

Food Imagery in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*

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Abstract

In *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Amy Tan lists food items and portrays meals and parties from time to time. The texts provide adequate evidences to support the argument that Tan does not attempt to display food only. Food imagery has a three-fold purpose. First, food references help enrich the portrayal of characters. Second, activities concerning food, such as eating and cooking, symbolize power relations between man and woman, or between mother and daughter. Third, Tan's treatment of Chinese cookery shows how a Chinese American daughter gazes her mother's culture. It also indicates the daughter's ambiguous cultural identity.

Keywords: Amy Tan, food, cooking, power relations, culture, Chinese American literature

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I

Amy Tan's first two novels, *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, convey culinary connotation even in their book titles. The Joy Luck Club is portrayed as a regular gathering, where four female characters cook, eat, play mah jong, and have fun. According to Chinese folklore, the Kitchen God takes charge of the kitchen and makes an annual report to the Jade Emperor in heaven. Women worship and bribe the Kitchen God lest he should betray them in his report. In addition to the titles, there are large amounts of food references in both novels. Like Tessa in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Tan has "the trait of listing things."¹ Unlike Tessa, who lists animals at the zoo, Tan lists food items—food in kitchens, food in restaurants, food in markets, and food in imagination.² Critics have successfully explored evident subject matters in *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*: the mother/daughter relationships, the search for female identity and the ambiguity in ethnic identity. But very few of them have explored the hidden meanings of those long lists of food items that recur here and there.³ The lists can be attributed to Tan's Chinese background, since the Chinese people are regarded as "food oriented" (Chang 11), but there are adequate evidences to support the argument that to display food is not Tan's only attempt.

The connotation of food has been a field of study that attracted many sociologists and literary critics in recent years. When discussing the social function of food, E. N. Anderson, Jr. and Marja L. Anderson argue that "food is universally used throughout the world to maintain and create interpersonal bonds." They further point out that "food can be used to heighten or relax a group's emotions, to communicate trivial or vital messages" (381). In "Eating the Evidence: Women, Power and Food," Sarah Sceats discusses "pleasurable eating in fiction" and concludes that "[e]very meal incorporates political, cultural, personal and psychological ingredients" (125). Lévi-Strauss analyzes the social meaning of eating practice and presents his famous "culinary triangle" in *The Origin of Table Manners*: "the cooked being a cultural transformation of the raw, and the rotten its natural transformation" (478). In "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption," an article on food semantics, Roland Barthes says food is not only "a collection of products," but also "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and

¹ *The Kitchen God's Wife*, 12. Subsequent references to *The Kitchen God's Wife* and *The Joy Luck Club* will be cited in the text as *Kitchen* and *Joy* respectively.

² See *Joy* 23 and *Kitchen* 267 for some examples.

³ For discussion about images of food and eating in *The Joy Luck Club*, see Wong, *Reading* 34, 44, 45.

behavior" (167). He further explains that the "item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies" (168). Barthes also elaborates on the significance of eating: "To eat is a behavior that develops beyond its own ends, replacing, summing up, and signaling other behaviors, and it is precisely for these reasons that it is a sign" (172). The above-mentioned sociologists and literary critics unanimously make it clearly known that food can carry manifold significance and that consumption of food is a very complicated social behavior. Besides, in view of Tan's Chinese ancestral background, K.C. Chang's observation in *Food in Chinese Culture* will be enlightening:

I have pointed out earlier that the Chinese people are especially preoccupied with food, and that food is at the center of, or at least it accompanies or symbolizes, many social interactions. The Chinese recognize, in their social interactions, minute and precise distinctions, and nuances of distinctions, in regard to the relative statuses of the interacting parties and the nature of the interaction. Consequently, they inevitably use food—of which there are countless variations, many more subtle and more expressive than the tongue can convey—to help speak the language that constitutes a part of every social interaction. (15-16)

Another factor that makes food especially prominent in Tan's fiction is its monologue narratives. With four pairs of Chinese mother/American daughter as major characters (Suyuan/Jing-mei, An-mei/Rose, Lindo/Waverly, and Ying-ying/Lena), *The Joy Luck Club* consists of sixteen monologues, each made by a mother or a daughter. *The Kitchen God's Wife* is primarily Winnie's monologue, with the first-person narrative of her American-born daughter Pearl as prologue and epilogue. Within each monologue, storytelling plays an important role. Some critics consider "talk-story" to be "the Chinese American oral tradition" (Wong, "Chinese American Literature" 42). The stories connect the characters and help the development of the plot. Throughout Tan's novels, eating and telling stories are very important activities. As An-mei points out, gossiping and cooking make up the most comfortable time in her life (*Joy* 228-29). In her study of food as a literary element, Sara Lewis Dunne also comes to the conclusion that "food and words are intimately connected as parts of human experience."⁴ The connection of food and words thus leads to a better understanding

⁴ Dunne suggests that eating and speaking are closely related because we eat and speak with the same organ, the mouth.

of Tan's page-long description of food preparation and food consumption. This paper is going to discuss not only Tan's use of food, but other alimentary images related: the meal, the table, the kitchen, the cook, the feeder, and the fed. It will focus on how Tan uses food to enrich characterization, to delineate power relations between the feeder and the fed, and to portray the American-born daughters' ambiguous cultural identity.

