

Between Two Cultures- Finding Meaning in Amy Tan's Use of Superstitions

Gehan M. Anwar Deeb

October 6 University

Gehan M. Anwar Esmail Deeb

Lecturer, Department of English, Faculty of Languages and Translation,

October 6 University

ABSTRACT: *The practices or beliefs subsumed under the heading of 'Superstition' are often rejected in modern times as irrational thinking or laying beyond rational explanation. The use of the Superstition in Amy Tan's work is generally well-known though not widely discussed. The purpose of the current paper is to discuss the development of this theme in the fiction works of the female Chinese-American writer emphasizing how irrational expressions can sometimes imply an underlying rational thought, especially in its relation to "Chinese American" identity. Tan concentrates on rationalizing the ghost or visions, even if they are not real. This irrational rational quality is presented by Amy Tan through her illustration of the language barriers and her use of oral storytelling tradition, in a structure of a frame (whole) narrative that comprises individual interrelated narratives. Therefore, this paper aims to approach this issue and deal with the concept of the Superstition, its use and application in three selected novels by Amy Tan: *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001). Tan masterfully uses various forms and manifestations of the superstition. Each novel has certain elements that have considerable effect on those characters who practise them, either spiritually, psychologically or in making their decisions. This makes it possible to detect and analyze the actual relevance of the superstition features as narrative devices rather than mere references reflecting the popular beliefs of the Chinese culture. To further unveil the strategies for rationalizing the irrational and to analyze Amy Tan's use of superstition in her fiction, I will refer to superstitions in the traditional sense as well as in terms of Collin Campbell's theory of modern superstition, applying his conception of the "half-belief". The aim of this paper is threefold (1) to answer: Can there be a space for the irrational within a well-structured and ordered space in modern thought? (2) to discuss: Why Amy Tan chose to use so many superstitions in her fiction? And (3) to develop: In addressing many women, mothers and grown up daughters, and in examining the persistent tensions and powerful bonds between generations and cultures, how the element of the superstition can help the mothers and daughters, generations and cultures connect? Prior to the actual analyses, I will introduce the relevant backgrounds necessary for a thorough discussion of the achievement of the above set objective. The first section is an Introduction exploring how superstitions originate from a cultural background, in reference to the various definitions of superstition and its associations with culture, religion, science, rituals and magic. Firstly, this section will be relevant for the main analytical part that will develop later in the paper. Secondly, the topic will be treated from psychological and sociological perspectives. I will discuss Freud's theory on the need for control as the basis for the psychological approach. The sociological perspective will include cultural and ethnic identity formation to assess the impact of superstitious beliefs and behavior on modern society, in relation to the American "dream", or rather "nightmare". The core part of the second section will be the analysis discussing the popular traditions and relevant concepts with regard to the superstitions detected in the respective novels. Ghosts, spirits, dreams, the supernatural element, mediators or spiritual translators, rituals, ceremonies, fate, death, the afterlife and myths can be explored by placing this tendency primarily in the mothers,*

who remain tied to their Chinese cultural heritage much more than their daughters. However, Tan's use of the element of the Superstition adds meaning to the overall context of the plot and can make it rational. Therefore, the use of a ghost in one novel may bring about quite different implications than the use of the same feature in another novel. The present paper will be concluded by a summary that also considers the general pattern on Amy Tan's use of the superstitions.

KEYWORDS: Chinese-American literature, Superstition, Ghosts, Chinese myths, The American Dream, Identity formation, The art of braiding stories

INTRODUCTION: THE IRRATIONAL DOES BATTLE WITH THE RATIONAL:

Superstitions are found in every culture to explain events and influence decisions in everyday life. In order to understand why superstitious behavior is so prevalent in Amy Tan's fiction, and how it functions, it is necessary to provide an understanding of the etymology of the word "superstition" and the context in which I intend to use it. In googling the term, two obstacles have been detected: Firstly, there are several definitions for the term 'Superstition' in dictionaries, a fact that indicates the existence of different accounts of the term. Secondly, there is an overlap with the other domains of knowledge such as religion and science in defining the 'Superstition'. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins*, it is derived from the Latin word formation *super-* meaning "over" and *-stare* meaning 'to stand'. It can be interpreted as "standing over a thing in amazement or awe" (428). However, other interpretations of the literal meaning have been suggested, e.g. the sense of *excess*, i.e. over-ceremoniousness in performing religious rites, or the *survival* of old, irrational religious habits or beliefs based on myth, magic, or irrational thoughts. (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2012)

The superstitious beliefs may include beliefs in popular sayings, magic, rituals, witchcraft, ghosts, spirits and possession of lucky charms. Many superstitions relate to death and funeral rites, others to major occasions like weddings. They also may involve animals, graveyards and inanimate objects. Superstitions are also known as old wives' tales, legends, traditions and myths. Cicero in *De Natura Decorum II* derived the word 'superstition' from the term *superstitiosi*, which means those who are "left over", i.e. "survivors", "descendants", connecting it with excessive anxiety of parents in hoping that their children would survive them to perform their necessary funerary rites (Wagenvoort, 1980, 236). Plutarch widened the scope of superstition to include various religious behaviors, human sacrifice, Jewish observance of the Sabbath, fear of punishment in the afterlife, and belief in the literal truth of Greek myth. (Burns, *New Dictionary*, 2014)

Before approaching Tan's use of the superstition, an understanding of its definition should be attempted. Superstition has a very narrow definition restricted to common beliefs. Examples of commonplace beliefs or superstitions the people are familiar with since ancient times are: seeing black cats or breaking a mirror bring bad luck; the number 13 is an unlucky number; touching or knocking on wood surfaces, carrying a charm or an object may bring good luck and ensure continued prosperity. In *Encyclopedia of Britannica* (2008), the entry of superstition is defined as:

A belief, half-belief, or practice for which there appears to be no rational substance. Those who use the term imply that they have certain knowledge or superior evidence

for their own scientific, philosophical, or religious convictions. An ambiguous word, it probably cannot be used except subjectively. With this qualification in mind, superstitions may be classified roughly as religious, cultural, and personal.

Popular notions of superstition have been related to the supernatural (Becker, 1975), or to stories about the supernatural or reflecting the culture's views on the inexplicable (i.e., creation, death, the afterlife, natural phenomena) beyond the boundaries of the physical world.

As it is clear in most English dictionaries and encyclopedias, superstitions can be defined as the beliefs, practices, activities or behaviours, not based on reason or knowledge that are deemed "irrational" by members of a specific society, resulting from the fear of the unknown. During the Middle Age, superstitions led people to kill black cats as they symbolize evil omens or bad luck; and burn to death those who were suspected of witchcraft; they also feared witches and Satan, etc. *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 2014, states the definition as:

based on belief in the power of magic and witchcraft and in such invisible forces as spirits and demons. A common superstition in the Middle Ages was that the devil could enter a person during that unguarded moment when that person was sneezing; this could be avoided if anyone present immediately appealed to the name of God. The tradition of saying "God bless you" when someone sneezes still remains today.

Under the influence of the enlightenment and the secular movements during the 18th and 19th centuries, any belief in miracles, revelation, magic, or the supernatural was rejected and any practices that were not observed or experimented were considered beyond the boundaries of science and may be considered as superstitions. Socially, eighteenth-century thinkers identified superstition with marginalized groups—peoples outside Europe, the European masses, and women, particularly old women. (Burns, *Encyclopedia.com*) Superstitious beliefs are related to the culture of an ethnic community. The term superstition is sometimes interrelated with the term "folk belief", an attempt to examine carefully local cultural influences. A practice such as the crossing of fingers to nullify a promise may be called "folk belief", while it may be labelled "superstition" due to a judgment of irrationality.

Primitive and Modern Superstition: Individual and Collective Experience:

According to the Greek and Romans, there is a thin line of distinction between the concept of *superstition* and *religion*. They considered the fear of the gods (*deisidaimonia*) as 'superstition'. In his *Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), also referred to as "The Pagan Servitude of the Church," Martin Luther described the papacy as the "fountain and source of all superstitions." The current Catechism of the Catholic Church considers superstition to be "a deviation of religious feeling and of the practices this feeling imposes." (Matthew 23:16–22, para. #2111) It denotes a lack of trust in the divine providence of God and, as such, is a violation of the first of the Ten Commandments (forbidding worship of false gods), defining superstition as "a perverse excess of religion" (para. #2110).

Superstition is a social construction that varies from culture to culture. No doubt to say that rituals can unite the individual with society. Ritual is the power of belief whether it is in God, country, self or any higher/personal power, that is essential to survival. One does ritual not only out of habit and tradition, but also out of superstition. However, what is fully accepted as genuine religious statement may be seen as poor superstition by those who do not share the same faith. In this sense, Christian theology will interpret Chinese cults as pure superstition

while an evangelical Christian will see as meaningless the Catholic ritual of doing the Sign of the cross or reciting “a little prayer” before an important event, without doing it according to real faith in God. In primitive cultures, rituals of birth, marriage and death, referred to as the passage rites, are practised as a form of religious behavior. Intellectual-rationalist approach to primitive life is exemplified by Sir Edward Tylor and Sir James Frazer, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They saw primitive life as characterized by a belief in magic and unseen forces or powers. In most anthropological and sociological texts "magic" is considered as equal to superstition. Magic, however, exists in all cultures and is related to uncertainties, instabilities, and threatening conditions directed into specific ritual practices. (Douglas, 1966). Superstitious thought, or magical thinking, results in superstitious or magical rituals and practices that can attain a favourable outcome.

The concept of superstition is analyzed by other modern scholars such as Collin Campbell (1996), who considers its practice as paradoxical, the remnants in contemporary society of the ancient beliefs and magic rituals of primitive societies. He calls it the concept of “half-belief”, a form of thinking that lacks rationality. (151-166). Campbell gives an example for the half-belief: Out of superstitions that are formed from religious beliefs, some people who would never define themselves as superstitious would avoid walking under a ladder in order to ward off disaster. Such belief came from Christian religion; the ladder makes a triangle with the wall and ground, representing the Holy Trinity. This meant that the person was in league with the devil, and might lead the other villagers to condemn him as a witch. Now the relationship between the superstition and religion is open to dispute (Jahoda, 1969, Vyse, 1997). Therefore, in modern superstition, people adopt superstitious behaviours without deeply believing in them, or they are reluctant to say they really believe in the validity of superstition, but they are also reluctant to say that they do not believe in it. This concept of half-belief will help us differentiate superstition and related but distinct concepts.

Although we live in a technologically advanced society, superstition is as widespread as it has ever been. It is interesting to note that rational people may come to put their faith in such ephemera. Although, superstition in the modern era can be viewed as the opposite of science and reason, astrology can/cannot be qualified as superstition, since astrology relies on what is meant to be a science, according to which the position and the movements of celestial bodies influence life on Earth. This is also the case for those who read their horoscope and rejoice (or not) about what they read, but without really believing in the science of astrology. Mowen and Carlson (2003) refer to a survey conducted in the United States in 1991 and according to which 56% of American people declare themselves not superstitious at all, whereas 74% admit reading their horoscope. Even if superstition and astrology are to be distinguished, those results are interesting because they demonstrate that people are reluctant to admit their irrational beliefs, even if a great proportion of them do have such irrational thoughts or practices.

