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Contributions to Transnational Feminism

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Volume 1

LIT

Silvia Schultermandl

Transnational Matrilineage

Mother–Daughter Conflicts in Asian American Literature

LIT

CHAPTER THREE

The Politics of Transnational Memory in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

> "I can never things I didn't understand in the first place" Jing-mei Woo in "The Joy Luck Club"

With the publication of her debut novel *The Joy Luck Club* in 1989, Amy Tan launched a wave of intensive academic and popular interest in Asian American mother-daughter literature and brought Asian American women writers to a large readership in ways that no other writer has since been able to achieve. Much more accessible than Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Tan's novel opened up a market for Asian American fiction on mother-daughter relationships, so much so, that the often-quoted "Amy-Tan Phenomenon" continues to be the ground of all comparison in mother-daughter literature in North America and, most recently, also in Asia.[33] Critics, and probably authors as well, have been trying to crack to code of Amy Tan's immensely successful first novel. In her essay "Sugar Sisterhood: Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon," Sau-ling C. Wong takes into consideration the literary and social circumstances that might have contributed to Tan's crossover success. Its subject matter, argues Wong, is one of the most important factors for the novel's success with a mostly white female reading audience which "appears to have a keen appetite for mother-daughter stories by and about women of color" (1995, 177). Given the large amount of mother-daughter writing by and about Asian American women, subject matter cannot be assumed to have had the greatest impact on the emergence of the Amy Tan Phenomenon. On the contrary, as Wong argues, the novel caters well to the expectations of its reading audience by offering "a convergence of ethnic group-specific literary tradition and ideological needs by the white-dominated readership – including the feminist readership – for the Other's presence as both mirror and differentiator" (177).

The fact that Tan's success was carried by a predominantly white, predominantly female audience places the novel at the heart of ongoing controversies about the cross-cultural reception of multi-ethnic American literatures. The question of why these readers were so taken by the complex relationships

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[33] See, for instance, Tamara S. Wagner's "'After another round of tissues': 'Bad Time' Fiction and the Amy Tan-Syndrome in Recent Singaporean Novels" (2003).

between the first-generation Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters is worth exploring. In the context of globalization in general and China's growing economic power in particular, Tan's depiction of China and of Chinese American women offers many incentives for a discussion of how American readers have been viewing China in the past few decades. Yuan Shu's recent deconstruction of the unmistakably "Asian values" in Tan's novel, and his observation of a common conflation of Asian and Asian American cultural identities on the part of a non-Asian American college student audience, makes apparent the persistent and preconceived notions about the exoticism of Asian American literature's depiction of the "Other." Shu's main observation is that reading audiences of *The Joy Luck Club* bring to the text existing notions about Asian and Asian American culture. These assumptions about the nature of Asian American identities often echo prevalent stereotypes and are pivotal to Fatimah Tobing Rony's assertion that "the exotic is always already known" (6). The occurrence of such preconceived reading practices of Asian American texts stresses the importance of investigating Tan's politics of representation of Chinese and Chinese American culture through the complex and conflictive mother-daughter relationships, the subject of Tan's novel.

In this chapter I look at Tan's discursive construction of the cultural memory with which the mothers and daughters approach their matrilineage. I am most interested in the daughters' appropriations of their Chinese heritage through the use of memory as cultural vehicle. In *The Joy Luck Club*, memory is a cultural narrative which serves the function of narrating the mothers' appropriations of their lives in China and their immigrant experiences in the U.S.; memory also has the function of delineating the daughters' experiences of growing up as daughters of immigrant mothers and dealing with their mothers' memories of a country and culture with which they themselves are not familiar. My main focus of attention is on the daughters' relationship to her mother and thereby to their cultural heritage. My analysis of the daughter protagonists' difficult relationships with their mothers and, by extension, with their Chinese heritage, follows Sau-ling C. Wong's suggestion that the "Americanized daughter, who needs to be enlightened on things Chinese, serves as a convenient, unobstrusive stand-in for the mainstream reading public" (1995, 197). Therefore, the aspect of the daughters' relationships to their Chinese heritage that I am most concerned with is their difficulty in establishing a sense of feminist solidarity with their mothers and their collective, matrilineage ancestry. This difficulty, as I argue in a later section of this chapter, becomes apparent from one protagonist's actual experience of China: when Jing-mei travels to China in order to meet her twin half-sisters, the image she created of China based on her mother's storytelling and her personal experience of China as an

American tourist collide. I propose the term *belated memory* for this confrontation between memory and experience, a confrontation through which her memory of her mother's homeland is being validated through her personal experience. For this purpose, I focus for my present project on the first and the last chapters of the novel, two of the four that Jing-mei narrates; the fact that in the first chapter, Jing-mei narrates her mother's memories of China and in the last chapter narrates her personal experience of and in China lends itself well for an investigation of the narrative representation of memory and exemplifies the belated nature of the daughter's memory. I begin by placing Tan's novel in the context of memory studies in ethnic American literatures before I emphasize the transnational aspects that characterize the difficulty Chinese American daughters have in remembering their cultural legacies.

Cultural Memory in Multi-Ethnic American Literature

The use of memory as literary performance of ethnic consciousness in U.S. culture has been discussed in literary scholarship with considerable attention to the specific functions memory has in establishing alternative histories of American culture. First and foremost, two collections of essays, *Memory, Narrative, and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures* (1994) and *Memory and Cultural Politics: New Approaches to Ethnic American Literatures* (1996), edited by Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett Jr. and Robert E. Hogan, recognize cultural memory as ubiquitous trope in ethnic American literatures. The two collections point out the political implications that memory has, especially in the context of American culture studies: "What we study are the traces of memory in language and narrative and the ways individual writers challenge it: opposing to memory its dark shadow, forgetting; reconsidering its relation to history and oral tradition; erasing and revisiting it; preserving or recovering it" (Singh et al. 1994, 17). G. Thomas Couser rightfully observes that for ethnic minorities, who have been excluded from mainstream history, "the only history *is* memory" (Singh et al. 1996, 107, original emphasis). The diasporic experience of first-generation immigrants and their American-born children often determines memory as the only viable means of staying in touch and symbolically *returning* to their cultural origins. What Richard Rodriguez claims for the cultural transmittance among the Mexican immigrant population echoes the function of diaspora memoric in general: "Like the wandering Jew, Mexicans had no true home but the tabernacle of memory" (Mendoza and Shakar 197).

