

Negotiating the Geography of Mother-Daughter Relationships in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

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THE UNIVERSAL AND CONTINUING popularity of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* has surprised even Amy Tan. In a 2006 interview with Dana Gioia, the chairperson of the National Endowment for the Arts, she comments, "I had no idea this was going to be anything but weird stories about a weird family that was unique to us. To think that they would apply to other people who would find similarities to their own families or conflicts was beyond my imagination" (49). Yet it is precisely because readers identify with the "weird stories" of family tension, relational misunderstandings, loneliness, and self-actualization that the novel maintains its thematic relevance for contemporary readers.

When critics discuss these themes in the novel they most often analyze the generational tension inherent within the mother-daughter relationships of four immigrant Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters living in San Francisco. Many critics who analyze or summarize the novel suggest that the four San Francisco mother-daughter relationships illustrate themes of family misunderstandings, loneliness, and personal ambivalence. However, critics overlook the relationships the novel represents between the earliest generation of Chinese mothers and their China-born daughters and how these earlier relationships influence the family tensions and loneliness that all four San Francisco mother-daughter pairs experience in the book. Tan's dedication of the book, "To my mother and the memory of her mother," suggests that the mother-daughter relationships the text portrays in China provide a critical framework from which to analyze

the mother-daughter relationships in the United States. Catherine Romagnolo also suggests the importance of the past for the present in *The Joy Luck Club* and argues, "the text acknowledges an integral continuity between the past in China and the present in the United States" (101). Contemporary readers may also relate to the concept that past relationships must always influence present personal interactions. They may also discover, as this essay suggests, that one's inability to translate the past may have negative implications for present and future relationships. The mother-daughter relationships in both China and the United States represented in *The Joy Luck Club* not only provide a link between the past and the present but also suggest how the ability, or the inability, for mothers and daughters to share geographically informed cultural stories influences both mother-daughter relationships and individual and cultural identity.

The mothers and daughters who live together in China share a cultural bond contiguous with geographical landscapes that transcends the potential generational divide in mother-daughter relationships. The lack of a cultural bond concomitant with geography informs the tension of the mother-daughter relationships in the United States and creates a so-called generation gap that the China-born mothers neither anticipate nor understand. Amy Ling argues that the mother-daughter relationships in the United States "are not marked by a slip of the tongue or even a generational gap, but by a deep cultural and geographical chasm" (134). By including the stories of a generation of Chinese grandmothers who never leave China, *The Joy Luck Club* demonstrates that the tension in the San Francisco mother-daughter relationships, the "chasm" between the immigrant mothers and their daughters, is not simply a generation gap. Rather, the novel suggests the tensions within the mother-daughter relationships in the United States rise from the inability of the mothers and daughters to share cultural myths of strength and identity because they do not share the geographical landscape from which those cultural stories originate. Further, because

the American daughters view their mothers as essentialized versions of what it means to be ethnically Chinese in the United States, they are unable to interpret their mothers' stories of individual strength, and each daughter fails to recognize her mother's individual identity. Ironically, the daughters' quest to interpret both their mothers' and their own ethnic identity disrupts the daughters' ability to forge individual identities of strength in the way their mothers' did; that is, through the cultural stories of place they shared with their mothers.

The structure of *The Joy Luck Club* suggests the importance of geographically-informed shared myths of place for mother-daughter relationships and identity. Tan structures the novel with four distinct sections. A prologue introduces each section thematically, and each section contains four first-person narratives. The first section, *Feathers From A Thousand Li Away*, foregrounds China-born mother-daughter relationships. The last section, *Queen Mother of the Western Skies*, juxtaposes the geographically-informed cultural myths the immigrant mothers learn from their mothers with their inability to translate them for their own American daughters. Sections two and three represent the narratives of the American daughters. It is significant that the mother-daughter relationships in China and their shared cultural myths provide the novel's narrative frame. The narrative frame suggests that shared geographically-informed cultural myths provide the structure for positive mother-daughter relationships and individual identity. Yi-Fu Tuan correlates cultural myth with the natural landscape. He argues that "myths, by weaving in observable features in the landscape (a tree here, a rock there), strengthen a people's bond to place" ("Language," 686). In *The Joy Luck Club*, the mothers and daughters who live together in China share both the landscape and the myths that interpret that landscape. Tuan argues that cultural myths of place have power, and he asserts that myths "are not just any story but are foundational stories." Tuan contends that regionally-informed "foundational stories" are important to cul-

