory closure between the Chinese American daughter and Chinese immigrant parent, American society still alienates the Chinese American—and the Chinese immigrant even more.

Additionally, Tan actively estranges China and communism through the Chinese American daughters' neoconservative fears and stereotypes. Aunt Lindo reflects:

> My daughter wanted to go to China for her second honeymoon, but now she is afraid. "What if I blend in so well they think I'm one of them?" Waverly asked me. "What if they don't let me come back to the United States?" "When you go to China," I told her, "you don't even need to open your mouth. They already know you are an outsider"… My daughter did not look pleased when I told her this, that she didn't look Chinese. She had a sour American look on her face. Oh, maybe ten years ago, she would have clapped her hands—hurray!—as if this were good news. But now she wants to be Chinese, it is so fashionable. (*The Joy Luck Club* 253)

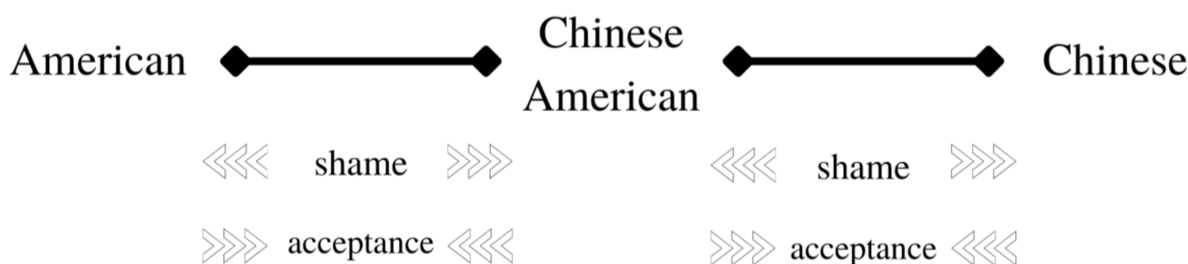
Waverly wants to fit in when she visits China, but she's afraid of fitting in *too well* and losing her Americanness. China and Chineseness are only romanticized on the basis that they are temporary and indefinitive. Selectively flaunting one's non-mainstream culture to appear trendy shines a positive but Orientalist light on Chinese Americans. Whether demonized or romanticized, Chineseness is foreign. The inability for "Chinese" and "American" to coexist and coalesce is reflected in Waverly's fear that too much Chineseness invalidates American citizenship and identity. This means that Chinese Americans are forced to choose a side, completely obliterating the potential for the American identity to diverge from the white-dominant mainstream.

Such underlying disdain for communist China is further seen when Jing-mei visits her half-sisters in China:

> The taxi stops and I assume we've arrived, but then I peer out at what looks like a grander version of the Hyatt Regency. "This is communist China?" I wonder out loud… The bathroom has marble walls and floors. I find a built-in wet bar with a small refrigerator stocked with Heineken beer, Coke Classic… packets of M & M's, honey-roasted cashews, and Cadbury chocolate bars. And again I say out loud, "This is communist China?" (*The Joy Luck Club* 276-277)

Seeing the grand architecture and Western imports surprises Jing-mei because she presumes communist China to be dilapidated, rustic, and void of any Westernization. "Western," in this sense, means luxurious and advanced, and "Eastern" the opposite. Finally, Jing-mei gets a taste of the China she expected: "The hotel has provided little packets of shampoo which, upon opening, I discover is the consistency and color of hoisin sauce. This is more like it, I think. This is China. And I rub some in my damp hair" (*The Joy Luck Club* 278). In Jing-mei's perspective, China is completely untainted by the West, reflecting the American upbringing that distinguishes freedom, advancement, and quality as Western values. Even as Jing-mei and Waverly cope with their Chinese mothers and cultural differences toward the end of the novel, they represent the general American public that seemingly "accepts" Eastern differences but under the condition that the East remains inferior, stagnant, and predictable. By drawing a sharp line between what is communist China and what isn't, both Jing-mei and Waverly reinforce the "Chinese" and "American" binary in which "American" is exclusive of anything Chinese.

Given how rigid and unyielding this binary is, strengthened through both sides' self-deprecating and self-empowering shame, the task of bridging such division is insurmountable. The following diagram visualizes the identity dynamics of Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants:



In this simplified, linear spectrum, shame and acceptance are factors shaping the Chinese American identity. Shame, for all three identities, widens the distance between American and Chinese American, between Chinese American and Chinese, or between both gaps. Acceptance narrows the distance.

First considering the conventional "American" and "Chinese" binary that Chinese Americans have been positioned in, Chinese Americans' disdainful mirage of China, Chineseness, and their Chinese immigrant parents estrange the Chinese end and enables them to shift closer to the American end; this is seen in Jing-mei and Waverly's teenage angst and cultural ignorance. Accepting one's Chinese immigrant parents, visiting China, and adopting the Chinese culture and language increases the proximity between Chinese Americans and Chinese natives and immigrants, but threatens American assimilation and societal acceptance, as exemplified by Waverly's irrational fear. Because of Chinese Americans' position as mediators, Americans' acceptance of Chinese Americans, in the case of Mr. Rory and Waverly's amity, increases the gap between Chinese American and Chinese and thereby estranges Chinese. Likewise, Chinese immigrant parents' shame and misunderstanding of their Chinese American children constrains cultural integration and indirectly estranges the American end.

