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Mother and Daughter: the Plural Voices of Cultural Translation in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

Liya Yang, Joan Pong Linton

When Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* appeared in 1989, it won wide acclaim from reviewers.¹ Most reviews pay attention to two factors. The first is the mother-daughter relationship, with especial emphasis on the daughters' conflict between and reception of two cultures. Orvill Schell, for example, focuses on the relationship between Jing-mei and her mother Suyuan, exploring how the younger generation recrosses, in reverse, the mental chasm between two different cultures "in order to resolve [their identities] as whole Chinese-Americans" (Schell 3). Critics like David Gates, on the other hand, focus on the narrative strategies of the book, as for example, its "showing the tragi-comic conflicts of cultures and of generations, and never telling a word" (Gates 113).

What interest us most about *The Joy Luck Club* are its plural voices narrating the experiences of four mothers who left China after 1949 and their four American born-daughters. Although the narratives appear disjointed and interrupt each other, the disjunctions, as one critic has noted, "work for, rather than against, the novel" (Schell 28). For behind the disjunctions, subtle conjunctions link the narratives. A narrative may pick up where it broke off be-

fore or reinsert itself at some point prior to the break. The voices may also intersect in their narrations, commenting on shared events as well as on each other. From this interplay of voices emerges the sense of a community, a rich fabric of Asian-Americans lives, channeled not through the unifying consciousness of an omniscient narrator, but through the multiple and partial viewpoints of mothers and daughters.

Indeed, the plural voices of *The Joy Luck Club* testify to a Chinese-American community engaged in the ongoing process of cultural translation. This cultural translation entails the effort of immigrant mothers to pass on their Chinese heritage to daughters who have grown up in American circumstances. As such, the translation raises not only the problem of cultural differences between the generations, but also the issues of gender both mothers and daughters confront within their own cultures. In this paper, we explore the questions of how the mothers' cultural heritage is shaped by their responses to Chinese patriarchy; and how this heritage is received by the daughters. Our analysis will show that the mothers do not always get across their message of gender resistance to the daughters. Even if they do, daughters still have difficulty translating them into American terms.

Taken individually, each voice narrates fragments of an autobiography, these fragments highlight the narrator's isolation. But collectively, they offer testimonials to the ongoing life of a Chinese-American community. In using the terms "autobiography" and "testimonial," we rely on Doris Sommer's distinction between the two literary forms as practiced by women. The differences can be summarized as follows. The autobiography is the story of an indi-

vidual. It insists on the singularity of the heroine, the invention and development of an “I” with whom the reader is expected to identify as the ego-ideal. The testimonial, on the other hand, is the story of a people. It insists on “showing relationships” within the community, of which the speaker is a “typical” or “unexceptional” member. The reader need not identify with the “I” in the testimonial, but is invited through her address to enter the community (Sommers 107–30). While Sommer refers specifically to *testimonios* of Latin American women engaged in communal efforts to resist imperialist domination, her formulation can be extended, by analogy, to the present. Although *The Joy Luck Club* does not purport to present actual events and characters dealing with similar conditions of exploitation, it does adopt the narrative strategies of the testimonial to address issues of cultural difference.

In the first place, the plural voices in the work narrate the lives of ordinary people who are “no poet (or painter or architect),” as one reviewer puts it (Wang 68). In fact, they are not particularly pleasant, and are at times even petty to each other—definitely not the ego-ideals with whom the reader is expected to identify. Instead, the narratives emphasize and develop the relationships among the characters: between members of the Joy Luck Club, between parents children, and including several Caucasian American husbands and sons-in-law. Most important, the narratives explore the relationships between mothers and daughters, with foremothers² in the background going back several generations. These relationships offer different avenues into a collective sensibility, coming to focus on the tensions Chinese-Americans feel, caught between an almost completely American identity on the one hand, and an almost accessible Chinese

heritage on the other. It is in this sense that each narrator is typical of her community, though not a generalizable part of a uniform whole.

Both in telling the lives of ordinary people, and in emphasizing the relationships among them, the narrators invite readers into the experience of an ethnic community, ethnic not because it highlights its cultural difference as exotic, but because it confronts the ongoing questions of cultural identity and translation, because it is part of the Asian-American culture in the making. And it is in this sense that readers can acknowledge this ethnic consciousness through the mother-daughter relationships without having to be either female or Chinese-American, or to identify with the narrators as ideal selves³.

In this regard, *The Joy Luck Club* bears comparison to Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975), which adopts the narrative strategies of the woman's autobiography. Kingston's work presents an individual quest for identity. While issues of gender and ethnicity are highly visible, the narrator chooses to foreground her "marginality" as "a mark of personal distinctiveness" (Sommers 130). Although she embraces the myths of Chinese heroines, she appropriates them to her own self-invention (Juhasz 221–37). The setting for the story does not extend far beyond the narrator's family in America or her family history localized a Chinese Village. Kingston does not claim to speak for the culturally diverse Chinese-American community and, justifiably, she objects to the question of whether her work is "typical" of Chinese-Americans (Kingston 62).