tural and individual identity because they “provide glimmers of understanding for the basic institutions of society” (“Language,” 686). The China-born daughters can interpret their mothers’ foundational stories because they share the same geographical landscapes that inform those stories. Further, the shared stories cultivate both positive mother-daughter relationships and individual identities of strength because the foundational stories allow the women “glimmers of understanding” about themselves and their relationships within a larger social context.

In the chapter, “Magpies,” An-mei Hsu describes the sympathetic relationship she had with her mother. An-mei remembers the myth of the turtle she and her mother shared in Ningpo. On the night before An-mei’s mother is to leave Ningpo, she asks An-mei if she has seen the turtle in the pond. An-mei nods that she has. An-mei’s mother says that she had seen the same turtle when she was a little girl. An-Mei considers, “I could see that turtle in my mind and I knew my mother was seeing the same one” (216). Because they both understand the geographical landscape of Ninpo and a particular pond with a particular turtle, An-mei can understand the meaning of the myth of the turtle, and “why it is useless to cry.” An-mei comprehends “that this was our fate, to live like two turtles seeing the watery world together from the bottom of a little pond” who must “swallow [their] own tears” (217). An-Mei and her mother share the landscape and language of a foundational story; therefore, they are able to communicate with each other and to negotiate their sorrows together.

The morning of her mother’s departure from Ningpo, An-Mei sees her mother on the ground in front of her uncle. An-Mei watches her mother swallow her bitter tears: “her back as rounded as the turtle in the pond. She was crying with her mouth closed” (218). When An-mei and her mother leave the Ningpo house, An-mei’s mother confirms both their bond of mutual suffering and the myth that reflects it: “Poor An-mei, only you know. Only you know what I have suffered”

(219). Later, after her mother's vengeful suicide, An-Mei understands how her mother imparts strength to her, and on the day when An-mei demonstrates this new-found strength to Second Wife, she no longer must swallow her own bitter tears. She says, "On that day, I learned to shout" (240). The cultural myth, or foundational story, originating from a pond in Ningpo becomes the foundation on which An-Mei builds her strong, individual identity.

In the chapter, "The Red Candle," the geographical landscape also informs Lindo Jong's relationship with her mother. The landscape in and around the "family compound in the village outside of Taiyuan" in the northern Shanxi province provides the foundational stories that inform their mother-daughter relationship (52). Lindo describes how the Fen River and heavy rains change both her and her mother's destinies. Lindo's family home sat on a hill created by silt deposits from the Fen River. The river is the source of life and death for Lindo's family and for all who live in the Taiyuan River valley. When heavy rains flood the river, the river destroys Lindo's family home and the family's wheat crop. As a consequence of this natural disaster, Lindo and her mother are separated when the family must send Lindo, who is only twelve years old, to the home of her betrothed, Tyan-yu Huang. Before Lindo's mother leaves with the rest of the family to move southeast to Wushi, she gives Lindo a necklace "made out of a tablet of red jade. When she put it around my neck, she acted very stern, so I knew she was very sad" (53-54). Lindo could interpret her mother's heart and intent because she shared her mother's fate—a future determined by the landscape of the Fen River valley. Both Lindo and her mother understand that the flooding of the Fen River causes their early separation and their mutual unhappiness. The shared Fen River flood memory is a foundational story that informs not only Lindo's relationship with her mother but also Lindo's ability to craft her own individual identity of strength that allows her to negotiate suffering and loss.

