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## Representation and Contextualization: A Comparative Study of *The Joy Luck Club* and *Typical American*

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### ABSTRACT

Besides Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and Gish Jen came to the literary scene with their debut novels *The Joy Luck Club* and *Typical American*. Since the 1970s, the “Chin-Kingston debate” on “the real and the fake” representation of Chinese has aroused heated discussion among scholars and Chinese American writers. This article aims at pinpointing the similarities and differences between both writers in their literary representation of Chinese and “Chinese America” in the contemporary American literature. Besides the shared writing techniques between the two writers, they differ greatly in their dealing with the gender knots, Chinese American experience in the U.S. and their respective attitudes that lurking behind their words. Hence, in the light of this perspective, we can better grasp the “typical American” writing strategy of Gish Jen and the typical recourse to Chinese elements in the “Joy Luck Club” stories by Amy Tan, which will shed light on later Chinese American writing.

### 中文摘要

自上世纪七十年代以降，华裔美国文学界关于再现华裔真伪命题的“赵汤之争”成为作家们创作和学者们讨论均无法规避的话题。除汤亭亭外，谭恩美和任璧莲也相继携各自代表作《喜福会》和《典型美国人》在华裔美国文坛中展露锋芒、各具千秋。在大争论的语境下，本文旨在对两部小说进行对比研究，探讨当代华裔美国文学中对中国和华裔美国人的再现议题。两位作家在对中国、中国元素和华裔美国人的文学表征上虽有共通技巧，但她们彼此间的差异更不可忽视，特别是在处理再现策略、两性关系、华裔美国人在美生活以及隐藏在字里行间作家对如许种种的态度等。因此，从这个角度切入能够帮助我们更好地把握任璧莲在处理华裔美国社会的“典型美国人”写作技巧以及谭恩美小说中典型的诉诸“喜福会”般独具中国情结故事的叙事策略，同时也为后来的华裔叙事和写作指明方向。

### KEYWORDS

Representation; comparative study; *The Joy Luck Club*; *Typical American*

### 关键词

再现; 比较研究; 《喜福会》; 《典型美国人》

If the Chinese American literature in the 1970s is the budding flower with the novels of Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston, then since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the budding has turned into flourishing blossom due to the rising multiculturalism in the United States of America and the paramount prominence China has assumed in the era of globalization and in the academia of transnational studies. Besides Kingston, the first female Chinese American writer who broke out from the mainstream Anglophone

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culture and aired her distinctive voice, Tan (1952) and Jen (1955) came to the literary scene successively and published representative novels *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *Typical American* (1991) to their own credit, respectively. The three of them all are generally considered by the public “three golden flowers of the contemporary Chinese American literature” because of their representational display of Chinese elements and Chinese American in their novels. Since the 1970s, the famous, or say infamous, debate between the incendiary Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston toward the authentic representation of Chinese culture became a heated discussion that any researchers on such pertaining topics cannot circumvent. This controversial “war of words,” since then, has its everlasting and profound influence on later discussions on Chinese American representation in its literary history. As many a critic argues that the ultimate goal of contemporary Chinese American literature is not just mimetically mirror the ethnic social reality but rather “to change it through the agency of literature, to forge a new ethnic identity, to define a unique sensibility, and to delineate a new social political space called ‘Chinese America’”(Zhao, 2004, p. 9). Chinese America, as an integral part of America, is often neglected by the mainstream American society. The once much marginalized Chinese America began to find good expression under the pen of many writers such as Kingston, Amy Tan, Gish Jen, and so on.

