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Moving Forward to Reach the Past: The Dialogics of Time in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

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[(essay date fall 2001) *In the following essay, Singer observes the interaction and narrative interdependence of the present and the past in The Joy Luck Club, suggesting that the novel presents "a convergence of different moments in and methods of representing time."*]

History and myth coexist in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, but they do not coexist easily. The novel forges connections between two generations of women, traces four family genealogies that span the twentieth century, and stresses the importance of ethnic heritage, suggesting a heavy investment in history and historical representation. Yet the family histories depicted in the novel are profoundly mythical--the tales of the mothers' youth are timeless fables filled with supernatural wonders, presenting a China that seems drawn as much from occidental cliché as from authentic Chinese history. Even events as clearly historical as the Communist revolution become transmuted into heavily allegorical parables such as An-mei Hsu's tale of angry peasants rising up against tyrannical magpies (Tan 272-73).¹

This fusion of historicity and mythic fabrication is all the more unusual because Tan assigns radically separate cultural and temporal valences to each: the techniques of myth are unilaterally reserved to represent China and the past, while America is narrated with a historical specificity which, for Tan, connotes modernity and the present. Indeed, the split is so extreme that Tan creates two entirely different scripts of cultural identity, a realistically-outlined "American" identity for the daughters and an Orientalized "Chinese" one for their mothers. With such a drastic cultural and temporal divide bifurcating its stories, Tan's work might easily be classified as a mere collection of independent short stories, or at best a novel pulled in two different directions by its dissonant components. Indeed, much of the academic criticism of *The Joy Luck Club* presumes that the novel is split into a dialogic divergence of different characters, voices, and cultural settings; some studies go so far as to attribute all of the novel's apparent discontinuities to its dialogic structure.

Yet such readings do not consider the variety and the power of the interconnective tactics Tan deploys to integrate her sixteen short stories into a single overarching narrative. Amy Tan fashions a unifying narrative structure for *The Joy Luck Club* by aligning its sixteen stories into a coherent and deliberate temporal order. This order emerges from advancements and juxtapositions in the timing of each of the stories; the larger, supranarrative plot only becomes apparent when the stories are connected and contrasted with each other, exposing a systematic progression through time. Furthermore, this narrative structure not only connects the past to the present, it also balances the modes of historicity and myth that Tan uses to represent those periods. Thus, the true dialogue in *The Joy Luck Club*, is not a cacophony of voices but a convergence of different moments in and methods of representing time.

However, few critics have explored Tan's use of time in *The Joy Luck Club*, despite its centrality to the novel's articulation and negotiation of conflicting modes of gender, generational, and cultural subjectivity. Tan models and previews her manipulation of narrative time in the novel's eponymous opening tale, which suggests that Jing-mei Woo and the other daughters can only attain understanding and rapprochement with their mothers through techniques of temporal juxtaposition and investigations into the familial past. This interaction of past and present replaces any literal dialogue between mothers and daughters, which is actively prevented by the stories' temporal framing. Instead, the stories interact through their superstructural arrangement into a narrative that stresses the importance of returning to the past in order to progress into the future; because Tan almost uniformly associates China with the past and America with the present, she also implies that this polychronic progression can resolve the temporalized contradictions of Chinese American female identity. Tan thus capitalizes on *The Joy Luck Club*'s formal capabilities as a collection of interdependent stories to reconcile the potentially contradictory temporalities, ideologies, and subjectivities that drive her novel.

Temporality, Dialogicity, and the Critics

Many studies of *The Joy Luck Club* preempt any examination of these contradictions, however, by explaining them as mere consequences or indicators of the work's dialogic structure. While the novel's interconnected, multivocal narratives obviously lend

themselves to a Bakhtinian theoretical analysis, Tan's complex narrative structure cannot be reduced to a simple scheme of dialogism. Bonnie Braendlin, for example, writes that "Tan's novel depicts the socialization of young women as a dialogical process" between mothers and daughters (Braendlin 114), but does not examine how these dialogic interactions occur. Gloria Shen similarly presumes the characters conduct a literal dialogue through their stories (Shen 240-41), a common conclusion but one that the stories' isolating narrative frames do not support. **The Joy Luck Club** instead displays a far less literal mode of dialogicity, one that moderates between competing historical periods, narrative chronologies, and methods for manipulating the passage of time.

The critical discourse has only fleetingly acknowledged this temporal dialogicity. Braendlin touches on the contradictions between the changes in the characters brought about by their maturation and the similarities that defy these changes (114)--in other words, between the temporally progressive and counter-progressive or atemporal forces at work in **The Joy Luck Club**. Yet Braendlin turns away from this largely unexplored topic, instead classifying the novel and all of its paradoxes within the easily-applied label of dialogics. A perfectly viable interpretive framework of Bakhtinian theory is thus used to close down an area of inquiry which practically demands further exploration by virtue of its centrality to Tan's work.

Stephen Souris conducts a formalistic, narratological analysis of **The Joy Luck Club**, and discovers some of the limits of a narrowly dialogic reading of Tan's novel. Like numerous other **Joy Luck** [**The Joy Luck Club**] scholars, Souris views the novel as a heteroglossic collection of voices in dialogue with one another. However, he also detects a potential contradiction between the novel's division into multiple, multivocal narratives and its attempted closure into one univocal ending (114). Souris recognizes that his Bakhtinian, Iserian reading "privileges the flaunting of diverse perspectives that, while dialogized, are never resolved into harmonious agreement or simple synthesis" (115), a reading strategy that stands in stark contrast with the novel's larger narrative structure and particularly with its conclusion. Upon discovering this contradiction, however, Souris shifts his terms of analysis, arguing that Bakhtinian dialogicity dictates the impossibility of a formal closure in **The Joy Luck Club** but that other factors of gender and cultural identity bring it to a thematic resolution. He quite accurately concludes that **The Joy Luck Club** "suggests resolution and reconciliation, but the actual collection of voices cannot with complete accuracy be reduced to a thematic reading" (119), identifying a powerful narrative tension between the work's multivocality and its attempts to assemble those voices into a single novelistic plot. Nevertheless, he focuses almost solely on the literal dialogicity between characters' voices, at the expense of examining the novel's manipulation of chronology and sequence, which overwrites the dialogue between characters with a less visible but no less present dialogicity of time.