This exploration of cultural memory is especially important for women writers who write the complexities of gender and ethnicity into American

history. bell hooks, for instance, asserts: "Remembering makes us subjects in history. It is dangerous to forget" (Mariani 54). In her book *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990), hooks affirms that "[t]here is an effort to remember that is expressive of the need to create spaces where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering and triumph in ways that transform present reality" (1990, 147). The politics of memory in ethnic women's writing is, in the words of hooks, "a struggle of memory against forgetting" (ibid.). In her essay "Narrating Memory," Terry DeHay observes that "[t]he minority woman must look to her history, both to preserve it and to find out who she is. She needs to have a clear vision of her past, in order to re-vision the present. This is the process of re-membering" (Singh et al. 1994, 31).

In the literature of matrilineage, memory is the main device through which the American-born daughters connect with the lives of their foremothers. Through memory narratives, women writers of color have been honoring and preserving the culture of their foremothers, a culture that has been excluded for generations from history in general and mainstream literature in particular. This re-claiming of their own and their community's histories, their collective memories, and the minority cultures preserved by their mothers, allows women writers to assert their identities in a society that doubly marginalizes them. Through stories of multi-layered memories, many Asian American women writers portray the interconnectedness of the daughters' lives with their ancestors' as carriers of their cultural legacies. In her cultural narrative "Grandma's Story," Vietnamese American writer, filmmaker, and composer Trinh T. Minh-ha, for instance, describes a daughter's collective memory as a source of cultural richness. In particular, Trinh acknowledges that in this act of remembrance itself, lies the possibility to establish feminist solidarity and female alliance:

> The world's earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women. Patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, from body to body, hand to hand. In the process of storytelling, speaking and listening refer to realities that do not involve just the imagination. The speech is seen, heard, and smelled, tasted, and touched. It destroys, brings to life, nurtures. Every woman partakes in the chain of guardianship and of transmission. (1989, 121)

Traditionally, the literature of matrilineage recognizes the cultural collective as continuum whose continuity depends on the individual woman and her interaction with her culture. As Trinh's quote suggests, the interconnectedness between the individual members helps preserve a history and tradition that are

separate from that of the dominant culture. Hence, the claiming of literary and biological foremothers is a highly political act of commemoration of those who are forgotten in Western mainstream history. However, the question that is most interesting in this context is *what* the American-born generation (including American-born daughter Amy Tan and the protagonists in her novels) is remembering, and, by logical extension, what it is more or less in line with Kingston's concept of "deliberately forgetting" (1976, 16).

Belated Cultural Memory

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* emphasizes the politics of representing cultural memory by narrativizing memory. Composed of four sets of four first person narratives told by four immigrant Chinese American mothers (Suyuan Woo whose stories are narrated by her daughter Jing-mei, Lindo Jong, An-mei Hsu, and Ying-ying St. Clair) and their American-born daughters (Jing-mei Woo, Waverly Jong, Rose Hsu Jordan, and Lena St. Clair), Tan's highly acclaimed first novel forcefully combines the cultural narrative with the conflicts innate to the mother-daughter relationship. In her portrayal of mothers and daughters who are emotionally alienated from each other because of cultural differences, Tan challenges the idea that the daughter is the embodiment of her mother's personal memory. Although often claimed as an example of matrilineal mother-daughter texts,[34] *The Joy Luck Club* epitomizes the American–born daughter's difficulty re-membering her collective heritage. This difficulty complicates the daughter's interaction with her mother, and, as evident from Jing-mei's case, also with her mother's memory.

Memory plays a central role in the novel, both thematically as well as structurally, so much so that critics have referred to the novel as "a collection of intricate and haunting memories" (Shen 234). For instance, already in the dedication of the novel does Tan evoke memory as the overriding theme. Tan writes: "To my mother and the memory of her mother" and then below "You asked me once what I would remember. This, and much more." The two inscriptions represent memory as a vehicle of matrilineage and at the same time open up the dialogue about the potential of memory as a parameter of cultural identity. Furthermore, the chapters of the novel that Jing-mei narrates also present three kinds of narratives: her memories of her mother, incidents that occurred when Jing-mei was a young girl, a young adult, and an adult woman in her early thirties, and her mother's memories, framed by her own narratives

[34] Marina Heung engages Tan's novel as example of an intact mother/daughter plot after. See also, Suzanna Danuta Walters' argument in *Lives Together / Worlds Apart* (180-84).

of her present life after her mother's death. Moreover, memory also configures the narrative structure of the novel. The absence of a chronological plot development foregrounds the episodic and flash-back like emergence of different memories of specific life situations. For instance, the first set of narratives, all headed under the title "Feathers from a Thousand *Li* Away," depicts the mother's lives as young girls in China; the second set, "The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates," depicts their lives as immigrant mothers of American-born daughters and their relationships with their daughters as young girls; the third set, "American Translation," narrates the relationship between the mothers as old women and their adult daughters; and the forth set, "Queen Mother of the Western Skies," depicts the mothers' lives in China as adult women and their immigrant experiences in the U.S. The narrative voices of these four sections are alternating: the mothers narrate the first and the last set of narratives and the daughters the middle ones. This general pattern is disrupted by the fact that Jing-mei tells a narrative in all of the four sections, including the first chapter of the first sect, and then the closing chapters of each of the other three sets of narratives. While the mothers and daughters interweave their present lives with memories of the past, Jing-mei's stories additionally contain episodes that depict her mother's memories. Therefore, in Jing-mei's role as a daughter and in her narrative agency lie the most complex aspects of memory in Tan's novel.

Through this interconnectedness of the mothers' and the daughters' stories, Tan's novel depicts the past as being interconnected with the present. In line with Ben Xu's assertion that "If the past casts a shadow on the present through memory, the present also re-imposes on the past by means of memory" (7), the thematic complexity of memory becomes evident in the novel in the fact that the daughter protagonist Jing-mei Woo has difficulty retaining and retelling the story that her mother used to tell her. The story in question is a story of loss as well as of survival: it is the story of her mother's flight from the invasion of the Japanese troops in China during World War II, a flight during which she is forced to abandon her young twin daughters along the roadside at the outskirts of Kweilin; but it is also the story of the Joy Luck Club's weekly meetings her mother hosts in China to celebrate with her neighbors the fact that they survived the hardships in their war-torn communities. While with the founding of the Joy Luck Club with the Chinese immigrants in San Francisco and their weekly meetings, Suyuan Woo adds a new chapter of survival to her life story, she is unable to reconnect with the daughters she had to give up in China, and thus her story of loss remains one of loss. It is this story of loss that her daughter Jing-mei symbolically inherits, and along with it the mission to complete her mother's quest to reunite with her half-sisters in China.