Superstition: 'a sense of control over the uncontrollable'

Superstitious thoughts or behaviours are used as a substitution to instrumental acts that people would have liked to achieve in order to control the situation. By applying superstitions, individuals make their chaotic surrounding worlds more meaningful and controllable (Case et al., 2004). Superstitions are a means of explaining the unexplainable and remain a part of many people's lives. Eugene McCartney (1952) seeks the origin of superstition in the fears experienced collectively or individually, fears from the incomprehensible, inexplicable, unpredictable, and destructive forces of man's natural environment. Individuals practise irrational actions and superstitious beliefs when they lose their sense of control over events and

outcomes or even when the conditions grow dubious to ward off any threats or dangers. (p. 74). Modern societies are characterized by enhancing the value of actions more than the value of inactions, and strongly believe in science and rational thinking. Thus, it is very difficult for a modern person to remain passive in a stressful and uncertain situation; that person practises superstition with the benefit of gaining illusion of control over the situation.

Superstition then provides some psychological advantages to human beings who practise it; i.e., the sense of control that gives a sense of meaning. A psychotic patient, for example, who develops mystical or magical beliefs, is not superstitious because those beliefs have a rational meaning for him/her and really exist in his/her world. Generally speaking, the study of psychology does not pay interest to these beliefs that seem irrational and become the reason for human behavior. "Sigmund Freud called such superstitions "faulty actions." Some psychologists consider them expressions of inner tensions and anxieties. Others believe intense superstitious feelings indicate some sort of mental disorder. However, there has been no reliable clinical correlation between superstitious beliefs and mental illness." (Burns, 2014, *New Dictionary*)

In his book *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition*, Stuart Vyse regards that Superstitions "provide a sense of control over the uncontrollable." (160) People try to explain negative superstitions. It is human nature to seek control, whether illusional or rational, when faced with inexplicable phenomena and uncertainty. Illusion of control increases in times of stress, when the level of uncertainty and danger is greatest. Dealing with death for example becomes more stressful, and as Vyse points out, "the stress created by fear of death threatens a person's sense of control and that, conversely, any improved sense of control—even if it is an illusion—can help alleviate stress" (160). Although superstition is a normal part of human culture, Vyse argues that we must provide alternative methods of coping with life's uncertainties by teaching decision analysis, promoting science education, and challenging ourselves to critically evaluate the sources of our beliefs. (230) Acceptance of rational thinking can then lead to a richer life.

Chinese Superstitions

There is actually a slight difference between the Chinese term “迷信” (which is usually translated as “superstition”) and the English word “superstition”. (theworldofchinese.com). From ancient times, Chinese superstitions cannot be distinguished from traditions and cultural beliefs, even if laws are imposed to ban them.

The early twentieth-century Chinese government in its efforts to modernize Chinese culture employed a new concept, *mixin*, usually translated as "superstition," to denote many aspects of popular religion previously called *xie*, "heterodoxy." This linguistic change accompanied a shift from the Neo-Confucian strategy of incorporating popular religion as a support for the established order to one of actively suppressing many aspects of it. The Chinese nationalist government's 1928 decree "Standards for Preserving and Abandoning Gods and Shrines," attacked superstition as opposed to science and progress. The decree distinguished between cults, which remained permissible, mostly those of deified humans such as Confucius and the Buddha, and "superstitious" cults, which were outlawed, mostly those of nature deities such as the god of rain. It was followed by several other antisuperstition edicts attacking divination and other magical practices. (Burns, 2014, *New Dictionary*)

The list of Chinese superstitious beliefs includes various examples, such as New Year's superstitions that have similar meanings as other cultures, i.e., getting rid of the previous year and hopefully giving birth to a prosperous year. At midnight, every door and window in a house should be opened to let out the old year. Avoiding eating meat on New Year's Day ensures a long and happy life. Chinese people eat a whole fish for togetherness and abundance, or eat chicken with its head and feet for prosperity. Because plants and flowers symbolize rebirth, luck is brought to home if plants bloom on New Year's Day. Other superstitions center on numbers as there are lucky and unlucky numbers in Chinese culture. Prices ending with the number eight are very common as there is a belief that this number brings luck and symbolizes prosperity. Conversely, the number four brings bad luck as it sounds like the Chinese word for death. Seven is death, and one is loneliness. The number nine is good because it sounds like the Cantonese word "sufficient."

A number of customs are related to Chinese marriage and weddings; while the bride is supposed to wear white on her wedding day, this is not so in Chinese culture, other colors like red and yellow can be worn on the wedding day for a lucky marriage. If black, blue, or gray is worn, this will bring bad luck to the marriage. Interestingly, you cannot marry someone with the same surname, even if they are not related to you. It is believed that they belong to the same ancestry. A couple should also be no older or younger than three or six years. Moreover, a number of old wives' tales concerning pregnancy, childbirth and death are told in Chinese culture. For instance, if newlyweds want good luck and baby boys, a boy must roll over their matrimonial bed. When a woman is pregnant, she cannot use glue because they believe this will cause a difficult birth. Striking an animal during pregnancy will make your baby look and act like one. Praising babies invites evil spirits and ghosts.

Amy Tan: Eastern and Western Cultures

Amy Tan was born in Oakland, California, in 1952 to a Chinese-born couple John and Daisy Tan. Tan has a Master's degree in linguistics from the San Jose State University. Her first novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) won several awards and was translated into thirty-five languages. She is also a co-producer and co-screenwriter of its film version. Tan's following successful novels include *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001) and *The Opposite of Fate: Memories of a Writing Life* (2003).¹

Even though Tan dislikes being classified as an ethnic literary writer, her works center on Chinese-American society, depict Asian-American cultural identity struggles and conflicts, and follow a tradition of Asian-American writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Jade Snow Wong, and Frank Chin. These writers challenge dominant American culture's stereotypes and clichés about Asians and Asian-Americans who are portrayed as marginalized and displaced by such a culture in their works. With reference to her predecessor adherent Maxine Hong Kingston, Tan admitted that, prior to writing *The Joy Luck Club*, Kingston was the only Chinese American writer that she had come across; Tan was recognized as her literary successor. Kingston published her two works, *The Woman Warrior* (1974) and *China Men* (1980), the first Chinese American texts to achieve critical and popular acclaim. Consequently, with Amy Tan's fiction writing, the voices of Chinese American can finally be popularly

¹ Subsequent references of these novels are cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviations: *JLC*, *THSS*, and *TBD* respectively.

recognized. It is regarded as the most important contribution to Asian-American literature in the feminist literary tradition.

In her novels, Tan blends Eastern and Western cultures, often by telling a "Chinese" story through "American" eyes, and vice versa. She has inherited her mother's and grandmother's experiences and their influences upon which she builds her personal experience "as a Chinese-American, and feelings concerning life and death which have always been a part of her life." (Thompson 1) Her father was a deeply religious Christian and her mother always kept her Chinese traditions on reserve; Tan's ties to China have so much to do with her mother. When Tan's brother and father became terminally ill with brain tumors, her mother called on as many of the Chinese religious traditions that she could. Tan describes her mother as "haunted" by these spirits that she so strongly believed in. The process of combining and contrasting Eastern and Western cultures began in Tan's relationship with her mother, a fact that is clearly reflected on the covers of her novels:

From her first hit *Joy Luck Club*, the cover designs of Tan's books are full of stereotypical oriental icons: dragons and traditional Chinese window patterns are just the most common to see, needless to say Chinese women in cheongsam, gorgeous phoenix and the Western fonts designed in association with Chinese characters. (Huang 3)

Amy Tan's grandmother is also portrayed in the character of Precious Auntie in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. "Daisy, at age nine, had watched her own mother kill herself, which had brought death close to her heart throughout her entire life." Indeed, "Tan had many memories of Daisy that became part of her stories. Her fondest memory of her mother was when she taught her about the idea of "invisible strength" (Thompson 2). As mentioned in *The Joy Luck Club*, "invisible strength" is the hope, determination, and passion that so characterized her mother's life during World War II (Ibid 210). Many of Tan's siblings died, and her father was abusive.

The relationships and struggles of Chinese immigrant mothers and their American daughters are the central and most significant theme in her first novels. This is more obvious in Tan's use of four mothers and four daughters in *The Joy Luck Club*, Kwan and Olivia in *The Hundred Secret Senses* and Ruth and Luling Young in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. Having lived the role of a minority ethnic group within the American society, other important themes are included: the use of superstition, issues of immigrant identity, and the power of her mythical storytelling.

The next part of the paper will discuss the meaning under Tan's use of superstitions in her fiction in relation to themes of cultural and self identity through using multilayered narratives. The English poet John Clare (1793–1864) viewed superstition in his country as a remnant of the culture of the Anglo-Saxons and Normans and recognized that the beliefs and practices categorized under 'Superstition' were threatened by memory loss and oblivion, so he "collected songs and stories from his neighbours ... and translated them into prose and poetry which all too often was never read." (Vincent 182-3) He dealt with the issue in his 'Essay on Popularity in Authorship (1825): "Superstition lives longer than books; it is engrafted on the human mind till it becomes a part of its existence; and is carried from generation to generation on the streams of eternity, with the proudest of fames, untroubled with the insect encroachments of oblivion which books are infested with" (Qtd. Vincent 183) Amy Tan is fascinated by the folk stories of her Chinese culture including traditions, ceremonies, myths, life and death, and wedding rites. She tries in her writing to use many "aspects of her family's lives, her own life as a person of Chinese ancestry, and her link to the "World of Yin" as influences in her stories." (Thompson

1) The theme of superstition is explored in Tan's novels in connection with a variety of aspects of the Chinese culture and storytelling tradition, the handing down of beliefs, customs and practices from generation to generation.

The Joy Luck Club

Tan's most successful and widely read novel *The Joy Luck Club* is regarded as a significant achievement in documenting the hardships of immigrants in America and the complexities of modern Chinese-American life. Superstition plays an important part in this novel; it is represented in fate, ghosts, tradition, luck, storytelling, the idea of sacrifice, myths and rituals. Two strong-willed generations are portrayed; four tough, intelligent Chinese women (Suyuan Woo, Ying-Ying St. Clair, Lindo Jong, An-mei Hsu) who came to America and their American-born tenacious daughters (Jing-Mei Woo "June", Lena St. Clair, Waverly Jong, Rose Hsu). A group gathers each week to play *mah jong* at the Joy Luck Club in San Francisco. The mothers relate heartbreaking stories about their lives in China, and the daughters tell of the trials that they face growing up as first-generation Chinese-Americans. The younger generation cannot relate at all to the ways their mothers think. They try to reconcile their personalities, shaped by American standards, with seemingly irrational superstitions that can meet their expectations.

Tan's literary symbolism cannot be separated from her cultural background, as the book is basically a bunch of linked stories of the four Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters that anyone can identify with. The narrative voice moves among seven women narrating interrelated compelling stories of their lives in the past; some of which, especially the mothers' tales, weave together to make Chinese folk tales. One of them, Suyuan Woo, is a spiritually vital mother who has recently passed away, and whose husband considers her not only as an ancestral ghost needing to be fed but as a Hungry Ghost attending an unfinished business. Her daughter, Jing-Mei Woo ("June"), is asked by her father to take the place of her late mother, the founding member of the Joy Luck Club. This Club symbolizes the merging of the two cultures, the Chinese and the American.