If the linear shifting of the Chinese American identity entails perpetual dilemma, exclusion, and dubiety, then there must be two rectifications: the increased acceptance of both

ends and the redefinition of all three identities. If both ends (American and Chinese) simultaneously open up to the opposing values and practices, Chinese Americans' sense of dual alienation and dilemma may finally subside. Easier said than done, of course, but the livelihood of a nonexclusive Chinese American existence necessitates both cultures and nationalities to be equally receptive.

Chinese Americans cannot continue to represent the selective compromises of either end; this holds them up to an unattainable standard of possessing the best of both ends—with any shortcoming directly displacing their identity on the spectrum. Disempowering Chinese Americans as a vantage point to both cultures *is* empowerment; forcing Americans to directly communicate with the Chinese community and vice versa means that Chinese Americans are no longer the punching bag for cross-cultural miscommunication and hostility.

To clarify, acceptance does not equal assimilation; acceptance of both similarities and differences is key. Afterall, "identities and relationships are sustained by difference. Not only does difference allow the narrators to become their 'own person[s]'… but it also helps to ensure that self and other identifications do not end with a harmful objectification" (Adams 134). Redefining "American," "Chinese American," and "Chinese" will also affect the distance between the gaps. The underlying presumption of Chinese Americans being in the middle of this spectrum is that they are not fully American. Chinese immigrants—whom I've been reluctant to label "Chinese Americans" because of the severity of their societal alienation—stand even closer to the Chinese end and risk their Chinese American identity even with citizenship attainment and decades of residency. Again, this emphasizes the need for American acceptance of Chinese cultural, linguistic, and physical differences in order to normalize non-white identities being fully American. Only with such revolutionary shift can Chinese Americans self-identify as American

without forsaking their familial relations and cultural diversity. More importantly, Chinese immigrants would be able to identify as Chinese American and thereby American without closeting their birthplace, upbringing, and memories. Allowing polyculturalism, rather than rigid, exclusive nationalism, to generate stability and selfhood is the ultimate goal.

A study of 162 Asian Americans' self-identity suggests that "Asian Americans are weaving a complex cultural perspective that contains both Asian and American traditions of individualism and collectivism," meaning polyculturalism has always been ingrained in the Chinese American identity—just not normalized and mainstreamed (Oyserman and Sakamoto 450). Eventually, the Chinese American would no longer be dissonant halves of two wholes because the two wholes will have embraced intersectional expansion. Nuance would be the new clarity.

Reception and Representation

The setback of mainstream popularity is its ensued reception literature (e.g., book reviews, scholarly journals, reader's guides) that mediates between the original text and its prospective readers. I term it "setback" because such reception not only stifles the author's voice and intent (with recognition that author's intent does not overrule reader's subjectivity) but also inflates the text's assets and liabilities so that amid polarized debate, the text is presumed to be representative and omnipotent. Such power is especially dangerous when attached to ethnic texts, as such texts are still struggling to find substantive orientation within the American literary mainstream/canon and therefore cannot coexist as heterogeneous voices.

As this last chapter dissects the role of influential and authoritative praises, criticisms, and explications of *The Joy Luck Club* in exacerbating the novel's credibility and exoticism, it strives to raise awareness of a larger issue: the reception pattern of presuming the capacity of media (e.g., books, films, music) to represent a community. Critics have focused on deconstructing *The Joy Luck Club* novel and film to counter assertions that the work is a non-stereotypical and accurate representation of the Chinese immigrant and Chinese American experience; however, they have failed to notice their contributions to the vicious cycle of attaching representative functions to media and then criticizing media for not "properly" representing.

What *is* "proper" representation? I argue that ethnic literature has not, will not, and cannot fully represent or encapsulate ethnic communities—just as one voice cannot speak for all. Therefore, we must discuss not only what deserves mainstream recognition but also how much power we attach to mainstream media and media in general. The influence of the selected reception texts on all readers is not definitive, since concrete data is rarely obtainable and

objective in reception studies (Schmidt 160-161). However, the high circulation of newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*, the necessity of reader's/teacher's guides for teaching *The Joy Luck Club* in high school classrooms, and the increasing popularity of online book reviews (via Amazon and Goodreads) all suggest the likelihood of Tan's readership to have been influenced by some form of reception literature. And since interpretation largely lies in reader subjectivity and context, some criticisms of *The Joy Luck Club* should be redirected at the readers (especially those who possess an influential platform) rather than at the original text and Amy Tan. To blame a novel for its mainstream success is perfunctory; alleviating ethnic writers' burden to "accurately" represent their community and acknowledging the subjectivity of the writer and the limits of a novel allow for more voices in mainstream media and less communal weight on each voice. By habituating introspective reception, we can diverge from media's current function of being representative rather than discursive and personal.

Criticisms of the novel accrue to this: *The Joy Luck Club* feeds into racist/sexist Chinese stereotypes and misrepresents China, Chinese people, and Chinese Americans. Whether it be a composed critic revealing the backward portrayal of China (the "Other") and progressive portrayal of the U.S. (the "Self") like Jing Yin or ruthless critics who label the stories "fake" and the film adaptation a "rip-off" like Frank Chin and Al Wong, they all warn readers of the novel's dangerous misrepresentation in a way that reaffirms the representative authority of the novel. Therefore, they ironically set the novel on the same pedestal (Chinese American representation) that the mainstream audience (majority being white readers) set it on. They perpetuate the binary

of "good" and "bad" representation[5] when literary representation in general is fractured and insufficient.