However, it becomes clear in the opening chapter of the novel that Jing-mei finds herself to be ill-equipped to fulfill this task. Never having taken her mother's stories seriously and never having anticipated the cultural importance her mother's stories hold ("I never thought my mother's Kweilin Story was anything but a Chinese fairy tale" [25]), Jing-mei cannot rely on her memory in order to fulfill her role as her mother's successor, symbolically as the fourth player at the Sunday night mah jong game her mother used to host, and figuratively as the person who should recover her mother's lost daughters. The reasons for Jing-mei's inability to tell the story of her cultural memory are testimony to her degree of alienation from Chinese culture and are the result of her life-long conflict with her mother. This, we learn throughout the novel, now comes to be a detrimental loss to Jing-mei, who, after her mother's death, finds herself unable to keep the memory of her mother alive and recognizes this as a missing link in her own identity quest.

Jing-mei Woo's difficulties assuming the responsibility of perpetuating the matrilineal heritage forcefully illustrate the complexity of memory. Since her mother's recent death, Jing-mei is confronted with the challenge of taking over her mother's place, figuratively as well as literally, at the monthly mah-jong game. There, her ineptitude to replace her mother becomes the epitome of a generation of culturally alienated daughters who are unable to handle their ancestral memories. Such inability leaves the Joy Luck mothers with the feeling of being emotionally and culturally duped: "Imagine, a daughter not knowing her own mother!" (40). The Joy Luck mothers are appalled by the fact that Jing-mei knows so little about her mother's hardships in China, her mother's children before she immigrated to the U.S., and her mother's dedication to the Chinese American community. They are terrified by the idea that Jing-mei's ignorance about her mother's live pushes the memory of Suyuan more and more into the past and into the forgotten. This fear of being forgotten, as becomes evident from the Joy Luck mothers' reactions, is prominent among the first-generation immigrant women of the Joy Luck Club: Jing-mei realizes:

> And then it occurs to me. They are frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English. They see that joy and luck do not mean the same to their daughters, that to these American-born minds 'joy luck' is not a word, it does not exist. They see daughters who will bear

> grandchildren born without any connecting hope
> passed from generation to generation. (40-41)

This passage epitomizes the immigrant mothers' desire for prolongation and recovery of their cultural heritage and their personal achievements after immigrating to the United States.[35]

Therefore, memory in *The Joy Luck Club* unfolds as an important vehicle for the second-generation immigrant daughter to explore her cultural heritage of her family's country of origin. Reiterating Marianne Hirsch's notion of "postmemory" (1997), Agnieszka Bedingfield argues that ethnic memory between different generations of members of immigrant families relies on three main components: transference, translation, and transcription. These three constituents of the diasporic memory, in Bedingfield's terminology, define the cultural memory of the diasporic condition as "trans-memory," characterizing first-hand memories that the second-generation immigrant authors handle through the process of transference, translation, and transcription. Such reliance on indirect memory refers to the concept which Marianne Hirsch describes as "the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated" (1997, 22). Bedingfield's appropriation of Hirsch's concept of postmemory as "second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences" (ibid.) denotes aptly the Joy Luck daughters' complex task of dealing with their own experience.

I would like to expand Bedingfield's definition of trans-memory by addressing the transnational representation which becomes evident in the daughter's narrative agency. Any form of cultural appropriation from the perspective of diaspora and exile is often determined by a person's attempt to achieve a sense of self that recuperates partially the cultural origin into the diasporic location. Stuart Hall's definition of identity as production is helpful in this context (222). Hall argues that cultural identity "is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some

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[35] Numerous critics have focused on the mothers' need for a preservation of their collective memory. See, for instance, Chandra Tyler Mountain, "'The Struggle of Memory Against Forgetting': Cultural Survival in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," *Paintbrush* 22 (Autumn 1995): 39-50; Michael Delucchi, "Self and Identity Among Aging Immigrants in *The Joy Luck Club*," *Journal of Aging and Identity* 3.2 (1998): 59-66; and Claudia Kovach Smorada, "Side-Stepping Death: Ethnic Identity, Contradiction, and the Mother(land) in Amy Tan's Novels," *Fu-Jen Studies: Literature and Linguistics* 24 (1991): 31-45.

final and absolute Return [sic]. [...] The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as simple, factual 'past,' since our relation to it, like the child's relations to the mother, is always-already 'after the break'" (226). In the portrayal of Jing-mei's attempt to relate to Chinese culture through the memory of her mother's life, Tan's novel provides an interesting case study for Hall's concept of a diasporic production of identity. If we take for granted Hall's assertion that the past continues to speak to Jing-mei, then we need to explore the different ways this interaction between present and past affects her ability to understand the origin of her Chinese ancestry. Transnational feminism lends viable tools for this discussion of memory and identity. Most forcefully, emphasizing the representation of the "Other" culture within Jing-mei's narratives in the tradition of transnational feminist theory, brings into sharper focus the ideological underpinnings that reverberate in Tan's depiction of a mother-daughter relationship that integrates memory as a component of their personal interaction and of their collective responsibility.

Tan's treatment of an unreliable memory, rooted in and overshadowed by a fierce mother-daughter conflict, raises issues about the preservation of cultural memory of the diasporic 'home' land. Both first- and second-generation immigrant women, as the examples of Jing-mei Woo and Lindo Jong suggest, ultimately have to return to China in order to be able to define their ethnic consciousness without relying on imposed stereotypes they have about Chinese culture and about American culture. Through this return to the origins of their cultural heritage, Tan implies a certain belatedness of memory as part of the diasporic experience of Asian Americans. What is most interesting about this intervention of a belated memory is that the second-generation American daughters experience a certain kind of displacement and alienation not only in relation to their mothers' pasts, but also in relation to the influence their mothers' lives in China continue to have on their lives in the U.S. In this context, memory becomes a contestant of cross-cultural communication as well as a vehicle of transnationality. The term belatedness, in this specific context, echoes the meaning of the term in Spivak's usage, namely as reference to the "time lag between sign and referent in colonialist cultural indoctrination" (Joseph 2002, 73), but does so in its reversed form. While Spivak's use of the term belatedness emphasizes the experience of subaltern subjects with American indoctrination (1999, 141-42), my use of the term belatedness implies the confrontation between memory of and lived experience in the 'homeland' from the second-generation immigrant daughter's transnational perspective.