Instead Souris, like many other **Joy Luck** critics, suggests the novel's formal dilemmas are resolved by the common subjectivities it inscribes upon its characters. Critics such as Amy Ling, Elaine Kim, and Bonnie TuSmith have all located the novel's structural unity in the similarities it draws between characters through their gender, their culture, and especially their generation; Ling, for example, contends that the mothers "seem interchangeable in that the role of mother supersedes all other roles" (138) and that the novel presents a generalized struggle between mothers and daughters.² Other critics begin with a more explicitly narratological focus but arrive at the same basic point. Walter Shear initially suggests that Tan's multiple-narrative form allows her to negotiate the contradictions of representing different generations and different perspectives on Chinese American culture within one text (Shear 193-94). However, when confronted with the novel's ending, Shear too abandons his formal focus and suggests that Tan does the same, arguing that "Tan seems to place more emphasis on the Chinese identity as the healing factor" that reunites the family unit and the fictional narrative (Shear 199). Similarly, Marina Heung argues that Tan's narrative form resolves her novel's temporal contradictions by making the reader an "active constructor of meaning" (Heung 613) who connects the sixteen stories both synchronically and diachronically. Yet even Heung ultimately subordinates this polychronic narrative structure to the matrilineal narrative it creates, suggesting once again that **The Joy Luck Club's** formal continuity stems from its construction of a unifying mother/daughter plot and not from its form *per se*. Thus, each author maintains that the dialogic diversities of the characters are subsumed by their deeper narrative roles and shared subjectivities as mothers and daughters, Chinese Americans, and women.

Curiously, Malini Johar Schueller makes the same argument in reverse: she maintains that "Tan's decision to have several different mothers and daughters telling their different stories reflects her awareness of ethnicity as a constantly shifting social construct" (80)--in other words, Schueller says, Tan uses her novel's dialogicity to undermine and avoid any unifying, essentialist generalizations about identity. But whether the critics argue that Tan's schemes of collective identity counteract her methods of dialogic divergence or vice versa, they always posit the same split, suggesting that the novel's unifying theme of identity stands in opposition to its diversifying form of dialogicity. Inevitably, any problems in one area (narrative closure for Souris, essentialized identity for Schueller) are solved by Tan's tactics in the other: theme unites form, form alters theme. I will suggest instead that Tan's form and content are complementary rather than counterpoised--that any contradictions or tensions within one area are reflected in the other. Exploring **The Joy Luck Club's** formal and temporal tensions, rather than seeking to close them down, can reveal serious thematic and ideological discontinuities in Tan's work, and can expose the strategies with which she attempts to balance them.

Sau-ling Cynthia Wong has initiated one such reading of **The Joy Luck Club**, detecting in the novel a deliberate tension among conflicting models of ethnic identity. She acutely criticizes Tan for fabricating a "quasi-ethnographic, Orientalist," heavily mythologized version of Chinese culture (Wong 181)--but rather than claim this portrait is mitigated by any literal dialogue between the stories, Wong notes the novel also presents "counter-Orientalist interpretive possibilities" (Wong 191). Wong perceives a dialogic relationship not among the characters' voices, but between the novel's multiple models of Chinese subjectivity. Although she castigates Tan for privileging the false, exoticized, Oriental identity, her argument credits the novel with sufficient complexity that it no longer requires a literal dialogue to support a multiplicity of meanings; another kind of dialogism, Wong would argue, already exists within Tan's varied ideological statements. However, Wong only briefly considers time and other narrative techniques in her discussion of Tan's delicate ideological balancing act, focusing primarily on an analysis of the reasons for Tan's enormous popular success. Wong points the way to a deeper understanding of the structure of **The Joy Luck Club**, but the need for a full analysis of Tan's use of time and narrative form still remains. Such a formal analysis is especially important because, as critics from Souris to Wong all demonstrate, Tan's use of time and history affect not only the novel's form, but also its figuration of Chinese and Chinese American cultural identity.

Strangely, one aspect of Bakhtinian theory that critics have not applied to **The Joy Luck Club** is the concept of the chronotope, "the

intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin 84)--in other words, a narrative's articulation of patterns of time and space. Given that Tan constructs divisions in both space and time--divisions between China and America, the past and the present--the chronotope seems particularly relevant to her work. As Bakhtin suggests in his "Concluding Remarks" to "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," dialogic interactions need not occur solely between literal voices:

Chronotopes are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships. ... The general characteristic of these interactions is that they are *dialogical* (in the broadest use of the word).(252)

Structures of time can also interact dialogically within a novel, as they do in ***The Joy Luck Club***. These dialogics of time forge many of the narrative interconnections between Tan's component stories; they also rationalize and harmonize the novel's mutual narrative drives towards divergence and amalgamation, drives that under more literally dialogical readings terminate only in paradox. These dialogics of time even reinforce the novel's ideological claims: Tan complements ***The Joy Luck Club***'s mythical, static portrayal of Chinese American women's subjectivity with its framework of historical progress and change by arranging these conflicting narrative structures into a dual temporal order. In this temporal order, progression into the future is dependent upon the characters' return to and acceptance of their mythologized Chinese past.

One final explanatory note must precede the examination of Tan's temporal structure. Throughout this article I frequently refer to ***The Joy Luck Club*** as a novel, in spite of Tan's own well-documented reluctance to use that term (Huntley 43, Souris 99). Tan's ambivalence notwithstanding, ***The Joy Luck Club*** contains one crucial novelistic element: an overarching plot which progresses through a carefully-modulated chronological arrangement of events. However, unlike more conventionally telic multiple monologue narratives--such as Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, in which the monologues convey different perspectives on the same central plot--***The Joy Luck Club*** advances this chronological master-plot through multiple independent stories and sets of stories, few of them ostensibly concerned with the same actions. Tan is not simply depicting one plot through a variety of perspectives, but building a larger master narrative through the arrangement and juxtaposition of smaller, independent short-story narratives. Time and sequence become key syntactical elements in building this master-plot--the grammar by which Tan turns the divergent stories into a unified narrative.

The term "master narrative" can hardly be used lightly in contemporary literary criticism, not only because it conjures images of racial and sexual tyranny in an era of constant theoretical self-examination, but because of the phrase's verbal similarity to Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the *grand récit*, the "grand narrative" through which cultures legitimate knowledge and meaning. In reference to ***The Joy Luck Club***, however, neither connotation of "master narrative" is entirely inappropriate. Tan's novel builds a grand narrative of its own, a superstructural story in which the daughters' maturation in the present day leads to a confrontation with and acknowledgment of the distant, mythologized Chinese past that is represented by and transmitted through their mothers. This narrative may be somewhat more limited in philosophical scope than Lyotard's critique of Enlightenment and postmodern knowledge, but it is a *grand récit*, a metanarrative of knowledge acquisition and legitimation, nonetheless.

