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Identity in Amy Tan's Novels

谭恩美小说中的华裔身份建构

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**The Chinese Americans' Identity Construction in Amy  
Tan's Novels**

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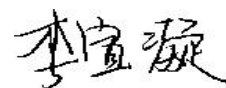


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## Abstract

Amy Tan is a famous Chinese American writer whose works attract a great number of readers and scholars. *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan's first novel, is published in 1989 and then brings her great success and numerous awards. It is so popular that it has been on the list of "New York Times Best Seller" for ten months. Besides, Tan's third novel and also one of the most successful novels of her, *The Hundred Secret Senses*, receives wide popularity as well. As a member of the second generation of Chinese immigrants with two cultural backgrounds, Tan can sensitively observe the awkward situation that Chinese immigrants face in American mainstream culture. Besides, the experience of Tan's mother is another source of inspiration for her writing. Therefore, most of Tan's novels take the conversion of mother-daughter relationship from conflict to harmony as a tool to probe into the identity dilemma faced by Chinese Americans and to discuss the process of their identity construction. On the clue of identity theory, this thesis analyzes two of the most classic novels of Tan from post-colonial perspective, which points out that the changing identities of the mothers and daughters in Tan's novels reflect her supplementations to the identities of Chinese Americans.

This thesis is divided into five parts: The first chapter examines the related information of Amy Tan and two of her most important novels, then it gives a review of the scholarship abroad and at home on Amy Tan. This section ends with a brief introduction to identity theory and postcolonial method, which is the theoretical foundation of the whole study.

The second chapter analyzes the identity dilemma that Chinese mothers and American daughters faced in America. They cannot merge into either the American society or the Chinese one. By writing about the identity dilemma which the minority characters face, the necessity for the minority to build a new kind of identity is exposed. Therefore, the writing of identity dilemma acts as the driving force for the characters' construction of hybrid identities in the end.

The third chapter analyzes the identity negotiation of Chinese Americans. During the process of identity negotiation, the immigrant mothers no longer stand in the opposite cultural stance with their daughters by storytelling; and the two

generations finally get reconciliated by articulating the differences between Chinese culture and American culture. This chapter tries to suggest that identity is changeable and negotiable, and to prove that identity negotiation plays a crucial role in the construction of hybrid identity for the minority.

The fourth chapter intends to discuss the identity construction of Chinese Americans. Through the depiction of conflict and reconciliation between the characters, Tan endows her characters with hybrid identities, which means that they do not simply designate themselves as a member of Chinese culture or American culture, but they start from other standpoints to achieve a temporary but reasonable identity. On this basis, the author further explores Tan's perception of identity reflected in her works, thus to figure out the motivation of identity construction in her works.

The fifth chapter is the conclusion of this thesis. After summarizing the content of this paper, it reiterates that Tan is deconstructing and reconstructing the identities of Chinese Americans. During this process, Tan is not to endow the characters with clear identities; instead, she intends to construct hybrid identities for Chinese immigrants in her novels so that they can receive a temporary but appropriate approval from two different cultures. This process reflects Tan's own understanding of Chinese Americans' identity, so Tan's writing of identity is also finding and constructing her own identity.

**Key Words:** Amy Tan; Identity; Post-colonialism

## 摘要

谭恩美是美国著名华裔作家,她的作品深受读者们的喜爱并受到了学者们的广泛赞赏。她第一部小说《喜福会》在 1989 年出版,给她带来了巨大的成功和诸多的奖项,它占据了纽约时报畅销书排行榜长达十个月之久。此外,她的另外一部小说《灵感女孩》也获得了一致的好评。作为华裔第二代移民,双重文化背景使得谭恩美能够敏锐地观察到华裔在主流文化中的尴尬处境。同时自己母亲的故事为她的创作提供了良好的素材。她的大部分作品都以母女关系作为载体,通过母女间的冲突到融合的过程探寻华裔在美国主流社会中的身份困境,以及在困境中探寻华裔身份的构建之路。本论文将以身份认同的相关理论为批评线索,从后殖民主义视角出发来分析谭恩美的两部小说。指出谭恩美不断重写华裔母女身份认同的过程是对华裔身份意义的增补,是不断处于变化中的。

论文主体包括五部分:

第一章引言部分主要简单介绍了谭恩美以及她的两部小说、国内外对谭恩美及其作品的研究现状与研究方法;最后,该部分简要概括了身份认同理论和后殖民主义研究方法,为论文正文的论述奠定理论基础。

第二章分析华裔母女在美国面临的身份困境,她们既不能融入美国社会,也无法融入华人社会。通过分析华裔的身份困境,作者指出为少数族裔建立一种新的身份认同是十分必要的。因此,身份困境的书写为小说中人物混杂性身份的构建提供了动力。

第三章分析了华裔母女的身份协商过程。在身份协商过程中,通过讲故事的方式,移民母亲不再与女儿站在对立的文化立场上;通过理解中美文化间的差异,母亲与女儿之间的矛盾最终得以化解。通过这一章节的分析,作者表明身份是可协商的,并且身份协商在少数族裔混杂性身份建构中起着至关重要的作用。

第四章分析了美国华裔母女身份的建构过程。通过描写母女间的冲突与和解,谭恩美为她笔下的华裔人物构建了一种混杂性的身份,也就是说,他们不再只是简单地把自己认定为中国文化或美国文化中的一员,而是从其他立场出

发,实现一种暂时的、合理的认同。在此基础上,作者进一步分析了谭恩美在创作中体现出的身份观,从而探究她为作品中人物构建一种混杂性身份的动机。

第五章是论文的总结部分。笔者将在总结全文的基础上再一次强调谭恩美在对华裔身份不断重写中解构并重构人物的身份,她并不是要确定华裔对中美文化的归属,而是形成一种从其他立场出发为华裔构建一种混杂性身份的态度,从而获得临时的、合理的认同。而这一过程也体现出谭恩美对自己华裔身份的理解,可以说,她对于小说中人物身份的书写同样也是寻找和构建自己华裔身份的历程。

**关键词:** 谭恩美; 身份; 后殖民主义

## Chapter One Introduction

### 1.1 Amy Tan and Her Novels

Amy Tan is a rising star and an influential figure among Chinese American writers, and the female characters depicted in her works help to construct a typical image of Chinese American women in literature. According to Gus Lee, another important Chinese American writer, Tan's works help to generate the American publishing industry's interest in the new generation of Chinese American writers.

Tan's parents are the first generation of Chinese immigrants to America, they moved to America in 1947 and 1949 respectively, before which her mother had divorced and left three daughters she had with the previous husband in China. Tan was born in Auckland in 1952. Several years later, in 1967, both her father and brother died of illness, which placed great burden and pain in the heart of young Tan. As the second generation of Chinese immigrants, Tan grew up with American popular culture. At home, however, her mother told her a lot about China and educated her as a traditional Chinese mother would do, so Tan is also greatly influenced by Chinese culture. She longed to be a member of the American mainstream society but against her wish, she was regarded as an outsider and treated with oppression and discrimination by the American society. Tragedies of the family, pressure from the society and struggles in a cultural dilemma all contribute to her conflicts with her mother. It was exactly these conflicts and the thoughts and feelings coming along that gave Tan great inspiration and writing materials. The novels she created based on her mother's stories reflect the transformation of thoughts and feelings of Chinese Americans. She once said that she tried to get her imagination as close as possible to the reality and what was the most important in her books was her mother's stories, determination, hope and ever-lasting innocence.

Tan's first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, was published by G.P. Putman's Sons in 1989. It quickly became a hit and was listed as one of the four best sellers in America in that year. The book has been translated into 25 languages and won many important literature awards including *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize and American National Book Award, thus bringing Tan a high status in Chinese American literature and great reputation. Tan then published *The Kitchen God's Wife* in 1991, *The Hundred Secret Senses* in 1995, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* and a memoir *The Opposite of Fate: A*

*Book of Musings* in 2003. She published her fifth novel *Saving Fish from Drowning* in 2005 and her last novel *The Valley of Amazement* in 2013.

This thesis mainly pays attention to two of Tan's the most classic novels, which contain the complex mother-daughter relationships, and reveal the hardship of Chinese immigrants' identity recognition. *The Joy Luck Club* published in 1989 is Tan's first novel and the best known one. It depicts the ups and downs of the life of four Chinese women who moved from mainland China to America just before the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949) ended and also their estrangement and emotional conflicts with their daughters. The novel actually is a reflection and distillation of Tan's own life and her mother's experiences. Besides, *The Hundred Secret Senses* created in 1995 is Tan's third novel and it's a relatively mature one of her works. It lively depicts two heroines, a Chinese girl Kwan and her American younger sister Olivia. When Olivia is six, Kwan, her half-sister from China, comes into her family and brings Chinese culture into her life. At first, Olivia rejects the sister who allegedly possesses magic power and "Yin eyes" that can see the ghosts. Later, however, with her love and Chinese thinking patterns, Kwan helps Olivia solve many problems and is finally accepted by Olivia. And with the help of the older sister Kwan, Olivia finally recognize her Chinese American identity.

## **1.2 Literature Review**

This section is divided into two parts. One is foreign research on Amy Tan's novels and another is domestic research on this topic.

### **1.2.1 Studies of Amy Tan's Novels Abroad**

Tan's novels are sold very well in America and draw great attention of critics. As *The Joy Luck Club* receives wide popularity and is added to the textbooks of high schools and universities in America, the novel has become part of classic American literature and Tan is positioned as a "model writer of racial minority" and often compared with other famous ethnic minority writers such as Toni Morrison. But Tan's novels, as well as Americans' comments on her works, receive a mixed response from Chinese American writers. Huang Xiuling (2002), a Chinese American scholar, proposed the reasons why *The Joy Luck Club* has become a best seller in America from two aspects. One is the position of Tan and another is her way of narration. According to Huang, the novel carries on the feminism tradition of Asian writers; Tan's role as an interpreter of Chinese culture and a seeker of cultural identity attracts white American readers. Besides, she keeps trying to find a balance between

Orientalism and anti-Orientalism. Frank Chin, a Chinese American writer, criticizes Tan in his book *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974) that works of female Asian writers like Amy Tan are “fake” and the “China” portrayed by Tan’s books caters to the values of white Americans, while Chinese culture and the relative identity politics are not introduced in a proper manner. *The Joy Luck Club* is included in Harold Bloom’s book *Novelists and Novels: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Bloom’s Literary Criticism 20th Anniversary Collection) (2007), which states that most of the novel’s readers are feminist, and Tan as a contemporary female Asian American writer excellently portrays the mother-daughter relations in an immigrant family.

Besides, *The Hundred Secret Senses* published in 1995 also receives both applause and criticism. *Newsweek*, an American magazine, praises that Tan has once more produced a novel wonderfully like a hologram: turn it this way and find Chinese-Americans shopping and arguing in San Francisco; turn it that way and the Chinese of Changmian village in 1864 are fleeing into the hills to hide from the rampaging Manchus... But *New York Times* thinks that the novel destroys readers’ imagination, stating that although Tan injects in the book many wonderful thoughts, the results turn to be not so satisfying as the family history is covered by a sensational story of reincarnation.

Most of foreign PhD. or master students’ thesis interpret Amy Tan’s novels from perspectives of anthropology and sociology, while those taking them just as literature works are mostly written by Chinese students studying abroad and scholars from Taiwan with only a few American literature majors. Foreign study on Amy Tan’s novels mainly focuses the following aspects.