In his critical essay "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and Fake" (2005), Chin claims:

> What seems to hold Asian American literature together is the popularity among whites of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (450,000 copies sold since 1976)… and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. These works are held up before us as icons of our pride, symbols of our freedom from the icky-gooey evil of a Chinese culture… Amy Tan opens her *Joy Luck Club* with a fake Chinese fairy tale about a duck that wants to be a swan… The fairy tale is not Chinese but white racist. It is not informed by any Chinese intelligence. (134)

Chin does acknowledge the white reader's inclination toward an American-liberated Chinese culture, but much of his condemnation is directed at Chinese American writers whom he assumes wrote for a white audience. To clarify, there are two processes to the novel's perpetuation of racist stereotypes: Tan writing about characters' hardships within a Chinese cultural and geographical context, and the reader using such fictional experiences to reinforce their personal stereotypes. For one to emphatically condemn the first process restrains the ethnic writer's creative freedom lest their plot and characterization align with any preexisting stereotypes. Chin would have fared better acknowledging the patriarchal history Tan condemns while insisting readers not to selectively consume Chinese American works.

A less academic but equally incensed criticism was written by Al Wong after watching *The Joy Luck Club*'s movie adaptation. In a blog post, he writes:

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[5] Frank Chin, Jeffrey Chan, Lawson Inada, and Shawn Wong's essay "Introduction: Fifty Years of Our Whole Voice" (1974) approves of Chinese American writers like Louis Chu and Sui Sin Fah who accurately depicted Chinatown's bachelor society, while lambasting writers like Jade Snow Wong, Virginia Lee, and Pardee Lowe for their unrealistic portrayals of Chinese families.

> I noticed there were very few reviews mentioning there were Chinese stereotypes in the movie. (One review even claimed there were none!) I am a first generation Chinese-American male, born and raised in the USA. I am living the reality of the Asian experience. I am not a Militant-Chinese-Power-Fanatic but since none of my Chinese brethren appear to be commenting on the JLC, I feel compelled to write this review. (A. Wong)

Both Wong and Chin assert that their Chinese American identities[6] enable them to tell us what is truly Chinese and Chinese American, implying that the representative authority attached to ethnic Americans is conditionally justified. Such assertion leads to the logical fallacy of using one's Chinese Americanness to dictate that another Chinese American's (fictional) experience is invalid. Wong further elaborates on the novel and movie's high stakes:

> We are less than 3%! This means most Americans will get their exposure to Asians and Asian culture through the media, i.e. newspapers, magazines, television and movies. The JLC does a great disservice to Chinese and Asians in general by perpetuating stereotypes to Middle-America, giving a distorted view of our culture… It is definitely a feminist type movie with the male characters taking a back seat to the female characters. That isn't bad. What's bad is the negative Chinese male characters and stereotypes the movie portrays… Let's see what we have for the Chinese husbands. A rapist, a promiscuous husband and a clueless cheapskate. Of the two white husbands, one is simply ignorant of table manners and the other is a very rich man who plays around with other women. What kind of message does that send to young Asian boys? To young Asian girls? What other positive Asian male role models are there? Damn few, I'm sorry to say. ("Why The Joy Luck Club Sucks")

Wong raises the realistic issue of limited access to Asian Americans and Asian American cultures in the U.S., but rather than using such facts to argue for a critical, self-aware reader approach to ethnic texts and films, he argues that the few Asian Americans lucky enough to have a platform are obligated to positively represent their culture and people and to provide "role models" for younger generations.

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[6] Frank Chin proclaims to be a fifth-generation Chinese American. Al Wong is a second-generation Chinese American (but mislabels himself as "first generation").

Yin Jing, on the other hand, asserts that since the movie has not acquired a rich balance of praises and criticisms like the novel has, there must be more critical analyses of the film to alleviate the dangers of its mainstream popularity and representative authority:

> The “ethnographic” power that this movie assumed in the mainstream U.S. culture makes it problematic and dangerous in the increasingly diverse society in which we dwell. Thus, we need to critically read this Hollywood movie to explore how the articulation process contributes to the struggle over meanings of cultural or racial identities. (151-152, 154)

Again, the focal point is placed on the text; this trajectory results in using the text’s defects (e.g., stereotypical portrayals, racist connotations, white-pleasing exoticism) to complicate or deny its representative authority—thereby implying that ethnic minority texts with minimal or (if possible) no stereotypical qualities are more deserving of such authority.