The topography of the Fen River valley allows Lindo to

understand both her and her mother's social position compared to the Huang's social position. She realizes that because the Huang home is located on a higher hill near the Fen River, their home has not been flooded. She understands the Huang's higher topographical place means a higher social position. The geography of the Fen River valley informs Lindo's connection to and sympathetic understanding of her mother and their shared subordinate position. Lindo Jong reflects, "I was so much like my mother. This was before our circumstances separated us: a flood that caused my family to leave me behind, my first marriage to a family that did not want me" (257). Lindo's bond to place cements her bond to her mother. Both she and her mother negotiate their life-experiences and their social identities with the foundational stories they share. The Fen River changes both Lindo and her mother's circumstances, forever uniting them as co-sufferers in hardship and survival.

Ying-ying St. Clair introduces herself in the first section of the book in the chapter, "The Moon Lady." Ying-ying lived with her wealthy family in the prosperous east coast town of Wushi near Tai Lake in Jiangsu province. Because of the family wealth, Ying-ying has two mother figures—her mother and her amah, the servant designated to take care of her. Ying-ying describes the Moon Festival pleasure boat cruise her family takes on Tai Lake when she is four. The lake proves to be the geographical marker by which Ying-ying understands her own ontological sense of loss. The lake almost drowns her during her family's holiday excursion, and she becomes a person without a place. The geographical memory of Tai Lake informs her ontological wish "to be found" (83).

A few years after Ying-ying had been lost and then physically found again at the Tai Lake Moon Festival celebration, Ying-ying explains in the chapter, "Waiting Between the Trees," the cultural myths of Tai Lake that her mother had told her when she was younger. Ying-ying's mother warns her not to be like "the lady ghosts at the bottom of the lake" (243). Her mother encourages her to pin up her hair so that she will

not be “like the lady ghosts” and bring shame upon their house. At the age of eighteen, Ying-ying considers becoming one of the ladies of shame at the lake’s bottom after her husband deserts her. After Ying-ying marries St. Clair and moves to the United States, neither St. Clair nor Ying-ying’s daughter, Lena, can find Ying-ying psychologically because neither of them knows or understands the myth of sorrow, shame, and loss associated with Tai Lake that informs Ying-ying’s identity. Only Ying-ying’s mother and amah might be able to understand the significance of the memories and myths of Tai Lake they share with Ying-ying. Ying-ying’s mothers are the only people who might be able to find Ying-ying because only they would know in what geographical place to look.

Even though the novel does not represent the deceased Suyuan Woo’s relationship with her mother, it does recreate the mother-daughter relationship she had with her twin baby daughters in China. Jing-mei tells her mother’s story in the chapter “The Joy Luck Club.” Through Jing-mei’s telling of her mother’s story, the novel represents how Suyuan Woo and the twin daughters she leaves by the roadside in China share two geographical connections—the mountains surrounding the southern town of Kweilin and the sea port of Shanghai. The beauty of the mountains surrounding Kweilin loses its significance when the mountain caves become Suyuan’s only hope for surviving Japanese bomber attacks. She recounts the ironic terror that her only hope of survival, hiding within the mountain caves, might have killed her. She tells her American born-daughter, Jing-mei: “I could only see the dripping bowels of an ancient hill that might collapse on top of me” (22). Later in the novel the reader discovers that Suyuan’s twin daughters share the same connection with their mother to the geography of the mountains. When Mei Ching and her husband Mei Han find Suyuan’s daughters on the side of the road, they take them back to live with them in their hidden cave in the mountains near Kweilin. Even though the little girls do not know Suyuan, the survival narrative associated with the geography of the mountain caves creates a sympathetic mother-daughter bond.