First, postcolonial theory is applied by many scholars to interpret Tan’s works, for instance, racial study and postcolonial feminism. For example, *Seeking a Spiritual Home for Women—a Comparative Study of Chen Ran’s and Amy Tan’s fictions* (2012), a book by He Jing, analyzes the loss of women’s identity and the process of identity construction by awakening women in the fictions of Amy Tan and Chen Ran, a Chinese writer, from the perspective of postmodern feminism. It delves into Chen’s writing and gender-transcendent consciousness as well as Tan’s discussion on mother-daughter relationship under specific social and historical backgrounds. The book points out that the two writers have the same pursuit that women should get rid of injustice and discrimination. Now the translated version of the book has been

published in China. “A Genre of Our Time: Women’s Narratives of Violence and Collective Identities” by Giti Chandra (2001) analyzes the narratives of violence in the works of four writers, including Toni Morrison, Amy Tan, Isabel Allende and Maxine Hong Kingston, and proposes that individual and collective identities are rooted in their narratives. It states that Amy Tan’s novels reflect the painful life of Tan’s mother who leaves her homeland to escape the turmoil brought by World War Two. Besides that, it says that traditional Chinese women are under the oppression of the old patriarchal Chinese society. Liu Hong’s “Representing the ‘Other’: Image of China and the Chinese in the Works of Jade Snow Wong, Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan” refers to the theoretical analysis of the anthropologist Margaret Mead, proposing that Amy Tan and other Chinese American writers regard themselves as Americans while seeing Chinese as the “other” and rejecting everything from China. “Inventing transnational Chinese American identities in Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim’s *Among the White Moon Faces* and Shawn Hsu Wong’s *American Knees*” by Su Suocai (2004) proposes that Chinese American writers create a typical image of Chinese Americans so as to respond to the open and multicultural American society. It also says that the conflicts and reconciliation between mother and daughter in Tan’s works show that Chinese American women have transcended the gap of cultures, generations and languages and gained an identity that connects both China and America. Some scholars objectively analyze the research methods of racial identity. For example, “Cross-Cultural Intervention in Twentieth Century American Literary Theory: Another Look at *Dictee*, *The Hundred Secret Senses*, *Dreaming in Cuban*, *So Far from God*, and *Song of Solomon*” by Moe Carol Noreen (2004) analyzes the approaches of literary criticism in America in the late twentieth century and states that research on Chinese American writers focuses mainly on race, social class and gender while ignoring the aesthetics in their works.

Second, in terms of narratology, Tan’s novels are taken as autobiography and they are often written in the first person. “Rereading the Past and Reshaping the Future: Narrative Texts by Asian North American Women Writers” by Lu Shujiang (2001) discusses the narrative strategies applied by Chinese American writers including Amy Tan and states that the fragmented and contradictory narratives are a challenge to America’s traditional literature. Some scholars noticed that Tan’s father is a Christian and Tan also loves Bible very much and thus discussed the Christianity



in her novels. One such example is “Christianity in Contemporary Asian-American Literature: (mis)-translations of the Word” by Di Ga and Blackburn (2004).

In general, foreign research on Amy Tan’s novels focuses on post-colonialism and feminism and often compares Tan with Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston, the black American writer Toni Morrison and other writers. Scholars abroad often refer to research approaches applied to black American or Jewish literature works to analyze the works of Chinese Americans. Besides, foreign researchers often put Amy Tan and other Chinese American writers in the context of white-dominant American literary tradition and regard them as marginalized writers, thus forming a stereotype about how to view and explain their works.

### 1.2.2 Studies of Amy Tan’s Novels in China

There are relatively abundant journal articles and theses about Amy Tan’s novels in China, which can be generally divided into the following types.

First, book recommendations and interviews of Tan. As Tan is a famous author of many best sellers, every novel of her has been introduced to the public in China. Tan went to Hong Kong to promote her new book *The Valley of Amazement* in 2013. She has also received interviews from *Southern Metropolis Weekly* and *The Beijing News*. During interviews, Tan replied to questions that concerned many readers, such as which country she comes from, where she got to learn Chinese culture, how is her relationship with her mother and what duties she thinks that she needs to take as a Chinese American writer, etc.

Second, racial research. As Pu Ruoqian (2006) says, “Where there are Chinese immigrants in America...there is value in Chinese American literature to write about this group’s race and culture”. Some researchers use postcolonial theory to analyze Tan’s novels and propose that Tan, as an American, depicts China from the perspective of Orientalism to cater to the mainstream ideology of America. For example, Wang Meng (1999) states that *The Joy Luck Club* aims to appeal white western readers. Chen Aimin (2007) thinks that Tan’s novels—even her novels written for children—exhibit an ancient, mysterious and backward China which conforms with white western people’s imagination of this country. “Images of China in Amy Tan’s Novels” by Liu Junkai (2009) discusses the identity of Chinese Americans from the point of view of postcolonial theory and says that China depicted by Tan is “a projection of her own desire”, a “miserable” and “imaginary” China, the “other” that is denied but also a symbol of utopia, which shows the Orientalism of

Tan. However, some scholars notice the contradiction within Tan's mind: while catering to the mainstream ideology of American society, she abandons the Oriental factors in it. For example, "On the Construction and Deconstruction of Orientalism in *The Joy Luck Club*" by Song Xiaoyang (2013) thinks that the reconciliation of mothers and daughters at the end of the story represents the exchange between oriental and western cultures and therefore such an end deconstructs the Orientalism in the novel.

Third, narratology. At the beginning when *The Joy Luck Club* was written, Amy Tan deliberately disrupted the narrative order of the novel, which shows her distinctive personality when it comes to creation. For example, Hu Yanping's "A Study of the Overtopping Mode in Narratability of Amy Tan's Novels" (2008) thinks that Tan has established a model of narration of her own. Liu Qun's "Narrative Techniques in *The Joy Luck Club*" (2010) refers to the narrative discourse theory of the French literary theorist Gerard Genette to analyze the narrative time, voices and moods in the novel and says that the success of Tan can help Chinese American literature enter the mainstream American literature and strengthen the exchange between Chinese and American peoples. In the journal article "On the Evolution of Confucian Family Ethics in Chinese American Literature--A Case study of *The Hundred Secret Senses* by Amy Tan", Wang Yuwen (2012) applied a creative approach to analyze *The Hundred Secret Senses*: they utilized LIWC2007, a database app, to search for the frequency that ethic words appear in the novel and found that words like family and parents are the core vocabulary of it. Then they concluded that this novel carries strong family consciousness and the author has a contradictory attitude towards traditional Confucian family ethics of China.

Fourth, characters analyzed from the aspect of feminism. For example, in her master's thesis "A Voice of Their Own: Reading Amy Tan's *Hundred Secret Senses* from the Point of View of Third World Feminism", Cai Tingting (2007) thinks that in *The Joy Luck Club* Tan constructs the identity of women through storytelling, narration from female voices and writing in mother language and sets a model for Chinese American women that are hard to be defined. Also for the same novel, Liu Yi's "The Subversion and Demolishment of Patriarchal Culture" (2005) analyzes the evil, shameless male characters that are always absent in the family and the female ones who keep finding their identities and points out that Tan deliberately deconstructs and attacks masculinism. The academia has argued about feminism and

Orientalism in Tan's novels to deplore the question whether her novels have established a complete identity of Chinese American women. For instance, Xiao Lamei (2011) thinks that Tan's novels form an oral history of women and the experiences of the female characters disrupt masculine and patriarchal ideology. There are some scholars who refer to Bakhtin's dialogism to analyze the female characters in Tan's novels and think that although Chinese mothers and daughters cannot communicate in reality any more, the hidden monologue in the narration not only achieves the communication between two generations of Chinese American women but also aims to strive for the right of speech and social status of those women in the mainstream American society.

Fifth, discussion on the mother-daughter relationship. Some researchers think the conflicts between Chinese American mothers and daughters not only come from the generation gap but also the differences between traditional Chinese culture and American culture, which can be used to discuss the deep causes of those conflicts, and "On the Theme of Mother-Daughter Relationship: Decoding Amy Tan's New Novel: *The Hundred Secret Senses*" by Chen Aimin is an example. What's more, researchers pay special attention to Chinese stories in Tan's novels. When those stories are placed in America of the twentieth century and even nowadays, they exhibit the huge differences between traditional Chinese culture and the contemporary Western one. Some scholars think that the mysterious Orient portrayed by Tan's novels carries features of primitivism. For example, "Tints of Neo-primitivism and Amy Tan's Works" by Zhang Qiong (2005) analyzes the poetic and primitive image of China from some creative angles and thinks that Tan's novels unfold through traditional Chinese method of narration, which is "storytelling", and evolve around mysterious themes such as collective unconsciousness of women, memories of impression, ancient human beings, etc.

Sixth, other aspects of research. Gao Lu's thesis "A Study of the Ambivalence in Mother-Daughter Relationship in *The Hundred Secret Senses* Through Mirror Image Theory" (2011) takes the mirror image theory of Lacan and "ambivalence" in psychology to discuss the causes of mother-daughter conflicts and the process of identity reconstruction of mothers and daughters. Guo Zhenyu's "The Evolution of Themes in Amy Tan's Works from the Perspective of Existentialism" (2013) uses existentialism to analyze the deep structure of Tan's novels and changes of their themes, which include the dilemma that marginalized Chinese American women face

in their life, free choices in plights and spiritual alienation of modern people. In his thesis “An Analysis of Taoism in *The Joy Luck Club*”, Wang Yuming (2011) refers to “circle and return”, “wu wei” (inaction) and “yin and yang” in Taoism to analyze Tan’s novels.

To sum up, domestic research on Amy Tan’s works mainly falls into the following three categories: first, discussion on Chinese factors in the novels; second, analysis of American factors in them; third, multiple angles of research. Researchers of the first two types insist that they analyze Tan’s works from a local point of view. If viewed in detail, the domestic research has three features. First, the research methods and explanation of Amy Tan’s works have basically become fixed, such as utilizing certain theories to analyze the true intentions of the author and discover the social and cultural value of the works. This kind of research approach fails to consider Tan’s attitudes towards culture and identity. Therefore, this thesis will combine the analysis of Tan’s novels with Tan’s perception of identity and culture to explore her motivation of her creation. Second, many domestic theses of Master and Ph.D. students compare Amy Tan and other Chinese American writers to discuss Tan’s own features of writing, showing the changes of Chinese American literature in different periods in various aspects, including themes, narrative techniques and characters’ images. Thus, this thesis will analyze two novels of Tan and points out that as Tan deepens her understanding of Chinese and American cultures and story settings change in different novels, it can be seen that she has acquired a deeper comprehension of Chinese Americans’ identity.

### 1.3 Research Theory

Identity is an important concept in western literature research. Basically it refers to “an individual’s self-perception of belonging to a specific social culture” (Brown 420). Deaux thinks that identity is an important part of a person’s thought about his or her self. Huang Ling points out that identity is one’s acknowledgement and reception of the characters and features of a group that he or she belongs to. Zou Ying thinks that identity means that a person thinks he or she belongs to a certain group in terms of emotion and value, and this kind of confirmation is finally accomplished by the perception of one’s psychological identity. He Hongtao thinks that “identity is the confirmation of one’s qualities that makes him or her” (He 180). Weeks (1998) thinks that “identity can be roughly divided into four types, including individual identity, collective identity, ego identity and social identity”. In a broader sense, it means that a

cultural subject chooses its collective identity between a strong culture and a weak one. In this process, it goes through huge pain and shock psychologically and thus gains a unique experience where distress and joy, confusion and hope coexist, which is called as “mixed identity” and is a focus of study for post-colonialism. This thesis thinks that this kind of “mixture” shows exactly the wars between multiple cultures caused by their differences and confrontations in values and thoughts. Many contemporary literature families and models have vividly depicted such plight of “mixed identity” faced by human beings living in such a world.