II

Undoubtedly, the principal significance of food is its role to supply nourishment and strength. As a survival skill, eating responds to human hunger physically and spiritually as well. Tan does not spare depiction of food and feasts in her portrayal of wartime in China. In *The Joy Luck Club*, when Suyuan arrives at Kweilin during the Sino-Japanese War, she finds the hill peaks like "giant fried fish heads" and the caves with "hanging rock gardens in the shapes and colors of cabbages, winter melons, turnips, and onions" (21). Despite its reputation of beauty, Kweilin attracts crowds of people because it is a safer city; those alimentary images refer to a more relieving rear. However, when the Japanese start to bomb the beautiful city, what Suyuan sees becomes "dripping bowels of an ancient hill" (22). Put in the context of war, the image of bowels sound cannibalistic although the Chinese do eat bowels of animals. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Hulan, at the sight of starving beggars, starts to swallow everything but still feels hungry. Instead of giving the beggars a hand, she "added fat onto her body the same way a person saves gold or puts money in a bank account" (363). Hulan derives sense of security from food; her act simply results from human instinct. But characters in Tan's novels hardly suffer from hunger. Even in war times, they can shop in the market where varieties of food are displayed, they can hold parties, and they can even eat rare food. Food produces multiple meanings besides its principal function to feed.

Tan shows her sensory perception in the seemingly trifle and produces "positive representations of the feminine" (Humm 23). She makes it very clear that the sensory perception is unique to women. While men keep off the kitchen as the fed, women enjoy their unique experience in the kitchen as the feeder. In many scenes women respond to the color, smell, shape, and texture of food items. Lines from Emma Parker can summarize how Tan uses food images: "Food imagery saturates the novels and becomes the dominant metaphor . . . to describe people, landscape, and emotion" (340). As discussed earlier, Tan describes the city Kweilin with a lot of symbols connected to food. But more frequently seen is her use of similes and metaphors in the

portrayal of characters and their emotions. Lena, the half-Chinese girl, does not like her Chinese parts, especially the eyes, which have “no eyelids, as if they were carved on a jack-o’-lantern with two swift cuts of a short knife” (*Joy* 104). An-mei’s acrimonious auntie is portrayed as a woman with “a tongue like hungry scissors eating silk cloth” (*Joy* 44). When Mrs. Huang looks for a baby girl to be her future daughter-in-law, the chosen one is recommended as “a precious buncake, sweet with a good clean color” (*Joy* 50). Huazheng is nicknamed “Peanut” because she is “small and plump like the two rounds of peanut shell” (*Kitchen* 133). Another passage used to describe Helen’s plumpness seems more picturesque: “She was plump, but not in that classical way of a peach whose pink skin is nearly bursting with sweetness. Her plumpness was round and overflowing in uneven spots, more like a steamed dumpling with too much filling leaking out the sides” (*Kitchen* 215). At a Chinese New Year dinner party, Waverly and Rich are likened to crabs. Rich is thus labeled in accordance with his features: “He had the same coloring as the crab on his plate: reddish hair, pale cream skin, and large dots of orange freckles” (*Joy* 203). On the other hand, Waverly is blamed for “always walking sideways, moving crooked” (*Joy* 208). Here Tan adopts a Chinese allusion to compare arrogant, aggressive people to crabs. More importantly, the use of crabs as simile or metaphor adds spice to the story because the dinner *is* a crab dinner.

More striking instances are those that illustrate how food links characters’ emotions. In these examples, Tan focuses on not only the appearance of food, but also its “physical attributes” (Wong, *Reading* 46). She uses food symbolically to express women’s suppressed self. At the Chinese New Year crab dinner, after Waverly criticizes Jing-mei’s writing style, Suyuan responds, “Jing-mei not sophisticate like you. Must be born this way” (*Joy* 206). The remark sounds humiliating to Jing-mei, but with the following observation she soon realizes that Suyuan does not mean to betray her:

I could hear my mother eating an orange slice. She was the only person I knew who crunched oranges, making it sound as if she were eating crisp apples instead. The sound of it was worse than gnashing teeth. (*Joy* 206)

The context can prove that Suyuan is actually gnashing her teeth. She feels angry because Waverly chooses the best crab for herself and criticizes Jing-mei harshly. Although Suyuan detests Waverly’s behavior, she is not supposed to lose her temper in public. As the hostess, she cannot blame her guest. She has no choice but to

transform her anger into crunching.

In light of the effect of food on people's emotion, An-mei's story is very much thrilling. After An-mei's widowed mother becomes a number-three concubine to a rich man, she asks to take An-mei with her. Her family deem her behavior to be disloyalty to widowhood; therefore, they try to prevent An-mei's departure. When the two parties are arguing across the table, a boiling soup falls all over An-mei's neck. The soup symbolizes the family's anger, which leaves a scar "in [her] skin's memory" (*Joy* 46), a mark of shame and "punishment of unauthorized will" (Ty 65). Hot soup also symbolizes hardship that wives have to go through. Winnie learns from her mother-in-law that to "make a proper hot soup" (*Kitchen* 207), she has to test the soup with her little finger. Only when her finger is scalded is the hot soup ready to serve. She has to hurt herself because her husband demands sacrifice and respect from her.