Representative authority, as I continue to argue, is the root of the “danger” of mainstream ethnic texts. Therefore, all three critics of *The Joy Luck Club* novel and film overlook the fundamental threat of representative authority and instead bandage infectious, racist perceptions of Asian Americans with demands for “better” representatives. Tan’s sentiments regarding such criticisms are encapsulated in a quirky anecdote:

> Let me relate a conversation I had with a professor at a school in southern California. He told me he uses my books in his literature class but he makes it a point to lambast those passages that depict China as backward or unattractive. He objects to any descriptions that have to do with spitting, filth, poverty, or superstitions. I asked him if China in the 1930s and 1940s was free of these elements. He said, No, such descriptions are true; but he still believes it is “the obligation of the writer of ethnic literature to create positive, progressive images.” I secretly shuddered and thought, Oh well, that's southern California for you. (“In the Canon” 28)

Reception theory emerged during the late 1960s in West Germany largely under the influence of Hans Robert Jauss and his essay “Literaturegeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft” (“Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory”) (Schmidt 157-158). He proposed a “dialectical relationship between cultural production and consumption” in which “the reader as historical subject consequently assumes a major and active role in the

literary process" (Schmidt 158). Therefore, "critics, as readers, are called upon to view themselves as historical subjects as well, whose function it is to gain insight into the traditions and contexts that affect their subjective response… demonstrating that readers are affected not by a text alone but also by its reception history" (Schmidt 158-159). Reception theory has been divided into two approaches that differs in their reader identification: reception aesthetics and reception history. Reception aesthetics maintains the "normative authority of the text, preserving literary interpretation as an institutional prerogative and thereby legitimating the existence of the professional critic… to protect institutionalized criticism from subjective and spontaneous attack by the critical reader" (Schmidt 160). Since the text authorizes "correct" and "incorrect" interpretations, the reader becomes a theoretical construct that "has no empirical basis" (Schmidt 159). This approach neglects the concrete reader subjectivity that this thesis builds on, so the second approach—reception history—will be used to demonstrate reception literature's effect on readers. Schmidt differentiates reception history:

> It attempts to create reader typologies not according to strictly aesthetic expectation horizons but according to the position of real readers within an institutionalized communication process at a particular place and time in history. Documentation of reader reaction is drawn from reviews, diaries, letters, memoirs, etc. (160)

By putting into conversation Tan's original intent and readers' concrete responses (via publications and reviews), I emphasize the presence of reader subjectivity and volatile contexts not to denounce the reader like reception aesthetics does but to alleviate criticisms directed solely at the writer and text. Validating but also reminding readers of their subjectivity—mediated by reception literature—disengages the direct, oversimplified relationship between text and readership and between text and representation.

Werner Faulstich, in *Domänen der Rezeptionsanalyse* (1977), proposes solutions to "make students conscious of their preconceived expectations, to encourage them to reflect on

their spontaneous reactions as they read and evaluate literature" (Schmidt 167). The responsibility of educators would be to examine "the discrepancy between the text's original intention (as far as that can be deduced) and the way individuals read it today" in a way that both preserves the validity of reader subjectivity and garners reader awareness of "their own historical-semantic context and of their material interests, insofar as these interests affect the act of reading" (Schmidt 168). And only by empirically investigating the influence of publishers, critics, and educators on reader expectations and reactions can we "develop immunization strategies against audience manipulation" (Schmidt 168). Therefore, what this chapter strives to achieve is not only a more self-informed approach to ethnic literature but also the self-empowerment of students and general audiences among the authoritative and vocal positions of educators, publishers, and established scholars.

A prominent example of reception analysis is Matthew Vechinski's dissection of *The Joy Luck Club* excerpts featured in two mainstream magazines: *Seventeen* and *Ladies' Home Journal*—both having edited the short stories to cater to their audience demographic (teenage girls and women respectively). Since these were published before the novel's release, Vechinski saw the opportunity to analyze these preliminary exposures that might have influenced the novel's reception (Vechinski 46). He notes, "Amy Tan's fiction initially appeared in the magazine racks in grocery stores, not in the company of canonical authors with CliffsNotes guides of their own, and both the commercial and academic success of the book can be credited in part to positive book reviews and author interviews in mass circulation magazines" (Vechinski 46).

Vechinski found that both magazines cut out certain details to emphasize the mother-daughter relationships, which results in a simplified representation of Chinese American families

(46). For example, *Ladies' Home Journal* "eliminates references to June's father, the widower, and the men of Joy Luck… the sons and daughters of the three other women," which inaccurately depicts the club as female-centered rather than communal (55-56). Such foundational patterns of dismissing the male characters in *The Joy Luck Club* in favor of a relatable mother-daughter theme might explain the tendency for critics like Chin and Wong to overlook the presence of unvilified Chinese American male characters in the novel. *Seventeen*'s edited version of the story "The Rules of the Game" presents the struggle between young Waverly and Aunt Lindo in a way that encourages readers to think that mothers and daughters' close bond outweighs their disagreements (Vechinski 50). This advocating for peace in the family seems to be a suitable message to send to the preteen/teen audience. However, what this edited version dismisses, then, is Tan's acknowledgment that sometimes two cultures and two identities cannot easily merge or harmonize. A Chinese American daughter might never settle down with a merged identity or communicate effectively with her Chinese immigrant mother.

Vechinski concludes, "*Seventeen* prefers the story of a willful Americanized daughter actively asserting her independence from her Chinese-born mother" (53). Tan's intention might have been to acknowledge and present the difficulties of the coexistence of these two cultures, but the dismissal of such cultural clash in *Seventeen*'s edits depicts Tan as an advocate for the Americanization of Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans. *Seventeen*'s editorial choices are especially influential considering their target audience. Sociologist Kelley Massoni warns, "'unlike adult women who have attained a certain amount of self-understanding and may read women's magazines critically, female adolescents are on a mission of self-discovery that makes them more susceptible to magazines' messages'" (Vechinski 48). For these magazine readers, unlike readers who purposely seek out ethnic works, empathy is not a prerequisite. These

editorial choices "appeal to their audiences' existing cultural assumptions" and offer an "irresistible path-of-least-resistance reading" (Vechinski 60). Therefore, critics asserting that Tan overemphasizes mother-daughter relationships to cater to a white audience can consider detaching the intentions of mainstream magazines from the intentions of the writer.