Due to the affinity of the publication year and the similar subject in *The Joy Luck Club* and *Typical American*, I choose them to further my tentative study on the representation of Chinese American in the contemporary Chinese American literature. With the help of detailed textual analyses, this article aims at pinpointing the similarities and differences between both writers in their literary representation of Chinese, Chinese elements, and Chinese American. In spite of Chin’s “the real and the fake” representation of Chinese culture, both writers, as cultural ambassadors and inheritors of two distinctive cultures, have their claimed rights to express what they want to interpret. Although there are some shared writing techniques, such as the recourse to and reflection on traditional Chinese cultural values, between Amy Tan and Gish Jen, they differ greatly in dealing with the gender knots, Chinese American life in the U.S., and their respective attitudes lurking behind the surface toward those things. Hence, in the light of this perspective, readers can better grasp the “typical American” writing strategy in Gish Jen’s treatment of Chinese American life and the typical recourse to Chinese elements in the “Joy Luck Club” stories by Amy Tan.

### **1. Complex feelings toward Chinese cultural heritage: transnational experiences and changed sensibilities of Chinese American**

With the publication of those novels by contemporary Chinese American writers, the researches of and studies on the pertaining topics are in full swing. Amy Tan and Gish Jen become popular with readers in China as well as in America. Transnational experiences assume a large part in their novels. Those transnational Chinese American experiences, on the one hand, portray the ethnic life reality while on the other dispel the Orientalism stereotypes of Caucasian representation such as the passive and submissive images of Chinamen in literary history. In this sense, they have achieved unprecedented accomplishment in representing Chinese and granting them agency which they have never had in the past.

Strange enough, before the 1980s, those writers like Chin and Kingston were unanimously furious at being labeled as (American-born) Chinese writers or having any connection with Chinese traditions. They asserted strenuously that they are Americans, at least Chinese Americans, and hence not Chinese writers. However, since that time on, they seem to be indifferent, even pleased, to be connected with their Chinese cultural roots. It is, therefore, a common phenomenon for writers to employ affluent Chinese elements in the writings of Chinese American life stories. So we safely conclude that Chinese Americans' recourse to traditional Chinese culture was partly in response to the rising multiculturalism and partly in reaction to an intrinsic need to further develop itself.

Like Kingston, Amy Tan and Gish Jen, both as the female ABC writers, have their own interpretations of their Chinese roots which are expressed clearly in their works. However, their deployments of Chinese resources differ in many aspects. Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* appropriates a lot of Chinese stories, such as the Moon Lady, the kitchen God, and other fairytales in Chinese culture, in the storytelling and thus adds much Chinese flavor and exotic elements to this novel. The heavy Chinese elements, including the final heart-rending ending of Jing-Mei Woo and her twin sisters meeting in Shanghai, are conspicuous in this novel. Despite the grown-up four daughters' life in America, the backgrounds of many stories are in Chinese settings. For Amy Tan, in spite of her recourse to Chinese culture for nourishment, the Chinese elements seem to be the bonding ties between the real understanding of mother and daughter relations.

Unlike Amy Tan, Gish Jen seeks an alternative identity to what was being offered in the mainstream culture – “the nonchoice between being either different and inferior or the same and invisible, between eternal alien and assimilated mascot.” (Zhao, 2004, p. 175) In *Typical American*, her seemingly nonchalant attitude toward the ethnic cultural roots, her using the male Chinese protagonist and her depicting of Chinese American experience in the context of America made her popular with readers worldwide. Ralph Chang's life and family hardships experienced in the U.S. are characteristic of Chinese American experiences. This story not only tells about the American Dream those first-generation Chinese immigrants harbor when they first settled down on this Promised Land but also contains the negative consequences of embracing the darker side of the material side of the American Dream. Hence, it is really the typical American story to some degree. From the authors' varied points of view toward Chinese culture, we can get a little knowledge about their possible different strategies of treatment in their own novels.