If the theory of identity is put into post-colonial field, it has more abundant meaning. Post-colonialism supports an inclusive attitude towards cultural identity and holds that culture plays a critical role in the construction of identity. Jorge Larraín (2005) proposes two ways to understand cultural identity: the first one is to view it from essentialism, which is narrow and exclusive; the other is to consider it within the historical context, which is open and inclusive. The first point of view sees cultural identity as something that has been accomplished and fixed, while the second one regards it as a production, which is incomplete and always in process. Therefore, it is not enough to judge a cultural identity only from its history, which is just like what Stuart Hall states:

Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they (cultural identities) are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere “recovery” of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (Hall, 1997: 59 ).

Besides, Homi Bhabha proposes to establish a multiple identity. According to him, the choice of identity and its expression of mental state and ideology are a painful process that involves conflicts and struggles. Identity is formed by different and unbalanced identity structures, and the boundaries among them are where our social relations are explained and established. What Bhabha emphasizes is not multiplicity of identity but the actual conflicts occurring the construction of “one” identity. Duality, contradictoriness and conflict of identity must be theorized and discussed. But the duality proposed by Bhabha does not mean two identities, but the

repetitiveness of identity negotiation and constant repetition, revision and repositioning, which is never the same with the previous ones. Bhabha has made a brilliant summary of identity's definition: identity is a performative behavior between subjects; it refuses boundaries between public and private, mental and social. It is not an "ego" with consciousness; instead, it is a way for the "ego" to enter the realm of "consciousness" through a symbolic "other", which includes language, social systems and unconsciousness. Bhabha rejects (perhaps with no other choices) an original and fixed racial or cultural identity but rather chooses a contradictory, negotiated and performative dual identity and protect his doubtful immigrant identity.

For colonized people in the past and immigrants in a multicultural society at present, there is no other choice but to live in a world "between different cultures" and create their own identities within contradictory traditions full of conflicts. They are both "this one" and "that one", but they are neither of them at the same time. They are stuck in a turbulent and painful process of cultural translation. But it is exactly through this kind of original cultural shift that endows immigrants precious postcolonial perspective, places them in a liminal or in-between space and helps them to create unique value in literary criticism.

What is special about Chinese Americans' identity is that it is the outcome of the encounter of two cultures. According to post-colonialism, hybridity is the result created when different cultures interact. Hybridity refers to a context that does not belong to internal or external culture but is a third space existing on the boundary between them, where a person is standing inside but also outside... Perhaps hybridity is a form of identity, which, although spreading more widely, mainly exists in some certain groups. Homi asserts a clear definition of hybridity in one of his articles "Signs Taken for Wonders":

Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the "pure" and original identity of authority)... It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion.... For the colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the rite of power is enacted on the site of desire, making its objects...in my mixed metaphor, a negative transparency (Bhabha, 1985: 98).

Some critics think that Bhabha's postcolonial theory is a theory of a globalized era. "In a globalized world, hybridity emphasizes the exchange, communication and adaptation between different cultures. This concept can help to resolve conflicts among cultures"(Ma 72). Besides, Bhabha's thoughts about hybridity partly come from the hybridity concept brought up by Bakhtin, who uses it when studying novels to "disclose dialogues created by hybrid discourse and effects produced by mutual explanation"(Zhou 219). Homi Bhabha, however, utilizes hybridity to analyze postcolonial discourse which, he hopes, can overturn colonizers' hegemonic narratives. Moreover, in terms of postcolonialism, Bhabha proposes a concept of "the writing modes of identity". The writing here does not mean to simply repeat a question but to question one's identity during repetitive but different processes of writing to deeply discuss the meaning of identity. Bhabha thinks that there is not a pure subject of identity: "an identity is placed in a in-between space where many conflicts coexist; it is a strategy of discourse negotiation"(Zhai 28). Cultural negotiation is to reconcile the relationship between the mainstream culture and ethnic culture. It is a significant strategy to deal with the conflicts between the mainstream culture and ethnic culture. As for construction of new identities, cultural negotiation also plays an important role; meanwhile it provides preconditions for cultural hybridity.

Therefore, writing of identity is a dynamic process of challenging, which is a response to questions about culture and meaning. Those living among different cultures urgently need a space where they can negotiate with other people so that they can reach a temporary consensus. That is the reason why Homi Bhabha proposes a term of "Third Space" aside from "hybridity" and "mimicry". He thinks that the Third Space is not a third room in imagination existing outside two colliding cultures or a mediator that reconciles two different cultures. According to Bhabha, the Third Space reflects a mixture of two cultures, which are mutually transformed, negotiating with and reflecting each other. It shows an attitude that the subject is close but also alienated to both cultures and that the identity is constantly being constructed based on the subject's stance.

## **Chapter Two Identity Dilemma of Chinese Americans**

An exclusive environment with just one culture can hardly generate problems of cultural identity, only when two different cultures crush and collide will anxiety about identity arises. In Tan's works, Chinese mothers in America cannot merge into the society so they turn back to their Chinese traditions, but in this way they also encounter countless setbacks as they cannot receive the majority's approval. The second generation of Chinese immigrants are also rejected by the society even though they call themselves "Americans". Besides, their behaviors are also regarded as inappropriate by their mothers who are actually the symbol of Chinese traditional culture. Seeing the plight of their mothers after they moved to America, the daughters growing up here cannot agree with Chinese values. The autobiographical novels of Tan portray the feelings of pain and struggling of Chinese American mothers and daughters and discuss what kind of identity that Chinese Americans should acquire in order to live at ease in American society. It is safe to say that Tan's novels record the predicament that Chinese American mothers and daughters face in their lives in the aspects of race, gender, class and so on and show the difficult journey that they have gone through to look for and construct their identity in the cultural dilemma between Chinese and American cultures.

### **2.1 Identity Dilemma of Mothers**

As stated before, Tan's works originate from the stories of her mother. As Tan's works reflect much of her family history. What Tan wants to express in her novels is who her mother was and how her identity influenced her life. Corresponding to it, in Tan's novels, the immigrant mothers all tries their best to seek for their identities. At first, they lose their identities due to conflicts of various factors. So they try to find a solution, but it is mutually hard whether to merge into the world of white Americans or resort to Chinese culture, so they experience much traumas and anxiety in this dilemma.

#### **2.1.1 Mothers in Cultural Intersection**

Most Chinese mothers moving to America came from a stable cultural environment. After coming to America and being marginalized, they have to make a choice between Chinese and American cultures, depending on which one is more



favorable for them or their daughters. Actually, the mothers speaking pidgin English are placed in a swing between two cultures: the pain that they suffered in China causes them to look for hope in America, but after they arrive in the country, they find that they cannot adjust to the new culture. In America, they are discriminated by the mainstream due to not only gender but also ethnicity. Moreover, there is another thing that they struggle with, that is how to bring the Chinese heritage that they carry with them to the lives of their daughters.

Take *The Joy Luck Club* as an example. In the first section of the book, the mother Suyuan Woo tells her daughter about her story in Kweilin, a city in southwestern China, about the origin of the Joy Luck Club and her twins left behind in China. The story with multiple endings reflects what a horrible war that the mother went through and how guilty she feels towards her two children left in China. She always hopes that there had never been such a violent war, that her husband could return safely and the two daughters she left at the side of the road could be safe and sound. What worth noticing is that Suyuan, along with three other mothers, tries to make their stories authentic and reliable when telling them. But actually these stories are something that they also try hard to hide from their husbands, daughters and other people in the club. Once they are told, however, daughters and readers in front of the book will believe in the scary and feudal China in the mothers' stories. Facing severe discrimination, Chinese mothers who immigrated to America try to find hope the minute they stepped on American land. The swan Suyuan brought from China, which was a symbol of her hope, was confiscated by the Immigration and Naturalization Service immediately they arrived. She tried to keep the swan by catching it but only got a feather, which is just like a sign, silent and powerless.

Ying-Ying St. Clair, another mother in the book, was detained on the Angel Island for three weeks until there were finally enough documents to prove that she was a war bride, a foreign student or a spouse of an American citizen. Ying-Ying was photographed when she was just released, looking humble and pitiful, terrified and disturbed. This photo actually shows the anxiety of mothers stuck in the conflicts between Chinese and American cultures. Ying-Ying finds it hard to adjust to her new life as she was born in a wealthy family in China but now lives a very tough life in America. Her living room is much smaller while the size of her clothes grows larger; she now has to do things that her maids should do back in China; and she has to learn to live in a western lifestyle while speaking awkward English. What's more, language

barriers contribute to the estrangement of Chinese mothers' families. For example, Ying-Ying can only speak a little English, but her husband, who calls himself her savior, insists that she must learn English. Every time when Ying-Ying cannot express herself, her husband will put words in her mouth, and even their daughter who can understand Chinese refuses to help her.

The mothers cannot live in America by the life experience they accumulated in China anymore, nor can they maintain their Chinese traditions as well in such a melting pot. But, no matter how they adjust to the American lifestyle, they fail to be accepted by the mainstream American society. While absorbing American culture, Chinese mothers also hope to bring Chinese culture into their daughters' lives. Most of the mothers once lived a well-off life in China, so when talking about China, they tend to not criticize it harshly, which, of course, maybe because Amy Tan herself comes from a relatively wealthy family. For most part of the time, the mothers miss their homeland very much, and this attitude has influenced their education of their daughters. For example, when it comes to what a good daughter or a good marriage should look like, they think that only girls who are docile and always follow mothers' words are good daughters. As one mother Suyuan says, there are only two kinds of daughters, a docile one and a rebellious one, and in Suyuan's family only the first one is accepted. Be it *The Joy Luck Club* or Tan's other novels, the Chinese American mothers always think that they must control their daughters and teach them to be obedient. They believe only in this way can their girls live a good life. They even hope that their daughters can teach their grandchildren in the same manner. But the huge gap between Chinese and American cultures makes their education approaches fail, which frustrates the mothers very much. As Lindo Jong, another Chinese mother in the novel, says, for a long time she hopes her daughter can adapt to American environment and maintain Chinese characters as well, but, against her expectation, the two wishes can never be achieved at the same time.

In the novel, both mothers and daughters are narrated in the first person, which brings a sharp contrast of their different narratives. Lindo intends to make her child learn American lifestyle but also carry Chinese features, but Waverly, the daughter, is not interested in that. A generation gap still exists between them. Immigrant mothers hope that they can offer their experience in love, marriage and career to their daughters, but actually the situation faced by their generation is different from that of their daughters. Therefore, just like what Tan said in an interview, after years, the

daughters find that the conflicts between them and their mothers are not only cultural but also generational. Mothers offer their children their whole heart but their love cannot be understood. Tan's own mother is also one of them. How can she do nothing when seeing her daughter may take drugs or cheated by men? As a result, the image of mothers in Tan's works is quite complicated and strikes a chord among many readers. Tan once said in an interview that many readers of *The Joy Luck Club* told her that the story was just like their own experiences.