The more ideologically disturbing connotations of "master narrative" are also quite apt--not because Tan's metanarrative is explicitly invested in the values of slavery, but because for critics such as Ben Xu and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, ***The Joy Luck Club*** promotes a shallowly essentialized scheme of ethnic-identity in which Chinese American women must find validation from a heavily Orientalized version of their Chinese heritage. For these critics, Tan's novel subjugates both individual subjectivity and historical specificity to the mythologizing ideology of its master narrative. An analysis of ***The Joy Luck Club***'s temporal technique can bolster these claims, for the content and structure of the novel's master-plot are key elements in Tan's appeal to the authority of a mythologized past. Furthermore, because this master-plot is formed through the sequencing and interconnection of seemingly independent pieces--formed, in other words, by the reader's assembly of sixteen stories into a novel, just as Heung has argued--Tan has arranged for her audience to participate in the creation of this ideological narrative, although she nevertheless determines its content.

Critical readers therefore have ample reason to examine ***The Joy Luck Club***'s supranarrative structure. The same techniques that conjoin the short stories also manage the formal tensions that have most vexed some critics, and reinforce the ideological claims that have most angered others. Furthermore, because Tan builds this master narrative largely by manipulating the timing of the various stories and their narrative frames, any discussion of ***The Joy Luck Club***'s overarching narrative design must first look to time--both as the technical means of assembling the master-plot and as the thematic cornerstone that gives it meaning.

Formal and Thematic Preludes in "The Joy Luck Club"

Tan begins her novel with "The Joy Luck Club," the eponymous short story which doubles as an introduction to the thematic concerns and temporal techniques of the entire work. This metanarrative role distinguishes it from the other three stories in "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away," the novel's first section. While those stories are childhood tales of An-Mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair, the three surviving mothers, "The Joy Luck Club" does not adhere to this pattern. Tan instead opens the novel with Jing-mei Woo's attempt to replace her late mother, Suyuan, at the Joy Luck Club's mah jong table. Even the flashbacks in "The Joy Luck Club" depict Suyuan Woo's adult life in Kweilin, not her childhood. The story thus defies the common focus in "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away" on mothers-as-daughters, before that focus is even established. Yet "The Joy Luck Club" also serves as a typological model for the entire collection, providing reflections (or rather, precursors) of the subjects and narrative techniques of subsequent episodes--including a demonstration of how a dialogicity of time will supplant a literal dialogue among characters as the chief means of conjoining Tan's individual episodes into a single narrative.

Because it metanarratively anchors the collection, "The Joy Luck Club" is a tale of storytelling. In fact, it is almost an anthology unto

itself, encapsulating or alluding to numerous stories in less than thirty pages: the founding of the San Francisco Joy Luck Club, Suyuan's journey to Kweilin, the founding of the Kweilin Joy Luck Club, Suyuan's flight from Kweilin and abandonment of her daughters--a separate story from the previous one, demarcated by Jing-mei's narratorial intercession (12-13)--the Hsus' unfortunate trip to China, Suyuan's rivalry with Lindo Jong, Jing-mei's attendant rivalry with Waverly Jong, the final revelation that Jing-mei must meet her half-sisters, and of course, the frame-story of Jing-mei taking Suyuan's place in the Joy Luck Club, the occasion for all these other revelations and reveries.

This is an incomplete and reductive listing of tales, however; "**The Joy Luck Club**" also contains a host of other, less fully narrative memories that a more expansive definition might term "stories." The tale begins with one such mnemonic proto-narrative, as Jing-mei recalls her mother's preparations for the latest meeting of the Joy Luck Club. The memory becomes an epigraph for the novel when Jing-mei expresses her confusion over Suyuan's Chinese terms, saying "I can never remember things I didn't understand in the first place" (6). The anecdote establishes a dilemma common to all four **Joy Luck** daughters, who believe they can never understand their mothers and who do not appreciate their heritage. Even if Jing-mei's initial memory is not a proper "story," it still becomes an anticipation, an emblematic reduction of the thematic core of **The Joy Luck Club** as a whole.

"**The Joy Luck Club**" therefore serves as a prelude on both narrative and metanarrative levels, in its annunciation of the novel's central theme and in its emphasis on stories and storytelling. Because the novel is organized around a common script of using and telling stories to gain self-identity, then in some sense every story in **The Joy Luck Club** is a meta-narrative--which is entirely consonant with its multilayered narrative structure, in which nearly every story frames or contains another story. Nevertheless, "**The Joy Luck Club**" offers the earliest and most explicit reflections on the power and value of narrative. Narrative functions as a social glue between the women, as they trade gossip and generate stories around the mah jong table. Jing-mei, however, detects a more sinister and competitive cast in the gossip, especially when the gossip is about her: "what little we say to one another often comes back in another guise. It's the same old game, everybody talking in circles" (28). Jing-mei also sees a more personal purpose in the stories the aunts tell about themselves and their families:

They go back to eating their soft boiled peanuts, saying stories among themselves. They are young girls again, dreaming of good times in the past and good times yet to come. A brother from Ningbo who makes his sister cry with joy when he returns nine thousand dollars plus interest. A youngest son whose stereo and TV repair business is so good he sends leftovers to China. A daughter whose babies are able to swim like fish in a fancy pool in Woodside. Such good stories. The best. They are the lucky ones.(32)

"**The Joy Luck Club**" ends with these hypothetical stories, each one a dream of wish fulfillment that reverses some predicament in the mothers' families: the greedy and larcenous kinsmen of An-mei Hsu become honest relatives and good sons, while the loveless, childless marriage of Ying-ying St. Clair's daughter Lena turns happy and fertile. Jing-mei perceives that the older women circulate these tales around the mah jong table to comfort themselves, indicating storytelling's power to reshape reality. By exploiting this power, however, these mothers may be further alienating themselves from their times and their families.

The mothers see a different purpose to stories and storytelling. At the end of "**The Joy Luck Club**," they charge Jing-mei with a mission to tell her long-lost sisters stories of their late mother, hoping Jing-mei can reconstitute the absent Suyuan through narrative. Astonished when Jing-mei says she doesn't know her mother well enough to perform this reconstitution--and hence afraid that their own daughters similarly do not understand them--the aunts nearly drown Jing-mei under a tide of stories they need to see transmitted:

"Tell them stories of your family here. How she became success," offers Auntie Lin. "Tell them stories she told you, lessons she taught, what you know about her mind that has become your mind," says Auntie Ying. "Your mother very smart lady." I hear more choruses of "Tell them, tell them," as each auntie frantically tries to think of what should be passed on.(31)

The narrative superabundance in "**The Joy Luck Club**" becomes far more than a social agent or a cushion of comforting lies; it is the only way Jing-mei can preserve Suyuan's memory. Tan invests narrative with tremendous representational power, presenting it as a means of recovering the past and fostering communication between mothers and daughters. The fifteen tales that follow "**The Joy Luck Club**," and their arrangement into a collection, are the only way mothers and daughters can understand one another.

