
КИТАЙСЬКА МОВА ТА ЛІТЕРАТУРА

ACKNOWLEDGING CHINESE INHERITANCE AND CULTURAL PRACTICES IN AMY TAN'S *THE JOY LUCK CLUB* AND *SAVING FISH FROM DROWNING*

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Admitting that inheritance is closely connected to practices that revolve around the Chinese culture seems to be one of the key elements in Amy Tan's novels, as there are themes and motifs which can be easily spotted in any of her works. Although Amy Tan's novels usually tell stories of women, who manage to re-connect with daughters, sisters or friends, this paper will try to demonstrate that Tan's characters succeed in strengthening the relationship between cultural inheritance and customs through storytelling and the revelation of past secrets. In trying to demonstrate that Amy Tan's works succeed in narrowing the space between the American and Chinese cultural clashes, two of her novels were selected for this purpose, namely *The Joy Luck Club* and *Saving Fish from Drowning*. This study explores the ways in which Amy Tan's novels managed to blend in certain elements that are specific for the Chinese culture as seen from the perspective of an American society. It should be mentioned that the Chinese practices of religion and storytelling are closely connected to strong character relationships and superstitions related to the motifs of ghosts and the relevance of food. One should not forget about the symbolism of jade jewelry and the cultural clashes that inevitably take place when discussing the two novels, as they also help in constructing the Chinese American context.

Several important concepts that define Chinese-American literature as seen from the perspective of Chinese immigrants should be discussed before analyzing the novels. A series of theoretical issues related to ethnic identity prepares the reader for analyzing the ways in which these concepts are reflected in her writing. Cheri Philip argues that "it is not the terminology that is the focus when we study issues related to race and racial identity, rather, it is the lived experience of the individuals who are categorized into the racial groups themselves, and the social meanings attached to such categorizations within the United States context" [2007, 14]. To put it differently, one should understand that race represents individuals that are part of a particular racial group. For example, a Chinese American individual learns that he/she is "Chinese" in an "American" context, where he/she is generally labeled as being Asian American and not Chinese American. The same thing could happen with a Japanese American, or a Vietnamese American. Therefore, individuals encounter identity crisis as they are deprived of their country of origin, being generally referred to Asian Americans.

Along these lines Cheryan and Tsai rightfully consider that "ethnic identity in Asian Americans is often understood as the degree to which individuals identify with their country of ancestral origin" [2007, 125]. Consequently, *The Joy Luck Club* presents

four mothers – Suyuan Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong and Ying-ying St. Clair – who have related various outcomes with their attachment to China. They cannot establish a well-structured relationship with their daughters Jing-mei “June” Woo, Rose Hsu Jordan, Waverly Jong and Lena St. Clair, because of their Chinese background, allowing their daughters to repress certain aspects of ethnic identity. The daughters feel alienated from their ancestral heritage, as they are Americans with Chinese appearances. More importantly, since they never managed to visit their country of origin, the daughters cannot completely relate to their mothers’ culture. Because the daughters are American-born Chinese, they find themselves in the position of leaving aside their Chinese heritage, not being familiar with important aspects of that particular way of life.

Since the mothers present different versions of China, the daughters cannot decide which story is true and they deliberately choose to repress their inherited culture, incorporating more and more American elements into their own self. Lisa Dunick rightfully considers that “Tan’s Chinese mothers not only verbally convey their stories, but also use writing to assert their identity. Their understanding of literacy, the power facilitated by the permanency of writing, and their active engagement with and use of written texts demonstrate that Tan’s mothers do more than talk-stories” [2006, 16]. In other words, Amy Tan succeeds in giving the immigrant mothers a voice that would help them and their daughters to cope with the nostalgia for the homeland. Furthermore, “in its multiple first-person narration, both the influence of traditional Chinese ideologies and presence of contemporary American culture within the family are equally strong” [Zeng 2003, 4]. *The Joy Luck Club* presents the mothers’ attempts to persuade their daughters into accepting the Chinese culture on the one hand, while on the other it shows the reader the daughters’ constant resistance. According to Joyner, “the mothers not only appear to give the daughters an originating version of their own anxieties, but in some unusual twist of logic the ‘maternal’ narrative is asserted as a cultural value, supporting tales regardless of whether or not those narratives are ‘maternal’” [2002, 109]. One could say that through their storytelling, the mothers succeed in creating a cultural bond with the daughters, in this way unlocking past secrets and creating a sense of nostalgia for their homeland.

One central element in the novel revolves around the daughters’ expectations towards their mothers. From their mothers’ stories, the American-born daughters understand that one should not rely on Chinese versions of the truth, as the stories have always different endings. For example, June claims that:

I never thought my mother’s Kweilin story was anything but a Chinese fairy tale. The endings always changed. Sometimes she said she used that worthless thousand-*yuan* note to buy a half-cup of rice. She turned that rice into a pot of porridge. She traded that gruel for two feet from a pig. Those two feet became six eggs, those eggs six chickens. The story always grew and grew [Tan 1998, 25].

This happened probably because Suyuan formed the Joy Luck Club when the Japanese were attacking China, and she invented different kinds of goods that could be traded for others, in order to comfort herself with the idea of war. However, June is not able to fully understand her mother’s actions and acts as if the Chinese culture, together with all its elements, is not as stable as the American one. Dunick states that “her mother’s constant revision of the story’s ending did not provide a narrative that Jing-Mei was able to recognize and claim as her own” [2006, 6]. In other words, Suyuan’s decision to continually change the story is closely connected to her desire of making June accept past events related to China. However, the way in which they were presented estranged June from both her mother and the country of her origin.