In "The Spirits of Chinese Religion", Stephen Teiser (1996) explains how Hungry Ghost figure is one of the six forms of existence in the Six Realms according to the Chinese Buddhist mythology. At the top are gods, demigods, and human beings, while animals, hungry ghost and hell beings occupy the lower rungs of hierarchy. The hungry ghosts have to rely on their relatives to feed them. In Chinese culture, Teiser also argues, 'Yin' accompanies the lower position, 'yang' the higher position. The 'yang' or male translation of spirit is 'ghost' or 'giu'; the 'yin' or female translation of spirit is 'ghost' or 'giu' (Keaton 2002). In the *Zen of Eating*, Ronna Kabatznick (1998) states that the hungry ghost is both a mythological figure of enormous appetite and psychological desire for desire. Keaton states that all deceased ancestors are treated as hungry ghosts, and surviving relatives pay homage to the dead by offering food. Children traditionally feed their deceased parents throughout the rest of their lives. It is the surviving descendant's responsibility to attend to their dead relatives throughout the years especially during the Festival of the Hungry Ghost. Strictly speaking, a hungry ghost can be a deceased person who has failed to become reincarnated due to unworthiness, unresolved attachment or relatives' lack of attention to the death rituals. When depicted in art, hungry ghosts are usually portrayed as women. This link between women and hungry ghost may clarify partially why Chinese-American women writers, such as Amy Tan, devoted many chapters to such a theme. (Balraj 305-6)

The Joy Luck Club is structurally composed of sixteen stories contained within the greater frame of June's finding out about her long-lost twin half-sisters. It is significant that Amy Tan gave her fiction a historical framework with a more personal perspective. Between 1931 and 1945 China was occupied by the Japanese. This war was one reason for their emigration to America. Suffering a serious disease and expecting to die when the Japanese attacked China, June's mother departs leaving her babies under a barren tree, along with a note asking anyone who might find them to care for them and contact the father. After her mother's death, her spirit "guided her Shanghai schoolmate to find her daughters." (*JLC* 286) Trying to satisfy her mother's hungry spirit, June decides, at the end of the novel, to go to China and meet with her long lost step sisters. The twins or 'double-image women', found as adults, have never left Shanghai because they believe their "much loved first parent had died and become spirits ghosts while roaming the earth looking for them" (*JLC* 286). The "words exchanged between the sisters are to satisfy their mother's hunger. On the contrary, the sisters have trouble communicating due to language barriers." (Balraj 306) June Woo says: "And although we don't speak, I know we all see it: Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long cherished wish." (288). Indeed, the mother's mouth remains open in this scene indicating a facial expression that alludes the desire to speak and eat: an expression linked to the Hungry Ghost. Even during her life, Suyuan acted as if she was an insatiable Hungry Ghost." (Balraj 306)

The struggle of women is strengthened through performing certain tasks or behaviors as a way to control their fate or destiny or to affirm their action and free will. The question of 'fate versus free will' is very well presented in *The Joy Luck Club*. Some characters are driven by their fate; they blindly accept that fate is controlling their lives and plaguing them with doing certain behaviours, or "faulty actions" as Sigmund Freud described them, but at the same time they give them a sense of meaning. Other characters, by contrast, remain aware of their choices and free will. Ying-Ying and "Jing-Mei" Lindo, two members of the Club, for example, believe that they have no control over their life and represent total acceptance of fate.

Ying-Ying tells of how she learned of the expectation that she would sacrifice herself for her husband, while she remains loyal to her ancestral traditions. Sacrifice of the self, is similarly the assertion of Ying-ying's Amah (nanny) that girls should not think of their own needs, that they should "only listen" to the needs of others. She marries a charismatic man not out of love, but because she believed it was her fate. Her husband is revealed to be abusive and openly has affairs with other women. Yet, the only person for whom Ying-ying seems to harbor any contempt is her daughter Lena. She criticizes Lena for being too Americanized, for being "lost" to her mother and her heritage, even though Ying-ying herself feels lost because of her heritage as will be shown later in this paper.

While some characters such as Ying-Ying and Lindo believe that fate controls them, An-Mei and Suyuan believe that they themselves control their own fate. Tan expresses her opinion that the latter is accurate and brings joy, while letting fate control one's life brings destruction and depression. One cannot let life pass by them, trusting a false hope that something will change their life for them. (Thompson 6)

An-Mei Hsu's story relates how her mother, a beautiful widow was raped by Wu-Tsing, a rich merchant, and was coerced into being his fourth concubine. An-Mei was raised by her maternal grandmother, Popo, who repeatedly said that An-Mei and her brother had fallen to earth out of the insides of a goose, like two unwanted eggs, bad-smelling and bad-tasting. But, An-mei

realizes, “[s]he said this so that the ghosts would not steal us away. So you see, to Popo we were also very precious. All my life Popo scared me.” (JLC 42)

To control the household, his second concubine, the favourite, claims An-Mei's half-brother as her child. Out of shame, she marries him wishing to ensure that An-Mei will grow up in favourable conditions. An-mei suffers because her mother was disowned first by her own family due to their patriarchal mandates, and then by becoming a concubine rather than remaining as a widow; she refuses to sacrifice herself for her husband even after his death. However, the idea of sacrifice is apparent in her mother's relation with Grandmother, Popo. An-mei remembers that when she was four, her mother arrived at Popo's house to beg her to give An-mei back. An-mei cried out for her mother, and a bowl of boiling soup spilled over her neck like a flood of boiling anger. The burn wound turned into a scar.

Just before Popo dies, An-mei's mother returns only to nurse her mother. When all drugs fail to cure her, An-mei's mother cuts a piece of her own flesh out of her arm to make soup for Popo. According to ancient tradition, such a sacrifice might cure dying family members or alleviate their pain.

This act symbolizes her desire: an act of penance-the impossible. An-Mei Hsu is portrayed as the Hungry Ghost here due to her inner desire to achieve the impossible. Even until death, An-Mei Hsu's grandmother does not forgive her and this leaves a yearning desire in An-Mei Hsu's mother's heart; another feature of the Hungry Ghost-yearning for the impossible. (Balraj 307)

An-mei's story also reflects the great respect she holds for the ancient ways and the elders. It is also a sign of bone-deep respect and a manifestation of her belief in her mother's attempt to cure Popo, an act of deep love and reverence. “Even though I was young I could see the pain of the flesh and the worth of the pain. This is how a daughter honors her mother.” (JLC 48) Similarly, An-mei, carries a scar that represents her tie to her mother. Though An-Mei later immigrates to America, marries, and gives birth to seven children— three daughters, four sons; the youngest, named Bing, drowns at age four— these bodily wounds function as symbols for An-mei of a daughter's corporeal bond to her mother to remember that she is in her bones.

Knowing that Wu-Tsing is a highly superstitious man, Second Wife fakes a suicide attempt to prevent An-Mei and her mother from getting their own small house, threatening to haunt him as a ghost if he does not let her have her way. According to Chinese tradition, a person's soul comes back after three days to settle scores with the living. Wu-Tsing, therefore, is afraid to face the ghost of an angry or scorned wife. Knowing Wu-Tsing's beliefs, An-Mei's mother poisons herself two days before the Chinese Lunar New Year so that her dead soul returns on the first day of the New Year, a day when all debts must be settled lest the debtor suffer great misfortune.

Three days before the lunar new year, she had eaten *ywansyau*, the sticky sweet dumpling that everybody eats to celebrate. She ate one after the other. And I remember her strange remark. "You see how this life is. You cannot eat enough of this bitterness." And what she had done was eat *ywansyau* filled with a kind of bitter poison, not candied seeds or the dull happiness of opium as Yan Chang and the others had thought. When the poison broke into her body, she whispered to me that she would rather kill her own weak spirit so she could give me a stronger one.

The stickiness clung to her body. They could not remove the poison and so she died, two days before the New Year. They laid her on a wooden board in the hallway. She wore funeral clothes far richer than those she had worn in life. Silk undergarments to keep her warm without the heavy burden of a fur coat. A silk gown, sewn with gold thread. A headdress of gold and lapis and jade. And two delicate slippers with the softest leather soles and two giant pearls on each toe, to light her way to nirvana.

Seeing her this last time, I threw myself on her body. And she opened her eyes slowly. I was not scared. I knew she could see me and what she had finally done. So I shut her eyes with my fingers and told her with my heart: I can see the truth, too. I am strong, too.

Because we both knew this: that on the third day after someone dies, the soul comes back to settle scores. In my mother's case, this would be the first day of the lunar New Year. And because it is the New Year, all debts must be paid, or disaster and misfortune will follow. (*JLC* 239-240)

Death of course means funerals, and traditional Buddhist funerals have certain rites and rituals. The night before the funeral itself, the dead body is laid out with the head facing north. So at home many people will not sleep this way, referred to as "kita makura". During the funeral, fearing bad karma on the way, and out of fear of being haunted by the mother's ghost, Wu-Tsing honors both An-Mei and her brother as his children and their late mother as his favorite first wife. When Second Wife attempts to discredit her at the funeral rites, An-Mei destroys a fake pearl necklace Second Wife gave her beneath her feet exposing Second Wife's deception and seeming generosity and symbolizing her new power over Second Wife, who now fears her and realizes the bad karma she has brought upon herself.

So on that day, Wu Tsing, fearful of my mother's vengeful spirit, wore the coarsest of white cotton mourning clothes. He promised her visiting ghost that he would raise Syaudi and me as his honored children. He promised to revere her as if she had been First Wife, his only wife.

And on that day, I showed Second Wife the fake pearl necklace she had given me and crushed it under my foot.

And on that day, Second Wife's hair began to turn white.

And on that day, I learned to shout.

I know how it is to live your life like a dream. To listen and watch, to wake up and try to understand what has already happened. (*JLC* 240)

This narrative technique, based on braiding, suggests the combination of separate elements into a single coherent whole that represents the book stories. As the basis for the writing process, the art of storytelling is a tradition Tan has inherited from her mother and her ancestors, who used to braid her hair when she was a child. Though *The Joy Luck Club* is a tapestry of stories, that suit four mothers, four daughters, four families, and even four main sections with one whole uniting them, the narratives are also grouped thematically. The novel is divided into four sections; each of which portrays a theme involving the mothers' or the daughters' cultural identity struggle. Furthermore, the title and the opening allegory of each section illustrate the section's theme. ... The unnamed mother and daughter in the prologue narrative symbolically represent the named mothers and daughters in the novel. (Conrad 14-5)

The opening allegory before the first section, "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away," highlights the theme of displacement that will be presented in the section through the narratives that depict the Chinese-American cultural identity and traditions. A Chinese mother "tells about the journey from China to America and how she wishes for her daughter to have the best of both worlds." Moreover, the second section "The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates" "portrays the daughters' resistance to their mothers' culture. The prologue contains a scenario in which a mother gives her daughter advice, which is contained in a book called *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates*." (Ibid 15). In Lena's eyes, her mother becomes a 'living ghost'.

Chapters 3 and 4 also focus on the themes of superstition and deceptive appearances. In chapter 3, Lindo Jong's first story, "The Red Candle," offers one of the finest examples of Chinese superstitious beliefs. Lindo narrates that when she was at age sixteen, she was coerced into an arranged loveless marriage to Tyan-yu Huang. On her wedding day, Lindo, out of despair, decided to drown herself in the river, but looking out of the window, she noticed the fierce wind and realized that, like the wind, she too was strong.