Regardless of Chin's controversial “the real or the fake” dichotomy of Chinese American representation and his contentious literal battle for the soul of Asian American, Chinese American in particular, with Kingston and other female Chinese American writers, we cannot deny the fact that Chin's assertion and insistence on the authenticity issue of Chinese cultural heritage is nonetheless thought-provoking and his doubts some decades ago are actually of vital importance in promoting the development of contemporary Chinese American literature. What's worthy mention is that what Frank Chin accused of Kingston and others is not an indicator of his hostility to the individual Chinese American writer but his being furious at their gradually formed complicity with Caucasian representation of servile, submissive, and silent Chinese stereotypes. The fact Chin is an unyielding fighter against Orientalism and the

Chinese American internalization of it is worthy of our due attention for the time being. It is also helpful in our understanding and appreciating those texts. However, we must confess Frank Chin's self-asserted "the real" guardian of Chinese culture is not only narcissistic to a certain degree but also renders other writers' representations of Chinese resources into invalidity and reduced them all to "the fake" stuff one-sidedly.

Just as Chinese American scholar Xiao-Huang Yin said, "it is baffling and even absurd to think that there can be an adequate and unitary standard by which to measure the literary sensibility produced by a vastly diversified and rapidly changing Chinese American reality." (Yin, 2000, p. 244) As we know, the Chinese American sensibility from the first generation to the ABCs varies a lot due to different living circumstances. What they share in common is the unending struggles to the harsh land and its cruel society. The first generation generally aims to claim rights of individual equality and impartial treatment in America while the latter has many complicated things to deal with: the entanglement of racism, feminism, and Orientalism, especially in their marriage life. So when it comes to the certain texts, we should take this changed Chinese American sensibilities into consideration.

## 2. Assimilation dilemmas in the representation of Chinese American experiences

As to the representation of Chinese culture, many critics of Chinese American studies seem to have assumed a better position to air their views than the self-asserted Frank Chin. Many professional scholars from China comment on the Chin-Kingston debate with impartial opinions and judgments. For instance, Zhao Wenshu, an expert in this area, states in his dissertation *Positioning Contemporary Chinese American Literature in Contested Terrains* that "[i]f Maxine Hong Kingston is faking Chinese culture, then Frank Chin can not authenticate his Chinese culture either. Measuring Frank Chin against his own criteria, we may conclude that he is no more real and no less fake than Kingston." (Zhao, 2004, p. 204) He then backs up his opinions by finding evidences of Chin's employing distorted Chinese cultural resources in several novels in the similar vein as Chin once did to Kingston's novels. Zhao also puts forward his inspiring view clearly,

In spite of the apparently unbridgeable difference between Frank Chin's Aiiieeeee school and those Chinese American writers who have been the subjects of his scathing criticism in the debate ... a close reading of their literary works shows that Chin and others (particularly Maxine Hong Kingston) are *actually working toward the same end*: to create through literature *a viable Chinese America*. (Zhao 2004, p. 8)

Quite interesting is that their debate is actually the confrontations within the Chinese American community. In spite of their own claimed authentic or inauthentic portrayal of Chinese American, they are striving to make Chinese America begin to feel its presence in the multicultural yet white-dominated American society.

In the similar vein, Amy Tan and Gish Jen may take the different paths to walk on; however, they are, using Zhao's words, working together at a flourished and diversified representation of Chinese American. Both *The Joy Luck Club* and *Typical American* are dealing with the assimilating dilemmas in Chinese American life, albeit in a greatly

different way of portrayal. *The Joy Luck Club* narrates the interwoven and broken memories of four Chinese immigrant mothers, recalling their intricate relationships with their own traditional Chinese mothers and American-born daughters, not without conflicts and misunderstandings. The author asks those questions such as which culture do they belong and forever linked, how to fit into the new culture without losing the legacy of the old one and so on, which are indeed what all kinds of American immigrants must pluck their courage to deal with. Throughout the novel with specific instances, we find the four Chinese immigrant families, as tokens of the whole Chinese-American minority group, are caught between two worlds and seized by the plight of their identities.