This narrative mission might appear to support the critical truism that **The Joy Luck Club** builds a conversation between its characters--yet none of the novel's sixteen tales are ever spoken or delivered to any other character. Without such a dialogue to connect her tales, Tan turns to other, more strictly formal methods to assemble the sixteen short stories into a single novelistic plot. Ironically, however, the strategies Tan deploys to interconnect her narratives sometimes reinforce the disconnection between her characters--particularly when Tan displaces the mothers' Chinese heritage into a distant, mythologized past that is forever denied to the modernized American daughters.

Tan's temporal framing embodies and increases the formal tensions between past and present in **The Joy Luck Club**. The characters' desires for emotional connection in the present would seem to invite a synchronic dialogue among the stories, yet that drive for synchronism conflicts with the novelistic narrative scheme that separates the stories along a diachronic timeline and divides the stories of the past from those of the present. Tan's narrative framing only exacerbates this tension. While she does locate nearly all of the stories within a common frame in mid-1980s San Francisco, this setting never generates a dialogue between the characters or their stories. In fact, as Sau-ling Wong has argued, this framing deliberately dislocates the mothers' Chinese stories from modern-day America by constantly stressing the differences, not only between the two time periods, but between the ways time itself is experienced in those two periods. Tan represents the mothers' youth as occurring solely within a "Typological Time" (Wong 185) that

contrasts "the static, ritual-permeated, mythical Time of a China past ... [with] the unfolding, enlightened, rational, secular Time of contemporary America" (Wong 186). Even the mothers' voices, which frame their stories with narrative openings like "When I was a young girl in China, my grandmother told me my mother was a ghost" (33), assume the qualities of a folktale or oral narrative--the mothers are ambiguous about the stories' exact placement in chronological history but quite unambiguous about their geographical and temporal distance from the present day.

"**The Joy Luck Club**" begins this pattern of mystification with its first flashback to China. Significantly, this flashback is framed not once but twice, with Jing-mei Woo recounting Suyuan's recollection of her journey to Kweilin; the first glimpse of China is attained at a double remove, as if this past can only be seen through the lifting of many veils. Suyuan tells Jing-mei, "I dreamed about Kweilin before I ever saw it ... jagged peaks lining a river, with magic moss greening the banks" (7). When Suyuan sees the real Kweilin, her descriptions become even more awestruck:

And when I arrived, I realized how shabby my dreams were, how poor my thoughts. ... The peaks looked like giant fried fish heads ... And then the clouds would move just a little and the hills would suddenly become monstrous elephants marching slowly toward me! Can you see this? And at the root of the hill were secret caves. ... These were things so strange and beautiful you can't ever imagine them.(8)

Grisly images of wartime chaos soon follow this account, but do little to demystify Kweilin after Suyuan's spellbound introduction. Tan frames the China of her initial story, and therefore of the rest of the novel, as a land of childlike wonder and innocence. (The other stories of "**Feathers from a Thousand Li Away**," in which the mothers recall their childhood, reinforce this characterization.) The hills themselves are infused with animal energy and sentience, and caves which will soon be hiding desperate war refugees are simply "secret caves." Suyuan describes a China which lies beyond the imagination even of its own residents, let alone the foreign-born children of its emigrants. Her question to Jing-mei, "Can you see this?", proves an impossible challenge--by Suyuan's own declarations her daughter can never imagine this terrain.

But while this distancing of an unrecuperable China privileges the mothers as the only characters who can envision their homeland, it also effects a more subtle privileging of the modern, American viewpoint as the framing perspective for the entire novel. By shrouding China in memory, the novel presumes it is only remembered from the present; by rendering it mysterious and alien, the novel presumes a normative American viewpoint rather than a native Chinese one. This narrative strategy is reinforced by the order and arrangement of the tales. However much critics have observed that the two sections of mother stories surround the two sections of daughter stories--"embrace" is a particularly popular description (Ho 149, Huntley 45)--Tan ultimately denies the mothers the first or last word. Instead, Jing-mei narrates the first story in "**Feathers From a Thousand Li Away**" and receives the last position in every other section, becoming a choral or narratorial figure for the entire novel. Paradoxically, this device narratively recreates the same level of mediation between past and present that the aunts fear will render Jing-mei unable to reconstruct Suyuan's life story. Thus, although the novel's framing establishes a common temporal setting in which the stories are told, it also increases the dislocation between mothers and daughters, and between the historically specific present and the mythologically vague past. This tension between frame and story escalates throughout the novel, into its final section.

Tan must turn to other narrative techniques to resolve this dilemma. If her frames, and her figuration of a mythologized Chinese past, create a widening divide between the mystified past and the immediate present, then her use of temporal juxtaposition attempts to bridge that divide by creating a free interaction between time periods. Once again, while these techniques of juxtaposition are on display throughout the novel--particularly in the fourth and final section, "**Queen Mother of the Western Skies**," which groups together stories from four different time periods--they are also modeled and previewed in "**The Joy Luck Club**." The premiere story presents a string of rapidfire temporal alternations between Jing-mei's present-day initiation into the Joy Luck Club and the countless narratives of the past conjured by that initiation. Sometimes Tan demarcates these temporal interruptions with typographical curlicues (6, 7) or a simple blank space (12, 16), separating the memories from the frame-story and from each other and preserving the division between past and present. But in other instances, and with increasing rapidity as "**The Joy Luck Club**" progresses, Tan gently elides that division, negotiating between past and present within one story as easily as the rest of the novel does between its four sections.

Jing-mei Woo drifts almost unconsciously from present-day, present-tense narration into past-tense memory, as when she considers playing mah jong with her aunts:

Auntie Lin looks exasperated, as though I were just a simple child: "How can we play with just three people? Like a table with three legs, no balance. When Auntie Ying's husband died, she asked her brother to join. Your father asked you. So it's decided.""What's the difference between Jewish and Chinese mah jong?" I once asked my mother.(22)

This passage exemplifies so much that is central to **The Joy Luck Club**, both in its characters' preoccupations with intergenerational continuity and Chinese identity, and in its temporal technique. Thematically, the Joy Luck Club's empty mah jong seat emblemizes not only a missing maternal authority for Jing-mei, but also an unbridgeable generation gap within all of the families; so long as the daughters cannot understand their mothers, so long as the mothers cannot perpetuate their traditions through their daughters, the families will be as out of balance as the mah jong table.