By contrast, *The Joy Luck Club* brings together four families from various parts of China and different social backgrounds, and the characters are themselves aware these differences. An-mei is from

Ningpo, and suffered culture shock when she went to Tientsin. Lindo Jong is proud of her Taiyuan roots and at first looks down on her husband's Canton origins. Suyuan Woo, who is from Shanghai, feels insulted when her Caucasian neighbor call her a Fukien lady. Ying-ying experienced life in three places: affluent Wushi, the poor countryside outside of Shanghai, and the urban Shanghai. In terms of social background, An-mei is born to an intellectual family but later moved into the house of a rich merchant after her mother became his concubine. Lindo's parents are peasants, and she is looked down on by her prosperous in-laws. Suyuan has Mongolian blood. Ying-ying is from a rich family and proud of the fact that her mother is not a concubine.

Given the diversity of the mothers' background, the book conveys no sense of a unitary Chinese culture. By the same token, there is no sense of a unitary Chinese heritage to which the daughters can lay claim. However, the Joy Luck Club provides a communal space where the families may associate and the daughters experience the diversity of their Chinese heritage. The cultural knowledge of myth, customs and superstitions which the mothers bring to their new lives in America and which surface in the speech, actions, and memories. This heritage also consists of the strategies the mothers have developed or inherited in dealing with oppressive patriarchal practices in China and comes with the best of intentions that it might help the daughters with their lives. In the process the mothers also hope to break through the American perspectives from which daughters view them and their culture.

However, the transmission of cultural heritage is not a straightforward process. Because the daughters have grown up in American

circumstances, they fail to understand and at times even reject their mothers' Chinese ways and values. And yet, they do not entirely escape their mothers' influence, which sometimes takes place without their consciousness and even against their will. Then, too, there are crises in the lives of the daughters when they feel the need for something more than what their American culture can give them. It is here that the mothers' legacies to their daughters become valuable. Even so, given the linguistic and cultural differences between mothers and daughters, the transmission of a Chinese heritage is at best a "translation" in which meaning is both lost and gained.

In the section on Ying-ying and Lena St. Clair, we deal with a mother whose inability to speak for herself as a woman is compounded by cultural differences. Her silence impedes the cultural translation between mother and daughter, a problem dramatized in the desperate desire of both women to break through the wall of silence to "save" each other.

In An-mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan, we have a mother whose mixed messages to be both strong and dependent fuel the daughter's inability to make her own choices. When divorce leaves Rose without choice, however, she will discover a strength in herself which reenacts her grandmother's passive resistance to patriarchal oppression. The relationship between Lindo and Waverly Jong, on the other hand, details what happens when a daughter learns the art of winning by subterfuge from her mother but also uses it against her. The result is an antagonism which magnifies cultural differences. Finally, in the narratives of Jing-mei, we observe a daughter's realizing of her dead mother's legacy: a hope without innocence. The hope which sustained Suyuan through war and loss becomes the means by which

Jing-mei discovers her Chinese heritage. Through their relationships, the book expresses a wish for a direct cultural transmission that bypasses linguistic and cultural differences.

I Ying-ying and Lena St. Clair

One of the fundamental problems of cultural translation is the mother's inability to speak for herself. In Ying-ying's case, the problem arises on two levels. Firstly, she learned as a child that she should not speak in order not to reveal her "selfish desires." Secondly, her husband and daughter always speak for her from their own point of view yet, and often misunderstand her. Deeply influenced by her mother, without understanding her, and victimized by the conflict between two cultures, Lena too comes to lose her ability to speak.

Ying-ying's inability to speak is not inborn. When she was a child, she liked to shout and to ask questions. Her Amah told her not to ask questions and that it is wrong for a girl to think of her own needs: "A girl can never ask, only listen." A girl's needs are seen as only "selfish desire"(68). Another significant factor that destroys Ying-ying's ability to question and speak is the Chinese Moon Lady Myth. On the day of Moon Lady Festival, Ying-ying falls into the lake from the boat on which she and her family celebrate the festival. She is saved by a fisherman and taken to the bank where she sees the Moon Lady Play. Because the Moon Lady steals a magic peach⁴ from her husband which gives everlasting life, she is punished to "stay lost on the moon, forever seeking her selfish wishes," while her husband lives on the sun.⁵ On the stage, the Moon Lady laments: "For women is yin,... the darkness within, where

untempered passions lie. And man is yang, bring truth lighting our minds”(82). Ying-ying grieves with the Moon Lady and feels that she too has lost her world. But Ying-ying’s eventual discovery that the Moon Lady is played by a man⁶ indicates that this idea is a creation of patriarchal society, which imposes on women, the idea that they should suffer because of their own sin. Deeply influenced and constantly haunted by the idea that darkness is women’s nature, so women are doomed to suffer in a darkness from which only men can save them , Ying-ying starts to see bad omens in everything. When she sees a north wind blow a flower from its stem to fall at her feet, she considers it a bad omen of her first marriage; when the baby boy from her second marriage died soon after birth, she thinks it is because she has aborted her first baby boy and “her body flowed with terrible revenge”(281). She marries St. Clair not completely out of love, but she thinks that by marrying one whose name means “angel of light”(284), “her evil side” will soon go away. This is why she partly agrees when her husband later tells her daughter that he saved her from her terrible life in China.