Perhaps the most striking example is what happens to Waverly in her childhood. At the age of nine, Waverly is famous for being a national chess champion. Lindo is proud of her, but Waverly thinks Lindo is using her to show off. Once after Waverly and Lindo argue over the subject on the sidewalk, the daughter runs and knocks into a woman with a bag of groceries. As Lindo helps the woman "pick up the escaping food" (*Joy* 99), Waverly makes *her escape* into one alley after another, only to understand that she has "nowhere to go" and there are "no escape routes" (*Joy* 100). On arriving home two hours later, Waverly sees on the dinner table "the remains of a large fish, its fleshy head still connected to bones swimming upstream in vain escape" (*Joy* 100). After that day, Waverly feels Lindo treats her like "a rotten fish she had thrown away but which had left behind its bad smell" (*Joy* 170). Food images indicate Waverly's feelings and situation. When that bag of groceries spills on the street, Waverly sees in "the escaping food" her desire to be free from Lindo's expectations. The remains of the large fish, however, ridicule her "vain escape." The "rotten fish" image further brings it to light that a disobedient child deserves contempt.

Food is "neutral" (Sceats 125). However, when coated with emotions, it can carry coded messages. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, eels play an important role in relations to emotions because they demonstrate "the potential of food to dismay or comfort" (Sceats 120). On their way from Nanking to Kunming to escape the Japanese troops, Winnie and her company enjoy a satisfactory meal with piles of eels, "as thick as fingers" (*Kitchen* 285). Since eels are very rare and special food, they signify heavenly blessings; they *comfort* people in distress. Nevertheless, when Winnie hears about the massacre the Japanese troops made in Nanking, she feels sorry for those who stay there. She becomes obsessed because, as she is enjoying the

delicious eels, people in Nanking are being killed, fingers being cut off to take the rings. In her nightmare, finger-thick eels in a dish, still alive, are struggling for life. The image of eels and that of fingers interact. As a result, the sight of, or even the thought of, eels *dismays* Winnie, and deprives her of the appetite for eels forever.

III

That both *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife* are women's stories is self-evident; considering Tan's treatment of the kitchen, the issue will be more interestingly explicit. In the first chapter of *The Joy Luck Club*, Jing-mei delineates the difference in after-meal behaviors between men and women. Men leave the dining table and make themselves comfortable at the card table; while women "carry plates and bowls to the kitchen and dump them in the sink" (32). Men stand away from the kitchen voluntarily, where women share secrets and tell stories. Tan's women have ambivalent feelings towards the kitchen. On the one hand, the undeniably laborious chores are debased: Lindo understands her low "standing" when she is sent by Huang Taitai to the kitchen, "a place for cooks and servants" (*Joy* 55). On the other hand, women with culinary skills are envied: jealousy possesses Winnie as Peanut's mother teaches Peanut how to put the kitchen in order--"how to be a proper wife" (*Kitchen* 136). Be it a voluntary act or not, women stay at the kitchen and regard it their domain. Men's intrusion simply brings about disaster, as shown by Wen Fu in *The Kitchen God's Wife*. When a hospital nurse refuses to bring him food because he is just a visitor, Wen Fu rushes madly to the hospital kitchen and damages it. The reason for his rage is not that he feels hungry, but that a woman dares to deny his habitual authority. Men keep off the kitchen, but, ironically, they need the kitchen desperately, for it feeds their "appetite," or their hunger for "power" (*Kitchen* 325). Men do not involve themselves in kitchen chores, but they still want to manipulate what is going on there.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, the conflict between Lena and Harold, her husband and boss, manifests a similar situation. To help Harold's architectural firm, Lena initiates the idea to specialize in thematic restaurant design.⁵ In spite of her efforts and creativity in the theme elements, Harold never treats her fairly. She is not appropriately paid, and she is not supposed to present her ideas to a new client. Lena's role in the thematic restaurant design symbolizes women's role in the kitchen, while Harold's reliance on her ideas and his purposeful neglect of her efforts clearly

⁵ When related to other food images, Lena's interest in this specialization is quite symbolic.

indicate men's attitude in relation to the kitchen. Similar stories recur in Tan's novels so much so that a resolution is made in the last chapter of *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Having been dubious about the Kitchen God's legitimacy in the kitchen for a long time,⁶ Winnie replaces his picture with the statue of his divorced wife. With a polished gesture, Winnie announces the exclusion of male dominance from the kitchen.

The significance of the kitchen also extends into the table: the dining table and the Mahjong table. In both novels there are just a few scenes in which male characters are seen eating on the dining table. Tan neither reveals male characters' food preference as she does on the part of female characters, nor involves them in cooking and consuming activities, but she depicts men's bossy manner at the table. In a so-called "cabbage game" (*Kitchen* 359), Wen Fu orders Winnie to eat pork with cabbage for two weeks because she says the cabbage is bitter and refuses to eat her words. The "cabbage game" is a good illustration of "battles between parents and children over food" (Sceats 118), where Wen Fu assumes his *patriarchal duty* and dictates to his wife what she should eat. Like the scenes that take place in the kitchen, most of the table scenes show activities for women exclusively. The exclusion of males from the kitchen and the table does not necessarily create a paradise, however. Conflict and power struggle still exist, and women exert power on one another by gossip and by food as well. While both are activities of the same organ—the mouth, gossiping and eating are instrumental in building the network of power relations.

No one will deny the fact that cooking in the kitchen and serving at table is a tiresome job, but once a woman becomes proficient at cookery, she can turn liabilities into assets and have control of those who are fed. Sceats thus explains the power and influences of a cook: "The cook is, after all, in command of the ingredients, and may use this dominion either to reinforce or sabotage the status quo" (121). As a future daughter-in-law, Lindo is sent to the kitchen to learn how to be a good wife immediately after she arrives at Huang Taitai's house. After a short period of time, she finds herself happy when Tyan-yu, her future husband, eats the food she cooks without complaining. It is not because Tyan-yu stops being picky, it is because Lindo has mastered the art of cooking. To say that Lindo has been tamed seems precise, for she starts to believe that she has to "follow and obey without question" (*Joy* 56). But, judging from what happens subsequently--how she saves herself from the Huangs,

⁶ As Winnie relates, the Jade Emperor made Zhang the Kitchen God after he committed suicide in a kitchen fire to evade his ex-wife, to whom he was disloyal. Winnie thus comments, "Why should I want that kind of person to judge me, a man who cheated his wife? His wife was the good one, not him" (*Kitchen* 61-62).

how she turns over a new leaf in America, and how she manipulates her daughter with *food*, we know that she is not tamed at all.