In addition to its presence in popular magazines, *The Joy Luck Club* received an array of reviews—both responsive to and catalytic of groundbreaking popularity—from large newspapers, including the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Written the same month the novel was publicly released, Orville Schell's review for the *New York Times* contextualizes the novel within an anti-communist and anti-China political sentiment and emphasizes its Oriental aspects. Schell begins his review with a summary of China and the U.S.' hostile relationship after the Red Army came into power in 1949, resulting in a surge of Chinese refugees who "fled Communism." He asserts, "Seeing old China as hopelessly backward, and contemporary China as besmirched by Communism, many in this new generation of Chinese-Americans wanted nothing more than to distance themselves as far as possible from the zuguo, or motherland" (Schell, "'*The Joy Luck Club*'"). This assumes that Tan and the novel's Asian American daughters seek assimilation in the U.S. to detach themselves from a vilified China. While Tan exemplifies the hierarchical and patriarchal issues of early-20th century China, she never explicitly denounced the entire country or asserted that most Asian Americans want to forget about their Chinese roots. It is Schell's generalization that has shaped the Asian American struggles in the novel into representation of a collective aversion to what Chin sarcastically remarks is "the icky-gooey evil of a Chinese culture."

Schell further argues that the novel reminds us "not just of the nightmarishness of being a woman in traditional China, but of the enormity of the confusing mental journey Chinese

emigrants had to make" ("*The Joy Luck Club*"). Again, he acknowledges the characters' struggles but takes the extra step to bridge the fictional characters' experiences to all Chinese female and Chinese immigrant experiences. It is possible that this initial reception, accentuating Tan's portrayal of China and distorting her intentions, influenced its audience to assume that the novel seeks to contrast a backward China against a progressive United States.

Another way Schell might have perpetuated the criticisms of *The Joy Luck Club* is through his emphases on the Eastern and Western dichotomy and the sense of Otherness. When discussing the hardships Chinese immigrants face in the United States, Schell writes, "But, unlike the children of European emigrants, they had obviously Oriental features, which made it difficult for them to lose themselves in the American melting pot" ("'*The Joy Luck Club*'"). The irony of this line lies in how the American population is labeled as a "melting pot," yet emigrants with "Oriental features" find it hard to fit in. This implies that this melting pot—supposedly indicative of the racial and cultural diversity in the United States—is only exclusive to those passable as Western. The stark clash between the words "Oriental" and "American" perpetuate the Eastern versus Western dichotomy in which Oriental features seem to endure additional obstacles in becoming "American." Therefore, the term "American" is more synonymous with "Western" rather than "melting pot." Rather than pointing out how the United States is *not* a melting pot if it fails to embrace Eastern people and cultures, Schell focuses on differentiating Chinese immigrants' physical and lingual features to explain the unique hardships they face coming to the United States.

In 2021, the *New York Times* republished Schell's review with the same commentary except for the deletion of the introduction (Schell, "Review: 'The Joy Luck Club'"). Rather than contextualizing the novel with the backdrop of hostile U.S.-China relations and Oriental

dispositions of Chinese emigrants, this edited review begins with Tan's biography. Such discrepancy implies that Schell initially took advantage of political turbulence to increase the stakes of the novel and thereby his review. The deletion of the previous introduction implies that it was not an integral part of the review. Schell didn't merely offer analysis and summary of the novel to potential readers; he steered them toward an Orientalist approach and fixated representational value to Tan's work by tying the fictional narratives to the larger political discourse and the general experiences of Chinese immigrants and their children. As seen in its 2021 version, such contextualization is not permanently bound to the review itself and was catering to its 1989 audience.

Published on March 12, 1989, about a week before Schell's review and a day several reviews for the novel came out, Carolyn See's review for the *Los Angeles Times* is considered "an early, influential one" among more than "a dozen periodicals, including People, Esquire, Fortune" (Feldman). Unlike the *New York Times*' review that overpowers the novel's contents with Schell's own political analyses, See's review dutifully summarizes the novel and glorifies its rich characters and transportive narratives.

However, traces of alienating China and Chinese experiences still linger: "On top of all their other terrors and adversities, their pasts have been lost; as if these horrors have taken place not just in another country but on another planet" (See). Such depiction of immigrant displacement is truthful, but it unintentionally widens the gap between the East and the West so that any attempts toward coexistent identities and cultures become futile. See dramatizes the foreignness the four mothers have experienced and asserts that their daughters are "drowning in American culture at the same time they starve for a past they can never fully understand." Quite contrary to *Seventeen*'s and *Ladies' Home Journal*'s coercion of a compromised mother-

daughter relation, See spotlights the generational clash through a geographical and cultural lens. Both are valid, subjective responses to the novel; one seeks out optimistic harmony, and the other seeks out insoluble conflict. Readers' initial impressions of and analytical approaches to the novel could vary depending on which reception literature they were exposed to prior to independent reading.