After she married her Caucasian husband, Ying-ying’ inability to speak becomes worse. Her husband supposes her to be a poor country girl and he saved her. He never learns that his wife has been “raised with riches he could not even imagine”(284). The language barrier between them also intensifies Ying-ying’s silence. Ying-ying often talks to her daughter in Chinese and Lena sometimes misinterprets it to her father in order not to let her father suffer because of her mother’s “insane.” Lena’s good intentions conversely widen the gap between her mother and father. Although Ying-ying disagrees with her husband’s patronizing views and suffers the misunder-

standing between her self and her husband, she can not speak out. The relationship between Lena and her husband is like "arms that encircled but did not touch, a bowl full of rice but without appetite to eat it. No hunger. No fullness"(286). When Ying-ying joins the Joy Luck Club, however, she becomes communicative. Although she seems to Jing-mei "a weird auntie, someone lost in her own world"(24), it is she who first tells Jing-mei how the Joy Luck Club aunties found her twin sisters. It is she who tells Jing-mei that she must tell her twin sisters about her mother's life: "the mother they did not know, they must know now"(30). When Ying-ying tells Jing-mei to tell her sisters about their mother, she is wishing the same for herself. For years Ying-ying thinks her daughter Lena does not pay any attention to her and does not understand her. Lena perceives her life as a life of a ghost: one who can not be seen or understood.

However, Lena is misunderstood by her mother that she does not pay any attention to her. Lena notices that her mother has been hiding something terrible that has made her live like a ghost, but because she can not find out what it is, she often fails to understand her mother. At the same time, Lena is afraid of knowing her mother's painful past. Lena, for example, does not know anything about her mother's abortion long before she was born and when her mother blames herself for the death of the new born baby, Lena thinks her mother is insane and tries to hide her mother's madness from her father. Lena does not know that her fear to know her mother's past life and misunderstanding intensify her mother's silence and suffering.

Because of her mother's influences and cultural conflict, Lena too

loses her ability to speak for herself. For example, her mother often tells her a Chinese saying: "Chunwang Chihan,"⁷ which Lena interprets as "one thing is always the result of another."(161). Ying-ying never tells her own life story to Lena, but only a story about her great grandfather who might have died by the revenge of the beggar whom he sentenced to "the death of a thousand cuts"(104). Her mother's constant fear that something terrible will happen and her grandfather's story nourishes in Lena a wild fear of terrible bad luck which will befall her at any moment.

When she was a child, she often left rice unfinished in the bowl. Her mother said to her that because of this bad habit, she would marry a bad man whose face would have one pock mark for every grain of rice she did not finish. Thus when Lena found a boy in her neighborhood who was a mean boy and had tiny rice-grain sized pits in his cheek, she thought he would be her future husband. Unlike her mother, Lena tried to resist her fate. First, she ate all the rice without leaving one grain and smiled to her mother, showing her mother her confidence that her future husband would not be this pock-marked boy but "someone whose face was as smooth as the porcelain"(164). But after she saw a film about people with terrible skin diseases, she began to leave everything on the plate, wishing that the boy would someday catch a skin disease. When she found out that the boy had died of complications from measles, she was terrified by the thought that she had killed him. She considers herself awfully lucky when she marries a man who has clear skin, but remains afraid that "all this undeserved good fortune would someday slip away"(169).

Besides her mother's strong influence, Lena also suffers from a

conflict between her two cultures. She does not want to be like her mother who is saved by her father and wants her relationship with her husband to be based on complete fairness. When she realizes that the fairness she has been seeking is only a illusion, and that she is “surrendering everything to him, without abandon, without caring what[shel]got in return”(174), She begins to feel lost, wondering if her husband is a bad man or if it is she who makes their relationship this way. Because of this confusion, Lena lacks words to understand and to express her suffering. When a black vase falls down and breaks in half, Lena tells mother, “I knew it would happen.” Her mother asks, “Then why you don't stop it”(181)? The image of the broken vase serves as a metaphor to indicate the future break up of Lena's marriage. It is interesting that at this time Lena is passive toward the bad omen; she is already deeply affected by her mother' passive attitude towards her own life.