Winnie in *The Kitchen God's Wife* also succeeds in turning liabilities into assets. When describing what women mean to Wen Fu, Winnie generalizes: "a pair of chopsticks for everyday use" (358). Although women are valued at their function as daily objects, they can refuse the designation. Winnie has ten pairs of silver chopsticks, the only one thing from her dowry that has not been deprived of by Wen Fu's family. The chopsticks symbolize keys to hope and happiness, as Winnie relates: "I would take out a pair of those chopsticks and hold them in my hand. I would feel the weight of the silver resting in my palm, solid and unbreakable, just like my hopes" (186). Instead of being the chopsticks used by her husband, she wants to be the chopstick user who holds her fate in her own palm. Winnie's story corresponds with Lindo's since they both revolt and obtain autonomy.

In women's eyes, food embodies competence, knowledge, and power. Waverly's remark about Lindo's cooking aptly explains the significance of cooking to women: "cooking was how my mother expressed her love, her pride, her power, her proof that she knew more" (*Joy* 176). In an engagement party, Helen and Winnie are eager to criticize the dishes so as to show their mastery of cookery. While Winnie admits that Helen is good at some "laborious cooking tasks," she also ridicules Helen's "sense of taste and smell" (*Kitchen* 248). When Suyuan knows that Lindo cooks red bean soup for the Joy Luck Club, she decides to cook black sesame-seed soup but denies that she is going to show off. The desire to show off places Lindo in a vulnerable position, however. Since Lindo purposely ignores the existence of Rich and evades any talk about him, Waverly has to use strategy. Also purposely, she and Rich drop in on Suyuan, have dinner there, and send a thank-you letter afterwards, telling Suyuan "it was the best Chinese food he [Rich] has ever tasted" (*Joy* 176). Gossip on Suyuan's part soon kindles jealousy in Lindo's heart. In three days, Lindo invites Waverly and Rich to dinner. The urge to compete, which is stronger than any other state of mind, turns a dinner table into the battlefield.

The power of food is also explicit in mother/daughter relationships. Jing-mei explains why she cannot refuse the food her mother offers: "That's the way Chinese mothers show they love their children, not through hugs and kisses but with stern offerings of steamed dumplings, duck's gizzards, and crab" (*Joy* 202). Food can be manipulative because it is synonymous with love. One can be seduced into doing something by food; one can also be hurt by deprivation of food. Waverly learns in her childhood that by following her mother's order—by biting back her tongue at the

store they shop, she can be rewarded with the “forbidden candies” (*Joy* 89). But, if she does not obey her mother, she will be punished. After Waverly talks back to Lindo on the street, Lindo does not talk to her and does not care whether Waverly has eaten at all. Waverly understands that it is Lindo’s “strategy” (*Joy* 171) and decides to ignore it. However, several days later when Waverly suffers from chicken pox and Lindo feeds her rice porridge, the daughter still feels so delighted that she exclaims, “I was so happy that she [Lidno] had become her usual self” (*Joy* 172). Lindo’s strategy works because it is a purposeful neglect, which “may be as powerful a means of control as over-protection” (Sceats 120).

Besides using food as a means to “love” and at the same time to “control” their children, mothers also alert them to eating taboos so as to discipline them at dining tables. For example, in order to teach Lena not to waste food, Ying-ying warns the eight-year-old girl that her future husband will have as many pockmarks as the rice grains she leaves unfinished in the bowl. She also tells Lena that a man with pockmarks is a mean person. Actually, rules and customs associated with eating are numerous in Chinese culture. Since the eating taboo originates from Ying-ying’s Chinese background, not from her own imagination, it exerts a lot of “disciplinary force” that is embodied in “cultural customs” (Sceats 126). Ying-ying plays the role of an agent who demands conformity to cultural customs. Ironically, her “strategy” drives Lena to the opposite extreme. For fear that a mean neighbor boy with tiny pits may become her husband, Lena decides to leave more food unfinished so that the boy might get leprosy and die. By doing this, Lena takes Ying-ying’s place as the agent, and resorts to the power of not eating so as to change her imaginary fate. Five years later, learning that the neighbor boy has died of complications from measles, Lena gorges on a half gallon of ice cream and then retches it back into the ice cream container. Although the episode reads like a melodrama, Lena’s reaction has a lot to do with her longing for freedom from control. Lena struggles between eating and not-eating, “I remember wondering why it was that eating something good could make me feel so terrible, while vomiting something terrible could make me feel so good” (*Joy*154). Although the boy’s death has nothing to do with Lena, she feels guilty and is eager to compensate for it. When Lena gorges, she is symbolically trying to follow Ying-ying’s orders—to finish the food. After that, when she vomits the ice cream she just swallows, she is playing her own role. On the other hand, Lena is trying to say that parents’ order, even though they are good orders, can suffocate children.