Mothers and daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* experience this aspect of transnationality through memory quite differently, and the representations of their memories in Tan's novel invite an intertextual reading that structures

thematically the individual chapters according to a specific subject. For instance, the vignette which precedes the first chapter of the novel initiates the reader into the issue of loss and recovery and the role that memory plays in this context.[36] The theme of loss and recovery then appears throughout the stories told by Jing-mei, both in relation to her mother's life and to her own. The swan that the old woman in the vignette loses and the single swan feather that she is able to keep upon immigrating to the U.S. signifies her transition from actual lived experience in a specific culture to the symbolic recovery of that experience through memory. The depreciation from "a swan too beautiful to eat" to "only one swan feather" (17), together with the implied trauma of her immigrant experience ("And then she had to fill out so any forms she forgot why she had come and what she had left behind") characterizes this transition from lived to related experience though memory and emphasizes the implied shifts and alterations. While it is the old woman, possibly an iconic figure for the entire generation of the Joy Luck mothers, who experiences this transformation from lived experience to remembered experience in the vignette, in the first and the last chapter of the novel it is "her" daughter who is supposed to come to terms with this shift. And as already announced in the vignette, the difficulty of getting the daughter to understand the significance of the swan feather, hence of the mother's memory, and to give the mother the power to tell her daughter "in perfect American English" (17) about the significance of the swan feather, constitutes a major problem in the transmittance of the mother's memory. The novel's narrative structure shifts in the sense that Jing-mei's narrative voice from narrating her memories to narrating her mother's memories. This shift amplifies the geographic binary opposition between China and the U.S., and the temporal binary opposition between the distant past and the recent past or even the present. The first and the last chapter of the novel elaborate on this theme of loss and recovery. For instance, Jing-mei's inability to recover her mother's stories through memory is rooted in her lack of understanding of the circumstances depicted in her mother's stories. In other words, Jing-mei's inability to do justice to her mother's life story stems from the fact that her mother always remains a cultural "Other" to her. Thus, the shift in the narrative situation form a homodiegetic to a heterodiegetic narrator mirrors the shift on the level of physical location.

[36] For instance, Wendy Ho even uses the subject matter of the first vignette, the "swan-feather mothers and coca-coal daughters" as entry point into her discussion of Tan's novel (1996, 327-45).

In the context of Jing-mei's act of remembering her mother's stories, this trans-memory is not only set in a different narrative diegesis but also in a different geographical, geopolitical and cultural space which contributes to the discursive "othering" of the mother's memories. If memory is a symbolic recovery of the past into the present, the diachronicity of memory also employs temporal difference as a marker on an "Other" time. The novel operates with two different mechanisms of enforcing this othering of the mother's memories: one is through Jing-mei's difficulty remembering her mother's life stories precisely because they are so foreign to her, and the other one is through her trip to China, during which her trans-memories are being renegotiated. The discursive juxtaposition of her trans-memory with her experience renders her relationship to her collective past a belated memory. Because she cannot rely on her memory of her mother's stories, despite the fact the she is supposed to be the missing link between her mother and her mother's past life in China, Jing-mei travels to China to meet with her half sisters. This meeting can be seen as her personal encounter with the subjects of her mother's stories, and thus, by extension, with the embodiment of her mother's memories of China. Therefore, to meet the subjects of the story, a story that she mistook until recently for a "Chinese fairy tale" (25), echoes the reversal of the shift from experience to memory that the old woman in the vignette confronts. These two circumstances, Jing-mei's encounter with the subjects of her mother's past life through storytelling and through first-hand experience, as I illustrate throughout the remaining part of this chapter, determine the complexity of memory in the transnational context of the relationship between mothers and daughters in *The Joy Luck Club*. Thus, on behalf of a generation of Americanized daughters, Jing-mei asserts: "I can never remember things I didn't understand in the first place" (19). This statement contains the dilemma of the entire generation of Joy Luck daughters, who realize that in order to be able to embrace their cultural heritage they need to be able to understand their mothers' life stories even if they are set in a time and place that is foreign to them.

Recovering the Past through Memory

The first way in which Jing-mei learns about her Chinese heritage is through her mother's storytelling. Despite the fact that Jing-mei assumes the narrative agency of her mother's life after Suyuan Woo's death, and thus seems to be able to lend her own narrative agency to the accounting for her collective, matrilineal voice, she also appears to be aware of her position of an outsider when doing so. This insider/outsider duality of her cultural agency can appear confusing and misleading on the level of narrative structure, since it is never

quite clear whether she is indeed a reliable narrator of her mother's life or whether she fills the gaps in her cultural understanding with acquired and internalized stereotypes about Chinese culture. This is important in the following analysis of Jing-mei's explicitly distanced depiction of her mother and of Chinese American culture. Jing-mei's narratives follow a clear pattern: the first person narrative perspective shifts from Jing-mei to Suyuan, from mother to daughter. This shift in the narrative perspective raises the question as to how reliable a narrator of her mother's stories she can be. The question arises because at different instances in the novel, Tan depicts Jing-mei as unable to understand and relate to the cultural customs her mother continually practices within the Chinese American community, such as her mistaking of the monthly gatherings of secret meetings of an illegal group (28). Because these implied mis-interpretations precede the supposedly true story about Suyuan Woo's life in China, her role as a reliable narrator is questionable. For instance, immediately before Jing-mei re-narrates the event of her mother's having to leave behind her twin daughters when fleeing from the Japanese troops, she calls attention to the fact that she is confused about the stories of her mother's life and never knows what is true and what is just "a Chinese fairy tale" (25). This is different from Kingston's use of a mother-daughter aesthetic in *The Woman Warrior* because the reader always knows who is speaking in which chapter of *The Joy Luck Club*. In fact, the individual chapters of the novel bear the names of their narrators. Hence, with the exception of the chapters in which Jing-mei tells her mother's stories, their narratives are always characterized by an autodiegenic narrative situation, one in which the main protagonist is also the narrator. And even in the chapters where Jing-mei tells her mother's stories, the narrative situation is made explicit through the framing of Suyuan's narrative by her daughter's introduction, in which she gives the context of her own storytelling as well as of the context in which her mother used to tell her these stories.