In “A Pair of Tickets,” Jing-mei’s father explains that when Mei Ching and Mei Han travel north to Shanghai to try to find Suyuan’s family, they discover only what Suyuan had discovered a few years earlier—the Li family home and the Li family have been destroyed. Both Suyuan and her daughters find loss and pain in the post-war landscape of a desolate Shanghai. Though Suyuan and her new husband leave for the United States, Wang Chwun Yu and Wang Chwun Hwa remain in a recovering Shanghai, and it is in Shanghai where Suyuan’s friend first sees the twins “shopping for shoes at the Number One Department Store on Nanjing Dong Road” (286). The twins have honored and loved their first parents—their first mother—all the years Suyuan has been looking for them. The twins, found as adults, have never left Shanghai because they believe their first parents are “still roaming the earth looking for them” (286). Suyuan’s grown twin daughters never leave the significant geographical place of their mother—the city of Shanghai. The geographical places they share with their mother create a bond with a mother they have never known and inform the foundational stories of loss and hope they share.

Not only does the novel’s narrative frame suggest the importance of shared foundational stories within mother-daughter relationships, but also the narrative frame and the individual first-person narratives within that frame illustrate the connection between unique geographical landscapes and individual identity. The immigrant mothers’ different geographical origins and their diverse cultural stories indicate both their individual and cultural differences, not a universalizing sameness that some scholars suggest. Catherine Romagnolo affirms that “an attentiveness to difference” in *The Joy Luck Club* is important because the text resists an essential representation of “authentic origin,” or an essential notion of what it means to be Chinese (90). Stephen Souris suggests that the text resists a conflation of all the mother narratives and argues that “Tan succeeds in achieving a truly diverse and heteroglot range of mothers’ perspectives” (105).

When An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, Ying-ying St. Clair, and Suyuan Woo emigrate from China to the United States, they leave the geographical places that have informed their cultural and individual identities. Further, they lose relationships with mothers and daughters who sympathetically understand their unique foundational stories. Each Auntie's individual identity helps her negotiate loss and hope in her immigration to the United States, yet each Auntie draws on a different foundational myth to negotiate the transition.

An analysis of the geographical home places of each San Francisco mother and the cultural stories connected with those home places is helpful because it resists a reading of the text that essentializes the ethnic identities of both the mothers and daughters who live in the United States. The text suggests that the cultural differences the Aunties embody defy the possibility of their daughters' ever achieving an essentialist notion of Chinese ethnic identity because as the immigrant mothers' hometowns and their disparate cultural stories indicate, an essentialized notion of Chinese identity is itself an American cultural myth. From a geographical perspective, the Aunties' differences from each other *are* significant. The Aunties must negotiate the *space* of the United States where long-term residents of California have essentialized Chinese identity. The immigrant women must also negotiate the space of mother-daughter relationships in an American landscape of essentializing prejudice where they are unable to impart foundational stories divorced from a unique geographic region in China.

Christopher Smith connects diverse geographical home places in the country of China with diverse cultural identities. He explains that people who live in China do not have one essential, unified understanding of what Americans might think it *means* to be Chinese. Rather, he argues that different regional populations in China often think and act independently. He explains that "instead of developing into one huge interacting and interconnected whole, China has historically been subdivided into a number of clearly identifiable and in-

dependent regions that tend to have little interaction between them" (16). *The Joy Luck Club* affirms both cultural diversity and regional prejudice in China when it represents the trouble Lindo Jong has finding a job in the United States. When she arrives in Chinatown from the inland northern Shanxi province, she finds that Chinese regional difference translates into prejudice against her when "families from Canton and Toishan and the Four Districts, southern people who had come many years ago to make their fortune" will not hire her (261). Her experience in San Francisco reflects the geographical hiring preferences that Smith cites in his book. Smith provides an example of nineteenth-century hiring practices in Shanghai and explains that business owners who had emigrated from Ningbo would hire "predominantly on geographical principles" (14). Smith says the new Shanghai elite would first hire relatives from their hometowns; second they would hire "people from the same city; then the same county; then the same region of the province" (14). The established and elite Chinese business community in San Francisco who in times past had emigrated from southern China makes a geographical judgment against hiring Lindo when she arrives in the United States from a northern province in China.