Yet, in its free interplay of past and present, this same passage slyly suggests a possible resolution to this generation gap. Tan no longer separates memories and flashbacks with typographical devices; having trained her readers to expect temporal alternations, she now signals those alternations with little more than a change in tense. Thus, while Lindo and Jing-mei both worry about their inability to bridge past traditions and the present day, Tan's passage creates just such a temporal union. And Jing-mei's transition out of the mah jong reverie is even more immediate than her slide into it:

These kinds of explanations made me feel my mother and I spoke two different languages, which we did. I talked to her in

English, she answered back in Chinese. "So what's the difference between Chinese and Jewish mah jong?" I ask Auntie Lin. (23)

By the end of "**The Joy Luck Club**," these alternations become so frequent and so effortless that Jing-mei can project herself into Suyuan's past, erasing the division between mother and daughter. She says, "And now I feel as if I were in Kweilin amidst the bombing and I can see these babies lying on the side of the road, their red thumbs popped out of their mouths, screaming to be reclaimed" (29). Jing-mei's description of her mother's history in the present tense, from her own point of view, further erases the division between Chinese past and American present. Despite her fears of generational and cultural disconnection, then, Jing-mei reaches her first tentative understanding with Suyuan through the temporal alternations and elisions of Tan's narrative. In this way, "**The Joy Luck Club**" foreshadows how the rest of the novel will resolve its thematic dilemmas through the formal arrangement and manipulation of time, particularly through the characters' engagement with their own pasts.

Thus, while Tan's narrative (and ideological) framing of a mystified China creates temporal dissonance and structural tension within the novel, other narrative techniques serve to reunite past and present. However, the temporal juxtapositions Tan forges from story to story are often displaced into the nonnarrative gaps between stories and sections; those that are contained entirely within "**The Joy Luck Club**" become far more immediate and visible, highlighting Tan's technique of temporal alternation. The story thus serves as a blueprint to the novel, a recreation in miniature of its predominant thematic concerns and formal tactics. As both a component in the overall narrative structure and a reflection of that structure, "**The Joy Luck Club**" proves to be a carefully wrought *mise-en-abyme* representing the novel's formal tensions and their resolutions.

Framing Narrative Isolation: A Dialogic Breakdown

Although Tan places past and present into chronotopic interaction with one another, the stories themselves rarely interact as conversations. Tan's stories are radically isolated from one another, locked into a dialogicity of time that hinders any literal dialogue between mothers and daughters. To some extent this confirms J. Gerald Kennedy's contention in "From Anderson's *Winesburg* to Carver's *Cathedral*" that the genre of the short story sequence "embodies an insistent paradoxical semblance of community in its structural dynamic of connection and disconnection" (195). Characters in short story sequences, and in works like **The Joy Luck Club** which contain more unified and novelistic plots yet still incorporate separate short-story narratives, frequently remain unaware that they share a common narrative; the forging of connections between these frustratingly isolated characters "instead remains the reader's function" (Kennedy 196), though the author often directs the formation of such interconnections. While **The Joy Luck Club's** more novelistic aspects might preclude it from Kennedy's definition of the short story sequence, his insights on the form are readily applicable to Tan's work in one important respect.³ For most of the book, the characters do not become conscious of one another's private or past narratives, "and thus remain unaware of the ways in which their situations may be similar" (Kennedy 196). This isolation results both from Tan's diachronic temporal arrangement--in which stories generally depict different moments in time--and from Tan's unusual use of narrative frames.

Tan eschews any global extradiegetic frame in the arrangement and relation of her sixteen stories. "**The Joy Luck Club**" does function as a thematic frame which introduces the novel's central characters and its preoccupation with narrativity and time, but this tale exists on the same diegetic level as the other fifteen, as one story among many. There is no single space in which all of the tales are told, no dramatic circumstance in which the characters might hear one another's stories. Each story instead bears its own separate narrative frame; most if not all of the tales appear to be internal monologues, rehearsed but never spoken. Sadly, and in keeping with Kennedy's observations on the alienating effects of the short story sequence, few of Tan's characters are even speaking, let alone listening.

Joy Luck critics often assert that the various stories constitute a literal dialogue between characters. Gloria Shen suggests that "the mothers finally discover that storytelling is the best way to reach the hearts and minds of their daughters"; her primary example of a mother sharing her own past is Ying-ying St. Clair's story "**Waiting Between the Trees**" (Shen 240-41). But "**Waiting Between the Trees**" is a purely internal monologue, delivered while Lena St. Clair argues with her husband, Harold, in another room; Ying-ying only imagines the dialogue with her daughter, projecting it into the future: "I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter's tough skin" (Tan 286). E. D. Huntley comes closer when she writes, "Addressing their stories to their daughters, the mothers remain aware that their words are falling on indifferent ears" (Huntley 49); the mothers are indeed afraid their words will be unheeded, yet the daughters never hear them at all. Instead, each mother frames her story in isolation, filling the frames with comments *about* their daughters, but never speaking *to* them. Even the willful Lindo Jong, who addresses Waverly directly in her narrative frames, obviously does so either *in absentia* or silently; the story "**Double Face**" for example, is narrated while Lindo sits beside Waverly in a hair salon, yet it provokes no reaction or conversation. Lindo, like Ying-ying, projects her dialogue with her daughter into an imagined future, saying "I will ask my daughter what she thinks" (305). These dialogues never occur within the scope of **The Joy Luck Club**; Shen and other optimistic readers rarely consider the disturbing possibility that the mothers' narratives of understanding are silent and unshared.

If the mothers fail to voice their thoughts, then the daughters are even more radically self-isolating. As Huntley notes, the daughters never address their mothers; their stories are "shaped as internal monologues" (49) which "give voice to their emotional estrangement from their mothers" (50)--yet the stories also reinforce that estrangement through their own isolation. Thus, the desired flow of understanding in **The Joy Luck Club** is resolutely one-way, with the mothers wishing to speak to their daughters, but rarely doing so, and the daughters hiding their monologues from their mothers. The sole exception is Jing-mei Woo, who attempts to reconstruct her mother through narrative and who eventually listens to her father's story about Suyuan--the final parental tale in the novel, and the only one for which Tan depicts an audience. Significantly, by assigning this climactic parental tale to Canning Woo, Tan sustains the lack of communication between women even as she reverses the novel's consistent displacement of male characters and voices to the narrative periphery. While this reversal arrives at a formally appropriate moment--in "**A Pair of Tickets**," one of the stories that reverses the novel's pattern of temporal progression and its ahistorical portrayal of China--it also insures that the novel's individual stories never interact in a literal mother-daughter conversation.

Although no such literal dialogue occurs, there is nevertheless a dialogic design to Tan's stories. The unidirectional flow (or potential flow) of information from parent to daughter becomes a corrective to the "one-way assimilation-acculturation process into Anglo-American culture and society" (Ho 170) occurring in the younger generation. The four daughters, having thoroughly acculturated to mainstream (white) American society, are each faintly embarrassed by and dismissive of their Chinese mothers (Shen 239, Ho 165-171).⁴ By containing half of her stories within the exclusionary frames of daughters who do not wish to address their mothers, Tan builds this phenomenon of acculturation into the structure of her narrative; by depicting mothers who hope to fight the process by addressing their daughters directly, Tan also constructs her novel (if not the mothers' uncommunicative monologues) as a solution to that phenomenon.