Another example that reflects June's negative reaction to Chinese customs and traditions is again reflected in the first chapter of the novel in which she describes Suyuan and An-mei:

She and Auntie An-mei were dressed up in funny Chinese dresses with stiff stand-up collars and blooming branches of embroidered silk sewn over their breasts. These clothes were too fancy for real Chinese people, I thought, and too strange for American parties. In those days, before my mother told me her Kweilin story, I imagined Joy Luck was a shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war [Tan 1998, 28].

Here one can clearly notice that June is not able to fully understand the Chinese way of life, as she seems to question the Chinese traditional clothing. More importantly, she compares Suyuan's Mahjong club with extremist organizations and TV shows that point to other cultures, aside from the Asian one. Since she never managed to cope with her inherited culture, she makes different kinds of associations that have no relevance.

As she is an American-born Chinese woman, June is not able to comprehend her mother's constant criticism and she even tries to make Suyuan change her behavior. Interestingly enough, June claims that: "There's a school of thought [...] that parents shouldn't criticize children. They should encourage instead. You know, people rise to other people's expectations. And when you criticize, it just means you're expecting failure" [Tan 1998, 31]. Although in the Chinese culture children are supposed to obey their parents, meaning that first and foremost they are supposed to listen, June fails to respect this practice, not only by disobedience but also by criticizing.

A very important episode that brings to light a lesson of life is again presented in the first chapter. Learning that June has two twin sisters, the aunts ask her to visit China and tell them about her mother. June feels somehow discouraged, as she claims that she does not know anything about her mother, while An-mei says with disbelief: "Not know your own mother? [...] How can you say? Your mother is in your bones" [Tan 1998, 40]. This clearly reflects that miscommunication never ceased to appear between the two characters.

Saving Fish from Drowning, on the other hand, has a different approach, in the sense that this novel does not only revolve around the relationship between women, but it also introduces masculine non-Asian characters. The novel opens with the voice of Bibi Chen explaining to the reader that she unexpectedly died not long after planning a trip to China, her country of ancestral origin. One could argue that *Saving Fish from Drowning* explores the relationship between eleven missing American tourists in the forests of Burma, the perspective belonging to Bibi Chen's ghost. Even from the first pages the reader can clearly see that this novel does not resemble Amy Tan's other works. However, there can be detected several elements in both *The Joy Luck Club* and *Saving Fish from Drowning*, that justify the discussion of the two novels in the same paper since they both offer insights into various facets of Chinese culture.

If *The Joy Luck Club* tells the stories of four oppressed Chinese-American mothers and four American-born Chinese daughters, who eventually learn how to cope with their second culture as part of their own identity, *Saving Fish from Drowning* presents Americans who learn, or at least try, to deal with cultural clashes between the Old World and the New. Although the trip is intended to reveal and present various ways of comprehending the Chinese culture, the American characters often misunderstand behaviors, stories and life perspectives. Moreover, they try to repair their mistakes, but unintentionally

tionally fail because they do not possess the knowledge required to escape from daily situations. Hence the narrator can clearly see that without Bibi Chen's contribution, the Americans face difficulties in relating to the Chinese culture. Although such issues related to the cultural clashes between China and America are not present at the beginning of the novel, they develop gradually into a well-structured, and yet surprising, story.

The reader can only assume that *Saving Fish from Drowning* is the embodiment of a public revealing of secrets because it begins with "It was not my fault" [Tan 2006, 1]. The narrator clearly regrets and, at the same time, rejects the idea of guilt and responsibility concerning the actions of her friends' expedition. However, one realizes that the first part of the novel is similar to Tan's other works, in the sense that the narrator remembers past events related to her biological mother, as well as to her step mother, who insisted to be called "Sweet Ma", despite her atypical behavior towards her sons and daughter. Even though the reader can make a clear distinction between the mothers and daughters in *The Joy Luck Club*, *Saving Fish from Drowning* also reveals elements that point to a Chinese heritage, in the sense that Bibi Chen herself chooses to tell a childhood story that involves Sweet Ma and the presence of jade jewelry given as a gift by mothers to their daughters. If *The Joy Luck Club* presents Suyuan giving her daughter a jade necklace during a family dinner, *Saving Fish from Drowning* brings to light Bibi's feelings toward a hairpin that once belonged to her mother, but is kept in Sweet Ma's jewelry box. The Chinese belief is that the jade stone symbolizes good luck and good health, symbols which could link to the names of the novels, as the Joy Luck Club is the embodiment of a reunion in which family values and personal experiences concentrate on a mahjong game, while the act of saving fish from drowning has to do with the possibility of interpreting a story in more than one way. One can either choose to save fish and contribute to the story, or let them drown and be a passive listener.

Another element that is specific for the Chinese culture is the art of storytelling, as Bibi succeeds in catching the reader's attention by following her friends through their trip. However, she is not the only character who uses this practice in order to transmit cultural values. At one point in the novel Bibi introduces a rather flat character, an old lady from the Karen tribe, who embraces the role of a storyteller when talking about the Karens' history. Similarly, in *The Joy Luck Club* talk-stories are used by both mothers and daughters. On the one hand, one could argue that: "The mothers understand this function of storytelling and use it to provide their daughters with a connection to Chinese culture as well as a method for passing on their personal values and advice" [Conard 1998, 11]. In other words, the mothers want their daughters to get acquainted with the culture of their ancestral origin. On the other hand, the daughters use this practice from an American point of view. Thus, storytelling achieves an entirely new stage. From the Chinese cultural practice, it evolves into a Chinese-American one. Hence the art of storytelling blends in with other cultures, the Burmese and the American one, in this way creating new stories from legends.