Lindo reflects her own geographical prejudice when she first sees her future husband: "I knew something was not right. . . . He was Cantonese!" (263). An-mei tells her not to worry and describes how people living in the United States consider all Chinese immigrants as essentially the same. An-Mei says, "We are not in China anymore. You don't have to marry the village boy. Here everybody is now from the same village even if they come from different parts of China" (263). Lindo and An-Mei's conversation reveals both their geographical prejudice and the ways in which the geography of their home places has influenced their understandings of their own identities. Their conversation also reveals their position in the United States in Ben Xu's terms as "cultural aliens in their new world" (3).

Even though each mother negotiates San Francisco as

a cultural alien, she tries to construct through her foundational stories an affirming home within which a healthy mother-daughter relationship might allow her daughter to understand and articulate her own individual and cultural identity. Because the American daughters are unable to translate their mothers' geographically—informed cultural stories within the context of their own quest for an emotional or ethnic home, they are unable to feel at home in their childhood homes, in their relationships with their mothers, or within a self-defined ethnic or cultural identity. Patricia Hamilton posits that, "language takes on a metonymic relation to culture in Tan's portrayal of the gap between the mothers and daughters in *The Joy Luck Club*" (125-6). A gap exists between the San Francisco mothers and daughters because the American-born daughters are unable to translate the linguistic symbols of their mothers' foundational stories. They are unable to translate the linguistic symbols because they are unable to envision the geographical scenes their mothers' words represent.

Without the images of a shared geography, the American daughters experience emotional and cultural gaps in their homes, in their relationships with their mothers, and in their own individual identities. Yi-Fu Tuan argues that "Home is created symbolically as well as materially. The most powerful and precise symbol system of humans is language. Words or speech calls homes into being" ("A View of Geography," 102). The American daughters feel alienated and unloved in the homes their mothers have tried to create for them. When the Aunties share foundational stories, their daughters are unable to interpret what Tuan calls the "minipoem," (103) or metaphor, implied in their mothers' geographically—informed words. Souris asserts, "Each mother hopes to establish a closer relationship by telling her [daughter] a story. And each mother is shown with a story to tell" (107). Each mother shares a different foundational story, or minipoem, with her daughter, although each mother hopes to accomplish more than simply a "closer relationship." The mothers hope to

transmit through their foundational stories a particular cultural story of strength to help their daughters negotiate not only their own losses and hopes but also a strong, individual identity. Without a shared understanding of the landscape, the American daughters repeatedly misunderstand the minipoems inherent in each story their mothers tell. Unlike their own mothers who found strength and resolve—home—in their mothers' words, the American daughters find only pain and confusion.

The chapter, "Magpies," juxtaposes Rose Hsu Jordan's divorce with the Ningpo myth of the turtle in the pond. An-mei understands her daughter's bitter sorrow more than Rose can interpret, but An-mei is unable to share with her daughter the strength imparted by the cultural myth: "Your tears do not wash away your sorrows. They feed someone else's joys" (217). Because Rose will not be able to interpret how the myth of a turtle informed by a specific geographical place can help her to negotiate the San Francisco sorrow of divorce, Rose will not comprehend the minipoem that "he [the psychiatrist] is just another bird drinking from your misery" (241). Neither Rose nor her psychiatrist can translate how the story of the death of millions of birds in China might give Rose a reason to shout for joy.

In the chapter, "Four Directions," Waverly Jong is unable to translate her mother's Taiyuan stories that inform her mother's strength. Lindo tells Waverly stories of the Sun clan to explain to Waverly the strength she could discover and claim "inside" her. When Waverly confuses Taiyuan with Taiwan, "the fragile connection snap[s]" (183). Since Waverly does not have a geographical connection to Taiyuan or even a linguistic understanding of Taiyuan, she is unable to understand the foundational stories of her mother's hometown, or how those stories can inform her own internal strength.

While Ying-ying lives her life like the ghost of a shamed lady from the bottom of Tai Lake, her daughter Lena "sits beside her fancy swimming pool" (67). Without understanding the significance of Tai Lake, Lena may never find her mother.