Whether it is possible for mothers and daughters to reconcile is a topic worthy of

exploring. Tan creates several kitchen scenes in which the older generation and the younger generation can share secrets, let out feelings, or argue with each other. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, when Auntie Helen asks Pearl to help her cut the cake in the kitchen, Pearl knows she is going to tell a secret. Actually, Auntie Helen has shared her secret with Pearl twice in that way. Structurally, *The Kitchen God's Wife* starts with Bao-bao's engagement party and ends with his wedding. In Chapter one, Auntie Helen makes believe that she has a brain tumor and discloses the "secret" to Pearl while the latter is helping cut the engagement cake in the kitchen. In the penultimate chapter, Auntie Helen drags Pearl again to cut the wedding cake, only to tell her that her brain tumor is a strategy used to draw Pearl and her mother Winnie together. It is also in her kitchen that Helen decides to let out Winnie's secrets in spite of the latter's indignation. Moreover, several mother/daughter conversations happen in the kitchen. Winnie unfolds her story as Pearl drinks the noodle soup she cooks. In *Joy Luck Club*, Lindo and Waverly talk about Rich while the mother is cooking. Suyuan consoles Jing-mei when they are washing the dishes. It is undeniable that the kitchen, as a female domain, is easily accessible for both mothers and daughters, although genuine communication between the two parties is not as easily achieved.

IV

Although there are a great many of food items mentioned in *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, a closer examination, however, will lead the reader to the fact that food items appear mostly in chapters about the mothers. What the daughters like to eat is unknown. In terms of this, Tan recalls "being very ashamed when people came over and saw my [Tan's] mother preparing food. She didn't make TV dinner and use canned foods. She used fresh vegetables and served fish with heads still on" (Schleier). Why does Tan devote so much of her writing to the cooking that is peculiar to her mother's culture and that she herself is ashamed of? What is Tan's attitude toward the culinary images related to her mother's culture? Those are interesting questions.

Tan seldom mentions American food in her novels. The reader can only have a glimpse of "American food" or "American eating styles" when he/she reads, for example, that Rich makes "noisy munches of cornflakes" (*Joy* 180), or that Lena's father eats bacon and eggs for breakfast. Apparently, Tan means to focus attention on the "strangeness" and "otherness" of Chinese way of eating. In doing so, Tan exposes

herself to the risk of being a “food pornographer.”⁷ However, because she herself *is* partly an outsider, Tan can sympathize with “the curious gaze of ‘outsiders’” (Wong, *Reading* 56). In other words, she is not so much “food pornographing” as “being food pornographed.” Actually, some eating habits that seem strange to Westerners did exist, but they are not practiced now, such as swallowing gold or opium to commit suicide, cooking one’s own flesh to cure one’s parents of serious illness. When Tan depicts food or eating activities in her mother’s culture, she is trying to recreate her imaginary motherland. What should she do with the aspects that panic and puzzle her? She depicts the motherland, and the picture in her eyes brings about debates on the validity of her stories.

It has been a popular subject whether the stories told in Asian Americans’ novels are fact or fiction. The editors of *The Big Aiiieeee!* deem Tan’s works as the fake (xv). They believe that “[t]he China and Chinese America portrayed in these works are the products of white racist imagination, not fact, not Chinese culture, and not Chinese or Chinese American literature” (xii). Stephen H. Sumida sees “a central conflict or tension . . . between what it is to be ‘Asian’ and what it is to be ‘American,’ or what it is to be stereotyped as one or the other or both.” He argues that Tan “simply assume[s] an intercultural conflict and the opposing sides to be ‘real’” (281). In *Images of Asian American Women by Asian American Women Writers*, Esther Mikyung Ghymn also asks whether the daughters in Tan’s works are really telling their mothers’ stories. Although she thinks that the Chinese legends in Tan’s works are distorted, she reaches the conclusion that they are “imaginative works.” Ghymn explains that *The Joy Luck Club* is “a combination of fact and fables” and *The Kitchen God’s Wife* is “a morality tale” (8). On the other hand, some critics question if it is a must for Asian American writers to supply ethnic fact. As King-kok Cheung points out in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, “In the wake of poststructuralism and postmodernism, however, not only is identity perceived as unstable and multiple, but history itself becomes suspect—a human construct not to be equated with ‘truth’” (15). She further indicates that “to value Asian American work primarily as autobiography or ethnography has perhaps prevented these works from being taken seriously as literature” (19). So, are the daughters in Tan’s novels recording what their mothers tell them? Or are they giving their own interpretation?

The problems that face the daughters are complicated. First of all, even the mothers themselves are not reliable storytellers. After their long journey of suffering,

⁷ The term “food pornographers” refers to those who try to attract the mainstreamers’ attention by exaggerating the “otherness” in their ethnic ways. See Wong, *Reading* 55-65.

as Maxine Hong Kingston indicates, the Chinese mothers may have forgotten some legends or changed others “according to need and circumstances” (Smorada 33). As to the daughters, they are only on the threshold of understanding their mothers’ culture. They are not *the pure insiders*, who can claim or defend the Chinese culture. Nor are they *the pure outsiders*, who simply watch and comment. The daughters can never realize whether their mothers’ stories are true or not; they can only weave into those stories what they actually see and feel. Through those stories they are peeping at their mothers’ culture, showing their curiosity and perplexity, and making up an imaginary motherland. So far as the structure of *The Joy Luck Club* is concerned, the mothers’ stories and the daughters’ stories parallel. However, the mothers’ stories sound distant and unreal in comparison with the daughters’. The contrast also exists in *The Kitchen God's Wife*. When skipping from Pearl’s section to her mother’s section, the reader immediately enters a remote world. Tan thus describes her mother’s response to her novels, “When she read the stories, the ones set in China, she laughed. She didn’t see that they were anything like herself” (Emory Davis, qtd. in Ghymn 21). Apparently, the stories “set in China,” the mothers’ stories, are *created* by daughters. They are representations of *how* an American daughter sees her Chinese mother. They are interfaces where two cultures meet and interact. Tan makes this encounter on the dining table.