When Ying-ying discovers her daughter's marriage is in crisis, her maternal instinct to save her daughter wakes her up from the world of a ghost. Ying-ying sees that her daughter is lost, too, in danger of not being understood by her husband and of not knowing herself. She realizes her negative influences over her daughter, and through her daughter's suffering, comes to see herself more clearly. She is going to pass her knowledge on to Lena to help her see herself, too; and Ying-ying knows that the only way to save Lena is by speaking out about her own life—how she has been victimized by Chinese patriarchal ideology and cultural differences.

At the same time, Lena is thinking of ways to save her mother, too. However, She comes to feel her mother's pain of her silence when she herself begins to suffer from her inability to speak. She

knows that she has to help her mother to speak out about her past. She also knows that to get her mother to speak out about her painful past is like cutting her mother into a thousand slices.⁸ But she also realizes that her mother's suffering from loneliness is more unbearable than the pain she would have from speaking out. So Lena is ready to pull her mother from the other side of wall where her mother stays as a "ghost."

The "fight" is the means by which both mother and daughter strive to save each other. Ying-ying's image of fighting is the fight of two tigers:

I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter's tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose. She will fight me, because this is the nature of two tigers. But I will win and give her my spirit, because this is the way a mother loves her daughter(286).⁹

In this image of two fighting tigers, Ying-ying puts herself in the superior position—the mothers' proper rank in a Chinese family. Whereas Ying-ying's ways are traditionally Chinese, Lena's ideas are a mix of two cultures: although Lena's imagination of "thousand cuts" comes from a Chinese punishment, it is conducted by the mother and daughter who are Italian-Americans. Lena's American attitudes help her to break the Chinese order between mother and daughter and put herself in the position of savior in relation to her mother.

The story of Ying-ying and Lena indicates that cultural differences can sometimes hinder and sometimes help the cultural translation. It also shows us that the cultural translation is not always

positive. Leslie W. Rabine discusses myth's negative influence on women in her analysis of Maxine Hong Kingston's text: "The myths that nourish the imagination and the spirit also relegate women to an inferior position; and the community, instead of suffusing them with warmth, suffocates them, limits them to a role of serving men, and hinders their growth" (Rowth 478). In *The Joy Luck Club*, the Moon Lady Myth serves as a chain imposed on Ying-ying that makes her unable to speak for herself and Lena becomes a victim of her mother's silence and of the negative cultural translation.

II An-mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan

Although the mother and the daughter try to reject the Chinese ways and to embrace Western ways, they finally realize that they can not completely escape their Chinese heritage. A tragedy occurred in the family due to their blind adoption of Western style. One of An-mei's sons drowned when her family tried to "act like a typical American family at the beach"(130). As a faithful Christian, firstly, An-mei prays to the Christian God to save her son. When that fails, she resorts to Chinese superstition. She relates her son's fall to one of her ancestors who stole water from sacred well and tries to sweeten the temper of the Coiling Dragon who lives in the sea by pouring sweet tea and throwing her ring of watery blue sapphire to the sea. Neither Western or Eastern rite could save her son. After losing her son, An-mei falls to "complete despair and horror... for being so foolish as to think she could use faith to change fate"(139).

Another tragedy is Rose's unhappy marriage. Rose marries a Caucasian American simply because he is different from the Chinese.

Her husband always acts like a god to save her or a hero to protect her. Under the influence of western romance, Rose herself plays victim to her hero. She finally becomes a person who can not make any decision for herself. When her husband fails by making a wrong decision, he comes to blame her for her inability to make any decisions, and finally tries to kick her out of his life. Rose, initially confused as to whether she should accept the divorce or not, because she is still under the illusion that her husband cares about her and will protect her, only becomes strong when she finds out that her husband is going to divorce her because he wants to get remarried. She immediately becomes strong. Her illusion of her husband as her savior or protector was the weight that kept her down. As soon as she is rid of this chain, she is free to find her strength again.

Like a weed that gains strength by being stepped on, Rose finds her strength when she realizes that her husband has never really cared about her. Rose discovers the weed's power by looking at those on her house: "No way to pull them out once they've buried themselves in the masonry; you'd end up pulling the whole building down"(218). Rose imagines herself a weed when she fights her husband by saying, "You can't just pull me out of your life and throw me away"(219).

Rose's bitter experiences of losing both brother and husband becomes the most important factor in shaping Rose's view of life—especially of fate. Lena comes to see fate as something of human making: that is "shaped half by expectation, half by inattention"(140). She realizes that "you can't trust anybody to save you—not your mother, not God"(128). Lena considers her tragic fate to be due to her inattention because she saw the danger that was to befall her brother

and her marriage, but she let it happen without doing anything to prevent it. In paying the price of losing her brother and her husband, Lena starts to realize that “you have to pay attention to what you lost. You have to undo the expectation”(140).