However, this kind of loss is somewhat compensated by the rights and privileges bestowed on the young generation in America. Each generation shows their different views toward the two cultures and even the same character displays diversified opinions from one time to another. As a whole, on the one hand, those hyphenated people experience complexities and hybridity or even otherness in the conflicting cultures, feeling the anxiety of representation in both. On the other, the daughter-generation in the novel spares no efforts to assimilate into the American culture, wanting to speak fluent English and trying hard to be Miss Americans. To some extent, their assertion of Americanness, rather than Chineseness, is worthy of our great attention. In the novel, when Jing-mei's mother speaks of Chinese mahjong, she makes a comparison between Jewish and Chinese mahjong deliberately in order to express her different opinion with that of her daughter. Her remarks that Chinese mahjong "is tricky" while "there is no strategy" (Tan, 1952, p. 18) in Jewish mahjong indicate palpably her hostility to the new world and limitless nostalgia for and proud of the old tradition in China. Besides, it is crystal clear that mahjong is a typical Chinese pastime entertainment, thus it in fact represents the old Chinese tradition. When Jing-mei and her mother adopt different views toward it, it is symbolical of their conflicting attitudes toward the Chinese roots. Maybe this is why Jing-mei always felt that she and her mother "spoke different languages" (Tan, 1952, p. 18) and don't understand each other well. They are actually symbolizing two cultures confronting and conflicting with each other with different ideologies lurking behind respectively.

These daughters are all born in America with their intimate and natural inclination to the American culture which they are so familiar with. Their knowledge of China basically come from their families' stories and their grasp of Chinese language is confined to some broken sentences heard from their ethnic minority group, it is with no doubt that the Chinese images are mysterious-like and even superficial illusions to them, something like fairytales which they can only get from the fables. The daughters sometimes laugh at their mothers' heavily accented English while speak highly of Uncle George's fluent English. The mothers, especially Jing-mei's mother, nonetheless, are often proud of her fluent Mandarin and Shanghai dialect, this, from another angle, displays the plight of assimilation of those first-generation immigrants. Contrast to this, those daughters are basked in American styles and tastes. There are no such things as assimilation into the new culture and which in turn endowed them with the newly got precious privileges which the daughters feel they may never get in China. When Jing-mei's mother desires to pass on her broken dreams to her, Jing-mei downright rejects it and declares that her mother "want[s] [her] to become someone [she is] not" and she'll

“never be the daughter [her mother] wants [her] to be.” It seems that she declares her freedom from the Chinese parental dictatorship like the America calls for its national independence which find good expression in her bias that her mother cannot make her just because here is America. The implication here is ostensible that the kind of obedient children belong to China only, not with the patterns of American children who are always full of rebellious spirit.

Independent and confident as other Americans are, clouds of puzzles and doubts also hang often over the American-like heads of the daughters, especially when those girls come of age. Jing-mei feels quite uneasy about her identity and her little knowledge of her mother and China. Lindo’s fierce conflicts with her daughter seem more like a battle, a tug of war, between the two cultures with huge disparity. Rose also experiences kinds of prejudice from those typical white dominated society during her relationship with her white boyfriend. The novel depicts the loss of old world heritage and puzzle-ments of seeking identities vividly and minutely. Caught between two worlds and two different cultures, those American girls with Chinese origin and their family members find out that there is no country felt really like home. After all, Chinese cultural influence is there, especially among the first-generation immigrants. The American-born generation’s vigorous denial of their Chinese connection is but an indicator of the “strong Chinese cultural influence which creates difficulty in the assimilation process of Chinese Americans.” (Wang, 2002, p. 348) Likewise, in *Typical American*, assimilation dilemma of the Chinese American is also strongly felt. Different from the *China Man* used in Maxine Hong Kingston’s title, Gish Jen uses *Typical American* as her book title to deal with the stories of those first generation Chinese Americans like the protagonist Yifeng Chang/Ralph Chang. What makes Gish Jen quite different from the others maybe that she creatively creates a male protagonist in her fiction. We often compare the male chauvinism of Frank Chin and the opposite feminism of Kingston, Amy Tan, and the others. So Jen’s alternative choice seems eye-catching and innovative in literary creation.