This script of nativism yielding to assimilation suggests a temporal master narrative, a movement from China and the past to America and the present. Lisa Lowe has observed that this cultural shift is often narrativized as a generational struggle, foregrounding the temporal element even further since each generation represents a different age as well as nationality and cultural identity. ***The Joy Luck Club*** provides ample evidence of this generational narrativization, as noted by many of its critics. However, Lowe also warns that this master narrative often creates a reductive binary opposition between Asian nationalism and Western assimilation, and that critics such as Frank Chin have used this opposition to accuse female writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan herself of promoting "assimilationist" values (Lowe 75-6). Ironically, then, Tan's use of this generational master narrative perpetuates the nativism-vs.-assimilation dichotomy that enables China's "profoundly anti-feminist" (Kim 78) appeal to cultural nationalism to attempt to silence Asian American female writers. This confluence should deter Tan's readers from uncritically reducing ***The Joy Luck Club*** to a narrative of generational struggle, as should Lowe's and Melani McAlister's claims that the assimilation narrative overshadows other concerns such as gender and class issues. Both types of criticism demonstrate--Lowe and McAlister through analysis, Chin by example--how a generational master narrative can naturalize or efface numerous other components of Asian American female subjectivity.

Typically, however, Tan's polychronic plot structure resists as well as confirms the generational master narrative of assimilation. Tan narratively challenges the purported unidirectionality of assimilation by directing ***The Joy Luck Club***'s temporal progress back to the mothers, China, and the past; she thereby raises the possibility that modernization and progress need not sever all connections with native heritage. But because the mothers never voice their stories directly to their daughters, Tan's counterassimilationist narrative strategies function only on the extradiegetic, supranarrative level of the novel as a whole. The daughters are united with their matrilineal heritage not by conversation but by ***The Joy Luck Club***'s narrative form and its interconnective tactics--the recurring characters and themes, the interlocking networks of symbols, and especially the stories' chronological alignment into a supranarrative master-plot. This diachronic structure governs the novel's narrative interconnections so thoroughly, in fact, that it sometimes prevents any literal, synchronic conversations between the stories and characters. In the novel's fourth section, for example, the mothers vow to end the intergenerational isolation: Ying-ying swears she will "penetrate my daughter's tough skin and ... give her my spirit" (286), while Lindo decides to initiate a two-way dialogue and "ask my daughter what she thinks" (305). But these stories happen during or after the tales of the third section, in which the daughters have already begun to respond to the mothers and their stories of the past. The potential dialogue between story and character suggested by the fourth section is rendered irrelevant, if not impossible, by the novel's temporal structure. The literal dialogue proves unnecessary, however, since a dialogicity of time has already provided the novel's true narrative interactions.

Negotiating the Double Chronology

The techniques of timing and sequencing that impede synchronic dialogue between the stories also provide an alternate, diachronic scheme that orders and connects those stories. Tan fashions this supranarrative trajectory through juxtaposition and alternation, modulating the stories' temporal settings and uniting them into a single historical progression. Over the first three sections of ***The Joy Luck Club***, Amy Tan structures the stories into a colonialist narrative of progress from the mythologized Eastern past to the modernized Western present; however, she also inverts and complicates this scheme in the final section, making the pinnacle of her novel's historical and geographical advancement a return to China and to the past.

Tan's narrative progress from China to America first unfolds by section, with each of the first three groups of stories occurring in a consistent and advancing temporal setting. With the exception of "**The Joy Luck Club**," the stories of the first section, "**Feathers from a Thousand Li Away**," all focus on the mothers as children and daughters in pre-Revolutionary China. The next section, "**The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates**," leaps forward a generation to offer four stories of the daughters as young girls in postwar America. The third section, "**American Translation**," moves still further forward to depict the four daughters as adults, although this section too has its exception; the story "**Best Quality**" eschews the romantic and marital focus of the other three tales to continue examining Jing-mei Woo's relationship with her mother. Just as Suyuan's death distinguished "**The Joy Luck Club**" from the other stories in its section by forcing Jing-mei to substitute for her mother, Suyuan's absence once again deforms the structure of "**American Translation**." Jing-mei's attempts to replace, reconstitute, and comprehend her mother take precedence over any other continuities of theme or narration within the individual sections.

Despite this topical discontinuity, "**Best Quality**" retains the other "**American Translation**" stories' temporal setting of present-day San Francisco, and thus maintains the novel's steady chronological progression from the mothers' childhood in China to the daughters' adulthood in America. From this pattern, readers might easily infer--as Sau-ling Wong has--that ***The Joy Luck Club*** fashions and promotes a traditional colonialist master narrative of ostensible progress from the primitive Third World to the advanced West (Wong 199-200). While such a pattern does exist in ***The Joy Luck Club***, the novel's fourth and final section, "**Queen Mother of the Western Sky**," performs a dramatic alteration on this simplistic chronological and cultural scheme. Indeed, the fourth section's drastic deformation of the novel's apparent pattern of progress should suggest that ***The Joy Luck Club*** also follows another temporal scheme entirely.

The first story in the final section, An-mei Hsu's "**Magpies**," is a virtual continuation of her story "**Scar**" in "**Feathers from a**

Thousand Li Away," resuming the narrative of An-mei's childhood reunion with her mother in China. Ying-ying St. Clair sets the next story, **"Waiting Between the Trees,"** significantly after her earlier tale; **"Waiting"** [**"Waiting Between the Trees"**] begins with Ying's adolescent marriage and abortion in China, relates her second marriage to Clifford St. Clair and, in the final pages, glosses over her subsequent emigration to America (286). Lindo Jong's **"Double Face"** recounts Lindo's emigration to America as a young woman and culminates with the birth and naming of Waverly. However, this story also opens and closes with an extended framing sequence depicting Lindo and Waverly in the present day as they prepare to travel to China for Waverly's impending honeymoon. As **The Joy Luck Club**'s final section, then, **"Queen Mother of the Western Skies"** both ignores the novel's previous temporal and geographic progressions and recapitulates them. The first three stories replicate the novel's progress from the mothers' childhood in China to the daughters' adulthood in America.