### 2.1.2 Mothers in Cultural Limbo

The mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* are always stuck in the dilemma of choosing between Chinese and American cultures, while the identity anxiety that troubles the mother ( the older sister) in *The Hundred Secret Senses* is her estrangement towards both China and America. They cannot adapt to either one of them, that is, they are in limbo in both cultures.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Kwan, the older sister born in China, has a complex image in this novel. She is not like “an exchange student” who will gain a wonderful experience in America, as thought by her younger half-sister Olivia and her late father's American wife Louis, nor does she behave like a model or actress in movies. When Kwan shows up, the American mother and sister and the aunt Betty find that she does not look like the Chinese girl they have assumed in their mind at all. After coming to America, Kwan is not at ease as well: she cannot merge into the American family due to the cultural gap. The reassembled family looks like a collage of Christmas, clearly divided into two parts, the east and the west. Every time when Kwan takes photos with other family members, she appears to be different from others, be it clothes or expressions, looking just like a silly Chinese doll, as Olivia's friend once said. The older sister seems to conform to all imaginations that Americans have for Asian women: superstitious, silly, and queuing for goods at discounts. In this novel, Kwan believes that she has “yin eyes” which can see ghosts coming from the hell to visit her kitchen in California. She seems to possess multiple personalities and her ability to see the world of the deceased cannot make sense in either Chinese culture or American culture. That is also the reason why some reviewers say that this is a novel of superstition. Kwan becomes a “third one” transcending both Chinese and American cultures, which represents a greatly dislocated and distorted identity. So Kwan stands in a status of cultural limbo, which is refused by both culture.

What's more, mothers' limbo status also shows in their religious belief. "Christianity in contemporary Asian-American literature: (mis)-translations of the Word" by Blackburn and Di Ga (2004) states that Asian American writers and the characters in their books are greatly influenced by Christianity. But in Amy Tan's novels, Chinese American mothers do not find their spiritual home from God. For example, in *The Joy Luck Club*, the mother An-Mei Hsu mixes Christianity with Chinese superstitions. When her youngest son Bing falls to the sea and cannot be found, An-Mei begs God for the return of her son and also begs the Coiling Dragon who lives in the sea, who is a Chinese god. But during her prayer, all she speaks is Chinese except for "Dear God" at the beginning and "Amen" at the end. Neither the American god or the Chinese one hears her prayer. Finally, she can only write the name of her son by a pencil on a page of *the Bible*. This story shows the difficulties that the first generation of immigrants face in search for identity. An-Mei thinks that she can enter the white Americans' society as long as she accepts Christianity, only to find that she just attempts in vain, so she stands in the cultural limbo all the time. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, although the older sisiter Kwan has been in American society, instead of turning to Christianity so as to accepted by mainstream, she just sticks in traditional Chinese cultures and superstitions. She just tells old Chinese superstitious stories to her sister. The stories she told contain many mysterious and magical Chinese traditional elements,. What makes she more different is her supernatural ability to see the world of yin and communicate with ghosts or dead people, which is strongly believed by old Chinese superstition. So Kwan is seemed as a strange and marginal person in American society. This shows the identity confusion that the immigrant mothers face. Kwan thinks that she can keep her Chinese identity as long as she sticks in Chinese traditional culture, but she is so strongly denied by American mainstream and her ethnic group that she even is seemed as a psychopath and is sent to hospital.

As for this matter, Tan said in an interview that she did not have one single religious belief and she believed that all religions share some commons. According to Tan, she does not like the way that a follower of a religion has to be faithful from beginning to the end and believe all things that the religion supports are truth. What she loves is to question herself and find faith within herself. It is safe to say that Tan's attitude to religion is same as her attitude to her own identity, which is changing all the time. As the immigrant mothers in Tan's works carry the features of her own

mother, the attitude of Tan's mother towards religion should be worth discussion: after moving to America, Tan's father, a devoted Christian, asked her mother whether she'd like to be converted. She just shook her head and said she could not change her long-time habits, besides, she also had her own Chinese faiths. During an interview, Tan said: "After my father died, my mother revealed all these beliefs I never knew she had. It turned out she was only pretending to be a good Baptist. My mother believed in curses, karma, good luck, bad luck, feng shui" (Fassler 2). With so much complex beliefs in immigrant mothers' mind, sometimes they just feel more helpless and confused, because they don't know which one they can truly rely on, so they are in limbo in both cultures.

While searching for identity, mothers in Tan's novels are not only influenced by the Chinese culture deeply-rooted in their mind but also assimilated or marginalized by the white American society. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the Chinese American mothers want to make a choice between Chinese and American cultures. They attempt to be accepted by the mainstream society in vain, and at the same time, they try to make their daughters inherit Chinese traditions but are rejected. Kwan in *The Hundred Secret Senses* is not assimilated by America nor does she strive to merge into the mainstream society, which put her in a limbo situation. And all the mothers are confused about their religious belief, with so much complex beliefs in mothers' mind, sometimes they just feel more helpless, because they don't know which one they can truly rely on, so they are in limbo in both cultures. To sum up, own to the cultural gap between China and America, all the mothers in American mainstream society are anxious about their identities.

## 2.2 Identity Dilemma of Daughters

In Tan's novels, what perplexes the daughters is different from that for the mothers, who had a definition of their identity before arriving in America. Even when they try hard to merge into the western society and become an American, they still accept the Chinese culture in their blood. But the identity struggle of the daughters have occurred the minute they were born. Physical factors like blood and skin color seem to determine that they will never be the same as white Americans, while living in America makes them different from Chinese as well.

Although the daughters live in a multicultural era of America and the social status and living standards of Chinese Americans have grown higher, the gaze from the white American society still exists everywhere. Under the constant control and

pressure from the mainstream western society, the Chinese daughters, on the one hand, attempt to fit in the mainstream society, and on the other hand constantly alienate themselves from Chinese culture. Born in marginalized Chinese families, they are faced with a great gap between them and the American society, but they are so attracted by some values of this country that they are desperate to be one member of it and the process is destined to be full of difficulties. Then when they hit obstacles and want to resort to Chinese culture to search for identity, they find that they cannot acknowledge it or communicate with their Chinese mothers. Besides, their behaviors are criticized as rebellious by their mothers who come from China Town or Chinese communities which stand for traditional Chinese culture. The plight of identity struggle for the daughters originates from two cultures, one Chinese and another American. They can be accepted by neither of them, thus experiencing great anxiety for becoming the “other” wandering in between. This is as what the postcolonialism theorist Homi K. Bhabha says, “the core of anxiety is about the blurring, swaying boundary between the self and the other” (He 12). What the daughters are anxious about is their ambiguous, swaying identity of being a Chinese. Actually, the research on Chinese daughters’ identity must go hand in hand with the research on mother-daughter relations, as the daughters’ identity confusion is reflected by their arguments with their mothers and their contradictory feelings of both love and hate towards their mothers.

### 2.2.1 Difficulties in Recognition of American Culture

In *The Joy Luck Club*, the Chinese mothers and daughters are attracted by the “American Dream” publicized by American media. According to the doctorate thesis of Tang Man (2006), “American Dream” means that there is a beautiful land where everybody can lead a good life, be richer and more fulfilled and enjoy opportunities matching their abilities. In this society, every man and every woman can reach their full potential and gain the acknowledgement and respect from others, instead of being decided by the family background or social status which they are born with.

But in the novel, the mothers and daughters have a superficial understanding of “American Dream”, which, for them, seems to have become an isolated concept in vacuum and a key for their identity. The author writes a lot vividly about the pursuit for American Dream by the mother Suyuan Woo and her daughter Jingmei Woo. Suyuan does not miss every show of Shirley Temple on TV and collects stories about life experiences of geniuses from *Reader’s Digest*. The thoughts promoted by the

mainstream media have deeply influenced Suyuan who hopes that one day her daughter can be one of these stars. To make Jingmei look like the beautiful Temple, Suyuan sends her to make a haircut, which, after painstaking efforts, turns the little girl's hair into a bunch of messy grass and she now looks like a "black Chinese" girl. The mother intends to make her daughter look more like the American child star, but the result marginalizes the girl's image even more greatly. Then Jingmei's hair is redone for another time but only turns to be more weird, just like the hairstyle of Peter Pan. This change is certainly far away from Suyuan's expectation that her daughter would look like a genius, a graceful ballerina or Cinderella. This experience seems to indicate that no matter how Chinese Americans change their appearances, they will never merge into the American society.

Having to do all kinds of things arranged by Suyuan to become a genius, Jingmei does not have a happy adolescence and even hates her mother for testing whether she has a genius' intelligence by IQ tests in magazines. When seeing again the disappointing look of her mother after she fails the test, Jingmei no longer excites about growing up. She begins to hate such tests, because every time her mother will start with great hope but end with disappointment. One night after such a test, Jingmei stands in front of the mirror in the bathroom and sees her plain face and cannot help crying. Screaming and stamping her feet, she desperately reaches out to scratch the ugly face in the mirror like an angry little beast. The feeling of disappointment towards herself makes Jingmei extremely painful and anxious. She seems to realize that she will never fit in the mainstream society. She begins to hate those American child stars, calls the Chinese pianist hired by her mother "weird" and revenges herself on her mother who constantly compares her with others. In the pursuit of American Dream, Jingmei loses herself. What accumulate in her mind are all kinds of negative emotions like discontent, hatred and agony, which finally lead to her outburst.

The party at the church is a place to test whether Jingmei has achieved the American Dream. But unfortunately, her piano performance is irritating to the ear, indicating that the pursuit of the American Dream fails at last. She thinks she might receive applause but only sees her disappointed mother with an indifferent look and the gloating audience. The dream turns to be an absurdity. The farce-like performance not only makes the daughter painful but also disappoints the mother greatly. On the stage in the church, Chinese and American cultures become symbols used as tools to attack each other. Jingmei shouts that they are in America, not in China, while

Suyuan forces her to choose between being a docile daughter and being a rebellious one. The choice presented by the mother seems to mean that as long as the daughter can be obedient like a traditional Chinese girl, her wish to be accepted by American society will be granted. But reality turns to be exactly opposite. The reply that the mother receives is the daughter's knowledge of the twin children left in China by Suyun. The mother breaks down. The American Dream finally disrupts her identity.

Waverly, another Chinese girl whom Jingmei is often compared with, becomes a national Chinese chess champion at the age of nine. Her mother Lindo Jong tells her about American rules by the simile of techniques of playing Chinese chess. Lindo says that everyone has to obey local rules when coming to a foreign place; local people will not explain what is deemed appropriate and what is not and one can only figure it out by themselves. Believing in her mother's words, Waverly has learned to stay calm and silent under all conditions and mastered the chess skills of defeating rivals by surprising steps from a Taoist old man. Thanks to these Chinese manners of behavior, Waverly becomes a rising star of chess and is regarded as a genius child. A photo of her is published on a magazine: biting her lip and seeming to be thinking about the next step, Waverly suddenly puts a chess piece on a critical place on the board with a threatening gesture, followed by a smile of victory. The picture with the pose carefully arranged by Lindo seems to prove the success of Waverly in her pursuit of American Dream and the acceptance of the American society. But the outcome goes against Lindo's expectation. The Chinese-style torture of the mother troubles Waverly greatly: the "latest American rules" set by her mother enable her to play chess successfully, but they cannot prevent the intervention of her life by her mother. In the pursuit of American Dream controlled by Lindo, Waverly seems to be a piece of chess and cannot have her own voice heard. Waverly is not defeated by her rival but by her mother as she begins to feel that everything, including her success, seems to be just the arrangement of her mother. At last, Waverly cannot win chess games anymore and only sighs at her past dream. Now Waverly is a successful tax broker, but she has become a selfish, harsh and hardhearted woman who only cares about wealth and success.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Olivia calls her family a modern American family, and it is true no matter in their lifestyle or in their values. But as a Chinese child, Olivia is also rejected by the mainstream American society. At an early age, Olivia hoped to become famous by playing a character at children's TV shows, or be



invited by her teacher to perform at concerts so that she could tell others about stories of silly Chinese girls and win laughter and applause. These narratives reflect the desire deep in her mind. These two novels of Tan depict how the Chinese daughters value the American features within themselves but are rejected by the western society, but they discuss more about the topic by understating the daughters' search for American identity, thus showing a more complex attitude these girls hold towards American culture.