An important part of the marriage ceremony according to custom is that the couple burns a red candle with a wick on each end, one for the bride and one for the groom. A servant is instructed to watch over the candle all night to make sure the candle burned equally at both ends until it was ash during their marriage ceremony. That night, the servant ran from the room where she was watching the candle because she mistook a thunderstorm for the Japanese attack. Lindo, who was walking in the courtyard, went into the room and blew out Tyan-yu's end of the candle. In the next morning, however, the matchmaker shows the candle's ashes proving that it were not gone out, and declares that the marriage was sealed.

I saw the matchmaker place the lighted red candle in a gold holder and then hand it to a nervous-looking servant. This servant was supposed to watch the candle during the banquet and all night to make sure neither end went out. In the morning the matchmaker was supposed to show the result, a little piece of black ash, and then declare, "This candle burned continuously at both ends without going out. This is a marriage that can never be broken."

I still can remember. 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. That red candle was supposed to seal me forever with my husband and his family, no excuses afterward. (*JLC* 59)

Lindo then is ordered by her mother-in-law to beget grandchildren, believing that the lack of children was Lindo's fault. In fact, Tyan-yu is not the strong-willed man his family thinks he is; even his own mother does not know the truth about how dispassionate he is that he and Lindo never had sex. Finally, using her wit and without dishonouring herself, Lindo falsifies a clever story to escape this unfortunate marriage. Mussari says:

Lindo uses her wit to convince Tyan-yu's family, the Huangs, that it was their idea to get rid of her. Knowing that her husband's family is superstitious, she invents nightmares as portents of evil that will befall Tyan-yu if he does not abandon their marriage, and she cleverly sets up a pregnant servant girl to take her place. By remaining true to her promise to preserve her self-worth, Lindo saves herself from a miserable life. (67)

Lindo pretends that her ancestors came to her in a dream telling Huang Taitai that the matchmaker's servant had allowed Tyan-yu's end of the candle to go out, which meant that her marriage to Tyan-yu would only bring bad luck to the family as he would die: "our ancestors became very angry. They shouted that the marriage was doomed! They said that Tyan-yu's end of the candle had blown out! Our ancestors said that Tyan-yu would die if he stayed in this marriage!" (*JLC* 64). She also managed to convince her in-laws Taitai that the ancestors had planted the seed of Huang Tyan-yu's child into the womb of a servant girl; this girl is Tyan-yu's "true spiritual wife" as she was already pregnant with his "spiritual child". She showed Huang Taitai the mole on his back as evidence that it would eat away his skin. Lindo knew that the servant girl was indeed pregnant but the child was that of another man who abandoned her; she gratefully agrees with Lindo in order to give birth to her child in wedlock, and to marry into comfort. The marriage between Tyan-yu and Lindo is annulled.

Hence, Lindo's superstitions were fake. Not only does Lindo succeed in breaking the marriage by using deceptive superstitious beliefs, but also she remains true to herself and aware of her actions leading to her decision to immigrate to America. "Lindo decides to preserve the part of her that belongs only to her." Indeed before her wedding, "Inside the beautiful red wedding dress she wears, Lindo recognizes something more worthwhile." (Mussari 67). Lindo's fate was decided when she resolved to honor her parents' promise and tradition. However, she realized she was strong, confirming a second promise but to herself: "I made a promise to myself: I would always remember my parents' wishes, but I would never forget myself." (*JLC* 58) In this story, Lindo's belief in superstition is questionable, or what Campbell calls the "half-belief".

Lindo's promise maintains her respect for the force of promises, but it also shows that she refuses to sacrifice her own identity to that force. The trick she plays on Taitai in order to extricate herself from the marriage demonstrates the power of language and imagination in directing one's own life. At the same time, however, it was an understanding of tradition that enabled Lindo to assert her own power. By playing on Taitai's cultural superstitions and reverence for her ancestors, Lindo escaped the situation without suffering punishment.

By using superstition as a weapon of deception, Lindo rejects it to some extent; however, using superstition also affirms the power of action. It is unclear whether Lindo blows out the candle because she wants to use the belief in magic to her advantage, or because a part of her believes that the superstition is true, even if only symbolically. It is also unclear whether the marriage does fail because of her actions or because the superstition is true. The red candle represents the fate from which the mothers have escaped; that of being bound by what others want for them. (Gradesaver.com) In "Rules of the Game, Lindo teaches Waverly, her daughter later on, the meaning of a promise, and the meaning of self-identity as well: "On the day of the Festival of Pure Brightness, I take off my bracelets. I remember the day when I finally knew a genuine thought and could follow where it went. That was the day I was a young girl with my face under a red marriage scarf. I promised not to forget myself. (*JLC* 66)

Between two Cultures

From the previous narratives, the theme of Superstition turns out to have a perfectly rational explanation particularly if Superstition is practised in an uncertain world in which "lack of confidence, insecurity, fear and threat, stress and anxiety are in abundance. Yet, whenever the events are explicable and interpretable, environment is more transparent, and conditions are less ambiguous individual tend lesser towards the superstitious beliefs and explanations

(Becker, 1975; Barsky et al. 2002). However, more attention is given to the family in Amy Tan's novels; all the relationships involved therein are very important in Chinese-American literature. The mother-daughter relationship in a family provides a valuable learning context for younger generation. The mothers or parents are the roots of cultural ways. Belonging to an ethnic group within the confines of the wider society makes it necessary constantly to affirm one's identity. This push and pull between the world of Chinese culture and the American world provides literature with an important subject matter. Amy Tan was always in conflict with her mother's wishes, particularly those related to her family union, but eventually she realized that she was mistaken and "ended her rebellion, settling down as a writer." Furthermore, she "learned the importance of family, as well, while visiting her relations in China for the first time and discovering how connected they were through their relationship, despite her lack of knowledge of the Chinese language." (Thompson 3).

These experiences are similar to those in almost all of Tan's works in which she uses historical references and backgrounds and traditional Chinese culture to explore a universal theme: female struggles. Mothers seek to teach their daughters how to honour their heritage. "Through their best attempts they leave a residue of unfulfilled desires." (Balraj 308). By making everyone else believe something that on the surface seemed to be true, it is evident how the mothers taught their daughters "the art of invisible strength" in their lives as they do in *Mah Jong*. This is quite explained by Mussari:

The stories of the daughters also reflect the theme of self identity. ... Waverly Jong transfers her knowledge of chess moves her power struggle with her mother, Lindo Jong. Waverly's obstreperous behavior and refusal to play chess defy her mother's wishes—but they are also her strategy for establishing and preserving her own identity. She learns the art of finding her "invisible strength. (67)

Amy Tan states the cause of her reverence for the Chinese storytelling traditions and customs in *The Joy Luck Club*:

I know this, because I was raised the Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat my own bitterness. And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she came out the same way! Maybe it is because she was born to me and she was born a girl. And I was born to my mother and I was born a girl. All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way. (215)

The core of this quote is the value of traditions that helps illustrate the mother-daughter bond. The daughters follow the pattern of their mothers who go the same path bearing the same burdens. This is also very reflective of the immigrant experience, the ups and downs of life, like a staircase.

The cultural knowledge includes traditional elements such as superstitious beliefs, myths, legends or rituals as part of the identity of an ethnic group, handed down orally from generation to generation, and, as Anthony Smith (2001) puts it, are "often linked to migration memories and to rituals, symbols and myths of a common cult" (109). Immigrants or minor communities seek to maintain them in terms of genetic heritage to survive. Stories related to Superstition, passed on from mothers to daughters, are clearly portrayed in Amy Tan's works, not only to remember the past but also to create a record for the future. For Chinese-Americans, the mythology includes links to China and America and may resolve the issues and struggles of

cultural identity. “Tan’s protagonists traditionally view America as the destination and China as the point of origin” (Haji Mohd Daud 383). Generally speaking, the Asian-American mythology contains traditional mythological features, “such as oral tradition, cultural values, and universal applications but exists in a contemporary timeframe, valuable to an Asian-American audience because it includes stories that were reconstructed to make them applicable.” (Conrad 55)

Ritual actions are supposed to be observed, read, and understood in order to be transformed, preserved and handed down. Joseph Campbell states the reason why ritual is important in contemporary life:

A ritual is the enactment of a myth. And, by participating in the ritual, you are participating in the myth. And since myth is a projection of the depth wisdom of the psyche, by participating in a ritual, participating in the myth, you are being, as it were, put in accord with that wisdom, which is the wisdom that is inherent within you anyhow. Your consciousness is being re-minded of the wisdom of your own life. (Campbell, 2005, CD 1)

The word ritual can be defined, as Campbell puts it, “the enactment of a myth,” relating it to religious ceremonies, cultural traditions or national customs. Chinese people believe that earthly events can be influenced by higher powers and that there is something beyond the rational world. In respect to Amy Tan, her characters react towards different rituals and different concepts and beliefs in a different way. She presents forms of ritual and supernatural in her fiction and attributes to them similar functions and characteristics as in her everyday life. In Chapter 4, *Ying-Ying St. Clair*, Amy Tan employs the festival of the Chinese myth of the Moon Lady to “express a cultural ideology (particularly in terms of patriarchal attitudes) and contain references to deities and the supernatural”, but simultaneously it works on “an internal level by reaffirming those cultural values,” (Conrad 7) that the traditional myths are giving. Chinese-Americans celebrate the day of the Moon, Mid-Autumn Festival (*Zhongqiu Jie*), in the eighth moon

at the time of the full moon commonly called Harvest Moon or Hunter's Moon in U.S. lore....Originally, this was an outdoor festival. With the heavy labors of farming over, people planned a leisurely day of thanksgiving and pleasure, hiking and picnicking in the valleys and mountains. Today, it is still an occasion for outdoor reunions where friends and relatives gather together to eat "moon cakes" and watch the moon, its perfectly round shape forming the ideal symbol of familial harmony and unity. (Stepanchuk & Wong 51)

In Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, on the day of the festival, in 1918, when Ying-ying was only four, Amah, her nanny or nurse, dressed her in a silken yellow outfit with black bands. She told Ying-ying that she would see the Moon Lady. She tugged Amah’ sleeve asking: “Who is the Moon Lady?” Amah replied “She lives on the moon and today is the only day you can see her and have a secret wish fulfilled.” (*JLC* 70) She also warned her not to voice her own wishes to anyone else, lest they become only selfish desires. In addition, “[a] girl can never ask, only listen.” (*JLC* 70) This notion stays with Ying-ying her whole life.

Ying-Ying also tells the story of how she fell overboard into a lake during the celebrations of the Moon Festival. She was rescued and taken by a fishermen to the shore where she watched a performance show (play) featuring the Chinese mythology of the Moon Lady who steals “a magic peach, the peach of everlasting life!” from her husband, the Sun:

... "My fate and my penance," she began to lament, pulling her long fingers through her hair, "to live here on the moon, while my husband lives on the sun. So that each day and each night, we pass each other, never seeing one another, except this one evening, the night of the mid-autumn moon." (*JLC* 80)

As soon as she tasted it, she began to rise, then fly-not like the Queen Mother-but like a dragonfly with broken wings. "Flung from this earth by my own wantonness!" she cried just as her husband dashed back home, shouting, "Thief! Life-stealing wife!" He picked up his bow, aimed an arrow at his wife and-with the rumblings of a gong, the sky went black.