Exceeding the narratives of the "generational conflict" (Lowe 1991, 26), the individual stories of *The Joy Luck Club* capture the complexity of cultural memory in a transnational context. The retention of cultural memory and the related ethnic and gender consciousness is different for the two generations of Chinese American women in the novel. The mothers ("aunties") of the Joy Luck Club feel an immediate sense of loss of their Chinese homeland and experience this special transition and cultural transference most directly. Told from their post-immigration perspectives, the mothers' narratives in Tan's novel convey the sense of ambiguity toward the Chinese homeland. On the one hand, the narratives depict candidly the hardships and struggles young women deal with in misogynist, patriarchal Chinese culture and within the Confucian

family traditions. On the other hand the narratives describe how the mothers made use of their sharp insight of and familiarity with the dynamics of traditional Chinese culture in order to subvert the impositions and restrictions on their own lives and to free themselves from oppression. Lindo Wong's story "Red Candle" is good example of the double message the mothers' narratives send. Instead of succumbing to the misogynist rules that determined her acceptance of an arranged marriage, Lindo makes use of the Confucian family model[37] and gets out of the marriage by claiming that the family's ancestors appeared to her in a dream and announced to her that one of the family's servant girls is their son's "true spiritual wife" (65). And by convincing the inlaws that the ancestors had discovered that the girl was "of imperial blood" (65) and had impregnated her with the longed-for male family heir, Lindo not only saves her own life but also the life of the servant, whose secret pregnancy with the delivery man's child she turns from a potential disgrace to a prophecy (65).

In addition to this ambiguous relationship to traditional Chinese culture, the mothers have very contradictory opinions about life in the U.S. On the one hand, the mothers find very compelling the exceptionalist notion that "[y]ou could become anything you wanted to be in America" (132) while on the other hand, they criticize American culture for its lack of values. The very same is true for the way they raise their daughters. Thomas J. Ferraro argues in *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth Century America* (1993) that despite that fact that the search for a better life is often the family's main motivation to immigrate to the U.S. in the first place, immigrant parents also want their children to honor their home-culture. While they do wish their daughters to become prodigy children and to take advantage of the seemingly endless possibilities American culture has to offer, the Joy Luck aunties also criticize their daughters for being too American and not Chinese enough. In many instances, the mothers become aware of the fact that it is difficult to have the best of both worlds: Lindo Jong articulates this wish: "I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these two things don't mix? (254).

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[37] In *Between Worlds*, Amy Ling lists the Three Obediences and Four Virtues Confucius attributed to Chinese Women: "The Three Obediences enjoined a woman to obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her eldest son after her husband's death. The Four Virtues decreed that she be chaste; her conversation courteous and not gossipy; her deportment graceful but not extravagant; her leisure spent in perfecting needlework and tapestry for beautifying the home" (3).

The function of the mothers' narratives seems to be to define the ongoing identity negotiation between their origins in China and their new beginnings in the U.S. The arrangement of the individual narratives, two sets of four stories that symbolically embrace the daughter narratives, define the mothers' stories as a backdrop of the daughters' identity negotiations and as a frame in which the daughters' searches for selfhood take place. I would even suggest that the mothers' lives, because they are communicated through the stories they tell, constitute the reason for the daughters' identity negotiations. By having to learn how to confront and best interpret their mothers' stories, the daughters experience the ways in which memory influences their ongoing identity negotiations. In addition, the mothers' narratives express strong criticism of the one-dimensional representation of Chinese Americans in American popular culture. They are particularly appalled when their own daughters use them to single out the flaws of their cultural heritage. When Waverly Jong inquires details about the alleged cruelty of Chinese customs, her mother Lindo replies: "Chinese people have many things. [...] Chinese people do business, do medicine, do painting. Not lazy like American people. We do torture. Best torture" (91). By using playfully and subversively stereotypical images of Chinese culture, Lindo applies what Sau-ling Wong has described as "counter-Orientalist" agency in order to decolonize concepts of Chineseness in the U.S. (Palumbo-Liu 190-91). For instance, Lindo asserts that supposedly traditional Chinese proverbs in fortune cookies are invented "nonsense" attempts at correcting misconceptions about Chinese culture in the U.S. (Kim 1982, 23-32). Thus, when the daughters define their mothers by means of orientalist stereotypes of Chinese culture, as Jing-mei Woo does by claiming that Chinese mothers communicate their love "not through hugs and kisses but with stern offerings of steamed dumplings, duck's gizzard, and crab" (202), the readers need to be aware of the problems that such orientalist depictions entail and need to challenge the daughters' biased representations of their immigrant Chinese American women.

The question that remains, however, is the question to what extent Tan solicits or averts such responses? For instance, the fact that the mothers' stories are set, to a large degree, in the past and the daughter's in the present also amplifies the cultural chasm between mothers and daughters. One can argue that this dichotomization on the level of the narratives' temporalities epitomize the complex dynamics of the mother-daughter relationships of the novel. Moreover, as unreliable as the depictions of Chinese culture may be on account of Jing-mei's narrative ambivalence, the intervention of the joy luck mothers' stories does provide details about Chinese culture and customs that Jing-mei might not be able to present. Tan's use of details and other references to Chinese culture, however, has often been target of criticism. In "Sugar Sister-

hood," Wong points out numerous misuses and mistranslations of Chinese words and the faulty characterization of typically Chinese customs (Palumbo-Liu 1995, 180-85). In her essay "Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?: Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and the Chinese-American Autobiographical Controversy," Wong calls attention to Kingston's quasi-authentic depiction of the Stockton Chinatown. By the same token, Tan's depictions of Chinese traditions, especially when articulated through the perspectives of the "aunties," also run the risk of exoticizing Chinese American culture. Wong speaks of an "Othering accomplished by temporal distancing" (Palumbo-Liu 1995, 186), one that enforces the binary opposition between the U.S. (present) and China (distant past). This temporal difference between the individual sets of stories, Wong concludes, discursively pits mothers and daughters, as well as the cultures they "represent," against each other in ways that replicate the dynamics of the mother-daughter conflict itself.