We can trace the causes of Rose’s weakness and her strength in the process of cultural translation. An-mei wants her daughter to be strong, not weak like herself and yet, at same time, to be protected and cared for. Her daughter’s name, Rose, may come from this wish. An-mei considers her weakness to be the result of the burden put on her by Chinese patriarchal practice, because she is “taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people’s misery, to eat [her]own bitterness.” when Rose too becomes weak, An-mei explains this fate through heredity: “maybe she was born to me and she was born a girl. And I was born to my mother and I was born a girl”(241). In the story of her mother, An-mei presents a image of a woman who is in a weak position but has strong spirit. As a rich man’s concubine, An-mei’s mother fought her fate by killing herself three days before the Chinese lunar New Year to improve her children’s prospects.¹⁰ Rose’s final fight against her fate by asking for the house as her property, is a reenactment of grandmother’s rebellion against the Chinese patriarchal value that women should desire nothing.

III Lindo and Waverly Jong

Even if mother’s strength or ability to speak is not at issue, the adversarial relationship between mother and daughter can still interfere with the process of cultural translation. This is the case with Lindo and Waverly Jong, two winners at the games of life in which

the rules are not of their own making. In *Lindo Jong* we find a woman who wins at the games of life through her “art of hidden strength.” Her art consists in concealing her intentions while apparently playing by the rules of the game. At age twelve, Lindo became a child bride and entered a life she did not choose. Instead of succumbing to circumstances, however, Lindo quickly learned the rules of this patriarchal game. By manipulating these rules and other superstitions, she obtained her freedom and passage to America while maintaining the appearance of the dutiful wife ready to give up her husband in order to avert his bad luck.

Lindo would teach her “art of invisible strength” to her daughter,¹¹ who then uses it to win her own games, with chess being her first triumph. At age nine Waverly was regional champion, a sign of her potential to win in the adult games of life. In their strength, both mother and daughter possess a sense of a “true self” under concealment, comparing it to the wind. Thus Lindo recalls her thought on wedding day, when she recognized her “true self” behind her bridal veil: “I was strong, I was pure. I had genuine thoughts inside that no one could see, that no one could ever take away from me. I was like the wind”(53). Likewise Waverly recalls the exhilaration she felt at her first chess tournament: “A light wind began blowing past my ears. It whispered secrets only I could hear,” secrets which, of course, helped her to victory(98). The shared metaphor of the wind underscores the likeness in character between mother and daughter. But as it turns out, their likeness would become the basis of their antagonism.

The likeness in character encouraged in Lindo the mistaken assumption that character is independent of cultural circumstances,

so that in moving from one culture to another one simply learns to play by a different set of rules. This is what she means by telling Waverly that one learns American rules to succeed in American society. However, in ignoring the role of cultural circumstances in the shaping of character, Lindo commits the error of treating her American-born daughter as an extension of her Chinese self. The problem began years before when Lindo tried to live vicariously through her daughter's chess victories, and to supervise Waverly's games as if she, Lindo, were playing.

For the young Waverly, her mother was too controlling, denying her the chance to have her own life. This is why, at the height of her chess career, Waverly refused to play, engaging instead in a contest of strength with her mother. Although the child was no match for her mother, the chess game would come to define the adversarial relationship between mother and daughter. Years later, Lindo still refuses to relinquish control of her daughter: "How can she be her own person? When did I give her up?"(290). As an adult, Waverly is still looking out for her mother's "sneak attacks"(191). To her, mother always manages to manipulate her, "making me see black where I once saw white." She is always the pawn and her mother the queen, "able to move in all directions, relentless in her pursuit, always able to find my weakest spots"(199).

This adversarial relationship has the effect of magnifying the cultural distance between mother and daughter. Having learned from Lindo the art of concealment and subversion, Waverly uses it against the Chinese heritage that her mother represents. Embracing her American circumstances was the means by which the daughter escaped the influence of a too powerful mother. It is no accident,

then, that among the four daughters in the novel, Waverly should be most fully assimilated into the “mainstream” of American society. As a tax assessor for a large corporation, she is well-off and filled with professional confidence. Although her first marriage to an Asian American failed, she enjoys a wonderful relationship with a Caucasian, unlike Lena and Rose whose marriages to white men are at different stages of disintegration.

In retrospect, Lindo takes responsibility for the strained relationship with her daughter: “I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these two things do not mix?”(289). Lindo’s error was inevitable because the combination had worked for her, as she explains by referring to her two faces, Chinese and American. The Chinese face is the map of one’s character, to be read by those versed in the meanings and values of Chinese society. The American face is the American stereotype of the Chinese, the “inscrutable” face with which one meets the expectations of white society. As stereotype, it both absolves Westerners of the need to understand the Chinese and allows the Chinese to conceal their own thoughts while playing by American rules.

The American face was the face Lindo prepared for the customs agent when her plane landed in the United States. Indeed, her first job in the country—stuffing messages into fortune cookies—involved the manufacture of a collective “American face” for the Chinese culture. The fortune cookie is not Chinese, by that quintessential Chinese-American product invented to meet the American stereotype of practical Chinese wisdom. Even in her lowly job of stuffing fortune cookies, Lindo was able to make use of her American circumst-

ances. By planting a “fortune” in a cookie, she maneuvered the willing but shy Tin Jong into marrying her. For the couple, marriage and the birth of a child were prerequisites for their United States citizenship. More importantly, for Lindo, the fortune cookie was the American face behind which she concealed her Chinese intentions, thus keeping intact her sense of a true self, of hidden strength, as she began her life in a new country.