... An eternity had passed since she last saw her husband, for this was her fate: to stay lost on the moon, forever seeking her own selfish wishes. (*JLC* 81)

The moral of the singing tale of the Moon Lady is that "Woman is yin...the darkness within, where untempered passions lie. And man is yang, bright truth lighting our minds." (*JLC* 81) Women represent darkness and require men to show them the light. But after the show had finished, Ying-Ying approached the Moon Lady to make a wish that she would be found and returned to her family. Unfortunately, she discovers that the Moon Lady was really a man; when she takes off her costume: "A face so tired that she wearily pulled off her hair, her long gown fell from her shoulders. And as the secret wish fell from my lips, the Moon Lady looked at me and became a man." (*JLC* 82) This experience emotionally traumatized Ying-ying who "loses herself" not only by becoming lost from her family but by gradually suppressing her own desires and washing away her pain "the same way carvings on stone are worn down by water." (*JLC* 67) She believes that she can be selfish one day and assert her identity, but the superstition was false although she was reunited with her parents that night. Ying-ying later confesses that she and her daughter Lena yearn to find themselves throughout their life "We are lost, she and I, unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others." (*JLC* 67) On the same occasion she remembers, she describes:

But now that I am old, moving every year closer to the end of my life, I also feel closer to the beginning. And I remember everything that happened that day because it has happened many times in my life—The same innocence, trust, and restlessness, the wonder, fear and loneliness. How I lost myself.

I remember all these things. And tonight, on the fifteenth day of the eighth moon, I also remember what I asked the Moon Lady so long ago. I wished to be found. (*JLC* 83)

In a state of realization, Ying-Ying learns her lesson about superstition. Using descriptive language, Tan describes the feelings of the characters in a unique way. Using many illustrations, Tan describes their traits by presenting their actions. Although telling her wish, "I wished to be found," to anyone, other than the Moon Lady, would no longer make it a wish but a selfish desire, Ying-Ying courageously tells Lena her secret wish, but this time she needs Lena to be the one who finds her:

This relationship between Ying-Ying and Lena is a source of tragedy in the story, because they both are, in Ying-Ying's words, exhausted "ghosts" with no more love or hope left (252). Their relationship is important because it causes the reader to reflect on repairing certain relationships and seeing that overcoming obstacles is important in order to move on. (Thompson 2)

From the stories mentioned in the novel, we find that both mothers, Lindo and Ying-Ying, are not able to express their own desires and wishes in a patriarchal society, in which women would be punished, as illustrated by the myth of the Moon Lady, for taking the joy they want from life. This idea of unfulfilled desire connects these chapters with the theme of sacrifice. Both Lindo and Ying-Ying had to sacrifice the approval of their families in order to get what they really wanted. Hence, all four mothers want for their daughters to be independent and strong and fulfill their secret wishes not to become invisible. The title refers not only to the actual Joy Luck Club but to the meaning under the stories told in the book in general. With wit and metaphor, not only does Amy Tan address many women, mothers and grown daughters, but she also examines the persistent tensions and powerful bonds between generations and cultures. The Chinese-American superstitions drive the characters' thoughts, attitudes and choices, creating a difference in thoughts between the Chinese women and their American daughters.

A common theory about myths is that they "concern gods, and are associated, for the most part if not always, with rituals" (Kirk 35). In Amy Tan's novels, mythology represents the voice, needs, and traditions of displaced Chinese-Americans in contemporary American society, where issues about ethnicity concern bicultural individuals who work to overcome their marginalized status. Daughters in Tan's novels are the heroines in traditional myths and legends whose quest for cultural identity is their holy grail. In fact, "feeling comfortable in both cultures does not necessarily mean that the individual is accepted equally in both." (Dennis, 2008, 17). Moreover, the daughters should face conflicts and struggles before they can acknowledge their mothers' culture. This rite of passage the daughters undergo parallels many rite of passage themes found in traditional mythologies.

Storytelling parallels Oral Tradition:

The ritual of storytelling is also an important element both within the context of Amy Tan's novels and in the context of Asian-American mythology. Tan uses the 'talk-story' or 'frame story' from Chinese oral tradition in a narrative form in works such as *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Kitchen God's Wife* and *The Hundred Secret Senses*; they are examples of intricate and moving frame stories that are intertwined within the main plot. Through it, Tan cleverly weaves many stories together in one big story as in *The Joy Luck Club*, she "is good at weaving these cultural differences of the West and China into a harmony and accord" (Huang 10) It allows the daughters to reach this point of being Chinese-American, rather than Chinese or American women. As noted by Anthony Smith, the history of an ethnic group is usually handed down orally, and hence it is related to memories and rituals (2001, 109). Like the mothers and daughters who engage in the ritual to share experiences and values, Asian-American writers engage in storytelling to voice the concerns of the community. The event that takes place within the novels is an event that takes place in "real life," in much the same way rituals have formed from existing mythologies.

The storytelling invoked by the mothers in these novels also parallels oral tradition and storytelling in preliterate cultures--when the myths and folktales were told, rather than read. The daughters in the novels are hearing these tales from their mothers and incorporating them into a personal mythology of their own--an Asian-American mythology. (Conrad 8)

The source of different superstitions is based on what evolve in this process. It can be cultural based that came from others and pass to one another. Through telling traditional Chinese folktales, Tan's narratives reflect cultural themes and motifs and Chinese values 'which

contribute to their mythological structure." (Conrad 14) Besides, personal values transmit from one generation to the next; the mothers yearn for their daughters to "have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character" (*JLC* 289)

In her novels, Tan tends to concentrate on the conflicts between mothers and daughters, whether born in China or in the United States, and invokes, as Feng suggests, Chinese history and landscape in order to contextualize her portrayal of Chinese American experiences (2010, 24). Amy Tan wants to illustrate the meaning under her usage of superstition that highlights the difficulties of their choices and of bridging two cultures.

Language is one of the most powerful changes in the immigrant experience (Espín, 2006, 247). It has a profound impact on the immigrant's identity and sense of self, as the immigrant is learning to live with two important languages: the mother tongue and the language of the host culture (Espín 247-8). Language is a continuously active social practice that reinforces the beliefs associated with culture. One can also refer to this concept as "mind style" since by language memories are not forgotten. Two languages mean two different social worlds, and learning the new language of the host culture means immersing oneself in the "power relations of the specific culture", which exposes the individual to social inequality due to various levels of language proficiency (Ibid 247).

Although the mothers in Amy Tan's novels believe that their daughters will intuitively understand their mysterious utterances, the daughters do not understand them at all. When Lena was a child "she gradually becomes her mother's voice and interprets her mother's Chinese words for others. Like her father Clifford, she translates Ying-ying's words to sound more pleasant than what Ying-ying actually says." (Dennis, 2008, 17). In addition, June and her mother spoke two different languages that hinder comprehension: "My mother and I never really understood each other. We translated each other's meanings." (*JLC* 37). "I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese," (*JLC* 34) says June.

The Hundred Secret Senses: Ghosts and Spirits

Not only did her mother's superstitions have an impact on Tan herself for a long time, but also Tan's own friend predicted his own murder, and after he was killed the names of the two killers came to her out of nowhere. In *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), Tan incorporates the superstitious element, the supernatural phenomena and magical realism. She relies upon "superstitions about ghosts, the afterlife, and reincarnation to show a cultural tension between Chinese folkways and American customs." (Conrad 51-2) To know what secret senses mean, we should read Tan's definition in this book, where Olivia asked Kwan about "The Hundred Secret Senses", Kwan says: "What's a secret sense?" "How can I say? Memory, seeing, hearing, feeling, all come together, then you know something true in your heart. ... You use you secret sense, sometimes can get message back and forth fast between two people, living, dead, doesn't matter, same sense". (*THSS* 102). The secret senses are again defined by in another chapter: "The senses that are related to primitive instincts, what humans had before their brains developed language and the higher functions –the ability to equivocate, make excuses, and lie. Spine chills and musky scents, goose bumps and blushing cheeks –those are the vocabulary of the secret senses." (*THSS* 237).

Tan's stories work as episodes or flashbacks about several persons who have lived other lives. She uses the emotional, long-worn relationship between two half-sisters; Olivia, a Californian yuppie, who was annoyed by the intruding presence of her older and superstitious Chinese-

born half sister, Kwan, an eighteen-year-old girl, and then “a strange old lady, short and chubby” (*THSS* 10). Coming from two different cultural backgrounds, both sisters are marked immediately by strong contrasts in character (Thompson 11). However, they ultimately manage to find a connection. Their relationship begins with the death of their Chinese father when Olivia is almost four and Kwan comes from China to live with the family.

Christine Downing’s work *Psyche’s Sisters* (1990) points out that “while both Jung and Freud attempt to analyze [sibling] relationships, they never touch on the sisterly relationship. ... [C]ontemporary psychoanalytic feminists such as Luce Irigaray have shown their concern that women must move beyond the mother-daughter relationship into all woman-woman intimacy, and recognize a sister in the mother.” (Qtd. in Yu 144-5) Kwan symbolizes a scapegoat figure, a common symbol in traditional mythologies as she ‘replaces’ Olivia’s irresponsible American mother as her protector, caretaker and surrogate mother assuring her, “Libby-ah ... I never leave you.” (*THSS* 23) Although Kwan’s love for Olivia is great and limitless, Olivia, the novel’s primary narrator,

expresses strong fear and anxiety that seem to confirm Freud’s theoretical concept of sibling rivalry. She is scared that Kwan would take her place when she arrives. Tan’s representation of the sibling relationship, however, is more complicated than a traditional sibling relationship. As Mink and Ward argue, sibling relationships in the contemporary family are complicated by various joinings and disjoinings. Unlike the traditional treatment of sisterhood, Tan repaints the Chinese-American family portrait to fit the modern frame. She chooses to show how the development of cross-cultural and cross-racial sisterhood influences female identity formation. (Yu 148)

Tan provided a number of dialogues to express the tension between the characters and the difficulty of the language barriers. Kwan’s broken English irritates Olivia whose friends at school ridicule her “retarded” sister calling her a “*dumb chink;” Olivia responds by yelling out “I hate her! I wish she’d go back to China!” (12).

This scene sets up the axes of difference between the two sisters—West and East, self and other—that will remain the structuring principle of the first half of the novel. The sister relationship in this narrative seems to follow the basic pattern of polarity. In the beginning, the sisters seem to take on opposite roles. Kwan represents the threatening other from the East. She becomes both metaphor and metonymy for the difference between East and West, for she simultaneously embodies difference and acts as points of entry to “larger” cultural differences, providing access to the mysteries of Chinese culture. By contrast, Olivia is all American except for her Asian features; she is rational and skeptical as well. (Yu 148-9)

Olivia emphasizes the fact that her family is “all-American”, and that she has no interest in learning about her Chinese heritage from Kwan. For Olivia, Kwan is an outsider, who “represents the ethnic and racial origin that she can neither fully embrace nor abandon.” (Yu 151) Her “strange, foreign customs not only frighten Olivia but interfere with her desire to fit into dominant American culture.” (Conrad 53) Olivia narrates that “[w]e were a modern American family. We spoke English. Sure, we ate Chinese food, but take-out, like everyone else. [...] She [Louise] had never heard my father talk about Chinese superstitions before; they attended church and bought life insurance.” (*THSS* 7).