Experience and Ideology in the Motherland

The second, and more immediate, way for Jing-mei to experience the culture of her mother's homeland is during her trip to China. Her trip to China is an important moment in the novel, both in terms of content and in terms of narrative structure. For instance, during this trip, the binary opposition between the U.S. of the present and the China of the past is being reconfigured, and, as I will point out below, reinforced. While many critics have discussed the narrative strategies of the beginning of Tan's novel, I see in the closing chapter a crucial aspect that helps us understand *The Joy Luck Club* in terms of its discursive construction of the mother-daughter relationship in Asian American literature and that helps locate Tan's novel within Asian American critique at large. Catherine Romagnolo argues that the narrative beginnings in *The Joy Luck Club* are of "ideological significance" because of their resistance to discourses of "authentic origins" in the question of the protagonists' identities (90). Romagnolo proposes that reading critically these ideological dimensions of the narrative beginnings brings into focus "a critique of the very concept of origins – especially in its relation to 'American,' 'Chinese,' and 'Chinese American' identity" precisely because such a critique "illuminates the discursive constructedness of authenticity, origins, and identity, thereby problematizing reductive cultural representations of female, American, and Asian American subjectivity" (90). While critics like Romagnolo pay close attention to the expository quality of the first few pages of Tan's novel, I would like to argue that the same "ideological significance" that holds for the narrative beginnings also applies to the narrative ending of the novel. Because Tan's narrative style

in *The Joy Luck Club* is circular, and because the individual chapters dialogue with one another on an intertextual level (Souris), the closing chapter reiterates Tan's strategies of narrativization of Chinese American cultural memory. In this last chapter, Tan's treatment of authenticity and origin is, contrary to Romagnolo's observation about the narrative beginning, not so subversive but operates with a highly essentialist approach. This completion of the narrative plot and of the thematic diversity of the novel's various accounts of Chinese American culture climaxes with Jing-mei's trip to China.

Jing-mei's trip to China constitutes the climax of her identity quest and ideological appropriation of China. During this trip, her very first trip to China, she is supposed to meet the twin daughters from her mother's first marriage. It has been Suyuan's wish throughout her life to find the abandoned babies and bring them into the family, just as much as it has been her wish that Jing-mei would understand and cultivate her Chinese heritage. Both events occur during this trip, which lends the novel a rather unforeseeable happy ending: Jing-mei not only finds her mother's "daughters in China" (39), she also finds her Chinese identity. Interestingly, Tan does not challenge this sudden metamorphosis from an American to a Chinese woman. Quite on the contrary, the novel reiterates the same essentialist argumentation that ethnicity and culture are biological predispositions, an argumentation it offers in the first chapter. Whereas at the beginning of the novel, the joy luck aunties try to convince Jing-mei that "[her] mother is in [her] bones" (40), at the end of the novel Jing-mei concurs with her mother's argument that her Chineseness "is in [her] blood, waiting to be let go" (267) and experiences this transformation as soon as she enters China: "I feel the skin on my forehead tingling, my blood rushing through a new course, my bones aching with a familiar old pain. And I think, my mother was right. I am becoming Chinese" (267). Commenting on how her make-up melts away in the hot, humid climate, Jing-mei describes this dissolving of her American identity and the surfacing of her genetic "racial" traits– hence the reference to how more naturally Chinese her eyes and hair look (272), two of the most pronounced facial features that distinguish Asians from Caucasians. Underlying this metamorphosis seems to be a variation of the Melting Pot hypothesis which locates the manifestations of a person's ethnicity as immediate response to his/her physical immersion into a foreign country. By the same token, Tan seems to imply that culture and ethnicity are pre-encoded, rather than "learned," features of a person's identity. Jing-mei's automatic transformation from American to Chinese stands in strong opposition to the previous parts of the novel, where she is unable to understand Chinese culture. For instance, while she repeatedly points out how limited her passive knowledge of Manda-

rin is, she now asks her father, who accompanies her on this trip, to tell her about her mother "in Chinese" (281).

Tan's depiction of Jing-mei's transformation appears to be a *deus-ex-machina* solution to the complicated process of ethnic identification which many second-generation immigrants face, but one that seems nevertheless tailored after a specific discourse of ethnic American identity: one that defines Chinese American identity as being Chinese *and* being American. The implication that Jing-mei turns Chinese just because she went to China is as troublesome as the related notion that only by going to China will she ever come to terms with her Chinese American identity. This emphasis of a possible "return" to China also alludes to the reading of the term Chinese American as Chinese people who live in America without taking the dynamics of diaspora and transnationalism into consideration. This is especially interesting because in contrast to Jing-mei's mysterious metamorphosis, Lindo Jong describes her return to China in quite opposite terms. Visiting China after almost forty years, Lindo realizes that she was no longer "one hundred percent Chinese" and that no matter how hard she tried, people immediately recognized her as a foreigner and "charged [her] high foreign prices" (266). Lindo Jong's emphasis on her loss of authenticity articulates well immigrants' acculturation to the U.S. and the resulting cultural distance from their homeland.

I would like to return once more to Jing-mei's feeling that she is "becoming Chinese." It is important to note that she utters this statement at the very beginning of the novel's last chapter, and that by so doing, she sets the tone for her identity negotiations in China. For instance, we get the sense, as the final chapter unravels, that Jing-mei is being transformed from a cultural outsider to a cultural insider. For instance, Jing-mei is clearly being characterized as an outsider to the reunion between her father and his relatives. A mere bystander who is, at times, unable to follow their conversations, she observes the meeting of her Chinese American father with his Chinese relatives but never really participates in it. Similarly, Jing-mei's bafflement "This is communist China?" (276), when she sees for the first time their hotel, "a grander version of the Hyatt Regency" (276), echoes her expectations of the much less modern, or should I say less westernized, China. Tan goes to great lengths presenting the details of the "magnificent" hotel, thereby giving expression to Jing-mei's surprise at the possibility of such luxury in China and at the comparatively inexpensive rate at which such luxury can be obtained. A particularly striking moment in the last chapter is when she takes inventory of the American products in her room, naming each and every one of the many items in the mini-bar, only to reaffirm her initial disbelieve, "This is communist China?" (277), at the availability of American consumer goods. As much as she questions the con-

cept of communist China, she is unable to discern that the consumer goods provided in upper class hotels cater to the tastes and needs of tourists like herself and can hardly be taken as signs of Chinese cultural development but as tokens of cultural commodification purported via mass tourism.