For example, in *Saving Fish from Drowning* the Americans seek different methods of letting the world know that they were stuck with the No Name Place where Karen people live. Among the most relevant episodes, there is the one in which they want to light fires in order to get smoke signals. Being content with their American ingenuity they inform one of the tribe members, Black Spot, the one responsible for their kidnapping, about their plans but a disappointing, yet logical reply strikes them: "When the soldiers are finding you, they are finding the Karen people too [...] then they killing us" [Tan 2006, 311]. Even if the response was prompt and implied a refusal, the Americans further argue that no one is to blame for being lost. To put it differently, one could say

that the tourists are not aware of the fact that Rupert is the key character in this affair. The reader could only infer that the climax of the novel circles around the tourists' disappearance, and more importantly, their involvement in the Karma tribe's affairs. Mistakenly, Rupert is depicted as being the reincarnation of a godly figure, and he receives a special treatment in comparison with his companions. Moreover, the Americans witness a story told by an old lady of the tribe in which she tells the legend of the Younger White Brother, or the Lord of Nats. Her story begins with Seraphineas Andrews, a white man who desperately wanted to be the reincarnation of the Younger White Brother, but instead tricked the Karen people either by claiming that God commanded the women from the tribe to grant him intimate favors or by performing card tricks which would give him full command of the Lord's Army – his followers [Tan 2006, 275]. One day, however, the Lord of Nats went to a picnic in the jungle and never returned. That is why the Karen people were still influenced by the idea of worshipping a divinity.

Probably the most well-known story in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* is the section narrated by Ying-Ying St. Clair, entitled "The Moon Lady" because Tan is also famous for the children's book that bears the same name. This section in the novel presents the narrator as rewriting the legend of the Moon Goddess, Chang-O, who manages to grant Ying-Ying's wish of being found by her family. The purpose of this story is to get Lena, her daughter, to see and hear her. She regretfully claims: "all these years I kept my true nature hidden, running along like a small shadow so nobody could catch me. And because I moved so secretly now my daughter does not see me" [Tan 1998, 67]. One could say that as a child and as an adult, Ying-Ying identifies with the Moon Lady, as she is the embodiment of women who wish to be found. Hence, the myth of princess Chang-O is not perceived as a story any more, but as an illusion of a story. Furthermore, the mother understands that her silence has estranged her from her daughter [Conard 1998, 38]. But there are other things that Ying-Ying kept for herself, apart from the story of the Moon Lady: her first traditional marriage with a cruel man. The reason why she decides to unveil this critical period in her life is because she is disappointed in Lena's lack of willpower to fight for her rights as a woman. Ying-Ying reveals aspects of her past marriage that have to do with her effort of being a good wife and of bearing a son for her husband. Even now she has negative feelings towards this man, as she claims: "this was a man so bad than even today I cannot speak his name" [Tan 1998, 245]. Apart from starting to take many business trips soon after their marriage, her husband brought home a prostitute during the period in which Ying-Ying was seven months pregnant. Being at a critical moment in her life, she made an abortion because of all the pain and sorrow he caused her.

One could also add that, as it has been represented in various works of Chinese-American literature, the presence of ghosts is crucial. They are representations of dead people who are not yet ready to go to the "yin" world. Some feel sorry for their loved ones, while others need more time to realize they are indeed dead. Accordingly, Bibi Chen's ghost chooses to follow her friends, while at the same time she tries to find a reason for her death. She even claims that she is not able to remember how she died and what she was doing when it happened. In the *Joy Luck Club*, ghosts acquire a new meaning in the sense that the reader does not encounter real spirits. Instead the novel presents strangers and disobedient women associated with the loss of identity concept.

To make a comparison between different interpretations of ghosts in both novels, one should keep in mind An-mei's section from *The Joy Luck Club*, which presents the story of her mother who became the concubine of a business man when An-mei was only four years old, and returned home five years later. By this time the protagonist had

heard numerous stories about ghosts that tried to take disobedient girls away; she had learned that disobedient women were severely punished in feudal China. Her grandmother, Popo, tried to make the little girl understand what her mother's punishment was. She said: "When you lose your face, An-mei, [...] it's like dropping your necklace down a well. The only way you can get it back is to fall in after it" [Tan 1998, 44]. This could only mean that there is no place for forgiveness: the loss of face implicitly points toward a loss of identity, and therefore, the sacrifice of one's life. Nevertheless, even though An-mei's mother knew the consequences of losing her face, she performed a Chinese ritual for Popo, because she was dying. The tradition says that only the flesh of a daughter can save a mother, so one night, An-mei's mother carefully prepared a soup in which she added a piece of meat from her arm. This section ends with a paragraph full of painful but still powerful memories:

This is how a daughter honors her mother. It is *shou* deep it is in your bones. The pain of the flesh is nothing. The pain you must forget. Because sometimes that is the only way to remember what is in your bones. You must peel off your skin, and that of your mother, and her mother before her. Until there is nothing. No scar, no skin, no flesh [Tan 1998, 48].