The male protagonist, Yifeng, literally means “intent on the peak” in every aspect. When settled down in America, he achieved his Chinese ideal of being an engineer professor with tenure in a university and honoring his family after many hardships and struggles experienced in the U.S. However, under the influence of the intruder Gruver Ding, another Chinese American who earns a lot of money by running Chinese restaurants, Ralph Chang was then trapped by the material success embodying in the negative side of the American Dream. He plunges without hesitation into the running restaurants after resigning from the well-paid and decent job. His former success in the early part of the novel and his later collapse almost in every aspect, failure in career, his wife Helen’s affair with Grover Ding and his big sister Theresa’s accident by his own car, have much in common. With the free will of choice, Ralph Chang is held responsible for his own mistakes especially when he embraces the material side of the American Dream. Different from Amy Tan’s novel, the main characters in *Typical American* have the possibility of success in the Promised Land. America is not to blame. Individuals are responsible for their own personal choices and its consequent results. After all those disillusionments of broken dreams, the ending part of the novel gives readers a kind of compromise and reconciliation by pointing to the clue of Theresa’s waking from her long coma and Ralph’s possibility of turning a new page in life.



The phrase “Typical American” is first used by Ralph to refer to the super Pete. At first sight, it denotes some negative connotations in it. Actually, “typical American” is a phrase the Changs use as an irony to describe Americans who are not like them. At first, they don’t deem themselves as typical American. While gradually, Ralph Chang is bewitched by the handy ways of rising in the American world just like many typical Americans. He aspires to wealth, the darker side of the American Dream, blindly accepts Grover’s suggestion and falls into that trap irrecoverably. The protagonist’s attitude toward the title “typical American” is thus ambiguous, belittling it on the one hand, while on the other, pursuing of it. Through the story of the Changs, the author shows her deep concern about the predicaments of Chinese immigrants. They can hardly integrate themselves into the American society, yet they believe in American dream and pursue it obstinately and relentlessly. Hard as they try, the family members still cannot smoothly assimilate into the exclusive group of “typical Americans” who harbor the privileges they so much dreamed of. It doesn’t mean that they don’t want to be Typical Americans per se, the very gesture of saying who is typical American and who is not is the very evidence of their sad loss and disappointments as well as their real desires lurking beneath the surface. The underlying theme of this novel is about the truthful depiction and revelation of the living existence as well as the endeavors of those immigrants in adjusting themselves to the new environment and bridging the huge gulf between two cultures. By being Typical Americans in their own way, the Changs are destined to go through hardships in America.

At the end of the novel, the seemingly reunion of the Changs gives readers much hope and expectations in looking into the family’s future life. Maybe they can be the Typical Americans or whatever they expect themselves to be. Theresa wakes from her coma and Ralph is ready to meet her after his own rumination and melancholic and soliloquy-like thoughts.

Progress, setback, progress, setback. The bouts of progress began to seem like no progress at all; the family braced for them just the same as for the setbacks. The days of no news had almost become easier. At least they had suffered peacefully! This suffering allowed them no rest; it was simple but relentless as a geologic cycle. Freezing, thawing. This suffering could split boulders, and did. (Jen, 1955, p. 192)

It is the vivid depiction of Changs’ struggling life in the wake of the old sister Theresa’s falling into coma after the terrible family accident. On one hand, it displays Theresa’s state of wandering between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness. On the other, it also, in a symbolic way, demonstrates the life-and-death struggle the whole family confront with. Different from their children Callie and Mona who are generally called the ABCs, the adult ones doomed to experience hardships beyond their imagination. The younger generation enjoys a much privileged life than their parents. Ralph and his alike are people who are intermittently disturbed by all sorts of troubles that they must be brave to face. Wandering between two worlds, those first-generation immigrants find it a tenacious task to deal with the poignantly felt culture shock and to survive for living in America.