The final story, however, runs against this pattern, defying the previous emigrations across time and space. **"A Pair of Tickets"** depicts a trip to China in which Jing-mei Woo meets her abandoned half-sisters and comes to terms with her mother and her Chinese heritage. The final story apparently reverses the course of the novel, returning the narrative to China and to a rapprochement with the past. Yet this story, too, contains its recapitulations; **"A Pair of Tickets"** also contains a flashback which spans from wartime China to contemporary America (324-29), replicating the novel's patterns of progression once again. Tan concludes **The Joy Luck Club** with a cascade of multiple-layered, self-reflexive recursions: the novel's temporal progression is re-enacted in its final section, and in its final story, and in the flashback which fills its final pages. Significantly, however, these recursions alter the temporal progression of **The Joy Luck Club** even as they reflect it, since they are not only recapitulations of the novel but also elements in it. As a result, **The Joy Luck Club** concludes in recursion--turning geographically back to China, temporally back to the past, and narratively back to repeat its own structure. In the fourth section, the novel is no longer simply a progress away from China and the past; instead, Tan reveals, it has in fact been a return to Jing-mei's Chinese heritage all along.

However, another chronology complicates this recursive temporal scheme: the timing of the stories' narrative frames. Each character narrates her stories from the same present-day setting in America, a strategy which serves to normalize and centralize the American point of view while distancing the mothers' Chinese background (Wong 185-86). Such a framing is consistent with the progression of the first three sections, which posit a modernized American present as the destination of the novel's temporal progress--and, implicitly, as the pinnacle of cultural progress. Yet this same framing contrasts greatly with the recursive turn of the fourth section. In fact, while the frames of the first three sections are roughly contemporaneous, Tan advances their timing in **"Queen Mother of the Western Skies"** even as the stories begin reaching backwards in time. Yet despite this structural contradiction, the mutual progression and recursion of the novel's fourth section narratively demonstrates the emotional strategies by which Tan's characters must negotiate the differences between generations and the passage of time.

The stories of the first three, "progressive" sections of **The Joy Luck Club**, in which the daughters demonstrate their estrangement from their familial heritage, are narrated from an immediate and generally unchanging American present that defers the past back into mythological timelessness. Ironically, though, that present is equally timeless due to its relentless immediacy. The constant use of the present tense creates the impression that the frames occur simultaneously, but it does so precisely by rendering everything in them hyper-immediate. Even those events which are only one week old, like Jing-mei's re-tuning of a piano or Lena's realization of her dimming love for Harold (155, 174), are uniformly consigned to the past tense, locking the frames in a narrowly-defined present. But this is a different kind of timelessness from that which marks the mothers' stories; that mystified vagueness consigns the Chinese stories to an undefined but distant *then*, while this narrative immediacy grounds the frames in an instantaneous and highly specified *now*.

The frames in **"Queen Mother of the Western Skies"** initially inhabit this same timeless but immediate present; the first two stories, An-mei Hsu's and Ying-ying St. Clair's, are framed contemporaneously with their daughters' marital troubles in the previous section. An-mei begins **"Magpies"** by lamenting her daughter's crumbling marriage and her fruitless trips to the psychiatrist, two situations which begin Rose's previous story, **"Without Wood."** Ying-ying's **"Waiting Between the Trees"** is even more definitively framed within the events of Lena's **"Rice Husband"**: Ying's opening line, "My daughter has put me in the tiniest of rooms in her new house" (274) verifies that she is in the midst of her visit to Lena and Harold's Woodside home during Lena's story. The two St. Clair tales also conclude simultaneously as Ying-ying topples Harold's poorly-made marble table (180, 287). Even within this contemporaneity, however, the frames do advance slightly--moving from a rough concurrence with the initial situation of Rose's story to a precisely-delineated synchronization with the end of Lena's.

Lindo Jong's frame in **"Double Face"** pushes the novel into new temporal territory by advancing beyond the events of the previous Jong story. In Waverly's story **"Four Directions,"** Lindo persuades Waverly and Rich to postpone their wedding so she can accompany them on a honeymoon trip to China; in **"Double Face,"** the women get their hair styled in anticipation of the imminent wedding and the subsequent travel. While the frame's advancement is small, perhaps only a few months, it is one of the first measurable differentiations registered in the frames. This advancement carries the characters closer to their projected goal of a return to China, a goal which is finally realized in the last story when Jing-mei Woo makes her own long-anticipated trip. Thus, while the chronology of the stories in **The Joy Luck Club** leaps forward from early twentieth-century China into Tan's present, the chronology of their frames also progresses minutely--from the vague and unchanging setting of the first three sections to the slightly later, more time-bound frames in the fourth.

These two progressions--frame and story--comprise a bizarre double chronology in the fourth book of **The Joy Luck Club**. The extradiegetic time of the frames advances into the future even as the stories and characters return to the past. However, the structural parallelism also rationalizes this apparent paradox. The narrative frames advance only when Waverly and Jing-mei take steps to travel to China and bond with their mothers, implying that forging connections to the past is in fact necessary for progression in the present and future; similarly, the advancement of the fourth section's stories from America back to China implies that progression in the present leads inevitably to a re-engagement with the past. The double chronology of frame and story in **"Queen Mother of the Western Skies"** structurally demonstrates Tan's claims about the interdependence and interactivity of past and present.

Tan has already presented a similar geographical irony at the end of **"Four Directions,"** when Waverly envisions her trip to China with her mother as "moving West to reach the East" (205). This phrase neatly sums up the novel's temporal resolution as well; because Waverly's trip East offers her a chance to reconnect with her mother and her heritage--indeed, because Tan has assigned temporal values of "past" and "present" to "East" and "West" throughout the novel--Waverly's paradox can easily be read in temporal terms. Just as the West leads to the East, so does the future lead to the past, and vice versa. Tan's dual narrative systems of progression and recursion unite the distant past and the immediate present into a dialogic interaction.

Narrative and Temporal Closure in "A Pair of Tickets"

This fusion of past and present, progression and recursion, is nowhere more evident than in the novel's final story, **"A Pair of Tickets,"** which completes and reiterates *The Joy Luck Club's* narrative superstructure. Just as **"The Joy Luck Club"** opens the novel with an explosion of stories, the complementary **"A Pair of Tickets"** closes it with a cascade of recursions that answer questions, fill in narrative gaps, and resolve the mysteries of Suyuan Woo's past. These recursions accumulate so rapidly that they sometimes recirculate back on themselves; Canning Woo, for example, has barely begun telling Jing-mei about Suyuan's life when he initiates a second "flashback" depicting the rescue and upbringing of Suyuan's first daughters (326). By depicting these previously unknown or unrepresented periods, **"A Pair of Tickets"** completes the chronology of *The Joy Luck Club*--Canning's tales chart the previously undisclosed time between the endings of the mothers' stories and the death of Suyuan, the event which prompts **"The Joy Luck Club"** and the novel's present-day action. Tan's final tale completes her narrative circuit; the stories advance to an ending which supplies the historical information necessary to connect the narratives of mythologized China with those of modern-day America.