"American Dream" is one of the main tools of America to attract immigrants. In Tan's novels, the Chinese mothers and daughters try to imitate other people to pursue "American Dream". It seems that they are obsessed with the beautiful dream, but essentially their imitation destructs their dream. As stated by Homi K. Bhabha, this kind of imitation is "ironic and contains mockery and distortion" (Zhao 110), thus satirizing the narcissism and arrogance of the authority. Tan gives her own explanation of "American Dream". She says that she has spent lots of time comprehending what the dream is exactly. At first, she thought it meant that everything would turn better and everyone had equal rights and opportunities to make things better. Her parents believed in such a dream and moved from one place to another in pursuit of it. But now she realizes that the most important thing about "American Dream" is to create your own identity by the freedom of American style. She thinks that this is what is unique about America and no other country can offer such an opportunity. In Tan's novels, the attitude of Chinese daughters towards the American culture turns from ambiguous yearning to estrangement.

### 2.2.2 Difficulties in Recognition of Chinese Culture

The daughters in Amy Tan's novels hold a complex attitude towards Chinese culture, which are mainly represented by various rules set by their mothers or the local community at China Town. Chinese women, as a special group of people, are constrained by instructions to be quiet and obedient or they will be the shame of the whole family. Once they violate the rules set by their mothers or the local community in the name of inheriting traditional Chinese culture, they will be defined as a "rebel".

To understand why the daughters have difficulties in recognizing Chinese culture, it might help to look at how they describe China Town, where they grow up. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the author gives an extremely detailed description of China Town through the eyes of Waverly: children here play happily on roads behind restaurants and antique stores; Waverly's family live in a comfortable apartment with two

bedrooms and they have bounty meals every day, with five dishes and one bowl of soup; there are old people sitting on benches, chatting and eating roasted sunflower seeds. She talks about her brother watching the trades made in a local Chinese pharmacy, about the local fish market and frightening childhood memory related to it, about how an American tourist asked her to take of photo of him in front of a show window hanging roasted ducks and many other details in her memory of the community. From her description, we can see clearly how people in China Town live their day to day life, and it seems that Waverly recalls her childhood very fondly and talks about it in an idyllic manner. But if she truly loves China Town, what is the point to describe it in such great detail? The way of depiction by Waverly is more like how a successful American, as an outsider, looks at the hometown where she ever lived. Now Waverly is a wealthy tax broker. The target audience of her narrative is white Americans and her purpose is to satisfy their curiosity about Chinese communities.

Jingmei Woo, another daughter in *The Joy Luck Club*, also views her mother and the mahjong club from an Oriental perspective. She says that Suyuan, her mother, and An-Mei, another mother in the neighborhood, are always dressed in embroidered *chi pao* (traditional Chinese gown), which seems extravagant in daily life but odd on banquets. And she feels a little bit ashamed of the Joy Luck Club, which in her eyes is a society that obeys many mysterious Chinese traditions which seem absurd to her. For Jingmei, it resembles secret meetings of KKK or dances that Indian soldiers play in front of bonfires, as they all follow a whole set of weird rituals. In this way, Jingmei's detailed description from the angle of Orientalism conforms with the imagination of the mainstream American society about Chinese immigrants, who are viewed by them as the "other" in the society.

Besides, the daughters' rejection of Chinese culture is also represented by their hate of their physical features. For example, in *The Joy Luck Club*, Lena St. Clair, Ying-Ying's daughter, has a typical Irish father and a foreign surname and thus is thought to be an European by all her friends. It is true that, at the first glance, she looks much like her father, but if observed carefully, she still carries some Chinese features. Her skin is pale as if its color had faded due to sunshine. Moreover, she inherits a pair of eyes from her mother: the bone there is quite flat, looking like the eyes on a jack-o-lantern, without the deep eye sockets typical of westerners. Lena thinks her eyes indicate that she inherits her mother's gene of anxiety and timidity,

which explains why she can see many horrible scenes. Physical features are an unsolvable problem that blocks Chinese daughters' entrance into the white American society. The daughters are like the deceased famous singer Michael Jackson, who kept changing the color of his skin so that he could become whiter and be accepted by white Americans.

What's more, the daughters' attitude to Chinese culture is also exhibited by their contradictory feelings of both love and hate towards their mothers. In Tan's novels, most mothers are a little bit neurotic. The mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* either keep silent all the time or easily become anxious and terrified. The sister Kwan in *The Hundred Secret Senses* is a silly Chinese girl with "yin eyes" that can see ghosts. All the features of their Chinese families make the daughters hard to accept Chinese culture represented by their mothers or sisters. Take Olivia in *The Hundred Secret Senses* as an example. Her identity dilemma originates from her sister Kwan, a girl with "yin eyes". Before Kwan came to her life, Olivia lived in a "modern American family", which has undergone great changes with Kwan's arrival. Olivia then obtains a Chinese name and gains new knowledge of China. Kwan's existence forces Chinese mysteries into her brain and changed her way of thinking. She even begins to have nightmares with Chinese elements. Olivia refuses to accept Kwan, a silly Chinese girl as called by her friends, as her sister, nor does she admit her half-Chinese blood relation, constantly imagining that her sister might return to China one day. The name also bears much relationship with identity, and it is the greatest obstacle faced by Olivia. She deems neither of her Chinese surname or the American one as fit for her. If she has a Chinese family name, she thinks, she seems to totally turn into a Chinese, which will trouble her greatly. She does not know exactly who she is or what she wants to become. Olivia's attitude to a Chinese surname reflects the difficulty for her to recognize Chinese culture.

To sum up, the identity anxiety of Chinese daughters comes from the rejection of the American society and the difficulty of recognizing Chinese culture. There is a huge gap between marginalized Chinese families and America. Seduced by the mainstream western world, they unremittently attempt to merge into it but encounter one setback after another. As Chinese mothers and daughters can never be really accepted by the American society, the daughters begin to stop admiring it but move away from it. On the other hand, the daughters cannot communicate with their mothers, who are a symbol of Chinese culture, and some of their behaviors are

deemed as rebellious and inappropriate by their mothers and the local community. They can only sigh at the double pressure and control from both Chinese and American cultures.

## Chapter Three Identity Negotiation of Chinese Americans

Cultural negotiation is to reconcile the relationship between the mainstream culture and ethnic culture. It is a significant strategy to deal with the conflicts between the mainstream culture and ethnic culture. As for construction of new identities, cultural negotiation also plays an important role; meanwhile it provides preconditions for cultural hybridity. According to Homi Bhabha, cultural identity is changeable and it is an “on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridity that emerge in moments of historical transformation” (Bhabha, 1994: 2). That is to say, cultural identity is changeable and it can form itself through the process of negotiation in cultural communication, instead of molding itself as a pre-given stereotype.

This idea of negotiable cultural identity is in accordance with that of Amy Tan. In her novels, after exposing the two generations’ severe identity crisis, Tan portrays how they struggle to negotiate their cultural identities in order to get out of the dilemma. Therefore, this chapter will interpret Amy Tan’s ideas about the possibility of identity negotiation for the Chinese Americans within the elaborations about the characters’ identity negotiation in the novel.

### 3.1 Identity Negotiation in Storytelling

At the beginning of the essay “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism”, Homi Bhabha points out that an important feature of colonial discourse is the concept of fixity in the ideological construction of Otherness and stereotype is the major discursive strategy of fixity (Bhabha, 2000: 66). In order to defend their priority from being threatened by other cultures, the colonial discourse tends to stereotype the cultures which are different from them as the Other. Assimilated by the mainstream, the American daughters tend to alien themselves from the Chinese heritage and stereotype their Chinese mothers as the Other. As E.D Huntley says “Mothers are the carrier of Chinese culture, displaying the history, old traditional wisdom and language ability” (Huntley, 1998: 17), with the power of mothers’ storytelling in the cultural negotiation, on one hand, the mothers get the chance to break their Other images by enunciating for themselves. On the other hand, the daughters not only begin to know more about their mothers’ past life experience, but also stop recognizing their mothers as the Other. The mothers and daughters no

longer settle in the opposite cultural stance, such as the self and the other, the East or West. Actually, their identities go beyond the polarities of the East and the West due to the storytelling in identity negotiation.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Jingmei defined her mother as an indifferent woman when she heard the story of her mother who had abandoned her children in China. Later, she used this excuse to hurt her mother several times. However, after hearing the true story, she changed her mind about her mother. In her mother's story, she was a fugitive who brought two children with herself during the Anti-Japanese War. At the end of the story, she said she arrived in Chongqing with only three fancy silk clothes. Jingmei thinks her mother is very indifferent, because in such a bad time, her mother is more concerned about her clothes than her children. Later, when Jingmei was asked by her mother to be a submissive girl, she rebelled against her mother and said she wanted to be one of the dead babies, which made her mother very upset. After her mother's death, Jingmei heard the true version of the story. In fact, her mother was not an indifferent person because she did not abandon the baby. In fact, after Suyuan went to the United States, she was still looking for babies. Finally, Jinmei promised to fulfill her mother's wishes and visited her half-sister in China. With the help of storytelling, Jingmei eliminated the misunderstanding of his mother. With the breaking of this indifferent stereotype, the prejudice brought about by Jingmei's pure American cultural identity has also been eliminated. As a result, her former American cultural identity has been challenged and negotiated.