Only later, in An-mei's second story does the reader find out why her mother chose to live with Wu Tsing: she had been raped and she was now believed to be a prostitute, so the only solution was to leave her home, to leave her daughter behind, in order to become a fourth wife. To put it differently, one could say that she chose to cover her shame with another one. During the time she spent with her mother, An-mei learned that a woman constantly suffers from injustices. She even claims that: "a girl in China did not marry for love. She married for position, and my mother's position, I later learned, was the worst" [Tan 1998, 228]. Although she was the fourth wife, or the third concubine of Wu Tsing, she was the only one who could give him a son, the most valuable member of a family. Her son, Syaudi, was soon taken away by Second Wife, who claimed him as her own. In other words, An-mei was very well aware that her mother experienced extreme pain, as she lost her face and tried to hide it.

Another Chinese mother who makes associations with ghosts is Lindo Jong. First and foremost, one should mention that in her sections she draws a clear line between the Chinese and the American ways of life, in this way presenting all the false expectations a mother can have in relation to her daughter and vice versa. Thinking about Waverly's americanized self, Lindo regretfully claims: "It's my fault she's this way. I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these things do not mix?" [Tan 1998, 254]. She is well aware that she failed in raising her daughter according to the Chinese customs because of the American environment in which Waverly grew up. Interestingly enough, the same section is discussed by Tammy Conard. The critic's remark which concentrates around the female characters in the novel is indeed interesting, as "the mothers share the belief that the daughters can be active agents in their own lives" [1998, 14]. This statement has to do with the daughters' inability to acquire Chinese elements and claim them as their own.

More importantly, Lindo realizes that her daughter wants to go to China on her honeymoon because it is fashionable, not because she feels the need to get acquainted with her traditional heritage. That is another reason why, before the wedding, the daughter insisted to take her to a hair stylist. Here another critical moment for both characters takes place, as she sits in front of the mirror expecting to get her haircut. First and fore-

most, Lindo refers to the stylist in a very peculiar way, bringing to light another difference between the Chinese and the American way of life: “Americans don’t look at one another when talking. They talk to their reflections. They look at others or themselves only when they think nobody is watching” [Tan 1998, 255]. Here the reflections could be associated with the Chinese ghosts, those fearful spirits which are not to be trusted. If one were to have a moment of weakness, in this case being distracted by something else than the other reflection, his/her face would be taken away. One could once again see that the Chinese and American ways of perceiving people and approaching people are so distinct that inevitable clashes occur between these two cultures. Hence, fear of identity loss is a crucial theme that is present throughout the entire novel. One could also add that here the word ghost acquires an entirely new meaning. More specifically, it may refer to people who do not have any emotional attachments with anyone. For example, the stylist’s interaction with people is strictly professional, so he does not feel the need to attach himself emotionally.

In contrast to the ghosts presented in *The Joy Luck Club*, *Saving Fish from Drowning* brings to light a rather complex male character, Bennie, who, after Bibi’s death, was named the leader of the group. He is humorously depicted as believing not only in ghosts, but also in strange coincidences such as making connections between the real situation and a message from a fortune cookie. Moreover, the narrator claims that Bennie “even convinced himself that I, dearly departed Bibi, was sending him signs to lead the tour in my permanent absence” [Tan 2006, 63]. There are, however, other instances in the novel which revolve around the spiritual life. For a better understanding, one should mention the American tour guide’s decision to get them acquainted with the tradition of honoring Nats, who “are believed to be the spirits of nature” [Tan 2006, 168]. The guide, Walter, explains that a Nat is similar to a ghost, meaning that it can or cannot be seen. More importantly, according to Walter, people usually bring them gifts and food in order to have a justification for being haunted. In other words, just like ghosts and disobedient women, Nats are considered to bring bad luck, if they are not honored appropriately. However, when Marlena asks Walter if he believes in Nats, he promptly replies: “Educated people usually don’t. But it’s tradition to give an offering. Like presents under your Christmas tree from Santa Claus” [Tan 2006, 169-170]. This comparison between two different types of gifts from two different countries is very interesting, as people nowadays tend to associate the Christmas holiday with the joy of receiving gifts instead of emphasizing Christ’s birth. However, there is another interpretation to Walter’s argument: just like Nats, Santa Claus could be associated with a ghostly figure, as he brings gifts during the night, when everybody sleeps. Hence, he cannot be seen.

As it has been previously mentioned, Chinese-American literature also has various connotations to religious practices, because it often presents rituals and customs related either to festivals, marriages, or even funerals. Accordingly, when reading Amy Tan’s novels one encounters specific elements related to the already mentioned celebrations. For instance, Lindo’s section from *The Joy Luck Club* concentrates around a critical point in Lindo’s life; that of a traditional marriage. Here Lindo explains the symbol of eternal marriage with Tyan-yu, her future husband – that of a red candle with two ends of lighting. Lindo displeasingly claims: “that candle was a marriage bond that was worth more than a Catholic promise not to divorce. It meant I couldn’t divorce and I couldn’t ever remarry even if Tyan-yu died” [Tan 1998, 59]. Together with this traditional custom, all women in feudal China were confined to their first and only marriage, in this way living a sorrowful life next to some people who despised and humiliated them.