In addition to the language barrier, the ritual of storytelling is also very obvious in this novel. While Kwan learns English from young Olivia, Olivia is "infected" by the Chinese language through Kwan's numerous stories she claims they share. Kwan begins to educate Olivia telling her oral narratives about past lives and Chinese mythology, cultural heritage and history. The refusal to learn a new language skillfully may be a desire for self preservation, as the new language might be posing "a threat for the individual's sense of identity" (Espín 248). In some cases, the fast learning of the new language may present the opportunity to create a new identity different from the one before (Ibid 248). Olivia's relationship with her Chinese heritage is complicated, and her identity is clouded by her struggles to accept her Chinese origin. These struggles can be seen in her negative attitude towards Kwan's stories and the Chinese language. For Olivia, Kwan's stories have been haunting her since childhood, and it has been difficult for her to understand the meaning behind those ghostly stories: "[f]or most of my childhood, I had to struggle *not* to see the world the way Kwan described it" (THSS 43).

Feng discusses how a country such as China becomes a "phantom space haunted by family secrets and ghostly past" (2010, 53-54). Tan's ghosts are closely linked to China and they can be regarded as products of her obsession with matrilineage and maternal memory (Ibid 58). Ken-fang Lee further discusses Tan's ghosts in his article "Cultural Translation and the Exorcist: A Reading of Kingston's and Tan's Ghost Stories" addressing the role of the "cultural translation in formulating a cultural identity" (2004, 106). He argues that the ghosts represent the cultural memory of China that has been forgotten and which has to be remembered and exorcised by the immigrant sisters and mothers (116). In Lee's opinion, the ghosts in *The Hundred Secret Senses* are a part of cultural memory that cannot be forgotten or eradicated, and Kwan's "ghost story like inerasable cultural memory that needs retelling and recollecting" (Ibid 117, 118). Mothers, grandmothers, or figure-mothers tell ghost stories for their daughters, or even tell secrets that cannot be openly said but must be remembered: "But don't tell anyone. Promise me, Libby-ah" (THSS 23). "Once a person has the bad habit of being scared of ghosts, it's hard to break." (THSS 315) Using the narrative technique, Tan shows the impact people have on each other; Kwan nourishes the idea of the spirits as a way to control her sister, because without it, there is nothing to protect her sister from.

Indeed, Tan's issues of life and death are entwined in her novel *The Hundred Secret Senses*; the world of yin and the world of yang.² Tan uses "the same personae and their reincarnations" in the yin-yang hologram "to present a broader vision of the various dimensions of life, a vision that is revealed only through the most elaborate and even conjectural strategy. The novel requires readers to adjust their ordinary senses to be willing to intertwine the real and the unreal." (Zhang 1). The irrational states of the world of yin are correlated to the real situations and events in the world of yang. It suggests that Tan's art cannot be understood entirely in terms of Western rationalism. (Ibid 2) The Yin people, so to speak, can be defined as "an element of Chinese mythology, those who have passed away, yet haunt the modern world like ghosts. ... This focus on life and death allows [Tan] to bring

² *The Hundred Secret Senses* represents the nature of yin/yang balance."In Chinese the two poles of cosmic energy are yang (positive) and yin (negative), [...] the ideograms indicate the sunny and shady sides of a hill, and they are associated with the masculine and the feminine, the firm and the yielding, the strong and the weak, the light and the dark, the rising and the falling, heaven and earth, and they are even recognized in such everyday matters as cooking as the spicy and the bland. Thus the art of life is not seen as holding to yang and banishing yin, but as keeping the two in balance, because there cannot be one without the other." (Wats 21)

both tragic and comic elements to her works, increasing the universal appeal.” (Thompson 3). Kwan's superstitions are enormous, as she claims that she even speaks to 'Yin people.' Olivia is confused by the recurring dreams through which she sees her own self as a Yin person. She specifically reflects upon her life: “Being forced to grow up with Kwan was probably one of the reasons I never knew who I was or wanted to become. She was a role model for multiple personalities.” (THSS 174) Whereas, Kwan has multiple identities, Olivia, after being separated from her husband, suddenly "realizes that her life is devoid of meaningful ties and suitable identities. Obviously, her identity crisis is mainly caused by a lack of cultural wholeness rather than by her marital problem.” (Yu 149-50). Olivia believes Kwan has yin eyes: "She sees those who have died and now dwell in the World of Yin." (THSS 3) She considers Kwan's stories as family secrets and ghostly pasts, which she does not understand. Due to her rational thinking and scientific view of life, Olivia overlooks the spiritual values of life emphasized by Kwan. Olivia says, "Kwan saw what she believed. I saw what I didn't want to believe" (THSS 57). "Because I'm not Chinese like Kwan. To me, yin isn't yang, and yang isn't yin. I can't accept two contradictory stories as the whole truth" (THSS 277).

Being a ghost talker, Kwan introduces the reality of the spirit world to Olivia: “Living people always more trouble than ghost. Living people bother you because angry. Ghost make trouble only because sad, lost, confused.” (THSS 122). Consequently, Kwan was confined to a mental institution. After returning home, she tells Olivia that she tricked the doctors in San Francisco who diagnosed her as insane that can be treated by electroshock treatments, but she can still see the dead. Modern science fails to explain the mysterious part of Kwan. “The secret senses, therefore, not only provide a channel of communication between the yin and yang worlds, but also suggest an extra-sensory aspect of human beings beyond that which medical doctors and scientists can understand.” (Zhang 2) Western rationalism provides a limited view of life with the lack of grasping the spiritual aspects embodied in Kwan's Chinese beliefs.

In fact, superstitions are prevalent where the individual feels insecurity, fear and anxiety. These ghosts Kwan tries to share with Olivia have also materialized before Olivia's eyes. On one occasion, when Olivia is still a child, she sees the ghost of a little girl in her room:

I remember a particular day – I must have been eight – when I was sitting alone on my bed, dressing my Barbie doll in her best clothes. I heard a girl's voice say: '*Geiwo kan.*' I looked up, and there on Kwan's bed was a somber Chinese girl around my age, demanding to see my doll. I wasn't scared. That was the other thing about seeing ghosts: I always felt perfectly calm, as if my whole body had been soaked in [51] a mild tranquilizer. I politely asked this little girl in Chinese who she was. And she said, '*Lili-lili, lili-lili,*' in a high squeal. (THSS 44)

The identity of this ghost is not revealed, however, it could be Kwan's friend, Buncake Lili, from when she was five, who died in a drowning accident in a terrible flood in Changmian. "*lili-lili-lili* was the only sound she could make" (THSS 224), which is the same sound the ghost in Olivia's bedroom makes. The theme of death and life are clearly represented in this narrative of the flood. “Kwan lost her body; Buncake, her spirit. In a mysterious way Kwan’s spirit possesses Buncake’s remaining body.” (Yu 152) “There’s a ghost inside this girl.” | “what can we do?” | “nothing. The girl who lived in this body before doesn’t want to come back. And the girl who lives in it now can’t leave until she finds her”. (THSS 256) The flood takes both Kwan and Buncake Lili, but Kwan claims to have survived by switching bodies with Buncake Lili, since her own body was too broken to return from the World of Yin. Kwan is not the only one

to believe in spirits; the people in the village of Changmian remember the incident for a while. This unfortunate story becomes a cultural secret when they decide to forget about the whole incident:

"They [the villagers] pretended I was not a ghost. They pretended I had always been the plump girl. Buncake the skinny one. [...] You see, everyone decided not to remember. And later, they really did forget. They forgot there was a year of no flood. They forgot Du Lili was once called Du Yun. They forgot which little girl drowned." (THSS 231)

This incident from Kwan's childhood is traumatic, therefore she tells this secret using ghosts and the World of Yin to make sense of it, and Olivia needs to learn this secret in order to understand Kwan's history. Olivia's ethnic identity is formed through Kwan's teachings of the Chinese culture and through her ghostly stories of strange ancestors from the Yin world. Investigating her real identity, Olivia now can accept Kwan in her life: "Looking at her is like viewing a hologram: locked beneath the shiny surface is the three-dimensional image of a girl who drowned" (THSS 289). Eventually she admits: "I listen, no longer afraid of Kwan's secrets. She's offered me her hand. I'm taking it freely. Together we're flying to the World of Yin." (THSS 363) Olivia's ethnic identity formation is only recognized through her acceptance of her older sister, "the sister bond seems to endure." (Yu 152)

Chinese people believe in reincarnation: people will be re-born in the next lifetime after death and be in the world of Yin. They believe that if we make a mistake that we truly regret, we could ask what we would be in the next lifetime. In this place where people go after death, Kwan claims to have seen Buncake Lili happy with her parents, and Olivia's unborn spirit pleading with Kwan to return to her body and wait for Olivia's birth:

I went to the world of Yin. I saw so many things. Flocks of birds, some arriving, some leaving. Buncake soaring with her mother and father. All the singing frogs I had ever eaten, now with their skin coats back on. I knew I was dead, and I was anxious to see my mother. But before I could find her, I saw someone running to me, anger and worry all over her face.

'You must go back,' she cried. 'In seven years, I'll be born. It's all arranged. You promised to wait. Did you forget?' And she shook me, shook me until I remembered. I flew back to the mortal world. I tried to return to my body. I pushed and shoved. But it was broken, my poor thin corpse. And then the rain stopped. The sun was coming out. Du Yun and Big Ma were opening the coffin lids. Hurry, hurry, what should I do? So tell me, Libby-ah, did I do wrong? I had no choice. How else could I keep my promise to you? (THSS 232)

To construct a sister bond, Kwan told the story of her last lifetime to Olivia: "Lao Lu said that you must stay together with Simon. This is your *yinyuan*, the fate that brings lovers together." | "and why is this my fate?" | "because in your last lifetime together, you loved someone else before Simon. Later, Simon trusted you with his whole life that you loved him too." (THSS 127) Taking Olivia back to a former life makes her develop the hundred secret senses with which she can speak with ghosts and

remembers dreams as other lives, other selves. ... Kwan's ghost-filled visions eventually invade Olivia's psyche. She can no longer identify the boundaries between her own dreams and episodes in Kwan's stories, as she asks, "So which part was her

dream, which part was mine? Where did they intersect?" As she matures, Olivia finds that she has inadvertently absorbed much about Chinese superstitions, spirits, and reincarnation. (Yu 149-50)

Generally speaking, in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Tan turns from employing popular Chinese myths into using personal mythology of the two sisters Kwan and Olivia. No doubt the links between this personal mythology and Chinese myths, superstitions, motifs and values provide the foundation for the progress of this novel's plot and narratives. Kwan's frame narrative that comprises all her individual interrelated past stories:

function as a new mythology by providing a group of tales which narrate the Asian-American experience, from Olivia's life as Miss Banner to her present life as a woman seeking to negotiate both her Chinese and American heritage. This Asian-American mythology is comprised of stories about displaced women who are struggling to find their identities, both personally and culturally, in a dominant culture that tries to assimilate them. (Conrad 54-55)

Olivia admits that Kwan has a profound influence on her, even in her relationship with her fiancé, who was previously in love with a girl, Elza, who died young. Out of fear of losing him, Olivia asks Kwan to persuade Simon not to leave Olivia as they are destined to stay together. Even after they get married, Olivia is still haunted by Elza's death, and is annoyed by her frequent and disturbing presence. (Yu 149-50). Eventually, disputes continually erupted between them. Yet later Kwan organizes a journey to China, to her native enchanted village of Changmian with Olivia and Simon. "But her most ambitious goal is a spiritual one: to encourage her sister to acknowledge the reality of the World of Yin and the truth of reincarnation. Thus the novel is threaded with a second narrative, Kwan's story of her fate in a former life, ..." (Messud 2)

During a storm, Kwan mysteriously retreats into a dark enigmatic cave in Changmian and is never seen again. Her disappearance gives a magical effect relying on a traditional Chinese myth of the imperial architect who, trying to escape the wrath of his emperor, opened a door in the drawing of the palace he had made and disappeared inside it (Zhang 3). In Changmian, Kwan sacrifices herself to allow the survival of Olivia and Simon who are eventually reunited. Olivia begins to believe in Kwan's tales of incarnation and the world of yin: "Did a terrible trauma in childhood cause her to believe she had switched bodies with someone else? Even if we aren't genetically related, isn't she still my sister?" (*THSS* 258) Olivia finds her "other half": "being here, I feel as if the membrane separating the two halves of my life has finally been shed" (*THSS* 230). At a moment of cultural reconciliation, China is regarded by Tan in this novel as a homeland for a whole that unites fragmented souls or selves, Chinese and American.