Another daughter in this novel, Waverley knew the pain Lindo had suffered as a child bride in old China, so she looked at the Chinese from another angle. She even doubted whether the failure of her first marriage was cursed by her mother. More importantly, she thanked God for protecting her daughter Shawsana from Lindo's poisoning. From Waverley's obvious positive attitude towards God and her negative attitude towards Chinese mothers, her absolute belief in American cultural identity exposed completely. However, Lindo's wise and strong image in the story eventually changed her mind. In her mother's story, she had to marry a helpless husband as daughter-in-law, but her mother-in-law accused her of infertility. Later Lindo used his wisdom to get rid of this miserable marriage. She tricked her mother-in-law with the power of ancestor worship. She threatened her mother-in-law that if she remained married, her ancestors would punish the family severely. According to her wise plan, her mother-in-law decided to release her and give her some money to the United

States. Lindo's new image in the story provides Wesley with a fairer view of her "evil" and "superstitious" Chinese mother. So Waverley abandoned her old prejudice and changed her old view of Chinese culture. In return, her purely American cultural identity was negotiated.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Kwan was the daughter of Olivia's father's previous marriage in China and came to the United States to fulfill their father's deathbed request. So, Kwan was abnormal and odd in the eyes of the Americans around her. She was treated as an outsider and "other" by the American mainstream society. Throughout the book, Kwan ceaselessly tells Olivia stories, about her past life in the 1860s, which Olivia has always thought to be figments of her half-sister's imagination. At first, Olivia annoyed with Kwan's ghost stories and the care on her, but Kwan still murmurs her ghost stories. When Olivia was a child, before falling asleep every night, she had to listen to Kwan's mysterious ghost talk. The mysterious stories in Kwan's voice constitute of war, romance and betrayal revealed, which is complicated, magical and exotic. She gives a glimpse of China at the same time of the Taiping Revolution, and she sketches the people she met then with ease and radiance. Kwan tells these stories in the hope that Olivia, who is Miss Banner reborn, will remember her own past life and her relationship with her sister, who is Nunumu reborn. Kwan also wants Olivia to remember her past life so that she will remember Yiban, who is reborn as Simon, and realize that Simon loves her with his whole heart instead of Elza, his late girlfriend. Kwan's stories help Olivia regain the love with Simon and find her Chinese American identity. When Olivia's marriage meets trouble, Kwan tried her best to recover it by telling the previous existences in the 19th century. Kwan plays an important role in Olivia's marriage, which she thought she is the "mei-po" of them. At least, she quicken up her marriage with Simon and it is still her that tries to prevent them from divorcing and helps them know they love each other. At first, Olivia doesn't pay much attention to these imaginary ghost stories, but when travel to China, Olivia undertakes a journey towards the truth about her previous life in the old China and discover her Chinese heritage. Kwan seems a spirit-guide to Olivia, reminding her of her cultural roots. And the alienation between the two sisters is dissolved and replaced by reconciliation and respect. At last, the missing of Kwan, and the introduction of newly born daughter are two episodes, which reveal Olivia's love for Kwan and the lasting of it. Therefore, by storytelling, Kwan helps Olivia regain her love and fulfill her Chinese American identity.

When it comes to her writing, Amy Tan often attributes her success to her mother, Daisy. She thinks that Daisy is her Muse goddess, because it is Daisy that inspired her a lot of writing. Many of Amy's stories are based on the stories of her mother and her grandmother. However, in Amy's early years, her relationship with her mother was so bad that she refused all the Chinese things in her life. It was not until she began to listen to her mother's story that her relationship with Daisy became calmer. Through negotiation in the story-telling process, Amy learns about Daisy's tragic past and her eccentric behavior. In the process, Amy found herself full of humor, wisdom and truth. Like Amy Tan, the stories told by her mothers give daughters a better understanding of Chinese mothers and Chinese culture. Through these stories, the daughters not only learned the stories of their mothers' past, but also changed their pure American cultural identity.

According to Bhabha, "The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality" (Bhabha, 2000: 75). In order to prevent the original priority from being threatened by other cultures, the colonists used stereotypes and false fantasies to deceive the colonized. But with the power of the mother's storytelling, the daughters succeeded in breaking these stereotypes and other images. On the one hand, Chinese mothers break the negative impression of China in their daughters' minds by listening and telling stories to speak for themselves. On the other hand, American daughters recognize their strong and intelligent image of Chinese mothers. The on-going negotiation held during the process of storytelling lead all of the characters into an in-between position which "overcomes the given grounds of opposition and open up a new space that is neither the one nor the other" (Bhabha, 1990: 19). The American daughters no longer reject the Chinese culture blindly and their American cultural identities and Chinese cultural identities are negotiated.

### **3.2 Identity Negotiation in Reconciliation**

According to Homi Bhabha, cultural differences "must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition" (Bhabha, 2000: 2). Instead, the cultural differences should be articulated and enunciated because "the enunciation of cultural difference problematizes the binary division of past and present, tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address" (Bhabha, 1994: 35). That is to say, by the enunciation of cultural differences, the fixed table of binary position such as lower and upper, East and West can be disturbed.



In Tan's novels, after suffering the identity crisis, both the mothers and the daughters begin to negotiate with each other and try to compromise with each other. The American daughters try to respect Chinese culture and their Chinese mothers. At the same time, the Chinese mothers also start to accept American culture. Before the cultural differences get enunciated, the cultural identities of the American daughters are fixed in the West and the cultural identities of the Chinese mothers are fixed in the East. After the the cultural differences are enunciated, the previous binary position of the West and the West is split. The cultural identities of the mothers and the daughter are all negotiated within their mutual compromise.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, one of the Chinese mother Linda deeply believed in Chinese collectivism. So she likes to show off her daughter's talent for playing chess in public. But her Americanized daughter, Waverly, advocates individualism because she believed in American culture. So she was embarrassed by being shown off. Therefore, she retaliated against her mother by giving up the chess game. Her rebellious actions hurt Linda, Linda chose to ignore her daughter as well. Each of them believed in her cultural identity and does not want to change it. Later, fearing the loss of his mother, Waverly tried to negotiate with Linda. She deliberately put herself in serious favor and eventually won Linda back. Waverly's positive compromise efforts symbolize her acceptance of Chinese culture which believed by her mother. After her recovery, she found that Linda no longer educated her in Chinese way. Even if she decided to not play chess from that time, Linda gave her enough freedom to live her own life instead of using her Chinese lessons. This also symbolized Linda's acceptance of American culture. Finally, both Linda and Waverly's cultural identities were unconsciously negotiated.

In this novel, Waverly's ingenious compromise with Linda not only won her a good relationship with her mother and a good marriage with her American husband, but also promoted her cultural identity negotiation. In the story, when Waverly mentioned her husband Rich, her mother would try to change the subject. She realized that her mother did not want to accept her husband. In order to protect her marriage with her husband and not offend her mother, Waverly made a compromise plan with her mother. She put forward a idea to win the reconciliation between the two sides. She knows that her mother loved cooking, and it is her own way to express her love to her children. So Waverly believed that if Rich appreciated her mother's cooking style and catered to her vanity, her mother would be satisfied, and she could

live with Rich without any worries. So Waverly invited Rich to eat dinner in her house. Before the dinner, she told Rich a lot of Chinese etiquette to help him win Lindo's love. Later, in the kitchen, when Lindo laughed at Rich's spots on his face, Waverley defended her husband. In the process of negotiating with her mother, she delighted her mother with Chinese etiquette and proverbs, which meant that she accepted Chinese culture. Her use of these Chinese rituals and proverbs was a clear sign of Waverly's efforts to negotiate her American cultural identity and Chinese cultural identity. At the end of the story, Waverly invited Lindo to go to China with her husband. She thinks her makes a sense because "The three of us, leaving our differences behind, stepping on the plane together, sitting side by side, lifting off, moving West to reach the East" (*JLC* 184). The American daughter's compromise with her Chinese mother helped her reconcile with both sides and positioned her cultural identity between their borders. In the ongoing identity negotiation between Waverly and her mother, cultural differences were involved, and the two generations finally achieved a harmonious reconciliation. They both disrupt the dualistic logic of the East and the West, and locate cultural identity in a third space between the two worlds.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Kwan and Olivia represent the Chinese culture and American culture respectively. The reconciliation of them suggests the Olivia's understanding and acceptance of the Chinese heritage and the integration of the two cultures. This process undermines the hegemonic American culture and creates a new hybrid one. The sisters who embrace this hybrid culture become the Chinese American instead of Chinese or American. In this novel, the relationship between the sisters is tense and problematic at first. The crisis between Kwan and Olivia is the one between the American sister and her Chinese heritage. The reason for the conflicts between the two sisters is the Olivia's assimilation. Despite the intense conflicts between sisters, Tan is quite optimistic about the daughters' reconnection to the Chinese heritage. In this novel, the conflict between the two sisters develops into a satisfying reconciliation. It is a drawn-out process involving, first of all, Kwan's efforts to reach across the cultural gulf, to speak in order to be heard by Olivia. Kwan must break her silence to break down the stereotypes that the external society has imposed upon them and the prejudices that their assimilated sister Olivia hold against them. This is the precondition for sisters' reconciliation and the reconciliation is extremely important for Olivia because her identity as a Chinese American is

acquired through connection to, and knowledge of, Chinese heritage of which she is a part.

Just as Stuart Hall announces that cultural identity is “far from being externally fixed in some essential past, and they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (Hall, 1990: 226), Amy Tan depicts the negotiation process of the ethnic characters’ cultural identities in her novel. The American daughters’ old opinions about Chinese culture caused by pure American cultural identities turn out to be wrong with the power of the mothers’ storytelling, and the two generations win peaceful reconciliation with the help of mutual compromise. All of the characters get through a period of time of identity negotiation. Within the plots of the characters’ identity negotiation during the process of identification, Amy Tan also shows the readers that cultural identity is changeable and negotiable. What’s more, the identity negotiation is very crucial because it lays the solid foundation for the characters to construct hybrid identities in the end.

## **Chapter Four Identity Construction of Chinese Americans**

Amy Tan repeatedly touches upon the theme of mother-daughter relationship, during this process, the content of identities of the Chinese Americans in her books is also added and revised. According to He Yugao (2012), “When a cultural identity is replicated in different contexts, the replication is not exactly the same one; instead, the repetition brings changes and essentially it is a process of hybridity”. Certainly the questions to ask about identity are not simple about “who am I” or “where do we come from” but more about who we will become and how we appreciate our identity. What is more, “cultural identities are constantly shaped and reshaped in practices, relationships and existing symbols and thoughts” (Hall, 1997: 96). Therefore, it is necessary to abandon essentialism and take a historical perspective when viewing identity. The same goes for the characters in Amy Tan’s novels so that we can understand how Tan construct a temporary hybrid cultural identity on a fragmented basis.

### **4.1 Identity Construction of Characters**

If an overall view of the changing attitudes and understanding of the mothers towards their identities in Tan’s novels was taken, it can be seen that even though the mainstream American society has never changed its rejection against them, they turn to take a different survival strategy and try to construct their identities through the connection of the past and the present. So they can recognize both cultures at their will. This is the result of their efforts to construct a hybrid identity by their unique way.

#### **4.1.1 Identity Construction of Mothers**

In Tan’s novels, the mothers feel extremely anxious after coming to America. They have to resort to their inner selves, or the deep memory of Chinese culture, to empower themselves and search for identities. Therefore, Tan lets them to tell their experiences in the past to find their true selves. Storytelling enables the mothers, who used to keep silent, to share their stories with their daughters. More than reshaping themselves, they connect the past with the present to find their identity in a cultural dilemma and create a new type of identity.

The first generation of Chinese Americans solve the problem of identity by raising self-awareness. Having suffered many hardships in China, they are determined to start a new life in America. But due to various factors such as language and race, they become marginalized and the “other” in the society. Not being able to get rid of their Chinese identity, they must pay unrelenting efforts to avoid being marginalized. They keep trying to understand themselves and search for their identity, which is a process for Chinese American women to construct their own cultural identity. Mothers in Tan’s novels, such as Lindo, Ying-Ying, and Kwan(sister) can be seen as representatives of Chinese females pursuing the identity. These women have to shoulder the responsibility to support families and educate children. Driven by their love for daughters and self-reflection as the female, they consciously become narrators and transmitters of Chinese culture. In spite of unfortunate past, they are still able to look forward to the future with a positive attitude.