### 3. Respective deployed strategies in representation of Chinese American

As second-generation immigrants, to what degree are they faithful to the history which they only heard of and what are their attitudes toward China? What are the similar and



different strategies used by them to represent the Chinese American, the past stories of the first-generation immigrants as well as the life experience of their offspring as a whole? There are many things awaiting us to unfold through the textual analyses such as the expression of the huge generation gap, politics of memory, and the writers' skills and strategies applied in their respective writings.

The construction of the Chinese in *The Joy Luck Club* is not always as pleasing to readers in China as that in America. For example, the sorrow and bitterness is always felt sharply when it comes to things happened in old China. Thus, the representation of China is somewhat distorted, slightly or heavily only in degree. The author tends to compare their fictional characters' life in different countries; however, they usually filter their memories and hence what they reflect in their books is not the whole story. Politics of memory is applied in the storytelling Chinese past history.

In Wolfgang Iser's point of view, "[e]very literary text inevitably contains a selection from a variety of social, historical, cultural, and literary systems that exist as referential fields outside the text." (Iser, 1985, p. 207) In his theorization of performative representation, Iser foregrounds the importance of "the act of selection" in textual representation and its meaning making. Likewise, Tan uses this kind of selection especially in the storytelling of those Chinese mothers' personal life stories with bitterness and numerous unfair treatments back in China.

What's more, "the embeddedness of Chinese America in America compromises the cultural nationalists' effort against Orientalism: their self-representation often ends up dismantling one stereotype but unwittingly reinforcing another." (Zhao, 2004, p. XIV) In this sense, in righting the former stereotypes in the white-dominated literary history, Tan unwittingly and unconsciously fall into the trap defined by Sheng-Mei Ma as "deathly embrace of orientalism net" (Lape, 2002, p. 148) in representation.

Heavy Chinese elements are easily found in *The Joy Luck Club*. Tan's recourse to traditional Chinese stories is crystal clear. Death, fate, and superstitions of Chinese stories are permeating in *The Joy Luck Club* from the very beginning to the end. The following is a good case in point. Aunt An-mei recalls her mother's sufferings and fidelity to her grandmother by cutting off a piece of flesh to make a kind of broth as a traditional Chinese medicine to cure her. Through this kind of depiction of stupid obedience and the stubborn fidelity of children to their parents, it easily reminds the readers of the heinous images of Chinese superstition and stereotyped Chinamen. Amy Tan's misrepresentation here of 1 of the 24 filial pieties, *Geguliaoqin*<sup>1</sup>, in traditional Chinese culture is worthy of our due attention. The adapted film of the same novel, directed by Chinese American WANG Ying and co-worked by Amy Tan, gives a long shot of this sensational scene. Therefore, the past traditional China is contrasted with the modern America. We can imagine that the effects of exposing the backward China and superstitious Chinese cater well to the large number of readers and audience in the western world.

In the novel, compromise and reconciliations are finally reached by dispelling the misunderstandings in the generation gap between the mothers and daughters. The daughters' opinions of being independent American women shattered little by little unless they finally find a balance of reconciliation with their mothers who represent their counterparts and the legacy of their oriental origins. Bilingual language speakers indirectly refer their double identities for the two generations. Just as Lindo Jong claimed in the

chapter “Queen Mother of the Western Skies,” they all have “double faces.” It seems that the original Chinese face is the true self for Lindo when she says that she tries hard to hide her “true self” and “[i]t’s hard to keep [one’s] Chinese face in America.” (Tan, 1952, p. 147) Later, Lindo cannot help but thinking about her two faces. “Which one is American? Which one is Chinese? Which one is better? If you show one, you must always sacrifice the other.” (Tan, 1952, p. 153) There is no one can have totally Chinese face when immersed in the American society whereas can be stay untainted by its culture. Although Lindo formerly feels her intimacy with and nostalgia about Chinese culture, she begins gradually recognize the complicated and inevitable hybridity of the two cultures. This find good expression in her recalling her tour back in China, “I spoke their language. I used their local money. But still, they knew. They knew my face was not one hundred percent Chinese.” (Tan, 1952, p. 153) The double faces of these Chinese Americans can be a well indicator of the gradual combination of the influences from two cultures.