But it is precisely the mother’s intentions that the daughter does not or will not understand, having grown up in entirely American circumstances. This cultural gap is poignantly evident in Waverly’s retelling of her parents’ courtship. In her version, Lindo had come to the United States in a slow boat from China. At a restaurant she read her fortune in a cookie, and looked up from the table to find it materializing in the shape of the tall dark waiter, Tin Jong. The story loses its “Chinese character,” so to speak, in Waverly’s retelling. By failing to read the Chinese intentions concealed behind the fortune cookie trick, Waverly puts an American face on her mother’s story, turning it into a stereotype for American consumption.

Despite their tense and evasive relationship, both sides make tentative moves to bridge their difference. One such attempt occurs when Lindo tries to explain to Waverly that her ability to win comes from her Taiyuan heritage. The selective memory that feeds this clannish pride is not lost on Waverly; but their “fragile connection” snaps when she mistakes Taiyuan for Taiwan(203). A more promising moment occurs during a visit to Waverly’s hair-dresser, when mother and daughter recognize their facial resemblance in the mirror, and their recognition sparks a momentary bonding between the two women. For her part, Waverly reads their crooked noses as a

sign of their shared “deviousness”: “It means we are looking one way, while following another. We mean what we say, but our intentions are different”(304). The episode reveals both the daughter’s understanding of her mother and their cultural distance. On the other hand, the episode also discloses the mother’s realization of her own cultural translation. For Lindo, too, discovers that after almost forty years in the United States, her Chinese face has been changed by American circumstances. And she recalls being charged tourist prices on a recent trip to China because the vendors saw that she was different. Appropriately, the narratives of both Lindo and Waverly end on a note of hope and ambivalence: hope of finding a personal and cultural connection by visiting China together on Waverly’s honeymoon, with the latter dreading she would be miserable.

IV Suyuan and Jing-mei Woo

What happens to cultural translation when the mother is no longer speaking—when she is dead, as in the case of Suyuan Woo? Surprisingly, among the daughters, Jing-mei comes closest to understanding her mother’s intentions and circumstances, despite her awareness of the cultural distance that separates them. Given this turn of events, the relationship between Suyuan and Jing-mei can be said to explore the possibility of a cultural translation that goes beyond the mediation of language, or the articulation of rules of the game. In the process, the book expresses a wish for a cultural transmission that escapes the problems posed by linguistic and cultural differences.

The issue can be restated in terms of the “parables” at the head of the first and last sections of *The Joy Luck Club*. Both parables are instances of Chinese lore transplanted into American setting, and both describe the mother’s legacy in terms of “hope” although they differ in the means by which the legacy is transmitted. “Feathers From a Thousand Li Away” poses the problem of language in cultural translation. The duck—turned—goose—turned—swan, “a creature that became more than what was hoped for,” symbolizes the hopes and cultural resources of the immigrant mother(3). The thousand li mark not just the physical but more importantly the cultural distance she has traveled with this knowledge. The confiscation of the swan by immigration officials represents the alienation from her own culture the mother experiences upon entering American society. What is lost—the swan—is the body of material circumstances underlying the meanings and values in her old culture. What is left—the swan’s feather—is a token of the cultural heritage she can no longer make present to her daughter. For the mother, the feather signifies “all[her]good intentions.” But it is a hope without explanation, for she yet to learn the “perfect American English” that would translate her hope into American terms for her daughter.

In “Queen Mother of the Western Skies,” the parable heading the final section, hope is likewise central to the mother’s legacy but the means of transmission is different. The parable presents a kind of “play-talk” during which the mother, now a grand-mother, projects the wish that her infant grand-daughter is born knowing what she herself has failed to impart to her daughter—that to survive one must “shed her innocence” but preserve hope(239). Both in prattling and in listening to the infant’s wordless wisdom, the grand-mother

plays with the possibility that knowledge can be passed by extralinguistic means. Moreover, such unmediated cultural transmission would be a form of gender resistance—an alternative to the language-centered and rule-oriented discourse of the patriarchal world. For in her make-belief, the knowledge of a hope without innocence is an eternal female principle embodied in the Queen Mother of the Western Skies, who is even now reborn in her grand-daughter.