To represent the elusive world of yin is to represent the unrepresentable, to visualize the invisible, and to think the unthinkable. Tan's novel, therefore, encourages readers to pass through the world of sensory experience and to search for meaning in the negotiations between yin and yang, and between the ordinary and the extraordinary. ... [Olivia's] recognition of the indivisible duality of light and dark, yang and yin, and the rational and the irrational allows her to understand life more fully. The image of a yin-yang hologram, in a sense, epitomizes the relationship of two halves of a divided whole. (Zhang 3)

The **idea of sacrifice** is explained through the idea of resurrection, as noted by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Power of Myth* (1988):

Somebody has to die in order for life to emerge. I begin to see this incredible pattern of death giving rise to birth, and birth giving rise to death. Every generation has to die in order that the next generation can come. (106)

Olivia gives birth to her daughter, who is suggested to be Kwan's reincarnation. To honor the memory of Kwan and their heritage, Olivia and her daughter take Kwan's last name Li.

Kwan can live only as a ghost of the other, or rather as a daughter. ... This family picture is a re-envisioned Asian-American family, an acceptance of her ethnic other into the family where the difference can be contained. ... In the process of novel writing, Tan has gestured toward, and ultimately contained the specter of ethnic and racial otherness by embodying it in the figure of a sister who appears and disappears. (Yu 151-2)

Interestingly, in her past lives, Olivia has rebelled against different traditions, especially patriarchal tradition. As happened in *The Joy Luck Club*, and *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Tan here resolves the racial and cultural issues by making the daughter come to terms with the mother figure (here Kwan) through realizing the mistranslations and cultural distances between them. This realization reveals the sensibility she has inherited from her figure mother, even though she distances herself from her beliefs. "How can I not love my own sister? In many respects, she's been more like a mother to me than my real one" (*THSS* 23). Olivia gushes at a moment of sudden realization at the end of the novel accepting Kwan's world of ghosts; it comes like an epiphany balancing the rational and irrational and bringing some peace to her mind:

I think Kwan intended to show me the world is not a place but the vastness of the soul. And the soul is nothing more than love, limitless, endless, all that moves us toward knowing what is true. ... And believing in ghosts –that's believing that love never dies. If people we love die, then they are lost only to our ordinary senses. If we remember, we can find them anytime with our hundred secret senses. (*THSS* 399)

The mode of *The Hundred Secret Senses* is of magic realism since "marvellous and impossible events occur in what otherwise purports to be a realistic narrative" (Lodge 114). The novel is not a mere ridiculous ghost story, but it has a rational meaning and significance. "Kwan gently forces Olivia to face the worst in herself and, in so doing, to find her strengths." (Messud 2) By balancing Life and death, Yin and Yang, the American-born Olivia now believes in the spiritual and literal truth of Kwan's spirits and visions and asserts "an identity connected with her cultural ancestry." (Zhang 3) From Kwan's belief in eternal cosmic renewal, Olivia learns how to view herself and the world in a new way: "[Kwan] pushed her Chinese secrets into my brain and changed how I thought about the world" (*THSS* 13).

The Bonesetter's Daughter: Ghost Translation

Amy Tan's frequent use of Gothic novels set in fearful places is evident in her writing career. The ghost story and the tales of the occult are part of that eighteenth century Gothic tradition. Set in contemporary San Francisco and in a Chinese village, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* "conjures the pain of broken dreams, the power of myths, and the strength of love that enables us to recover in memory what we have lost in grief" *New York Times Book Review*. In this novel, Tan again deals with the mother-daughter conflicts in an Asian American family and uses multiple narratives.

The Bonesetter's Daughter's protagonist is Ruth Young, a middle-aged, Asian American woman who works as a ghostwriter and whose life is under great pressure from many aspects: the clients, her husband Art and two step-daughters and most of all, her mother, LuLing. The fiction begins with LuLing's short self-confession, and then quickly moves to the main narration of Ruth Young's life in America. Her objective is to search for the name of her mother, the daughter of the famous Bonesetter from the Mouth of the Mountain. Through reading a manuscript titled, "Things I Should Not Forget," Ruth begins to learn about her mother's past and realizes that Luling's mother is in fact her nursemaid, Precious Auntie (*TBD* 168).

As forms of superstition, ghosts, ghost-writing, and ghost narration are themes that have occurred in Amy Tan's novels; and Tan has also recycled the idea of ghosts working as cultural and historical mediums (Feng 2010, 54). In a chapter titled "Lost in Cultural Translation", the author Huang says that Amy Tan gives attention to the 'cultural differences' that necessarily imply 'generation conflicts' in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*:

Tan adds some other mysterious flavours to her writing: the (im)possible communication between the living and the dead. In her habitual usage of pre-Communist China as the main background of maternal memory, Tan has achieved a transition and taps a greater issue in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*: the manuscript and the problem of translation. Here, "translation" in this fiction is not only a problem of languages, but also a problem of cultures, generations, countries, memories, and even, life and death...." (Huang 10-11)

Huang refers to a definition of the term "translation" between/among, explained by Rey Chow in her book titled *Primitive Passions*, as "betrayal" and a "tradition" at the same time; that may imply 'infidelity':

Etymologically, the word translation is linked, among other things, to "tradition" on the one hand and to "betrayal" on the other. The Italian expression Traduttore, traditore—"Translator, traitor"—allows us to grasp the pejorative implication of infidelity that is often associated with the task of translating. (Qtd. in Huang 11)

Because differences between cultures are like differences between languages, hence, misunderstanding or misconception is involved in translation in which "language is no longer the most crucial key, but an overall cultural aspect at the root of language is involved." (Huang 13) In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, the problem of translations is clearly pointed out with Ruth's inability to read her mother's manuscript written in Chinese. The solution is to find another translator, Mr. Tang, who knows both Chinese and English to translate.

Through translation, Ruth becomes able to understand her mother's as well as her grandmother's past. It also enables Ruth to discover herself and heal it, as it gives rise to her guilt to her mother, a betrayal to her mother tongue. Interestingly, Ruth's betrayal is a similar repetition of LuLing's own betrayal to Precious Auntie, which seems to form a family tradition, especially the mother-daughter one, a heritage of betrayal. The power of fate is clearly shown in the novel: "Luling believes that, because she betrayed her mother, she is fated to ill fortune and to be cursed for the rest of her life." (*TBD* 252) Even Precious Auntie was accused of setting her family's home and business on fire. However, Ruth eventually succeeds to help her mother "feel forgiveness for betraying Precious Auntie." (Thompson 6)

Just as Kwan acts as a sort of 'medium' or 'ghost-talker' (254) mediating between the community of the living and the yin world, LuLing thinks that her daughter Ruth is able to communicate with the ghost of Precious Auntie and talk to her due to the problem of language, Ruth writes on the sand and acts like a translator between two worlds; she betrays both sides. She invents the ghost's words to deceive LuLing on the one hand, and on the other hand, she is not able to communicate to the dead at all.

This invention becomes intervention, for the deep involvement of the role of translator, which also renders the translation to a calculating "transaction" – a transaction by Ruth's manipulation of LuLing's superstition, a transaction between the dead and the living. ... Daughters in the fiction, as a result, can only try to understand, but they can never fully understand their mothers' words, just like the translated target texts can never faithfully represent the original source works. (Huang 14-15)

Tan uses Chinese words with their translation to give effects to the text, such as (Hulihuda: confused; Heimongmong: dark fog). Because the daughters cannot read the Chinese text, the mothers tell them about the dangers explained in it. The daughters have no direct connection to Chinese values, linguistically or otherwise, and refuse to listen to their mothers' advices. Tan resolves this conflict by exchanging the functions for identity formation. Ruth called herself her mother's "mouthpiece" because of her mother's horrible English (*TBD* 65). In return, the mother must resort to the storytelling tradition even though the daughter refuses to listen to these stories. Thompson explains:

Ruth felt the knowledge of her family's past was very much a part of her, as Tan had. This parallelism is also interesting in that Ruth learns to help Luling adapt into American life, but also learns to listen to her mother's past and advice. This helped both women's identities, in that Ruth found her past and Luling modernized for the future." (5)

The ghostwriter, Ruth, suffers from a mysterious annual muteness, inability to speak, or rather a language disorder, which could be explained as a two-edged weapon; it is a means of communication to the heritage of her mother and to her own self. Ruth is

the one who seems able to listen to the female relative's voice—the supernatural voice from Auntie Precious. ... Her self-sacrifices as a daughter, a stepmother, a wife, and a ghostwriter are never highly valued, and are oftentimes neglected. But her muteness strangely evokes others' attention to her; or more specifically, her loss of speaking ability is not only the conventional idea of women's low position or being silenced, but also an innovative possibility of being noticed (Huang 17-18).

In fact, superstitions are prevalent where the individual feels insecurity, fear and anxiety.

Ruth was raised in a family whose craft of ink-making goes back to 600 years; her mother Lulling and Ruth herself is a ghostwriter. Eventually, after reading the manuscript, Ruth becomes a writer –without the ghost– and begins to write her family story; she changes her fate that was linked to her function as a ghost translator, a traitor. "To write the past is to claim one's own being, for writing is the reproduction of "ça-a-été" [what has been]: the maternal memory is written down as the maternal memento." (Huang 14) The quest for self-identification, model of female development, and Chinese culture that depict the formation of Chinese-American identity are themes explored by Tan in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. Ruth's creative art is an act of self-realization, a step forward to achieve her own identity, and a

salvation from ghost-writing “to step onto the pilgrim’s progress in search of selfhood as well as familial salvation, and this salvation most of the time happens to be the solution of mother-daughter conflicts in the way of writing and storytelling.” (Ibid 41)

In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, Tan also parallels herself to Ruth; she tried to fix up the conflicts with her mother throughout her young rebellious years, although she was able to “value her rich, detailed life.” Ruth comes to terms with her mother Luling “at the end of her life, just as Amy Tan did.” (Thompson 2) Precious Auntie has shown to LuLing that the writing must be “something that should have been remembered. Otherwise, why did the gods say it, why did a person write it down?” (TBD 183) So, writing is a means for remembering the past stories that must not be forgotten. Tan weaves her own real experiences of her mother’s Alzheimer’s disease and her annual muteness into the plot of her novel. LuLing’s Alzheimer disease causes memory-loss, motivating Ruth to study LuLing’s manuscript, out of her anxiety to outline her mother’s past and also the maternal history. (Huang 23)

As clarified by definitions, superstition is defined as “irrational”, a wrong belief and knowledge. The concept of so many Chinese superstitious beliefs is easily related to *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, such as superstition, good luck, brooms, unlucky numbers, Chinese Zodiac Signs, and dreams. The number 9 is known to be a lucky number which signifies extraordinary capacity. In the beginning of the story Ruth talks about how she counts on her fingers to remember all of the tasks she needs to complete on one day: “What was nine? Nine was usually something important, a significant number, what her mother termed the number of... a number that also stood for - Do not forget, or risk losing all” (20).