See further diverges from the conventional mother-daughter focus by evoking a more positive interpretation of the novel's male characters. She writes, "'The Joy Luck Club' is dazzling because of the worlds it gives us… At the perimeters of all these stories are all the men, buying and trading in this Mountain of Gold, selling Subaru at a loss, each one of them with his own story that has yet to be told" (See). She adds dimension to the otherwise flat characters and in doing so, venerates the novel as the key to multiple doors. The universality of the fictional narratives becomes apparent when See writes, "'The Joy Luck Club' has the disconcerting effect of making you look at everyone in your own life with the--however fleeting--knowledge that they are locked in the spaceships of their own amazing stories." Underlying this glorification is the assumption that everyone, especially Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans, have some rich, hidden past. A consequence of such assertion is the sympathetic gaze through which white readers will consider the Chinese Americans around them, leading them to show "tremendous sympathy toward… the 'poor' (oppressed) Chinese girl" (Yin 151).

This transcendence of fictional characters and narratives is precisely what empowers the novel to be representative of a larger population. See says so herself: "But the stories of the four mothers, the four daughters, are not really the point here." The *Los Angeles Time*s' review is yet another branch diverging from authorial intent and increasing its applicability and thereby marketability; the more universal and representative a literary work is, the more likely it'll break

into the mainstream canon. *The Joy Luck Club*, with these editorial efforts, evidently achieved that.

The popular presence of *The Joy Luck Club* in high school classrooms further necessitates substantial reception literature—in the form of readers' and teachers' guides—to situate the novel as an educational resource. Tan acknowledges the merit of being part of the high school canon: "Several years ago I learned that I had passed a new literary milestone. I had made it to the Halls of Education under the rubric of 'Multicultural Literature,' also known in many schools as 'Required Reading'" ("In the Canon" 27). Likewise, she was "perversely honored to be in CliffsNotes," although it featured "an unfamiliar version of her life story" (Vechinski 46).

The Joy Luck Club Cliffs Notes study guide presents underlying themes and messages while pinpointing the literary devices Tan utilizes (according to her, unintentionally). It aims to offer the reader a more enriched reading experience—if they choose to peruse the novel itself at all. Most importantly, it provides educators the context, cultural details, and open-ended discussion questions that would constitute their lesson plans; it essentially tells teachers what to teach about the novel. In its "Review Questions and Essay Topics" chapter, one question asks, "Compare the Chinese and Chinese-American cultures that Tan describes in this book to your own culture. How are they the same? How are they different?" (Rozakis 78). This is a generic prompt asked of most ethnic literature in a multicultural setting, but it insinuates that the novel is representative enough of Chinese and Chinese American cultures to contrast one's individual experiences to. Students are taught that Tan presents Chinese and Chinese American culture to them, as if ethnic fiction functions to create cultural awareness rather than to imaginatively narrate.

In an observational study conducted by Steven Z. Athanases, an education professor at UC Davis, a tenth grade's class discussion of *The Joy Luck Club* is documented with precision. According to Athanases, the teacher Reiko values "cross-cultural links" and differences, ensuring that her students are exposed to works by writers of color. In this session, Reiko focuses on the relatability and distinctness of Chinese mothers:

> The students sit in a large circle with Reiko. She launches a lively stretch of talk by asking simply, "How many of you saw your mothers in here?" Various students shout out how they recognize their mothers and grandmothers in the chapter. Reiko says, smiling, "You see, mothers and grandmothers and families are not all that different from one culture to another." (Athanases 283)

Akin to Cliffs Notes' question, Reiko prompts an empathetic connection between diverse readers and the Chinese American text. She asserts that the characters' relatability is analogous to Chinese culture's relatability, hence framing fictional ethnic characters as accurate, comprehensive representations of their culture.

As the class discusses the cultural ignorance of Waverly's white boyfriend that leads to embarrassing mistakes like drinking too much wine during dinner and pouring soy sauce onto Aunt Lindo's signature dish, Reiko extends the representational power to the few Chinese American students in her class:

> "Really? What do you think, Michelle?" Reiko asks, turning toward one of her Chinese American students who has not yet spoken today. But Mark interjects: "No, I said he was rude. But certain things like his drinking two glasses of wine at dinner didn't seem that bad especially since he brought it." Reiko persists, "Okay, whaddaya think, Michelle?" ... But Reiko keeps the talk now on the cultural faux pas: "Wait a minute. What else did this young man do that was wrong?" She turns again to two of her Chinese girls. "Denise or Michelle, tell 'em." (Athanases 285)

Reiko gently prompts the participation of quieter students and allows for students represented by the novel to be heard. She constantly seeks confirmation from Denise and Michelle, empowering them to inform their non-Chinese American classmates of the Chinese culture woven throughout the novel. The apparent trust in her Chinese American students reflects the unquestioned

credibility ethnic minorities possess when addressing a larger group outside of their ethnic community. From token Chinese American students in high school classrooms to token Chinese American authors in the literary canon, the eagerness to bestow upon them a hassle-free, overarching voice has never subsided. Athanases concludes the report with an optimistic overview:

> As they read and study other works by authors of color, her students will discuss the uniquely Native American view of land and nature, struggles Filipinos faced in immigrating to the West Coast of the United States, the historical rape of black women in the South by white men. Over a third of the class will read the full text of *The Joy Luck Club*, reporting a more balanced perspective of the mother-daughter struggle, learning of challenges Waverly's mother faced in China. (287)

It appears that the ethnic writer's power spans across all cultures, and the value we attach to their works forgoes the mindfulness usually harbored for fiction. Perhaps our appetency for ethnic literature has mutated fiction into nonfiction and nonfiction into infallible truth.