While the two parables can be applied to each of the four sets of mother-daughter relationships, they find particular resonance in the case of Suyuan and Jing-mei Woo. As the founder of the Joy Luck Club, Suyuan's legacy to her community is hope, or the determination "to choose[one's]own happiness"(12). Her hope was born of lost innocence, a loss indirectly resulting from the male-centered politics and decision-making of the Kuomintang. During the Japanese invasion, army officers of the Kuomintang sent their families to Kweilin, their last stronghold of masculine denial against the impending Japanese victory. Up to the last day, Kuomintang suppressed news of the fall of Kweilin,¹² leaving women and children to fend for themselves as they evacuated the city. This male denial engendered the deepest loss in Suyuan's life—loss of her twin daughters and, with it, the loss of innocence for having to abandon them. And it is against this loss that we should measure Suyuan's undying hope of one day recovering her twins, as well as the hope she placed in her youngest daughter, Jing-mei.

The parables also concern how the mother will pass on her knowledge to the daughter. The problem of language has always been foregrounded in Jing-mei's relationship with her mother. "We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than

what was said, while my mother heard more”(27). For this reason she realizes that she does not know her mother, that she “never thought [her]mother’s Kweilin story was anything but a Chinese fairy tale”(12). And she is apprehensive about a meeting with her twin step sisters which has been arranged for her by her mother’s friends, in a language she does not read and of which she speaks only “a poor version”(310). Despite Jing-mei’s awareness of what is lost in translation, her “aunties” insist that her knowledge of her mother goes deeper than words. “Your mother is in your bones,” they tell her(31). As we shall see, in her narratives about herself and mother, Jing-mei negotiates between both positions.

From the beginning, the relationship between Jing-mei and her mother was one of failed cultural translation. Suyuan sacrificed and saved in order to develop her daughter’s talents, but she had not acquired the language with which to explain her best intentions to the young Jing-mei, not to mention the loss and cultural alienation that lie behind these intentions. For this reason Jing-mei couldn’t understand why her mother wanted her to be different when all she wanted was to be herself. After a series of failures, her initial enthusiasm turned into dread that she would fall short of maternal expectations. The result is the typical story of a Chinese immigrant mother whose enormous hope for her child engenders resentment and rebellion in the latter. Jing-mei rebelled by putting on a disastrous piano recital before an audience whose applause her mother most desired—the families of the Joy Luck Club. Her mother’s expression—“a quiet, blank look that said she had lost everything”—convinced Jing-mei she had succeeded at failing all too well(151).

And yet she had not then seen the end of her mother’s hope.

Years later, Suyuan would give her daughter the piano on which she had placed—and still does—her hope. As Jing-mei recalls, Suyuan was “neither angry nor sad”; she had simply adjusted her hopes according to her daughter’s ability(154). Again, at a New Year’s dinner when Jing-mei was humiliated by Waverly, Suyuan reaffirms her hope by giving Jing-mei her jade pendant to wear as “your life’s importance”(235). Despite the daughter’s humiliation, Suyuan commended her for choosing the crab with the broken leg: “Only you pick that crab. Nobody else take it. I already know this. Everybody else want best quality. You thinking different”(234). Suyuan’s words indirectly confirm Jing-mei’s own perception of herself as a failure, at best only “succeeding at something small,” And yet Suyuan chooses to consider the crab incident “as if this were proof—proof of something good” in her daughter(233).

The strength of Suyuan’s hope lies in her ability to shed expectations, for in doing so one comes to accept oneself and the world, and to look forward of backward. In this light, shedding one’s expectations is bound up with the “hope without innocence” embodied in the Queen Mother of the Western Skies, for innocence is one’s ideal expectations of oneself. In shedding her expectations Suyuan gained the hope to survive the despair of war, and the guilt of “abandoning” her twins. For Jing-mei, her mother’s hope without expectations has made all the difference in her life. It has taught her—though not in so many words—an attitude, a habit of mind, with which to value herself. And it will teach her to shed her own cultural expectations in order to understand her mother and, in the process, to realize her own connection to her Chinese heritage.

This search for continuity is paradoxically facilitated by discon-

tinuity—by the mother’s death. For while Suyuan’s death forecloses language as a medium of cultural translation, the foreclosure releases Jing-mei from the “prison-house”¹³ of cultural expectations (meanings and values) encoded by language. Instead, Jing-mei would come to know her mother by taking the latter’s place at various events. First, Jing-mei experiences for herself what it is like to sit at her mother’s place at the mah jong table. Then, she discovers what it is like to be landlady of a six-unit property, how foreign and aggressive American society must still have seemed to her mother, like the tomcat spraying its territory at her window. Finally, in her mother’s place she goes to China to meet the twins that Suyuan left behind. Each occasion requires a revision of expectations, and in doing so, a fundamental recognition of how one’s expectations are constituted by one’s culture.