The table manifests relationships between people. Do they share the same food? Or are they against each other’s food? What happens when the Americans and the Chinese eat at the same table? In *The Sociology of Food: Eating, Diet, and Culture*, Stephen Mennell and his collaborators argue that “the table can demolish barriers between people” on condition that they “tasted each other’s food with approval” (80). Nevertheless, it is very difficult for the mothers in Tan’s novels, for they are loyal to Chinese food even if they marry Americans. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie has her first bite of American food in a party, where she first meets Jimmy Louie, her second husband. She admits that the American-born Chinese is attractive to her, but the food seems awful:

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

cheese. (385-86)

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Ying-ying's attitude to food also implies her feelings about Clifford, her American husband. Ying-ying thinks that Clifford is "anxious and eager to please" (*Joy* 250). Among other things, he praises the food she cooks. Tan does not say whether Ying-ying cooks Chinese or American food for Clifford, but she writes that Clifford has "five slices of bacon and three eggs sunny side up every morning" (*Joy* 150), absolutely not the Chinese style. On the other hand, Ying-ying has her daughter Lena eat rice every day, as shown in "Rice Husband." When Ying-ying pays a short visit to Lena, Lena asks her husband Harold to buy steaks and rice for dinner. Then, both parties can eat what they like. Ying-ying's inability to taste American food "with approval" shows her inability to love Clifford, the man who saves her from "the dark side" but who is "neither attractive nor unattractive" (*Joy* 250). She is indifferent to Clifford:

How could I not love this man? But it was the love of a ghost. Arms that encircled but did not touch. A bowl full of rice but without my appetite to eat it. No hunger. No fullness. (251)

Ying-ying does not have appetite to "the bowl of rice" because it is no more the rice she used to eat in China. She finds herself saved, but in a different world. Mutual understanding between Ying-ying and Clifford is lacking, and she watches Lena "from another shore" (251). When Ying-ying teaches Lena not to leave rice unfinished, she is trying to pass on wisdom in her own culture to Lena. However, Lena fails to understand Ying-ying's intention.

Also in *The Joy Luck Club*, Lindo tries to ignore the fact that Waverly lives with Rich, a Caucasian. Waverly decides to talk about it the first time Rich has dinner with her family, but her effort is in vain. It is good for Rich to use the "slippery ivory chopsticks" (178), no matter it is to show off or to please, but he fails to appreciate Lindo's cooking appropriately. When Lindo complains that one of the dishes is not tasty, Rich not only agrees but also pours soy sauce on the platter. Neither does Rich know it is "the Chinese cook's custom" (178) to criticize his/her own food, nor does he understand why Waverly has no chance to talk to Lindo about their plan to get married:

"How long does it take to say, Mom, Dad, I'm going to get married?"

“You don’t understand. You don’t understand my mother.” (179)

What Waverly has in mind is—You don’t understand my mother’s *culture*! In Mennell’s words, “Sharing food is held to dignify ‘togetherness’, an equivalence among a group that defines and reaffirms insiders as socially similar” (115). Since Rich fails to appreciate Lindo’s food, he is not qualified to be an “insider.” Later at Suyung’s Chinese New Year Party, when Lindo criticizes that Rich does not know how to eat Chinese food, that is, crab, Waverly protests, “Crab isn’t Chinese”(203). No, crabs are not Chinese, but the way they are cooked and served in this episode *is* Chinese. What annoys Lindo is not Rich’s ignorance of crabs, but his ignorance of Chinese culture.

Children in Tan’s novels are troubled by the way foods are cooked and served. At a reception in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, three-year-old Cleo insists that her grandma Winnie cover the duck’s head on the table with a napkin. The scene can be traced back to what embarrassed Tan in her childhood—fish served with heads still on, for example. The American-born daughter or granddaughter tries to hide under the “napkin” whatever that is unacceptable to her. At the same time, however, she is haunted by the world under the “napkin.” In “The Moon Lady,” Tan makes young Ying-ying utter her fear:

I turned around and a sullen woman was now squatting in front of the bucket of fish. I watched as she took out a sharp, thin knife and began to slice open the fish bellies, pulling out the red slippery inside and throwing them over her shoulder into the lake. I saw her scrape off the fish scales, which flew in the air like shards of glass. And then there were two chickens that no longer gurgled after their heads were chopped off. And a big snapping turtle that stretched out its neck to bite a stick, and –whuck!—off fell its head. And dark masses of thin freshwater eels, swimming furiously in a pot

It was not until then, too late, that I saw my new clothes—and the spots of bloods, flecks of fish scales, bits of feather and mud I quickly dipped my hands in the bowl of turtle’s blood and smeared this on my sleeves, and on the front of my pants and jacket. And this is what I truly thought: that I could cover these spots by painting all my clothes crimson red, and that if I stood perfectly still no one would notice this change. (*Joy* 76)

According to Tan, “The Moon Lady” “has nothing to do with her [mother’s] life” (Emory Davis, qtd. in Ghymn 21). The bloody scene of killing then does not come from the mother’s personal experience, but from the daughter’s exaggeration about what she sees as a child. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Waverly thus describes her childhood experience in San Francisco’s Chinatown:

Farther down the street was Ping Yuen Fish Market. The front window displayed a tank crowded with doomed fish and turtles struggling to gain footing on the slimy green-tiled sides. A hand-written sign informed tourists, “Within this store, is all for food, not for pet.” Inside, the butchers with their blood-stained white smocks deftly gutted the fish while customers cried out their orders and shouted, “Give me your freshest,” to which the butchers always protested, “All are freshest.” (90)

Besides its sympathetic tone in depicting those “doomed fish and turtles,” the passage also questions the fine line between “pet” and “food.” Although Waverly considers all the creatures in the tank pets, the butchers and the customers treat them as food, seemingly thinking about their edibility only. The sign written to the tourists, however, is not so much informative as it is defensive. Like Hong Sing’s, the café where only Chinese menu is prepared, the Fish Market does not welcome tourists. The sign and the Chinese menu then are a posture used to maintain “group boundaries” (McIntosh 57), be it apologetic or indifferent.

Although Chinese Americans try to show their food philosophy to the Chinatown tourists, they do not think it is necessary when their American-born children are concerned. These children are as confused as those tourists. In another chapter of *The Joy Luck Club*, Jing-mei thus describes her experience in watching her pet turned into food:

When I was eight, I had played with a crab my mother had brought home for my birthday dinner. I had poked it, and jumped back every time its claws reached out. And I determined that the crab and I had come to a great understanding when it finally heaved itself up and walked clear across the counter. But before I could even decide what to name my new pet, my mother had dropped it into a pot of cold water and placed it on the tall stove. I had watched with growing dread, as the water heated up and

the pot began to clatter with this crab trying to tap his way out of his own hot soup. (201)

Wong calls Jing-mei's birthday dinner an image of "quasi-cannibalism" (*Reading* 31) and "unsentimental killing for food" (*Reading* 34). However, the motif of "like devouring like" (*Reading* 31) is alien to the Chinese people because very few of them identify with the "foods" they eat. In fact, whether cooking crabs alive is appropriate can be a matter of opinion. Tan's narrative sounds merciless because, ironically, she feels sympathy for those fishes, turtles, chickens, and crabs. If her writing looks "erotic," it is that she exaggerates what she sees and hears. Her exaggeration, however, comes from her difficulties in comprehending her mother's food philosophy. Because the mothers in her novels are hardship survivors, they eat everything edible and utilize anything inedible as well. Tan ridicules this when she depicts the New Year crab dinner party. Although one of the crabs is already dead and will not taste good, Suyuan still cooks it, hoping that one of the guests will pick it so that nothing will go to waste. Furthermore, what is left uneaten is also useful. "The table was littered with crab carcasses. Waverly and Rich lit cigarettes and put a crab shell between them for an ashtray. Shoshana had wandered over to the piano and was banging notes out with a crab claw in each hand" (*Joy* 206). The dinner party turns out to be a farce!

Whether there is genuine mother/daughter reconciliation in Tan's novels is a controversial issue. In her discussion about mother/daughter relationship in *Joy Luck Club*, Ghymn argues that it "starts with imbalance and finally ends with a definite balance" (19). Judging from the degree to which the daughters accept food of their mothers' culture, however, one can conclude that "a definite balance" is still lacking. Cooking Chinese food is not American-born daughters' enthusiasm. When Winnie tries to teach Pearl how to cook, Pearl replies, "It's boring. Too much trouble. I'd rather eat McDonald hamburgers instead" (*Kitchen* 137). American-born daughters will not cook Chinese food unless it is specifically for their mothers. Lena cooks rice during her mother's temporary stay. Jing-mei cooks spicy bean-curd dish for her father because he doesn't eat well after her mother dies. Far from being a survival skill or a strategy to show off, cooking Chinese food is merely an occasional act on the part of the daughters.

At the end of *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Helen proposes a trip to China, her motherland, where Winnie will show Pearl magic spring she used to drink, "heavy as gold, sweet as rare flower seeds" (*Kitchen* 526). Winnie believes that the magic spring can cure Pearl of her multiple sclerosis. She also believes that it is "imbalance" in her

own nature that makes her daughter sick. Since the imbalance starts from China, a visit to it can remove worries, sorrows, or doubts from both the mother and the daughter. Based on such a concept, the motherland is designated as a place with healing power. A trip to China is also arranged as an inevitable solution in *The Joy Luck Club*. In spite of the mothers' zest, however, the daughters are still dubious about the Promised Land. When Auntie Lindo decides to join Waverly and Rich in their trip to China, Rich suggests that Lindo "translate all the menus" for them so that they can avoid "eating snakes or dogs by mistake" (184). Although Rich is merely making a joke, it connotes his distrust of the menus that might challenge them in China. Waverly is also threatened with eating problems. Even if Waverly can ignore Rich's joke, the idea to have Lindo with them for three weeks sounds distressing: "Three weeks' worth of her complaining about dirty chopsticks and cold soup, three meals a day—well, it would be a disaster" (184). Waverly's worry about eating in the motherland symbolizes her uncertainty of a satisfactory mother/daughter relationship.