Because the mothers have experienced so many traumas, they want their daughters to be happy instead of repeating their life, and thus they place high expectations on their children. One mother in the novel once said that she would have a daughter in America, who would look like her very much but never be at the mercy of her husband. She said that her daughter must learn to speak fluent American English so that she would not be discriminated. In the mother’s mind, her daughter would want nothing, have no worry or trouble, understand her mother’s efforts and expectations and become a beautiful swan, a hundred times more beautiful than she expected. Therefore they teach their daughters to be independent and ambitious to join in the mainstream American society; they tell their children about their past in the hope that their daughters can learn about their families and the history of their homeland; they hope that the girls can learn from these past stories so that they can lead a better life at present. Tan once said in an interview that many mothers and daughters could not understand each other even though mothers kept talking about the same story, just like my mother. She said that when she was a kid, the stories were boring, intimidating and tragic for her, but after growing up she began to understand what her mother wanted to tell her, and that is, you could not repeat the history, you had to be strong, and you must not allow others to decide your life. The same goes for the characters in her novels. The daughters in books begin to know themselves through their mothers and then change their life and understand their identity.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Ying-Ying, a mother in the novel, talks little and always feel nervous and worried. Like her daughter Lena says, she is so scared that she almost attempts to curl up in a corner where she can feel safe and secure, but even in that way she cannot get rid of the indescribable feeling of fear. Ying-Ying in America loses her original identity, but through recalling memories of China, she finds again the innocent, sincere and inquisitive self she used to be when she was a little girl, and also the self that bravely stood up against miseries and hardships. Therefore, when seeing her daughter's marriage is about to break down, she wants to wake up her daughter by pain. It is not only the enlightenment of the daughter but also a process through which Ying-Ying finds her lost ego and a journey where the two women finally understand each other. Lindo, another mother in the same novel, is another example. She has been stuck in sway between Chinese and American cultures. In her story about China, she was married to a man to fulfill the promise of her parents, but she was so oppressed in the family that she finally fought for her freedom and succeeded. It is due to this experience that she found her true self. At the end of the novel, her daughter Waverly finds that her mother seems to change into another person, losing all the feeling of authority and strong will. Waverly is puzzled but amazed at the other side of her mother, who now appears quite weak and innocent. Although she still cannot understand Lindo's stories of her hometown, now she finds a mother she did not know, a mother patiently waiting for her daughter.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, the sister is born in a small village called Changming in Kweilin, Guangxi, Kwan loses her mother at five and is left to a woman by her father who then moves to American and starts his new life. Kwan came to American at the age of eighteen. She is different from everybody around her in appearance, language or behavior, and thus she is always the "other" in the western world. Though her state in America is embarrassed and miserable, Kwan breaks away from the identity dilemma by connecting her past in China with the present in America and the Chinese culture with the American one and then constructs her identity as a Chinese American. She becomes a symbol of love, tolerance, loyalty and selflessness. Although she faces racial discrimination and rejection as an entire "other" after her arrival in America, Kwan is so strong willed that she bravely rebels against the stereotype of Chinese American and builds a new image of Chinese American. She is a symbol of the Chinese root, source and window for Olivia. She brings traditional Chinese culture to American mainstream culture and helps more

people know about traditional Chinese culture. She has unusual abilities and hundred secret senses, which can show the greatness and unique features of the eastern females who used to be considered as silent, obedient by westerners. She is the wise old man/woman, ready to give help to people in need at any time. She is no longer considered as abnormal, mysterious, stupid, eccentric; she has built up a completely new image of love, forgiveness, loyalty, selflessness, wisdom and tolerance. Thus, she completes her self-reconstruction as a great Chinese American. Kwan has used every mean to mediate the conflicts she faces in life and bridge the gap between the east and the west. At last, she even gives away her own life to achieve the merge and renaissance of the two cultures.

If an view of the changing attitudes and understanding of the mothers towards their identity in Tan's novels was taken, it can be seen that even though the mainstream American society has never changed its rejection against them, they turn to take a different survival strategy and try to construct their identities through the connection of the past and the present. The mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* try to find their true selves to reconstruct their identities; the Chinese sister Kwan in *The Hundred Secret Senses* finds solutions to problems she faces in reality and tries to narrow the distance between eastern and western worlds. These mothers are not confused about which culture to choose any more. They can recognize both cultures at their will. This is the result of their efforts to construct a hybrid identity by their unique way.

#### **4.1.2 Identity Construction of Daughters**

By linking the past self with the present one and their mothers' past with the present of their own, the daughters in novels realize that both Chinese and American cultures have deeply infiltrated into their blood: they are truly "mixed-race". At the end of each novel, we can see that the daughters do not struggle to determine which part of them is Chinese and which is American; they come to understand that they need to construct their identity which exists in their mixed blood of both Chinese and America.

The Chinese mothers in Tan's novels narrow the distance between them and their daughters by storytelling and try to be reconciled with their children through sincere communication and common resonance from the stories. They use their own ways to help their daughters go through difficulties. Their maternal power keeps pushing the new generation of Chinese Americans to pursue their goals and construct

their own identity. The rising self-awareness of daughters in Tan's works reflects the journey of them to find their true selves: driven by the subjective consciousness and senses of competition and innovation, the daughters learn from seniors and grow into strong women who control their own life. The daughters achieve their value and the unfinished dreams of their mothers. More importantly, the daughters grown into the people with truly free spirit and find balance between the eastern and western cultures in the pursuit for a sense of cultural belonging. The daughters do not superficially accept one culture and reject the other. Instead, they attempt to establish a multicultural hybrid identity for themselves. Within the new generation of Chinese Americans we can see sparkling ancient Chinese culture and modern independence and self-awareness as well. The daughters can join in the mainstream American society by their hybrid cultural identities, which is an ideal image of Chinese Americans.

By establishing a multicultural hybrid identity, the daughters of the second generation of Chinese Americans are not anxious about the Chinese features within themselves anymore and are able to travel between two cultures freely. Some reviews state that in Tan's novels it is usually white men who save women and therefore the novels are actually a variation based on the prototype of redemption by heroes. But when it comes to marriage, it is Chinese mothers who offer a hand to their daughters. They bravely touch upon their wounds for the sake of daughters' happiness in order to wake up their daughters by pain. Like Tan's mother has said, they have to have their own life and job so that it is totally okay even if they want to leave their husbands, and they can never live at the mercy of others. Chinese American daughters learn to be independent and strong through the stories of their mothers. For example, in *The Joy Luck Club*, when facing her intimidating and aggressive husband, the daughter Rose Hsu used to be so frightened that she would be totally at loss. But her mother An-Mei told her that she once swallowed opium to fight for her rights in order to educate her daughter to be brave and protect herself. An-Mei says that one must learn to firmly resist oppression, that Rose needs to believe in herself and the equal rights shared by her and her husband. At last, faced with the threat posed by her husband, Rose becomes strong-willed and bravely speaks out her real thoughts and feelings. She speaks word by word firmly, looking directly at him, rejecting the bad treatment from him. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, When Olivia's marriage meets trouble, Kwan tried her best to recover it by telling the previous existences in the nineteenth



century, which spreads the traditional Chinese qualities like inclusion and harmony. At last, she tries to prevent from their divorcing and helps them know they love each other. Kwan seems a spirit-guide to Olivia's marriage, reminding her of the true love. And the alienation between the couple is dissolved and replaced by reconciliation and respect. In Tan's works, the Chinese American daughters are gentle and kindhearted, like traditional Chinese females, but also as independent and confident as American women. Although they will never be obedient daughters, their personalities still enable them to deal with their lives in America.

In fact, no matter it is the American life narrated by daughters or the Chinese stories recalled by mothers, they have a common theme, that is the pursuit of a better life. For the Chinese American daughters, the two cultures are equal, and they constantly negotiate with each other and transform into one another. With their deep recognition of both cultures, they create an ambiguous "Third Space" between them where they establish their own hybrid identities.

At the end of *The Joy Luck Club*, the daughter Jingmei has learned two different pieces of piano music, one being happy and lively and another quite slow. She says that after playing the two pieces many times, she suddenly recognizes that they are actually two variations of the same theme. It does not matter whether the two songs represent Chinese and American cultures. What is important is that during playing music, Jingmei can accept both cultures, which coexist in harmony within her. At last, Jingmei does not feel anxious and confused anymore and can face the two Chinese half-sisters of her calmly. She says that her half-sisters hold a kind of indescribable kindness and affection to her, and she can finally feel the Chinese blood flowing in her vessels. After so many years, the Chinese gene within her wakes up at last.

In *The Hundred Secret Sense*, Kwan and Olivia plan a trip to a village named "Changming" in China. Tan gives a profound explanation of this name: "change" (meaning "long" in Chinese) refers to resting in peace forever. In the novel, Changming is more than a mountain village in southwestern China; it becomes a place where the past joins the present, the previous life merges the present one, and it is also where Olivia finally finds her identity. After the trip, Olivia stops the search for the surname of her Chinese father and chooses a Chinese family name for her daughter, because, in her mind, if there is nothing that connects one's past with the future, then a family name will be worthless. The huge differences between this pair of sisters cannot separate them. As Kwan says, what connects them is their common

Chinese blood, which give them the same hereditary features, motivations, fates and even luck. After linking the past with the present, Olivia comes to understand the original meaning of a surname and constructs her identity. Now she understands that the Yin world hanging above both Chinese and American cultures is a place full of love: "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."

Through depicting conflicts and reconciliation of mothers and daughters, Amy Tan has established a multicultural identity for the Chinese Americans in her books, which shows the "hybridity" of identity. It means that they do not simply designate themselves as a member of Chinese culture or American culture, but they start from other standpoints to achieve a temporary but reasonable identity. It concludes that Tan's understanding of Chinese Americans' identity keeps changing and she tries to keep a balance among various times of approvals, denials, adjustments and revisions.

## **4.2 Tan's Perception of Chinese American Identity**

Then, the author tries to explore Tan's perception of identity reflected in her works, thus to figure out the motivation of identity construction in her works. Due to her unusual life experience and unique angle of observation, Tan has a distinctive writing style. Her novels are not purely autobiographic, like the works of Liu Yichang and Jade Snow Wong, in that they are somewhat realistic. Tan focuses more on the family relationships, especially the mother-daughter relationship, the status of Chinese Americans and their difficult search for cultural identity. Tan has always put in her works the cultural significance of the mother-daughter relationship and her thoughts about related questions, which exhibits her own sense of identity.

### **4.2.1 Equality and Harmony between Different Cultures**

What Chinese immigrants encounter most in a foreign country are conflicts between cultures, which set great obstacles for their identities, and they have to think about how to cope with the collision of traditional Chinese culture and American culture. Almost all Chinese Americans have discussed the problem, and Tan is no exception. She takes the mother-daughter relationship as a vessel to discuss the conflicts and reconciliation of Chinese and American cultures.

In her novels, Tan always puts the two cultures in the same scenes in daily life. Tan's works depicts China's country life in the past, such as arranged marriage, domestic violence, war and famine, and also portrays the modern life of America, represented by bustling supermarkets, elegant hotels, the American lifestyle and the

comfortable life of the middle class. The two entirely different worlds are brought together by the flow of Chinese immigrants. Chinese and American elements are often juxtaposed in Tan's novels. For example, in *The Joy Luck Club*, when the daughter Jingmei cannot decide which major to choose, the mother Suyuan tells her that, according to the Chinese theory of five elements, Jingmei has always been indecisive because there is too much "water" in her fate, while the daughter tries to refute her mother's statement by the knowledge she has learned from the psychological textbook. The different attitudes the daughter and mother show to the same situation demonstrate the differences between the east and the west in their modes of thinking.