Nevertheless, Lindo's cunning idea to escape an undesirable marriage is the climax of this section. Again, putting all her hopes in a Chinese superstition which says that on the day of the Festival of Pure Brightness your thoughts are supposed to be clear when preparing to think about your ancestors, she manages to convince her family that her ancestors came to her when she was dreaming. They claimed that Lindo's marriage with Tyan-yu was rotten because the wind blew the red candle out. However, the Huangs needed more proof, and so Lindo started to talk about Tyan-yu's dead grandfather, and about the threat that if she does not leave this marriage all her teeth would fall off. The final warning, and probably the most important one, was related to a secretly pregnant servant, who was supposed to marry Tyan-yu. Eventually Lindo manages to leave the Huangs' house and fly to America, where every year on the day of the Festival of Pure Brightness she takes off all her bracelets claiming that she remembers the day when she finally grew genuine [Tan 1998, 67].

When talking about *Saving Fish from Drowning*, the reader should bear in mind various sections related to religious connotations, among which one should mention a scene that clearly depicts Western curiosity and inclination towards Eastern countries. The scene revolves around another character Esmé, and the former tour guide, Miss Rong, who "had heard that many Americans, especially those who travel to China, love Buddhism" [Tan 2006, 77]. Ironically, just as her name, Miss Rong is "wrong" because the Buddhism practiced in America does not resemble the one found in China. According to the narrator, Americans believe that Buddhism is associated with being Zen, while in China it is associated with torture. Another instance in which such stereotypes are presented is explored further on in the book, as it presents the American tourists being in Burma and confronting to the idea of Buddhism and preserving the animals' life, while their new guide Walter explains that "the butchers and fishermen are usually not Buddhist [...] But even if they are they approach their fishing with reverence. They scoop up the fish and bring them to shore. They say they are saving fish from drowning. Unfortunately [...] the fish do not recover" [Tan 2006, 162]. Here the reader could make a comparison with the title of the novel, as the fish could be associated with the American tourists. Taking into consideration that the Burmese kidnapped them, one may make associations between the Burmese and the fishermen, who intended to save the Americans, by making them empathize and relate to the legend of the Lord of Nats and his followers. Of course, there is another possible interpretation, meaning that the Karen tribe is not trying to save the Americans, but their own people, because Rupert is considered to be the embodiment of the Lord of the Nats.

Probably the most intriguing section of the same novel circles back to Buddhism and the morality of life, because death is seen as a release of any ambition or suffering. Sounding disappointed, Bibi claims with sorrow: "Would that happen to me? I wanted to expand, to feel the void, to reclaim all that I had wasted. I wanted to fill the silence with all the words I had not yet spoken" [Tan 2006, 229]. This passage clearly points towards the regrets the narrator faces, as she gradually realizes the consequences of her death. From this moment on she understands that she cannot contribute to her cultural inheritance anymore as she regrets all the things that she was not able to accomplish in her life. She realizes that her contribution to the Chinese and American society is now valid only through her storytelling.

Going back to *The Joy Luck Club*, one should bring to light an important element that has to do with the mothers' expectations towards their American-born daughters, as these particular expectations are crucial for acknowledging inheritance and practices. Because Waverly was believed to be a genius due to her ability of playing chess, Suyuan

persuaded her daughter to take piano lessons. During her childhood June witnessed her mother's perspective towards the American culture: "my mother believed you could be anything you wanted to be in America. You could open a restaurant. You could work for the government and get good retirement. You could buy a house with almost no money down. You could become rich. You could become instantly famous" [Tan 1998, 132]. One could argue that Suyuan's unique interpretation of the American dream determined her to wish all the best for her daughter. However, no matter how many things she tried, she could not make June realize that in order to succeed in life she had to make herself visible to both herself and the world. First she decided her daughter should be a Chinese Shirley Temple; then she tried to make June learn all the capitals of the states. After that, she made her read passages from the Bible and recite them. One day she decided her daughter is going to be a pianist, but June protested in a very American way. She cried: "why don't you like me the way I am? I'm *not* a genius! I can't play the piano. And even if I could, I wouldn't go on TV if you paid me a million dollars!" [Tan 1998, 136]. Immediately after that, Suyuan claims that she wants only the best for her daughter, as she has a lot of potential, but she refuses to make herself visible. It should be noted that together with the mother's desire of exploring June's potential, the daughter constantly rejects all her mother's pieces of advice and criticism. One could add that June's emphasis on not being a genius implies a certain relation to Waverly. She feels the need to be everything Waverly is not, hence she fails in being a professional piano singer, she fails in having a successful career and probably most importantly, she fails in establishing a good relationship with her mother before her death.

In contrast to June, who constantly rejects her Chinese identity, Waverly seems to be curious about certain facets of her predecessors. As a young girl, Waverly had questioned various aspects of her ancestral culture, among which is the Chinese torture. She even asks her mother to explain what it means, but instead she promptly replies: "Chinese people do many things [...] Chinese people do business, do medicine, do painting. Not lazy like American people. We do torture. Best torture" [Tan 1998, 91]. Here one could say that Lindo explains things related to her ancestral culture by comparing it with the American one. However, she does not realize that by doing this she unwillingly creates a gap between her daughter and herself, as Waverly is familiar with the American environment in which she grew up. Because Lindo criticizes her daughter's culture, Waverly chooses to repress elements related to China. Gloria Shen argues that "while the daughters, all born in America, entirely adapt to the customs and language of the new land, the immigrant mothers still hold onto those of China" [2009, 9]. One should highlight that the narrators in the novel have different ways of perceiving and embracing cultural practices. Therefore, it is important to make a clear distinction between expectations and dreams that come from both mothers and daughters, in this way revealing the differences that occur not only because of the generation gap but also because of the Chinese vs. American cultural cruxes. Conard further argues that: "linguistic and cultural barriers, generational gaps, and childhood rebellion all contribute to the young daughters' inability to truly listen and respond to their mothers' tales" [1998, 23]. Because they refuse to listen and obey to the norms imposed by their mothers, the daughters fail in understanding not only their cultural background but also their family relationships.