Cultural and Personal Myths

Amy Tan indirectly addresses a common myth, namely the American Dream. The word ‘myth’ may be used “in terms of discussing cultural ideology and tension because myth also refers to untruths or lies. Amy Tan’s novels clearly show women (both mothers and daughters) trapped between cultures as a result of myths or misconceptions. ... The concept of the American Dream is just one cultural myth that is deconstructed and redefined to fit the needs of a current, more diverse generation.” (Conrad 8) This dream is unattainable without renouncing the culture of one’s Chinese past in order to assume the culture requisite of an American future. However, she tries to maintain a balance between the ancient culture and the new.

Another common myth used by Amy Tan is the myth of personal experience. Ruth’s mother has a profound effect on her daughter’s cultural and self-identity. Generally speaking, Tan’s novels:

contain a personal mythology, one that embodies the mothers’ life histories and experiences. Although these stories are not myths or folktales in the traditional sense, their function in the novels and in terms of the characters’ lives parallels the way a culture uses myths. In other words, the mothers attempt to share wisdom, folk knowledge (and this includes superstitions and the supernatural), and ideology with their daughters, and they use personal stories to accomplish this. (Conrad 7-8)

Most researchers agree that superstitious practices like a risky activity appear in situations where uncertainty and stress prevail. The common point among their theories is that superstition gives the illusion to control one’s environment and brings the psychological benefits associated with this control (Langer, 1975, 311-328.). In other words, superstitious

acts bring emotional reassurance in an uncontrollable situation as they allow the individual to feel active rather than passive, and they protect this fundamental need in modern culture. In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, we are also presented with the theme of superstition which turns out to have a perfectly rational explanation. Tan's "Chinese American Dream" is clearly illustrated through **the female characters in her novels. They have their own dream that cannot be attained but through a blend of action and tradition.** During their quest for self-identity, the daughters in Amy tan's novels are lost in translation and their actual problem is how to adapt to the American society.

The overall structure of Tan's first three novels is strikingly similar. The protagonist through whose eyes the stories of the mothers are narrated is the Chinese daughter approaching her mid-thirties. This daughter has an established lifestyle that includes a professional but unfulfilling career of modest success in a creative industry - copywriter, photographer, ghostwriter. The mothers were not allowed to marry again after their husbands left or died without adding shame to their families. Yet the daughters were all going through divorces, remarriages, not wanting to be married at all.

RATIONALITY AND SUPERSTITION AMALGAMATED

A blend of American action (Christianity) and Chinese tradition

Having thus dealt with three major forms of superstition —ghosts, the supernatural, and mythology— in Amy Tan's Chinese American literature, it is important to consider the theme of religious belief in her work. As previously mentioned, there is no clearly defined border between superstition and religion. Both are what can be termed the "irrational rational", or those beliefs that can be rationalized though they may be considered irrational. Religious conversions, particularly in the case of new immigrants, are a common phenomenon. However, the previous attitudes of the immigrant characters concern themselves not just with the casting away of old gods for new ones as part of the move to America, but also with the changing of the religion itself. The changing of the religion suggests the forging of a new identity as if the character can write his/her own fate [and faith]. Richard King, in *Orientalism and Religion* (1999), remarks that this phenomenon stems from "The view that religion is largely a matter of personal belief rather than of communal involvement" which is "a prominent feature of modern Western religious consciousness." (12).

Superstitious behaviours cannot be explained according to religious beliefs which are not usually considered as irrational by members of a given society. Superstition and religion create a conflict in Tan's life since she tries to seek the truth and to do this she is open to both influences. The theme of the Christianized versus non-Christianized Chinese is very obvious and related to the theme of superstition versus religion. The main thrust of the protagonist is Tan's struggle to reconcile the independence due to her Christian self, and the traditional Confucian decorum. Her works illustrate a blend of Chinese tradition and Christian belief which is infused into all the Chinese-American families, as the need for one to survive as a Chinese American. However, the second generation Chinese immigrants think differently than the first and do not follow traditions blindly. From the daughters' perspectives, the triumph of Christianity over Chinese tradition is the main objective. They reject their parents' beliefs and search for spiritual satisfaction that creates their own personality.

Not only do Tan's novels deal with her questioning of traditional values, but also they portray the struggle between religion and superstition. We can observe how, by using paradox structure, Tan states the importance of the religion against superstition. Although each mother has her superstitions, they believe in God and yet they do not know doctrine. Mother goes to mass regularly, but she also believes in superstitions, such as the magical powers she incorporates into voodoo rituals to honor her ancestors. Any postcolonial nation has difficulties reconciling native traditions with colonial ones, but religion in particular is an exception.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Jing-Mei thinks of her mother's religion as 'just more of her Chinese superstitions, beliefs that conveniently fit the circumstances' (31). Lindo Jong masters her religion she is born into and she is able to manipulate it by pretending dreams to escape her first marriage in China. She also moves into her second marriage in America by means of a carefully selected and vetted fortune cookie. "Lindo accepts change, and realizes that she can never "lose" her past because it actually stays with her (18)." (Thompson 5)

The other mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* also know how to master their religions; their fear of the twenty-six malignant gates and desire to prevent them lead to their memorizing. They resort to Christian religion and superstition that exist side-by-side, with the maintenance of their previous religions, so that they are the wielders rather than the victims of Christianity. By keeping the mothers tied to their Chinese cultural heritage much more than their daughters, Tan also resists the conflation of religion with culture and race. However, there is spiritual awareness at the end of *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Kwan prays to both Pastor Amen's god and her own. Ruth in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* is dedicated to yoga. In his essay, "Chinese and Dogs" (2001), Ma's identification of Tan's daughters as prototypes of 'San Francisco yuppies', (30) is fairly accurate, Tan deliberately ethnicizes the primitive and spiritual in order to achieve a stronger contrast with the rational humanism of the West.

It is essentially the threat of death and loss – death of the mother in *The Joy Luck Club*, divorce in *Senses* and Alzheimer's in *Daughter* asserts the daughters' search for spiritual meaning. They take decisive decisions concerning their religious choices via the translations of their mothers, as well as their own experiences. The fact that they are, unlike their mothers, free to choose the religion they want, is a victory.

It becomes obvious that the popular beliefs of the Chinese-American daughters are significantly different from their parents. Bearing in mind that we are dealing with the conflict between superstition and rationality—where the former demonstrates the absence of control and the latter the presence of control—is actually a representation of the deeper and more thematic mother-daughter conflict, though they both search for national and self-identity. The daughters reject their parents' beliefs and search for spiritual satisfaction that created their own personality. [Christianity] Their search for autonomy is clarified at both a strong sense of selfhood (subjective consciousness) and in connection with the conventional (collective consciousness).

CONCLUSIONS

Although modern culture is characterized by its inclination toward the value of action, and the individual appreciation of superstitious rituals have been changed under the processes of modernization and globalization, superstition occupies a reasonable place in the Chinese-

American literature. The objective of this paper was to discuss the particular references to the element of superstition in Amy Tan's fiction and the ways of their interpretation. Tan's masterful use of various superstitious features with varying extent and different intentions originates from Chinese folklore and tradition. There is a clear strand of ghosts, the supernatural, myths, rituals, death and spiritual healing running through Amy Tan's three novels. All these elements, practised by her characters, have some effect on them, either psychologically or in the making of their decisions. They are recalled particularly when her characters are less certain of their outer environmental conditions and in their emotional anxiety.

Despite Tan's rejection of classifying her as an ethnic writer, the recurring theme of superstition in her novels is discussed in connection with the other two themes that center around Chinese-American identity struggles and the mother-daughter conflicts. Unlike traditional fairytales (both Western and Asian) based on the storytellers' personal histories and which usually include instances of the supernatural, strange creatures, or fantastical events, Tan's tales are not only based on her imaginative fabrication, but are rooted in Chinese traditions, on remembering the tales of the close persons she believed in. The mystical magical realism often interweaves with the 'real' stories. In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, the problem of cultural translation is especially highlighted with the real struggles that occurred in many families. The talk story, frame story, or interrelated stories became part of the structure used by Tan to assert that many of her characters have become obsessed and trapped in superstition. The mothers are superstitious, always fearing bad luck, and wish their daughters who lost their heritage to live a better life. So, the talk story seems like a way to make their own luck.

In a nutshell, it seems that Amy Tan "was embarrassed repeatedly in her childhood by her family's traditions and customs, yet finally realized as an adult that all people feel isolation." (Thompson 3). Hence, in her stories she is trying to handle a new and appropriate combination of Tradition and Modernity. However, this process of conflation has imposed a lot of tension and pressure onto her characters. It is natural that with the changes available the public understanding of superstitions will change; and under the influence of individualism in society collective and traditional rituals will be weakened. However, some funeral rituals or marriage ceremonies do exist. Characters practised old rituals: An-mei's mother cuts a piece of her own flesh out of her arm as a sacrifice to cure her dying mother or alleviate her pain, and Ying-Ying celebrates the rituals of the Chinese mythology of the Moon Lady.

The convenient aspect of their superstitious beliefs is that they are so freely interpretable. In this regard, Tan suggests, superstition bears a resemblance to religion. Characters are converted into Christianity to build their own identity. Daughters consider their mothers' beliefs outdated and superstitious. They make their own choices in writing their own religion, forging a new identity, yet wondering about death and the afterlife. Many of the characters sense the presence of their dead ancestors and feel connected to their pain. They pass their mothers' and ancestors' experiences on to their children in order to keep the family heritage alive. These past experiences are what fuel the craft of writing in the case of Ruth, giving her life a voice.

Tan's treatment of Chinese Americans and China have already been touched upon in this paper. China and Chinese traditions were represented by mysterious characters as tellers of secret stories from another world, such as Kwan's stories about the yin world, or Luling's secrets of ghost translation of their ancestors. By juxtaposing the yin and yang worlds and by layering both rational and irrational elements of life, Kwan-Olivia's relationship becomes a measure of their connection to life itself. In other words, China is not somewhere the daughters can go

back to in the same way as a first generation immigrant can; June wanted to go to China after her mother passed away to search for her half-sisters and Olivia went to China upon Kwan's request; it is a place of reconciliation not of destination. Certainly, there is a sense of deliberate removal from the previous community along with the physical removal from China to America. It is no longer that the immigrant does not actually believe in the old superstitions –but that she chooses to leave it behind despite her belief. The idea of fate does exist, however it should not control one's life. The daughters seek self-determination, "They must move on, take risks, and fight for their future." (Thompson 6)

These ideas keep recurring throughout Tan's novels; they all tell a similar tale. Not only is the reader enjoying a good book, but he/she is learning about Chinese Culture.

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