Most mothers in Chinese American families are refugees who were born and brought up in China and then moved to America with a deep Chinese cultural background. Due to barriers in language and culture, they find it hard to merge into the new environment. Thus they often lead an unhappy life and, if not necessary, will stay at home while keeping just a little communication with the outside world. As Rao Pengzi and Fei Yong said, living in an exotic country, Chinese American mothers are discriminated against and therefore stick to the traditions of their homeland, and they are also worried that their children born and growing up here will recognize the western culture and be estranged with them, which explains why they eagerly teach their children Chinese culture and make them accept their senses of value. But the reality turns out to be the opposite: they have a bad relationship with their daughters and, due to the language barrier, they often cannot really understand each other.

Tan takes the mother-daughter relationship as a symbol for the conflicts between Chinese and American cultures. According to Lucie Cheng, a Chinese American scholar, there are similarities and differences between Chinese and American cultural systems, and Chinese Americans can achieve harmony with American people if they can abandon traditions different from America's, but the question is whether they can or are willing to do so. But in Tan's novels, neither mothers nor daughters want to compromise. Mothers will not easily discard traditional Chinese culture as it is their mental support, while daughters firmly believe that geographical changes will also bring changes to cultural identity, and they, as Americans, do not need to obey Chinese traditions. They even publicly show their disapproval of those traditional rules, and An-Mei's daughter Rose in *The Joy Luck Club* is a good example. She

refuses to speak Chinese with her mother or learn Chinese; she smokes like an American girl, even though she actually hates the smell of cigarettes; she even lives with a divorced American man with two children without getting married with him. All of her behaviors are the opposite of the traditional image of “a good girl” in Chinese culture. In *The Thousand Secret Senses*, for Olivia, Kwan represents ethnic culture and origin, which constitute half of Olivia’s inheritance. At the beginning, young Olivia did not like Kwan and wanted to get rid of her love. She was also impatient with her undoubted enthusiasm and ghost stories. Olivia even betrayed Kwan by telling her parents that Kwan could communicate with ghosts, and her panicked parents immediately sent Kwan to a psychiatric hospital. As an adult, Olivia continues to stay away from Kwan in many ways without hesitation: pretending to be too busy to accept Kwan’s dinner invitation, during her 50th birthday celebrations, she only gave Kwan a cheap artificial turtle shell box as a symbolic gift. Therefore, the conflict between strong wishes from mothers and extreme resistance from daughters causes the growing tension between mothers and daughters.

But Tan does not stop at the conflicts between mothers and daughters; instead, she always tries to think about how to bridge the gap between the eastern and western culture. First, she lets the daughters be their mothers’ interpreters and coordinators with the outside world, although at first the daughters stand at the side of the mainstream society and even join others to discriminate their mothers and make up for the mistakes that their mothers made to avoid being marginalized as well. Then, Tan reveals the journey that the daughters go through to construct their own senses of value, which process is full of struggles. At first, the daughters recognize American culture and reject the Chinese one, shown by their aversion to *chi pao* (traditional Chinese gown), to their mothers’ wish that they should be successful and obedient, to the practical experience of their mothers and even to their identities as Chinese. Part of the reason for their rejection is that some traditional thoughts of China have become obsolete and unreasonable in contemporary times, especially in a modernized country like America. But according to Rachel (2002), “those who tries to abandon the community they belong to will lose their direction and their world will be deemed as meaningless”. Although the daughters share the same thinking patterns and habits with their husband, they cannot accept their materialism and thus find it hard to have a harmonious marriage. In their unhappy marriages, they start from reflecting to disapproving to finally resisting. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Lina gets inspiration of

reflection from her mother Ying-Ying. The daughters realize that some parts of the mothers' experience is valuable, which are what the mothers inherit from Chinese traditions. In *The Thousand Secret Senses*, at the end of the novel, Kwan seems to be a kind of spiritual guide to Olivia, reminding Olivia the treasure of love and her cultural roots, which make the separate couple get conciliated. Therefore, it can be seen that they partly resort to Chinese culture when they search for their cultural identity, which is what the famous "Hansen Theory" talks about. According to Hansen, the challenge facing the first generation of immigrants is how to adjust to a new environment and function well economically, culturally and politically, that for the second generation is how to accommodate the cultures of their homeland and the country now they are living in, and that for the third generation is how to explain the history of the previous two generations properly. Thus Hansen said that "what the sons of the first generation of immigrants want to forget is what the grandsons want to remember" (Ling 191).

Finally, as interpreters, the daughters are forced to construct a new kind of Chinese American culture. They need to help their Chinese-speaking parents with Chinese ways of thinking to convey their meaning to Americans and transmit messages from the outside world to their parents. Aided by the bilingual and bicultural background, they facilitate the communication and mutual understanding between Chinese parents and the American society and thus start to build a new type of Chinese American culture, which can show equality and harmony between different cultures.

#### **4.2.2 Constant Shift of Identity**

As the identity theory progresses, construction of identity is considered a process with no fixed features. According to Stuart Hall (1997), "a cultural identity has its own history, through which our past, consisting of memory, imagination, narratives and legends, keeps talking with us". Thus, the development of the identity theory provides a solid basis for the construction of Chinese Americans' identity.

Another advantage for the construction is the growing flexibility of movement for Chinese immigrants. Amy Tan lives in a much more relaxed environment than the first generation of Chinese Americans. New laws were passed in 1965 to endow Chinese Americans more rights and their living standards increased; the normalized China-America relations facilitated the two countries' exchange in diplomacy, politics, economy and culture; the great trend of globalization brought together every corner in

the world. All of these dramatically shifted the ways of living of immigrants, including Chinese Americans. According to Li Guicang (2006), Chinese immigrants are no longer coolies standing at the doorstep of the “Golden Gate”; now they want to earn their due wealth through their skills and capitals, and America is just considered a place where they can exert their potential. In this way, immigrants are able to maintain their national dignity instead of struggling to be accepted by the mainstream American society. Then, in such a brand new context, Chinese Americans have to rethink their cultural identities. And the specific reasons are explained as follows.

First, with rising social and economic status, Chinese Americans are no longer limited within a small territory, nor America is the only country they can choose. Technological advancement in transportation enable people to cross the boundaries between countries and nations and thus experience a lot of cultural shock. Chinese Americans need to constantly adjust their cultural identities to relieve the pain brought by cultural conflicts.

Second, individual differences determine the diversity of identities. “Essentially Chinese American culture is a mixture, a part of which is inherited from ancient Chinese traditions, a part is changed according to historical backgrounds and the left part is created” (Lowe 199). Now Chinese communities are geographically open and diverse. Before 1965, most Chinese immigrants came from Guangdong Province and engaged in manual work. In the recent decades, however, Chinese Americans mainly come from Hongkong, Taiwan, the mainland China and even southeastern Asia, covering students, professors, business people and talents in high-tech industries. Therefore, the diversity in cultural and educational backgrounds among Chinese Americans also contributes to the wide variety of identities.

Lastly, female Chinese Americans are particularly sensitive to cultural differences. Living in conservative Chinese families, they can sense the oppression on women from the traditional Chinese patriarchal society, which is the opposite of their feelings in the white society. But they also possess personalities of flexibility and inclusiveness, which enable them to adjust themselves to the external world. In such a multicultural society like America, they finally realize that some parts of their cultural identities cannot be abandoned. Therefore, Tan no longer insists on obtaining an American identity but tries to establish a practical cultural identity.

Identity construction is a process of self-questioning and self-constructing. According to postmodernism, “Cultural identity construction is never finished and it

keeps developing” (Zhou 219). A fixed identity goes against the trend of economic globalization and multicultural society of American and makes people vulnerable to narrow-mindedness and misjudgments. The second generation of Chinese immigrants, with special perspectives and a flowing identity, can view both Chinese and western cultures critically and thus naturally become ideal messengers for the communication of China and America. But as cultural identities are constantly evolving, the second generation of Chinese immigrants in Tan’s novels also need to go through a long and painful journey in pursuit of their identity. As Maxine Hong Kingston said, “a person with multiple cultures has more ways than other people to learn from the universe, but how he or she could merge different cultures together and comprehend their meaning and beauty can only be discovered through trial and error” (Chin, 1998: 221). At first, the daughters strongly rejected their identity as a Chinese and did everything they could to become part of the western society, but they failed. They gradually realize that some parts of the western culture need to be revised and abandoned, which can, however, be complemented by the eastern culture. So the identity recognition for Tan is to keep a harmony among her constant affirmations, denials, revisions and supplementations.

## Chapter Five Conclusion

As the thesis states before, discussion of identity is a topic that Chinese American writers cannot avoid, and neither can Tan. With her sharp observation, Tan exhibits for us the life of Chinese Americans, who live in constant collision of two different cultures. They keep pursuing their identity and try to establish one that can make their life easier and help them better deal with the two cultures. As a Chinese American writer, Amy Tan has been influenced by both Chinese and American cultures. Her attitude towards Chinese culture and identity is changing all the time, from trying to hide her identity as a Chinese to frankly claim that China is the origin of her family. Now as time goes by and her thoughts deepen, Tan does not try to make a choice between two different identities of Chinese or American. Instead, she can freely utilize both cultures in her works, and successfully construct a hybrid identity for all Chinese Americans.

Based on her personal thoughts and her family's history, Tan writes novels to portray the tough journey that Chinese Americans have gone through to seek identities and the various emotions they have suffered such as anxiety and pain. By writing about the severe identity crisis which the minority characters face, Amy Tan actually emphasizes the necessity for the minority to build a new kind of identity. Therefore, the writing of identity crisis acts as the driving force for the characters' constructing hybrid cultural identities in the end.

After revealing the infeasibility of the fixed, single identities of the Chinese American characters, Amy Tan describes many details about their identity negotiation. By using the methods like storytelling and compromise, the two generations have achieved reconciliation, and their previous identities have been negotiated and transformed. By describing the details of identity negotiation and the advantages they gained in identity negotiation, Amy Tan shows us that identity negotiation is rational and desirable. In addition, identity negotiation plays a vital role in the construction of hybrid identity of ethnic minorities.

Finally, Amy Tan builds hybrid identities for the ethnic characters on the basis of identity negotiation. Adopting hybrid cultural identities, the two generations manage to get out of the trouble of identity crisis eventually. In her stories, Chinese mothers and daughters connect their past and presents together and construct a hybrid identity,



which means that they do not simply designate themselves as a member of Chinese culture or American culture, but they start from other standpoints to achieve a temporary but reasonable identity. Various Chinese American writers like Amy Tan raise questions of identity and construct their own hybrid identities in their works, and their identities will never be completed but keep evolving. Just as Tan says in one of her books: if you can't change your fate, change your attitude. If the pursuit of identity is Tan's destiny, then she decides to face it bravely, change her own thoughts and attitude, and establish an identity she feels the most comfortable with. By this way, Tan constructs a hybrid identity for all Chinese Americans so that they can receive a temporary but well-deserved approval from these two different cultures. This process also reflects Tan's own understanding of Chinese Americans' identity, so the historical view of identity must be adopted to analyze the characters in her novels.

All in all, under the background that ethnic minority's literature is gradually merging into American culture, discussing the construction of Chinese American's identity in Amy Tan's novels not only can help people better understand Tan's changing attitude to Chinese American identity, but also can provide valuable reference for all Chinese Americans in this multicultural era.

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