Transitioning to digital reviews of *The Joy Luck Club*, Amazon has been a hub for media exposure through its product recommendations, ratings, and reviews. Albeit colloquial and largely anonymous, the 4,000+ ratings and reviews averaging 4.6/5 stars for *The Joy Luck Club* novel are significant in this academic conversation; some are reflective and laudatory enough to exhibit and perpetuate the representative authority conventionally applied to ethnic minority texts. Given the recency of these reviews, their backdrop is situated in over two decades of *The Joy Luck Club* scholarship. As context shapes modern readers' reception to earlier Chinese American texts, one might expect a progressive shift in public opinion. However, the unabated praise of the novel as being informative of Chinese and Chinese American cultures and experiences prove that our approach to ethnic fiction has remained stagnant. Integrating the novel's earliest reception with one's personal review feeds into the vicious cycle in which generational emblematizing of *The Joy Luck Club* feed off each other and grow stronger

collectively with the aid of time. Essentially, the initial laudatory responses to the novel set the stone for ensuing readers, and *their* responses solidify the novel in the present moment as a credible resource for Chinese and Chinese American culture; from here, the cycle continues.

An Amazon customer's review in 2006 states:

> Once I opened my first book by Tan (The Opposite of Fate), I could not stop reading. Joy Luck club is a fascinating work: it is full of humor and deep philosophic thoughts that reach in the middle of your heart, it is a great source of information about Chinese culture, Chinese immigration and what it is like to be born on the edge created by two cultures. (Amazon)

In addition to appreciating the literary value of the novel, this customer emphasizes its cultural insight into not Chinese American but *Chinese* culture and immigration; they equate Chinese Americanness to authentic access to dual cultures. Another customer by the name of Dr. John T. Webb enthused that each of Tan's books are a "*must read* for anyone who wants a *real* view of the life (or lives) of real people! Neither totally tragic nor comic, her books all show life as it is lived" (Amazon). The autobiographical voices of *The Joy Luck Club* function to humanize its characters and strengthen the reader-character bond. However, readers risk overlooking Tan's intended genre of autobiographical *fiction*. Webb further proclaims the novel to be "about the best book I have ever read about Chinese-American life in action. It reminds me of my own vicarious experiences with Chinese school-mates in Junior and Senior High schools in San Francisco, and their families" (Amazon). Assuming fictional ethnic characters and narratives' underlying realism and approaching ethnic literature as sources that enable cultural revelations of and personal connections to a general community exemplify the roots of the novel's seemingly problematic nature. Tan might emphasize her nonrepresentational intentions, but readers ultimately dictate their takeaways from the text.

One example that proves the unchanging nature of reader response is Michael D. Gilmore's review in 2015:

> Twenty-five years ago I read "The Joy Luck Club" and enjoyed it as much the second time. Ms. Tan's tale about the connection of four Chinese women with their daughters while reflecting on their own pasts is intriguing and poignant. The book provides an insightful comparison of ancient and modern Asian traditions. A well-crafted novel that's a pure delight to read. (Amazon)

This customer's impression of the novel throughout a 25-year period (from when the book first released to more recently) unwaveringly fixates on the historical and present "Asian traditions" that the novel provides. Not only does Gilmore attribute an educational purpose to the novel, but he also deems the terms "Chinese" and "Asian" interchangeable—as if Asia is a monolithic Other.

Concluding with a recent review in 2021, a customer writes, "A wonderful author who knows the Chinese mind and soul. I loved how she weaved all of the different characters and their lives and back stories together concentrating on mother and daughter relationships, American characteristics as well as historical facts" (Amazon). The words "knows" and "facts" again position the novel as historical nonfiction and Tan as an omniscient narrator. Even as Tan subsequently deconstructed her cultural and linguistic authority in response to critics, recent readers are still ignorant of authorial intent (either through lack of exposure or by choice) and prefer to self-determine Tan's credibility as a Chinese American author. Again, this is not to undermine reader subjectivity but to urge the critical reflection of ethnic texts' reader response patterns.

Goodreads, unlike Amazon, is a more academic database dedicated to readers and literary conversation. The website and app allow readers to discover new books and read through reviews before adding it to their virtual bookshelves. *The Joy Luck Club* has acquired more than 600,000 ratings (averaging 3.95/5 stars) and 10,000 reviews, making Goodreads a substantial mediator between new readers and the novel. The top review (with 387 likes) was written by Brina in 2016; one paragraph states:

> Tan uses a vignette format to alternate stories between the younger and older women, with June Mei's voice serving as a voice between the two. I enjoyed learning about life in pre-revolutionary, rural China and the hardships that drove the Chinese to immigrate in the first place… When published, The Joy Luck Club was an innovative look at Chinese immigrants and how being Chinese changes with each generation. Tan has encouraged an entire generation of Chinese American writers who we can enjoy today, and now there are a plethora of cultural groups writing about their immigrant experience. (Goodreads)

Brina acknowledges Jing-mei's mediation of her late mother's story, but the clear distinction between the voices of the younger and the older women obscure the fact that all the voices—as autobiographical and authentic as they may seem—are written by Tan, a Chinese American. The reviewer fails to distinguish between the lives and hardships of a few fictional characters (that do provide insight but do not seek to generally represent) and those of "the Chinese." The rest of Brina's review continues to indirectly shape Chinese people as a mass, as if Tan's characters and narratives open the single door to a whole population's experiences and struggles.