One example that could reflect different ways of thinking circles around a discussion between Waverly and an American friend, in which she complains of not being able to make her mother understand when to speak and when to keep her thoughts for herself. She promptly claims that: "well, I don't know if it's explicitly stated in the law, but you can't *ever* tell a Chinese mother to shut up. You could be charged as an acces-

sory to your own murder” [Tan 1998, 173]. Her statement has to do with a background full of disappointments starting from Waverly’s decision to stop playing chess, because she was embarrassed that her mother was extremely proud of her, and ending with her plans of marrying an American, who apparently has no knowledge of behaving according to the Chinese customs and traditions.

For instance, during a dinner party held at Lindo’s house, Rich, her future husband, is not familiar with the fact that for Chinese people taking only a small portion of food is considered polite. Instead, he helps himself with big portions of shrimp and snow peas. However, the most critical moment here is when Rich criticizes mother’s cooking by saying that she should have added a little more salt. Waverly regretfully adds: “but the worst was when Rich criticized my mother’s cooking and he didn’t even know what he had done” [Tan 1998, 178]. Waverly further argues that the Chinese custom of criticizing food is not perceived in the same way in an American environment: “as is the Chinese cook’s custom, my mother always made disparaging remarks about her own cooking” [Tan 1998, 178]. Although Waverly is well aware of the fact that Rich had failed miserably in Lindo’s eyes, he, on the other hand, has a different perspective on how the event had gone. This episode clearly reflects the differences between the American and the Chinese cultures, as it highlights distinct, yet powerful, dissimilarities among people and cultural practices.

One should further explore the importance of food in one episode from *Saving Fish from Drowning* in which the Americans try to decide what kind of Chinese food they should eat:

‘What shall we order?’ Bennie asked the group.

‘No dog!’ cried Esmé .

‘How about snake?’ joked Rupert.

‘You don’t suppose they eat cats?’ Heidi added, and shuddered at the thought [Tan 2006, 69].

The characters here are the perfect embodiment of people who have insufficient knowledge about the Chinese gastronomy. It is a worldwide recognized stereotype that Asian people use certain animals in their culinary activities, where in fact, the food is mostly based on chicken, vegetables and spices.

Nevertheless, one could state that in *The Joy Luck Club* there is another section entitled “Two Kinds” in which the importance of Chinese food and festivals is crucial. Again, the motif of dinner parties is thoroughly explored as Suyuan cooks crabs to celebrate the Chinese New Year. Probably the climax of this section revolves around June and her mother, as they seem to realize that they can finally understand each other. This is probably the first time when June pays attention to her mother’s words. As they talk about one of the crabs, the reader gets acquainted with the fact that it died long before it was cooked. June intended to take the crab for herself, but Suyuan knew her daughter’s intentions and decided to leave a better one for her. Soon after the dinner June wondered what would have happened if someone else had taken the rotten crab, but with a smiling face Suyuan replied: “Only you pick that crab. Nobody else take it. I already know this. Everybody else want best quality. You thinking different” [Tan 1998, 208]. In other words, one could state that the mother is well aware of her daughter’s intentions, as she does not seem to need any additional words. Hence the motif of food perfectly blends in with the characters’ reconciliation in this way learning that in order to cope with elements related to the country of ancestral origin, one must learn how to obey and to listen to the rules imposed by that particular culture.

Taking into consideration that the American characters from both novels are portrayed as being unable to cope with the country of the Chinese ancestral origin, one should reveal certain episodes that best reflect such instances. For example, in *Saving Fish from Drowning* the eleven tourists are clearly unable to understand the different cultural practices presented in the novel. Although they empathize with the people they encounter during the tour, they cannot receive a positive feedback to their help, because of the misunderstandings that occur between the Chinese and American cultures. One example directly points to a scene in which Esmé together with her mother, Marlana, and Harry visit a temple and end up being interviewed by a Mandarin reporter, who asks Esmé if she is happy to visit the temple together with her mother and father. When Esmé explains that Marlana is her mother, but Harry is not her father, the female reporter looks surprised. In other words, in a country in which family traditions are highly respected, people find it strange to relate to such acts of controversy. The same episode depicts the reporter asking the three Americans to sing the Jingle Bells song for the audience, but Harry kindly refuses and backs away. The cameraman, however, decides to follow Harry in his search of a toilet. Surprisingly, Harry's unconscious act of urinating on a shrine is neither welcomed nor understood, and more importantly, it costs Miss Rong her job, because she was not able to instruct the group on certain issues. However, the Americans decide to help her by gathering money for her farewell tip. One could state that the Western practice of tipping someone for his/her services does not comply with the Chinese way of life.

Another example, this time, in which the differences between the Chinese people and the ones from Myanmar are present, is reflected in an episode which depicts the tourists in Burma. Here three female characters, Roxanne, Vera and Wendy encounter with Burmese people and realize that they are indeed a tribe. They are slightly different from Chinese people, meaning that women "smeared the yellow thanaka paste on their face as both sunscreen and beauty symbol. Atop their heads, they wore a length of cloth that had been swaddled into a turban" [Tan 2006, 153]. The American tourists are able to see the differences between various countries in Asia, even by looking and observing their appearance and behavior. Here one can only infer that the stereotype of Asian people being all alike is not valid anymore, since the Americans make a clear distinction between citizens from several countries in Asia. Of course, taking into consideration the mainstream image of beauty, one should bring to light that in Myanmar beauty is differently perceived in comparison with the Western blonde hair, blue eyes and light skin.