Ying-ying waits as a crouching tiger in the guestroom to explain to Lena how years ago Ying-ying became a ghost. Lena may not necessarily understand what her mother will say since she does not share with her mother the myth of the tiger, the myth of the moon lady, and most of all, the myths of Tai Lake. Ying-ying compares her daughter's wisdom to "a bottomless pond" where stones "sink into the darkness and dissolve" (242). Ying-ying's connection to a geographical body of water informs her analysis of her daughter. While Ying-ying's name means "clear reflection," Lena's eyes, her mother comments, do not reflect anything. Because Lena does not share a geographical connection with the foundational stories of Tai Lake, it is doubtful she will ever understand her mother or the duality of strength and loss that is her mother's identity.

Jing-mei is the only American daughter who finds both an identity for herself and an understanding of her mother because only Jing-mei journeys to the geographical places that inform her mother's stories. In the last chapter of the novel, Jing-mei Woo returns to Shanghai in her mother's place to meet the daughters her mother left behind on the road to Chungking. During her trip, Jing-mei finally finds her mother "in [her] father's story" (286) and in her journey to her mother's geographical home. It is significant that she finds her mother and her own sense of psychological place when she can interpret the words of a story by connecting those words with the images around her. Tuan explains how Chinese landscape artists use both words and images to represent a "picture of place." He illustrates how a Chinese garden painting is not complete until the artist and possibly others over time add "poems and poetic prose [that] deepen the visually projected meaning" ("Language," 692). Like one who interprets a Chinese landscape painting, Jing-mei must integrate both images and words to create place. She must not only hear her mother's words, and later, her father's, but also she must see the landscape that those words, or minipoems, interpret in order for her to discover her own individual place.

On her journey to Shanghai, Jing-mei discovers the

landscape that enables her to interpret both her mothers' and fathers' words. After Jing-mei says, "And now I also see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood," she adds, "After all these years, it can finally be let go" (288). When Jing-mei *sees* the landscape, she experiences an ontological *seeing* as well. She is also able to "let go" the quest to discover what it means to be "essentially Chinese." She releases herself from the notion that there is one vague essentialist idea of what "being Chinese" means. More than coming home to China, or the "mother-land," as Amy Ling suggests, Jing-mei comes home to Shanghai, the place where she can interpret her family's foundational stories. It is in this place that Suyuan's daughters can finally fulfill "her long-cherished wish" (288) of resolution and wholeness.

The title of the last chapter, "A Pair of Tickets," suggests that a geographical connection to their mothers' home places will help the American daughters understand both their mothers' and their own individual identities. Contrary to what some scholars suggest, Jing-mei is not a symbol that represents all the American-born daughters' journeys home to the "motherland" or to an essentialist understanding of an ethnic self. Rather, she is the only daughter in the novel who experiences any kind of individual and ethnic resolution. Li Zeng notes, "The assurance of self-definition through connecting with her cultural roots is Jing-mei Woo's resolution to her ethnic dilemma" (7). Jing-mei does experience the "assurance of self-definition" on this trip through southern China to Shanghai, but she is the only daughter in the novel who experiences any kind of individual or ethnic resolution because she is the only daughter who can see the geographical regions that inform her mother's stories.

When Jing-mei can interpret a unified landscape of both words and geography, she can interpret the landscape of self. When she returns to the significant geographical place of her mother and finds the sisters who share her mothers' foundational stories of loss and survival, Jing-mei understands how both loss and hope inform her own unique identity. A critical

analysis of how shared foundational stories of place shape mother-daughter relationships seems to indicate that the American daughters' search for an essential Chinese identity will always frustrate their attempts to understand both their mothers' and their own individual identities. The narrative frame of mother-daughter foundational stories in *The Joy Luck Club* indicates that mothers and daughters find wholeness in the integration of the landscape and the words that interpret it. Further, the familial and personal wholeness the resolution of *The Joy Luck Club* suggests helps contemporary readers consider how an understanding of the past may inform their own relational and individual resolutions both for the present and the future.

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