But this interactivity between past and present, and between narrative progress and recursion, still creates a profound structural tension in Tan's work. As the final story, **"A Pair of Tickets"** most advances the narrative into the future; however, it is also the story most characterized by the return to the past. Marina Heung suggests that **"The Joy Luck Club"** demands a reading that is simultaneously diachronic and synchronic" (612), but the novel's scheme is still more complicated than that--even its diachronic readings extend both forward and backward in time. **"A Pair of Tickets"** is again perhaps the best demonstration of the supple interaction between the novel's temporal structures, because it directly emblemizes and addresses these tensions. The story attempts to balance the novel's progressive impulses with its nostalgic ones by bringing Tan's version of modern, American time to a China which she has previously mythologized.

The notion that America and China could have different types of time, that America could exist in the "present" while China could not, might seem ludicrous if the rest of Tan's novel did not create this very division. However, Tan begins to erode this temporal distancing in **"A Pair of Tickets"**. Wong has observed that Tan figures the 'modern' time of her American stories through "descriptions of high material specificity or informational density ... a high degree of topical and local precision" (Wong 186): modernity is represented through highly specific brand names, locations, television shows and other markers of American life. The Chinese stories, by contrast, are filled with undifferentiated details and unnamed objects, creating a sense of ahistorical vagueness and distance.

Yet the China Jing-mei discovers in **"A Pair of Tickets"** is described with the techniques Tan reserves for modern, commodified time. Jing-mei remarks that downtown Guangzhou "looks like a major American city, with high rises and construction going on everywhere," although Chinese signifiers linger in the bamboo scaffolding on those high-rises (317). Her father's relatives are enamored of a Polaroid camera and a hotel mini-bar "stocked with Heineken beer, Coke Classic, and Seven-Up, mini-bottles of Johnnie Walker Red, Bacardi rum, and Smirnoff vodka, and packets of M&M's, honey-roasted cashews, and Cadbury chocolate bars" (319). Whether this scene depicts the awe of a 'backwards' Chinese family for modern conveniences or, more likely, the awe of a poor family for the trappings and luxuries of capitalism, it still portrays China with the same historical specificity that Wong argues has been reserved for America. However, this historical specificity has only come to China through the goods and technologies of western capitalism; the process is jarring enough that Jing-mei remarks, "This is communist China?" (319).

Jing-mei's presumption that a barful of Western goods equates to a political transformation seems fatuous; just a few short months after the publication of *The Joy Luck Club*, the Chinese government would demonstrate its dedication to communism with the subjugation of student protesters at Tiananmen Square. The commodity capitalism of Jing-mei's mini-bar, it would seem, is not incompatible with the institutions of totalitarian government. But despite the absence of any real political transformation, **"A Pair of Tickets"** reveals a dramatic narrative and temporal transformation; its China is no longer the ahistorical, mythical setting of the mothers' tales. By introducing a Western, capitalist, commodified temporality, Tan transforms China into a site of dialogic interaction between different modes of culture and time, in which rising skyscrapers clash semiotically with their bamboo scaffoldings. This interaction, like the interactions wrought by the simultaneous progressions and recursions in **"Queen Mother of the Western Skies,"** brings Tan's conflicting temporalities of myth and modernity back into a careful equilibrium. China becomes a site of both historic specificity and ahistorical heritage, a fitting final destination for a book that trades on the powers of both history and myth. **"A Pair of Tickets"** thus serves as a crucial final step in Tan's creation of a dialogism and a continuity of past and present in *The Joy Luck Club*.

Conclusion

This dialogicity serves another, more ideologically laden purpose as well. By connecting the previously separated past and present, Tan does not simply provide a narrative and emotional resolution for her novel--she also brings its fabricated past, and its Orientalized portrait of Chinese identity, into continuity with the novel's more realistically delineated present. These two worlds have previously inhabited separate spheres, with characters in American settings mocking fortune-cookie aphorisms and other Chinese stereotypes even as the Chinese stories promote their own Orientalist clichés of exotic settings and self-sacrificing women. But by connecting these two worlds, Tan holds their radically different temporalities in suspension, justifying the mythologized past within the more demanding and realistic framework of the present; the Chinese myths cannot be unreal, because they are clearly continuous

with the "real world" of the present.

Furthermore, because "the reader's construction of interconnections ... dissolves individualized character and plot and instead collectivizes them into an aggregate meaning" (Heung 612), readers themselves play a role in reuniting Tan's ideological and structural disjunctions. Tan divides her conflicting mythic and historical structures, and her models of gender and ethnic identity, among sixteen stories and seven narrative voices. In separating these conflicts, Tan both defers them and invites readers to help balance them by assembling a narrative and ideological structure that can incorporate all of these oppositions. By participating in Tan's supranarrative composition, readers become active agents in bringing her often-conflicting ideologies into resolution.

Of course, some of Tan's compositional structures are themselves in conflict, such as her progressive and recursive temporal patterns. Yet in Tan's intricate narrative design, even these patterns are thoroughly interrelated. The temporal progression among the stories ultimately directs characters and readers back towards Tan's mythic Chinese past; the recursions in "**Queen Mother of the Western Skies**" connect that past to Tan's historically specific present. By fragmenting her narrative, Tan is able to intertwine these two structural patterns so thoroughly that, once assembled by the reader, the historical and mythological systems become complementary. This deft narratological manipulation can help expose Tan's own ideological assumptions, but it should also demonstrate that *The Joy Luck Club* possesses a narrative construction of remarkable subtlety and versatility. Scholars should continue to investigate this structure, to better understand how the novel's interdependence of form and ideology reconciles its often-conflicting claims about history, myth, and identity.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all references are to Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*, Ivy Books, 1989.
2. Not all critics define Tan's characters solely by their generational archetypes, however. In her book *Immigrant Acts* (1996), Lisa Lowe advances the compelling argument that "interpreting Asian American culture exclusively in terms of the master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation essentializes Asian American culture, obscuring the particularities ... of class, gender, and national diversities" (63). Lowe uses *The Joy Luck Club* as an example, demonstrating how a privileging of the intergenerational trope ignores or conceals other fissures among the characters' "different conceptions of class and gender" (79).
3. *The Joy Luck Club* is to some extent closer to Kennedy's definition of the novel rather than the short story sequence. Tan's work certainly creates "the sense--common to the novel--of a fluid social order in which personalities interact from episode to episode across time" (Kennedy 196). Furthermore, several of the stories fail to depict "separate, completed actions" (196), an incompleteness which Kennedy associates with novel chapters rather than with component short stories in a linked sequence.
4. Melani McAlister has argued that this embarrassment is symptomatic not of cultural assimilation but of class consciousness, and that *The Joy Luck Club* uses cultural difference as a substitute or surrogate for class anxiety. See McAlister, "(Mis)reading *The Joy Luck Club*."

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