Even *The Joy Luck Club* has such elements related to the idea of mainstream beauty and appearance. In one of her stories, Lena St. Clair refuses to acknowledge her appearance as part of her ethnic identity. Her obsession with Chinese eyes is present throughout the entire section, as she believes that her mother is responsible for giving her all that is worse in Chinese culture. She regretfully recognizes that:

And my eyes, my mother gave me my eyes, no eyelids, as if they were carved on a jack-o'-lantern with two shift cuts of a short knife. I used to push my eyes in on the sides to make them rounder. Or I'd open them very wide until I could see the white parts. But when I walked around the house like that, my father asked me why I looked so scared [Tan 1998, 104].

This example perfectly illustrates Lena's rejection of her own Chinese appearance. Being born and raised in an American environment, where she could observe other girls having long thick lashes and blonde curly hair, she wishes for these things and regretfully realizes that her appearance is, in fact, Chinese. A clearer image of how Asian

women perceive their own appearance in comparison with the mainstream standards of beauty is reflected by Iijima-Hall. She states that: “the facial characteristics of the epicanthic eye fold, a ‘flat’ nose, and a broad nose bridge are common among Asians, though not all possess them. Since many Asian women desire the double eyelid and the ‘sculptured nose’ of the white American standard of beauty, many spend much time and money to adapt their features to this standard” [1995, 12]. One can now understand that Lena unwillingly experiences a virtual surgery by choosing to change the shape of her eyes in order to become truly American. Because she wants to be part of a mainstream society in which women are categorized according to imposed standards of beauty, she is prepared to repress the features inherited from her mother.

In her second story, Lena mainly discusses her relationship with Harold, her husband, and obviously the injustices she suffers: her idea of evenness is constantly challenged as their costs are equally divided. For instance, when Ying-Ying pays a visit, she observes that there is a list on the fridge which shows their monthly expenses. The mother tries to explain that if they have equal rights that doesn’t mean they have to share everything. Lena has to pay for her cat’s food, but that cat was a gift from her husband. She also needs to pay half of a dinner, even if Harold ate two dishes while she only had a salad. And more importantly, she has to pay half of the ice cream even if she is allergic to it. All these things made her wonder if she is mistreated or not. Nevertheless, after a revelatory discussion with Rose, she realizes that one should not blame his/her ethnicity for all the bad things that happened in life. She realizes that: “I think I deserve someone like Harold, and I mean in the good sense and not like bad karma. We’re equals. I’m also smart. I have common sense. And I’m intuitive, highly so. I was the one who told Harold he was good enough to start his own firm” [Tan 1998, 156-157]. Lena’s self-esteem results from her will to demonstrate that being equals in marriage does not necessarily mean that expenses should be divided in two equal parts. It means taking the other person’s actions and decisions into consideration and act accordingly. Even if she is a woman she should stand up and proudly ask for her rights.

In a similar way, *Saving Fish from Drowning* also presents female characters dominated by male ones, but the difference in this novel is that the relationships between men and women are differently portrayed. For instance, in one of the grandmother’s stories, the reader gets acquainted with a terrific episode of violence towards women. Although her story is intended to reveal aspects of divinity related to Loot and Bootie, the Younger White Brother’s descendants, she manages to create a picture full of terror. The old lady explains that during an attempt to escape from the soldiers, the Karen women and girls were captured, violently raped and mutilated. She claims with agony that the soldiers:

Raped them, the old ones too, it didn’t matter how young or old, six men to one girl, all night, all day. The screams never stopped for those two days. [...] With those who tried to fight them off, they cut off their breasts. Some of the girls died from bleeding. As for the ones who lived, when they were all used up, the soldiers shot them [Tan 2006, 282-283].

If *The Joy Luck Club* presents domestic violence towards women, *Saving Fish from Drowning* goes beyond all this and expands in the sense that it comprises various outcomes related to war and conflicts. One could only add that although the types of violence are clearly distinct, they do not fail in creating a powerful, yet striking image of male domination.

One should also explore the motif of cultural clashes when talking about these novels. In *The Joy Luck Club*, another instance that reflects the Americanized conceptions and identities of daughters is best reflected in Rose's stories, because she describes herself and her future husband Ted as entirely American. However, when she decides to attend a family picnic held by Ted's parents, she finds herself in the position of explaining to his mother, who deliberately discriminates against her and explains to her that Ted's future plans should not be hindered, that she is not Vietnamese and she has no intention of marrying her son. Despite her firm response, she later decided to marry Ted, listening to her mother and learning from her own experiences. She even claims: "Over the years, I learned to choose from the best options. Chinese people had Chinese options. American people had American options. And in almost every case, the American option was much better" [Tan 1998, 191]. Only later does she discover that there were numerous unclear things revolving around the American version, because she realizes that there were too many choices and one could easily get confused and pick the wrong one.

Just like *The Joy Luck Club*, *Saving Fish from Drowning* includes an important episode in which the cultural clashes between countries inevitably occur. For instance, the novel presents Wendy and Wyatt wanting to help a woman who stirred Wendy's interest:

'Mona Chen?' the woman said. She held up a big wad of Burmese kyats.