On the discursive level, Jing-mei's rehearsal of American consumer products and her incredulous comment about the luxury of communist China in the last chapter also foreshadow possible means of identification between her and an American reading audience. As Sau-ling Wong points out, the fact that Jing-mei names the individual items by their brand names and that she does not use any brand names for the Chinese products she sees (Palumbo-Liu 1995, 186-87) also connotes a degree of cultural othering. The Chinese products, such as the shower gel she uses, do not have names but are characterized through their similarities and comparisons to products she knows to be Chinese, as the fact that the shampoo remindes her in "consistency and color of hoisin sauce" (278) shows. Finding her preconceived notions of Chinese culture affirmed, Jing-mei feels finally reassured in her ideas about what her experience in China should be like: "This is more like it, I think. This is China" (278). What becomes evident from this chapter is that Tan not only characterizes China as a place that remains locked in another time because it is locked in the stories of a former time, she also defines China to be backwards in relation to a contemporary setting. In Jing-mei's assessments of modern Chinese culture, memory seems to become unnecessary in the last chapter since Jing-mei now gets to experience what she has, up until then, only heard of through the memories and storytelling of the older generation.

In this light, her alleged "becoming Chinese" implies that after her transformation from American to Chinese, she is able to assume to role of a cultural insider, one who exudes authority in her assessment of Chinese culture and life style. This authority gives weight to her assertion that China remains a temporal "Other" in relation to the U.S. Now an insider, she can be trusted, and her judgment makes sense to an American reading audience who might share a similar sense of displacement when matching the imaginary notions of Chinese culture with their experiences of China through mass tourism. While memory can be contested, Jing-mei's first-hand experience cannot. In this context, Jing-mei experiences in China the same backwardness that she attributes to the China of her mother's stories. Jing-mei goes to seek proof of her preconceived notions of China. And in the fact that she did find them, she sees herself justified in her distancing from Chinese culture as well as in her conflictuous relationship with her mother. It is this experience, the one that validates in a belated context the stereotypical images of China that she has come to internalize on the basis of her mothers' stories, which the term "belated memory" implies.

In the previous section of this chapter, I have pointed out Tan's depiction of the daughters' orientalist and the mothers' counter-orientalist practices of self-identification. This observation leads me to my main focus for this project, namely the question about female solidarity. On the level of thematic representation, the mothers' experiences are largely interchangeable and contribute to the creation of a stereotypical image of Chinese women. The narratives of their lives in China are all set in the same era, capturing the mother's lives as daughters negotiating their own relationships to their mothers and as mothers negotiating their relationships to their daughters. At the same time, the sets of narratives about the mothers' lives in China also symbolically introduce the reader to the Chinese culture configured through the lives of the mothers as young Chinese women. On the discursive level of the mothers' narratives, the uniformity of settings in the past and in traditional Chinese culture characterize China as homogeneous country for which the mothers appear as "authentic" spokeswomen. The issue of authenticity in the mothers' narratives is especially interesting, since the mothers' narratives are full of generalizations about China. For instance, An-mei Hsu's account of China exemplifies this approach: "That was China. That was what people did back then. They had no choice. They could not speak up. They could not run away. That was their fate" (241).

There are also problems of representation of Chinese women in the novel that become apparent from a juxtaposition of the mothers' and the daughters' narratives. What is problematic is that by setting the mother's stories in the past and the daughter's stories in the contemporary, Tan creates distance and reinforces the difference between the two generations of women. By juxtaposing China of the past with America of the present, the novel decontextualizes the mothers' experiences from the experiences of a non-Chinese American readership not only on the level of culture but also on the level of temporality. For instance, the fact that Jing-mei's narratives about her present life are told in the present tense and her memories of her mother in the past is, although entirely plausible, is still a stylistic gesture that amplifies this difference in temporalities. This emphasis on a Chinese culture that is confined to the past makes plausible why the daughters have such a hard time identifying with their mothers. This notion of an "old China" reinforces the stereotype of immigrant Chinese women as backward and unprogressive and defines Chinese culture as old-fashioned. By choosing pre-communist China as narrative setting for the life stories of the maternal generation, the novel leaves out almost entirely comparative accounts of contemporary China. With the exception of the Hsu family, whose recent trip to China, a trip which left them nine thousand dollars in debt after they paid off the gifts and treats for the relatives they went to visit, none of the stories depict any "modern Chinese subject" (Rey Chow 1991)

other than the needy and greedy relatives. On the contrary, many of the mothers comment in their stories on the backwardness of traditional Chinese culture. Lindo Jong's reference to arranged marriage makes that apparent: "That was how backward families in the country were. We were always the last to give up stupid old-fashioned customs" (51). Unlike the daughters' negative stereotypical comments on China, the mothers' overgeneralizations do not stand challenged or corrected. Given narrative authority through correcting the daughters' misrepresentations and their lived experiences, the mothers seem to be representing authentic China. Not only does this portrayal of the mothers as authentic voices fail to acknowledge the intervention of their Americanized narrative perspectives, it also echoes the commonplace critique in transnational feminism that receiving texts by ethic writers as "'windows' into the presumed alterity of other cultures" (Amireh and Majaj 2) reinforces and often over-exaggerates cultural difference. This emphasis on difference singles out the mothers as cultural aliens and, in the specific context of the mother-daughter dyad, supports the daughters' cultural and emotional disassociation from their mothers.