It is beyond Tan's reach to depict activities of eating in China. In *The Joy Luck Club*, while Waverly's trip to China is still at the preliminary stage, Jing-mei arrives at the motherland for the purpose of making her late mother's dream come true. Jing-mei's experience in China can free Waverly and Rich from their anxiety about eating. In the hotel refrigerator Jing-mei finds foods and drinks that are familiar to her, such as Heineken beer, Seven-Up, M&M's, and Cadbury chocolate bars. Jing-mei looks forward to a "real Chinese feast" with her Chinese relatives: "a big banquet with one of those soups steaming out of a carved winter melon, chicken wrapped in clay, Peking duck" (*Joy* 278). Quite contrary to her expectation, however, the dinner turns out to be room service with "hamburgers, french fries, and apple pie à la mode" (278) to meet her Chinese relatives' hopes. Using the relatives as a legitimate reason, Tan makes Jing-mei evade the "real Chinese food." As the successor to *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Kitchen God's Wife* does not make great strides so far as the daughter's action is concerned. In comparison with Jing-mei, Pearl in *The Kitchen God's Wife* shrinks much more from encounters with the authentic motherland. The novel ends with a utopian description of rare flower seeds in China, of which only a swallow can "change everything" (*Kitchen* 526). Unlike Waverly, Pearl is not allowed even a concrete picture of what she is going to have in the motherland. The flower seeds exist only in her mother Winnie's dreams and remembrances. In short, no matter she has a good reason or not, eventually none of the daughters in the novels is exposed to the "real Chinese food." While both mothers and daughters rely on the trip to China very much, the motherland does not promise so much as they expect. The food in the

hotel refrigerator indicates that, to make up the deficiency in their imagination about Chinese food, the American-born daughters must resort to American fast food. On the other hand, the food also suggests dying out of the motherland that merely exists in the mothers' stories. Since the daughters are not able to eat real Chinese food, real reconciliation between mothers and daughters is unlikely to happen.

The absence of real reconciliation, however, does not mean lack of consideration or understanding. As Bonnie Braendlin points out, "the mother/daughter opposition becomes more complicated, with mothers and daughters still antagonistic, but also more accepting of the similarities between generations" (114). When her mother Ying-ying visits her, Lena respects her mother's eating habit and cooks rice especially for her. In order to tell Lindo her upcoming marriage with Rich, Waverly takes Lindo to lunch at a Chinese restaurant. According to Waverly, the restaurant is her favorite Chinese restaurant, but there is not any sign of her preference for it. Tan does not make Waverly list foods here as she makes many other characters do in other parts of her novels. Apparently Waverly chooses the restaurant to please her mother. She expects her mother to accept Rich while eating Chinese food. It is a strategy, but a strategy based on the daughter's understanding of the mother.

In Lindo's opinion, her children must be possessed of "the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character" (*Joy* 254). Lindo laments for her wishful thinking, without knowing that her daughter, together with other daughters in Tan's fictitious world, has been conditioned by an Asian orientation which lays stress on "respecting and serving one's parents, not resisting them" (Souris 116). From the mother's angle, the daughter is rebellious; however, the daughter does take her mother into consideration at the crucial moment in her life. The mother's influence on the daughter cannot be overemphasized. Having offended her mother by eloping with her first husband, Waverly is in desperate need for Lindo's consent to her second marriage. Lena conceals her marital problems from Ying-ying for fear that she may worry too much; the similar reason stops Pearl from telling Winnie her own illness. In addition, Jing-mei shops with her mother in Chinatown for lively crabs, although she herself is against her mother's cooking crabs alive. The American-born daughters do have the "Chinese character," but to what degree they are in possession of it is still dubious.

What is the possible solution to the mother/daughter relationship? Tan proposes a compromise to settle the differences between mothers and daughters. This can also be manifested in culinary images. How the food items are prepared, how they are cooked or seasoned, is a matter of culture. In Barthes' words, "[t]here is perhaps no unprepared food item that signifies anything in itself" (169). Since the mother and the

daughter are born and raised in different cultures, it is a tough job for the two parties to eat at the same table—no matter it is the daughter's table or the mother's. Actually, the mother is not supposed "to impose on her daughter her own taste" (Smorada 34), and neither is the daughter supposed to criticize her mother's taste. One restaurant image that appears in Lindo's monologue shows a way that is negotiable to the mother and the daughter. "The Cathay House had a sign that said 'Chinese Food,' so only Americans went there before it was torn down. Now it is a McDonald's restaurant with a big Chinese sign that says *mai dong lou*—'wheat,' 'east,' 'building.' All nonsense" (Joy 259). So far as Lindo is concerned, both the previous and the present sign of the restaurant produce absurd juxtaposition of Chinese and American elements. She feels scorn for such juxtaposition, not knowing that the sign aptly illustrates "the combination of American circumstances and Chinese character." Once combined, the two elements cannot be as distinct from each other as before. Consequently, it is as unlikely to stay Chinese as to be absolutely American on the part of the daughter. The mother has to accept the daughter's American style, and the daughter has to appreciate the mother's Chinese background. As translators, Tan's mothers and daughters can translate menus for each other and try their hand at something new. They are not beyond redemption.

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譚恩美《喜福會》與《灶君娘娘》中之食物意象

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摘 要

在《喜福會》與《灶君娘娘》中，譚恩美不時列出食物清單、描述大宴小酌。文本中有充分證據顯示，譚恩美並不以展示食物為唯一意圖。食物意象有三重目的。第一，食物意象有助於書中角色之塑造。第二，與食物有關之活動，例如吃喝及烹飪，象徵男/女或母/女間之權力關係。第三，譚恩美描述中式烹飪的手法，足以反映華裔美籍女兒對母國文化的看法，及其曖昧不明的文化認同。

關鍵詞：譚恩美、食物、烹飪、權力關係、文化、華美文學

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