Wendy whispered back: 'I'm not Mona, but I can still help you.'

'She wants to change money,' Wyatt said.

'What?'

'Mona Chen. Money change. See? She has money to exchange' [Tan 2006, 159].

Nevertheless, one should take into consideration that immediately after the tourists' disappearance locals reported them missing and spotted them as being Americans for several reasons. One, a papermaker reported and described a little girl and his Chinese mother who were most likely Americans. His arguments had to do with the girl's lack of gratitude towards the things her mother bought. The most important thing is that the papermaker reported that "American children are so easy to please [...] because they have so many desires to choose from" [Tan 2006, 230]. Two, a cheroot maker claimed that none of them smoked, which directly linked to another stereotype; they do not usually support smoking and they promote this policy whenever necessary.

Thinking about recognizing one's mistakes, Black Spot from *Saving Fish from Drowning* finally decides to tell the truth to both the American tourists and his people. Just as in another previously mentioned debate, the Americans try to convince the Karen people that no harm will happen to the No Name Place, once the soldiers find them. Nevertheless, Black Spot regretfully recognizes that Rupert is nothing but an ordinary man who loves to do magic tricks with cards, just like the legendary Seraphineas Andrews. The narrator portrays Black Spot in a moment of clarity when he admits the truth: "He was ashamed to realize that the boy was not the Reincarnated One. The boy was not the Younger White Brother or the Lord of Nats. And the ten other people were not his disciples or his retinue of soldiers. They were tourists who had attracted nothing but bad luck" [Tan 2006, 414]. One could only infer that together with this stage, the rebels acknowledge their mistake. They start to pray and soon enough the Americans find their way to civilization and face another potential danger: mass media and the worldwide influence upon their disappearance and the No Name Place. However, due to a signed certificate on live television, neither the Americans are blamed for their adventures in the forest, nor the Karen people for the abduction. More importantly, they are given land and a sense of equality, as the government of Myanmar claimed the full support of diversity among minorities.

Returning to the last section of *The Joy Luck Club*, one must add that it presents June fulfilling her mother's wish. By visiting the country of her ancestral origin, she eventually meets her sisters, in this way fulfilling her mother's and her aunties' wish: to tell them about their mother. To put it differently, June succeeds in accepting her two identities only by familiarizing herself with Suyuan's homeland. She finally realizes that: "Now I also see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood" [Tan 1998, 188]. Once she meets her sisters, June is able to accept her mother's culture and she claims it as her own. Zeng also brings strong arguments related to this section of the novel and mentions that: "we see an ethnic awakening, an isolated self embraced by a cultural wholeness, and the rupture in a diasporic family healed by connecting with the larger family of China" [2003, 7]. The reader can now understand that the stories heard by the daughters during their childhood taught them how to listen, how to obey, and more importantly, how to reveal secrets. Moreover, one could say that the ultimate reconciliation of the mothers and daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* is a result of breaking silence, expressing true self, and regaining their voices.

Saving Fish from Drowning, on the other hand, has a peculiar, yet interesting ending, because it circles back to the questions raised in the beginning of the novel. Bibi finds out that she died because she lost her balance when she decorated the house with Christmas lights and she fell on a comb, which immediately cost her life. Nevertheless, one should not forget about the mother-daughter relationship and the legacy left behind. Bibi is now able to remember that her mother's hairpin was in fact a hair comb; the hair comb which caused her death. The narrator further recognizes that there is in fact no end to any story, as she mistakenly thought when she died and when her friends were lost. She also waited for the forty-nine days to pass in order to disappear, as some Buddhist people think, but still nothing happened. Bibi joyfully adds that: "That is the nature of ending, it seems. They never end. When all the missing pieces of your life are found, put together with the memory of glue and reason, there are more pieces to be found" [Tan 2006, 472]. In other words one could not draw a clear conclusion from all the events that were presented in the novel, as the narrator implies that things do not have in fact a particular ending; they always evolve and allow other events to develop into a new story.

In discussing *The Joy Luck Club*, this paper has dealt with principles of cultural inheritance and Chinese practices as seen from the perspective of women. Through their stories, the mothers prove that one has to accept both American and Chinese identities in order to have a clear perspective on life. Moreover, together with the rewriting of the mythological Chinese stories, the mothers learn to revise certain aspects related to their ethnicity. According to Li Zeng "*The Joy Luck Club* ultimately reconfigures a Chinese-American identity, that is, a well-balanced ethnic bipolarity in a diasporic individual" [2003, 7]. Hence, the broken relationships in a diasporic family could only be healed by connecting the individual with a larger family in China embracing in this way ethnic aspects related to the ancestral culture.

It has also been demonstrated that *Saving Fish from Drowning* presents Bibi Chen in succeeding to rewrite not only her own history, but also her friends'. One could clearly state that Bibi acts as a mediator between cultures, as her spirit omnipresent throughout the entire novel. Hence, due to Bibi Chen's storytelling the reader can enjoy the novel in all its aspects. In her essay Chiang Hsin-chen rightfully considers that "to embrace her new identity as a global writer while not abandoning her ethnic heritage, Tan demonstrates a new possibility for her ethnic fellow writers" [2008, 10]. In other words, even if *Saving Fish from Drowning* does not resemble Tan's other novels, meaning that it is not so much concerned with the relationships between women and reconciliation through storytelling, the reader can clearly point to certain elements specific for the Chinese culture.

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