Recognizing the danger of such generalizations, Rey Chow offers two useful concepts for a critical evaluation of Western mass media's depiction of "the other country" (1991, 83). This is important given that, as Patricia P. Chu reminds us, *The Joy Luck Club* first appeared on the American book market the same year the massacre at Tienanmen Square made the global news (Chu 2000, 167). Although these circumstances are coincidental, Chow's critique of Western representation of China addresses well the existing political and cultural interest in East Asia and frames the release of Tan's literary debut with prevalent images on China in mainstream American culture. In her critique of American coverage of the "China crisis," for example, Chow refers to a sensationalist interest of the West that manifests itself in what she calls "China watching." Symptomatic of China watching, Chow specifies, are detailed depictions in which U.S. mass media depicts the Chinese government as controlling and ruthless and portrays the protesters without respecting their right to anonymity (1991, 83). The other concept, the "*King Kong* syndrome," which Chow defines as intricately connected to the sensationalism that is at the center of China watching (1991, 84), echoes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's contention that the "third world" is often depicted as the site of "raw" materials that invoke "monstrosity" which appears in contrast to the First World both as entertainment and as evidence for the persisting Western notion of cultural elevation (1987, 90). These two syndromes of orientalist gazing at China/the third world are ubiquitous in representations conveyed through American mass media. Chow asserts: "Locked behind the bars of our television screens, we become repelled by what is happening 'over there,' in a way that confirms the custom-

ary view, in the U.S. at least, that ideology exists only in the 'other' (anti-U.S.) country" (1991, 84). In a different essay, Chow defines the "fascination with the native, the oppressed, the savage, and all such figures" as "a desire to hold onto an unchanging certainty [...] a desire for being 'non-duped,' which is a not-too-innocent desire to seize control" (1996, 141). The fascination with violent and/or sensational spectacles 'over there' therefore assures the West that, guarded by democracy and political and social freedom, 'over here' everybody is safe and everything is in order.

Hence, Tan's depiction of a China of the remote past, argues Patricia Chu, fails to acknowledge the "vision of early-twentieth-century China as a country in which modern and traditional elements coexist, a country that, like the United States, is constantly changing" (156). This creates the impression that, in contrast to the modern US, Chinese culture is frozen in the past and explains why the daughters are so resentful in their identification with their matrilineal heritage. Given that they were brought up by their mothers to embrace the possibilities the American Promised Land symbolizes and given that they have internalized the freedom of post-women's rights movement U.S., how could the daughters relate to misogynist ideas of womanhood in the China of the early twentieth century? What is striking in the context of this discursive distance is that Tan's novel does not expose the bias with which the daughters view their mothers' Chinese pasts. As becomes evident from the yuppie lifestyles of career woman Waverly Jong or the comfortable financial situation of suburban housewife Rose Hsu Jordan, the daughter's upper-middle class status hardly reflects the hardships and struggles which their mothers experienced upon arriving in the U.S. or their previous economic and social dependency on the patriarchal family system in China.

It is in this context that I argue that Jing-mei's trip to China serves the function in the novel of recovering her mother's past instead of discovering a modern image of Chinese femininity. Although she does meet modern Chinese women, such as her twin half-sisters, there is no suggestion in the novel that these women imply to Jing-mei an encounter with modern Chinese femininity. On the contrary, if anything, her twin half-sisters embody the old China that she so clearly sought out to look for. As Jing-mei muses, they are the missing link between her and her mother: "Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish" (288). And through this encounter with her half-sisters, who serve as direct transplants from the old China that her mother's stories depict, Jing-mei starts to resume her confrontation with her Chinese roots: "And now I know what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood. After

all these years, it can finally be let go" (288). Thus, the meeting with her half-sisters is the epitome of her recovery of her mother's memory of China.

This section of the last chapter re-evokes the same theme as the vignette and the first chapter. Through this encounter with the sisters, the story of the loss and recovery for the "old woman" symbolically reaches full circle. The sisters are the lost swan that the mother remembers through a single feather, and Jing-mei is both agent and object of recovery at the same time. In this light, just like the swan is an embodiment of Chinese culture locked in the mother's memory, one that the mother is waiting to communicate to her daughter, the daughters are embodiments of Chinese culture waiting to be recognized as part of Jing-mei's life. There is a mirroring of the development from loss to recovery, one in which Jing-mei reverses time. This reversal of time, and her trip to China figures at times like a time travel, connects thematically the narrative beginning and ending of the novel. This interrelatedness between the first vignette "Feathers from A Thousand *Li* Away," the first chapter "The Joy Luck Club," and the last chapter "A Pair of Tickets" through the intertextual discussion of the role of memory as vehicle of ethnic identity, re-evokes and appropriates uncritically, questions of authenticity and origin.

Because of Jing-mei's belated memory, triggered by her experiences of and in China, the meeting with her half-sisters is a forceful example of the novel's mostly skewed treatment of female solidarity, one that, although it highlights the difficulties of transnational solidarity, only partly suggests that such solidarity between American and Chinese women can be achieved. In the same manner as the American-born daughters cannot recognize their mothers as "peers in struggle" against racism and sexism, the actual reunion between the American and the Chinese daughters relies on a foregrounding of national identity over individual identity. While Tan's novel does suggest that the conflict between mothers and daughters can be overcome, such as when mothers empathize with their daughters' desire for a content life, or through the inter-textual dialogue between the two generations that the chapters facilitate, it does not address the transnational sensibility needed in order to achieve such a union. In this sense, the tear-filled reunion of the half-sisters projects a premature notion of global sorority. In line with Shirley Geok-lin Lim's observation that global feminism often tends to be confused with "an international feminism coming out of the West" (2004, 8), the specific location from which Jing-mei meets her half-sisters does not articulate the obvious cultural differences and global inequalities which emerges from a world order that is based on global binary oppositions. Unlike global feminism, which was characterized by "its tendency to essentialize, homogenize, and centralize Western social and cultural concepts of women" (Lim 2004, 8), transnational feminism offers a

more dynamic set of parameters, language and frameworks for a contemporary discussion of experiences of migration across times and places. What interferes with a transnational alliance of Jing-mei with her half-sisters is their representation in the novel not as individuals, but as stand-ins for the China Jing-mei knows from her mother's stories. The ideological appropriation of the half-sisters discursively privileges Jing-mei, the narrative voice of the chapter, and thus enforces a sense of power and privilege of the American daughter over the Chinese daughter, one that reiterates the power struggle she had with her mother. Under these circumstances, the meeting of the sisters, which is supposed to suggest a sense of unity and healing for Jing-mei, can only be in part accomplished. The under-representation of a modern China, however, makes a transnational solidarity between mothers and daughters almost unimaginable.