By listing Tan’s recourses to traditional Chinese resources doesn’t mean there is no such stereotype in Jen’s *Typical American*. For example, Helen’s domesticity and confinement in her house under the patriarchal and tyrannical Ralph almost bored her to death. Hence it renders her affair with Grove Ding possible and conceivable. It is also the evidence of her alienation and estrangement from her normal social life. Theresa’s marital affair with Henry Zhao is another crystal-clear clue for part of her suffering, if not the whole. Despite of some stereotypes still portrayed unwittingly in Gish Jen’s this novel, her “Typical American” strategy of the non-choice between the Chinese culture and American culture is prominently felt. For instance, both Helen and Theresa have no problems with their male partners. Their affairs with others, on the other hand, are just indicators of their being liberal and independent modern women in America, not confining to the domestic trifles. Theresa, being the big sister in Changs family, is always the proud of the whole family which we can find from the very beginning of this novel when they were children in China. She is not only ambitious for career but also eligible for whatever she has ever done. All in all, this method of using the male protagonist and the independent and ambitious new woman in Gish Jen’s novel can hardly find its counterparts in any other writer’s novels. According to Gish Jen, Chinese Americans as her characters are, the individuals are definitely the typical Americans they claim to be. Being typical American doesn’t mean the author refuses to deploy Chinese elements in her book; she just does not do it on purpose to cater to the market demand. Such an exclusive strategy is more “a response to the life politics in the racially defined American society.” (Zhao, 2004, p. 175) So Jen’s Typical American is so atypical of Chinese American experiences which cannot find anywhere else.

From Tan’s strong sense of ethnic consciousness to mark difference to Jen’s effortless assumption of Chinese Americans as typical Americans, the metamorphic history of the appellation for Chinese Americans registers an interesting change of Chinese American sensibility as well.

#### 4. Conclusion

Like what we have already pointed out, “the Chinese elements in Chinese American texts, like Chop Suey, is an indigenous American product with a Chinese-sounding name invented to survive America,” (Zhao, 2004, p. xv) so they should be

appropriately called (Chinese)American culture. Similarly, Chinese elements in Amy Tan and others' texts are employed deliberately as empowering ethnic markers to consolidate and fortify the American cultural values that are at the core. By contrast, Gish Jen creatively chooses quite a different path to tread. Although she touches on the Chinese American experience in the U.S., her protagonists are responsible for their own choice-makings and the twists and turns in their transnational life. By thorough comparison and contrast between *The Joy Luck Club* and *Typical American*, this article dwells on the shared writing techniques of both writers and the changed Chinese American sensibilities along Chinese America history and pinpointing Jen's unique "Typical American" strategy to elucidate and interpret Chinese American experiences. Like her very title denotes, they are of course Chinese Americans living in America, they are also "typical American" in Whitman's sense that America is "a nation of all nations."

In the era of multiculturalism since the 1980s, ethnic cultural heritage becomes an advantage, rather than a hindrance, to the embellishment of ethnic writings and to the enriching of the cultural diversity in America, the great melting pot. There is no doubt that Chinese American writers successively recourse to traditional Chinese culture for cultural nutrition and nourishment. Whether they are the real or the fake(imagined) representation of the authenticity of Chinese culture, their concerted efforts are made for a viable and visible "Chinese America" history through the agency of literature which are at the disposal of those writers.

How to represent the image of China and Chinese American experiences in the U.S. is the very topic the contemporary Chinese American writers need to think seriously and to work hard on. Despite their own purposes in writing Chinese American experiences, their concerted efforts are made to construct the Chinese America which is part and parcel of America. Whether this kind of writing is a good beginning or not, nowadays those writers still have a long way to go. Fortunately, they are on the road, nonetheless.

## Note

1. In Chinese, "割骨疗亲".

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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