Quite contrary to the generally positive but troublesome reviews, another top review (with 169 likes) by Rebecca in 2007 appreciates *The Joy Luck Club* for allowing "ABCs (American-born-Chinese) to recognize themselves in a major work of literature" while criticizing readers' responses to the novel. Similar to critics of *The Joy Luck Club*, Rebecca points out its inaccuracies and dramatizations:

> I started pestering my mom about her abandoned children in mainland China. I also declared that I would name my two kids after the aforementioned abandoned children: Spring Flower and Spring Rain. My mom laughed in my face about the latter, saying no self-respecting Chinese would give their kids such pedestrian names, and would be mock-pissed about the former. The truth is that The Joy Luck Club got some things right and got a lot of other things dramatic. (Goodreads)

Rebecca's anecdote reveals the learning curve readers sometimes reach when they realize a novel's popularity or an author's identity does not negate readers' critical awareness. Such awareness, as previously emphasized, should not function to fact-check ethnic fiction (the fictional genre inherently presumes "inaccuracies") but should rather reinforce the

representational limits of literature. Rebecca concludes her review, “The problem is that the book came out almost twenty years ago and there have been nearly no major additions to the genre. I hate for people to think JLC is definitive about our culture and experience, as influential as it is.” Finally, we see a reader criticize the way readers have received the mainstream novel rather than channeling contempt toward Tan for being an ineffective representative of Chinese and Chinese American people and culture.

It is important to clarify, however, that Rebecca attributes the problematic reception to there being “no major additions to the genre” of Asian American literature. The root of the problem is actually the representational power we attach to any literary work, whether they are the sole inhabitant of a desolate genre or the inconspicuous voice of an overpopulated field. Even as the Chinese American and Asian American literary genre expands with contemporary writers, readers are not justified to consider any or a collection of those voices as representative of a larger whole. Likewise, we must avoid pitching ethnic writers against one another and dictating which ethnic text is a better representation.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to uncover the cruciality of reader response advancement—one that conjoins leisurely consumption and critical introspection. Media featuring and produced by Asian Americans have flourished in the twenty-first century mainstream, with box-office successes like *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *The Farewell* (2019), *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021); and bestsellers like *Pachinko* (2017), *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), and *Crying in H Mart* (2021). Each and every one of them, no matter how positively received, undeniably harbors points of scrutiny, historical inaccuracies, and room for improvement. Before we embark on the tumultuous journey of literary analysis, appreciation, and criticism, let us lift the representational burden off of ethnic creators, run toward the shoreline, and fling it into the ocean depths. We are not ready yet—and someday we won't have to be—to shoulder such burden.

Everything this paper means to be, Tan herself has already eloquently expressed, not so much out of self-defense as out of reverence for ethnic communities' creative freedom:

> What is in the canon of American literature now includes many different voices, reflecting that America includes many different voices. But I still feel it's important to examine how we treat any book as subject matter rather than story. There still exists a tendency to evaluate stories with characters from a different culture as being about culture. So when we hear the words "required reading," we should be asking ourselves, "What are we requiring literature to do?" Let me hasten to add that I am honored to be on required reading lists. My biggest fear these days is that some student will see the name of my book on the list and groan with disgust. But I hope that students will also sense after reading it that I was not just writing about Chinese people or just mothers or daughters. I was simply writing a story. I'd like the student to know that I felt something unexpected when I was writing the story and it means something only to me. Maybe the student will feel something unexpected when reading it. There is so much that a story can do that is not required. It just happens. ("The Joy Luck Club Reader's Guide")

The expansion of this paper appears endless, which is both daunting and exhilarating. I see the potential of conducting more in-depth studies of *The Joy Luck Club* reception, which would include quantitative data of the newspapers, magazines, online reviews' readership and of

the readers' exposures to reception literature prior to perusing the novel independently. Most importantly, I hope that the message and findings of this project will permeate a broader field, including Asian American literature, ethnic literature, literature in general, and media as a whole.

The seedlings of this project are admittedly rooted in a personal affection for *The Joy Luck Club*. Upon my first exposure to the criticisms of the novel, I was deeply ashamed to have appreciated a seemingly flawed text. However, my respect for and connection to Amy Tan, as well as my affection for the novel, never truly subsided; nostalgic memories can never really be unremembered. Rather, the progression of this paper taught me how to be a better reader. As I argued for readers' self-awareness, I learned to develop it myself. Awareness sometimes arises from yourself (in the rewarding form of self-revelation), sometimes warrants an outside force like an academic paper, and sometimes remains concealed, underdeveloped. Wherever our awareness remains, however it chooses to arise, I hope that the constituents of this paper can individually and collectively illuminate the expansive, perplexing space that is the reader's mind.

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---. 宿愿 (suyuan) [long-cherished wish]

---. 宿怨 (suyuan) [old grudges]

---. 你饭吃过了? (ni fan chiguole?) [Have you eaten?]

---. 我去了噢 (wo qule o) [I'm going now]

---. 能干 (nenggan) [competent]

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