Jing-mei’s quest is not entirely conducted in the absence of language, however. In shedding one set of cultural expectations, she opens herself to other cultural contexts—to the Chinese experience that shaped her mother’s hopes and meanings. Indeed, the meaning of Jing-mei’s journey to China is framed by her father’s narration of her mother’s flight from Kweilin, the circumstances under which Suyuan gave up her twin daughters, and the hope of recovery she places in the name Jing-mei (meaning “essence” and “little sister”). This knowledge colors Jing-mei’s recognition of familiarity (family resemblance)—not in features but in gestures—between herself and her step sisters. Her knowledge underlies, again, her recognition in the Polaroid picture that “together we resemble mother,” even though she means to suspend expectations, “to see what develops”(331). Finally, her knowledge enables her to see her journey as an under-

taking in the name of her mother, Suyuan—the fulfillment of “her long-cherished wish”(332).¹⁴

Desire for her absent mother provides Jing-mei an access to her Chinese heritage that both takes place through language and escapes its limitations. And yet it is hard to generalize from her narrative to the other daughters, because her position is unique. Among the daughters, she alone has neither married nor has she had a close relationship with a Caucasian American. She alone has lost a mother, a loss which brings Jing-mei into the circle of first generation immigrants, the group least assimilated to the mainstream of American society. By the same token, however, she occupies a mediating position between her mother’s generation of Chinese heritage and her own generation of American circumstances. Given this position, it is no surprise that Jing-mei should be the framing voice of the narratives. In her desire to know and speak for her mother, she provides an appropriate beginning for the other narratives by locating them in the context of cultural differences and translations between mothers and daughters. On the other hand, Jing-mei’s experience with the polaroid picture marks a moment of unmediated cultural “recovery,” the mother reborn in her daughters, like the Queen Mother of the Western Skies reborn in a grand-daughter. Although the experience is intensely subjective, it brings a momentary closure to a set of narratives which, in their ongoing testimony to a Chinese-American community in translation, of necessity has no ending.

Notes

1. All the reviews we have read are positive, with the exception of Carole Angier’s, which trivializes *The Joy Luck Club* by comparing it to fortune

cookies and mother's day cards. See *New Statesman and Society*, June 30, 1989: 35.

2. This is one major difference between Tan's narratives and the testimonios of Latin American women which center around a strong father figure and evidence a paucity of foremothers.
3. It is interesting to note that, according to Tan, the inspiration for the narrative structuring of her book comes from Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, which presents plural voices in testimonial to a Native American community.
4. In Amy Tan's version of the Moon Lady myth, what the Moon Lady stole to gain everlasting life is not an elixir, as the original myth says, but a peach. Although the image of the peach is not unrelated to Chinese fairy world, Amy Tan's substitution of the elixir with the fruit introduces the Western myth of *Paradise Lost*. Amy Tan may intend to use this myth to bridge the two cultures. The similarity is that both the Moon Lady and Eve are doomed to be ruled by men because of their sin. The difference is that the Moon Lady's sin is caused by her own dark nature, while Eve's sin is due to the temptation of Satan. The punishment they receive is also different. Eve is punished by the pain of the bearing of children, while the Moon Lady is punished by enduring eternal loneliness.
5. The image of men as sun and women as moon is based on a Chinese idea that women are yin and men are yang.
6. In traditional Chinese plays, men usually play any women's roles.
7. Literally it means "if the lips are gone, the teeth will be cold"(161).
8. This image of "a thousand cuts" is from the story of her grand-father her mother told Lena. The story has such a strong impression on Lena that she starts to imagine that the mother and daughter who live next door and who fight all the time are doing the torture of thousand cuts. When she finds out that the mother and daughter are communicating

- their love by fighting, she starts to imagine “a girl complaining that the pain of not being seen was unbearable,” and the daughter pulling out a sharp sword, saying to her mother: “then you must die the death of a thousand cuts. It’s only way to save you”(120). Finally she imagines that the daughter pulls her mother through the wall.
9. Both Ying-ying and Lena were born in the year of tiger.
 10. There is a Chinese superstition that the ghost will come back at the third day of its death. Rose’s grand-mother knows that her husband fears ghosts and thinks that her husband will treat her children well because he fears her ghost will come to haunt him and his house.
 11. The occasion was a trip with her mother to the grocery store, where Waverly cried out for a bag of salted plums. Rather than buying the snack for her daughter, Lindo told the child to “bite back [her] tongue”(89). And it was only on a subsequent visit, when Waverly had learned to bite back her tongue, that she was rewarded with the plums.
 12. The book first brings up this point in Suyuan’s narrative retold by Jing-mei: “Up to the last day, the Kuomintang insisted that Kweilin was safe, protected by the Chinese army. But later that day, the streets of Kweilin were strewn with newspapers reporting great Kuomintang victories, and on top of these papers... lay rows of people who had never lost hope, but had lost their lives instead”(13). The point resurfaces in the conversation between Jing-mei’s father and his aunt, Aiyi. When Aiyi insists that “the Japanese never came to Kweilin,” he tells her “that is what the newspaper reported.” He “was working for the news bureau at the time,” and is thus a reliable source in saying that “the Kuomintang often told us what we could say and could not say”(321).
 13. I have borrowed the term from Frederic Jameson’s book, *The Prison-house of Language*.
 14. The name Suyuan means a “long cherished wish.”

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