

CHINESE MOTHER AS OTHER UNDER PATRIARCHY AND RACISM

The Chinese Mothers' Image in *The Joy Luck Club* from the Perspective of *Orientalism*

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ABSTRACT

Among all the Chinese American writers, Amy Tan undoubtedly occupies a representative position. Her novel *The Joy Luck Club* wins several prestigious awards. Based on the concept of the Other encompassed in *Orientalism*, the paper makes an attempt at analyzing the Chinese mothers' image under patriarchy and racism. On the one hand, the Chinese mothers endure the discrimination from the eastern patriarchal society. On the other hand, they also have to face the racial prejudice from the western white society. All above-mentioned created the tragedies of the Chinese mothers, thus becoming obedient, silent and exotic Other.

This paper shows Tan's *Orientalism* and exoticism tendency in her writing about the Chinese mothers. Her descriptions highlight the Chinese mothers as the image of Other.

Key words: other; *Orientalism*; Chinese mother; patriarchy; racism

1 Introduction

For centuries the relationship between the West and the East is out of balance. Edward Said indicated in his *Orientalism*, “The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (Said 5) .

As we all know, from the 13th century ,due to the wide spread of Marco polo’s *The Travels* in Europe, China was once a rich, mysterious and splendid country in European’s eyes. But in the 19th century the west opened the door to China with their guns, from then on, the Westerners began to look at Chinese people and Chinese culture with conquerors’ eyes.

Some western scholars made up a series of academic principles and ideological systems concerning the East on the basis of Eurocentrism. They gradually set up the “Other” image of the East, and the Easterners are constructed as “Other,” different from themselves, reduced to silence and demeaned as an image to be dominated, thus constructing the relation of the opposition between the West and the East. It is exactly against this setting that Chinese mothers not only swallow their tears under patriarchal oppression but also keep silent under racial discrimination.

2 Discussion

2.1 Chinese Mothers under Patriarchal Culture

“The basic view is that Western civilization is pervasively patriarchal (ruled by the father)—that is, it is male-centered and controlled, and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal, and artistic” (Abrams 89), so is patriarchal in conventional Eastern culture. Therefore, the following discuss will focus on how these Chinese mothers as Other keep obedient and silent in Chinese and American patriarchal society.

2.1 .1The social background

Historically, women have been considered not only intellectually inferior to men but also a major source of temptation and evil in the West. In Greek mythology, for example, it was a woman, Pandora, who opened the forbidden box and brought plagues and misfortune to mankind. Early Christian theology perpetuated this kind of view, too. St. Jerome, a fourth century Latin father of the Christian church, said: “Women is the gate of the devil, the path of wickedness, the sting of the serpent, in a word a perilous object” (Jaworski 99). Thomas Aquinas, the 13th century Christian theologian, said that woman was “Created to be man’s helpmeet, but her unique role is in conception ... since for other purposes men would be better assisted by other men” (Jaworski 99).

Women were long considered naturally weaker than men, squeamish, and unable to perform work requiring muscular or intellectual development. The natural biological role of women has traditionally been regarded as their major social role as well. The resulting stereotype that “a woman’s place is in the home” has largely determined the ways in which women have expressed themselves. Furthermore, the myth of the natural inferiority of women greatly influenced the status of women in law. For instance, under the common law of England, an unmarried woman could own property. On the contrary, a married woman, defined as being one with her husband, gave up her name, and virtually all her property came under her husband’s control. And in the early history of the United States, a man owned his wife and children as he did his material possessions. All of these show that sexual prejudice in the West has a long solid history.

Similarly, the oppression of women also has a long deep-rooted history in China. Chinese society had been founded on the belief that the heaven is *Qian* and the earth is *Kun*. The male was defined as *Qian* and female as *Kun*. The relationship between *Qian* and *Kun*, the heaven and the earth, illustrates the relationship between men and women. The relationship between men and women was defined as one of *Yang* and *Yin*, with corresponding relationships of male domination and female submission, and of honoring the male and disparaging the female. Therefore, in the patriarchal society of ancient China, the perception that men are superior to women is solid in the minds of the Chinese for thousands of years.

According to Confucian classics and educational handbooks, Confucianists saw women as human beings (*Hsiao ren*) to be categorized with babies and slaves. Women's lives were ideally supposed to revolve around the Three Obedience and Four Virtues:

The Three Obedience enjoined a woman to obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her eldest son after her husband's death. The Four Virtues decreed that she be chaste; her conversation courteous and not gossipy; her department graceful but not extravagant; her leisure spent in perfecting needlework and tapestry for beautifying the home (Ling 3).

Women were perceived as not suited by nature for the intellectual life of a scholar or a statesman, just like a traditional Chinese proverb said, "A woman without talent is a woman of virtue." They were denied access to the educational system and confined to the private-domestic sphere where their virtue, honor, and chastity could be controlled and preserved. These four spiritual bonds act as an extreme form of discrimination against and oppression of women without regard for their characters, stripping their thoughts and lives of freedom, forcing them to follow the dictates of fate and others of parents and husband in everything. They could only stay at home laboring at agriculture, weaving, cooking and washing, and they were not permitted to enter society and engage in social activities. This type of feudal female education trampled on the bodies and minds of women and destroyed female talents.

These delimiting social prescriptions for women's gender roles could permit the physical and psychological abuse of women. Chinese mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* experience their mothers' as well as own difficult compromises and failures in a restrictive patriarchal culture and society. However, they obey the doctrines without resistance or any complaints, for they are raised and taught to be silent and obedient in male-dominating society. Speaking vividly, in the yoke of patriarchy, there is no longer women's voice, and only the men are laughing and singing.

2. 1.2 Silenced and obedient Chinese mothers in *The Joy Luck Club*

In the story of "Red Candles," Lindo Jong, one of Chinese mothers, is betrothed to the Huang family's son—Tyan-yu, a six-year old spoiled boy when she is just two years old. After that, Lindo says, "My own family began treating me as if I belonged to somebody else. My mother would say to me when the rice bowl went up to my face too many times, 'Look how much Taitai's daughter can eat'" (Tan 45). Instead of feeling hurt and irritated by the family's mistreatment and the mother's hurtful remark, Lindo, the obedient daughter, tries to understand her mother because it is the traditional way in families then. Lindo realizes, "My mother did not treat me this way because she didn't love me. She would say this biting back her tongue, so she wouldn't wish for something that was no longer hers" (Tan 45).

When she is twelve years old, a summer flood forces her family to move to Wushi. Lindo is considered old enough to be sent to live with the Huangs. Though Lindo's mother is very sad to see her leave, she still admonishes Lindo to be a very, very good daughter in the mother-in-law's family: "obey your family. Do not disgrace us. Act happy when you arrive. Really, you're very lucky" (Tan 48). Although Lindo does not want to marry Tyan-yu with all her heart, she cannot change her fate in patriarchal society. Lindo has to accept what is given to her without any complaints. However, Lindo herself also thinks it as a matter of course.

I learned to be an obedient wife. I learned to cook so well...I could sew such small stitches...Can you see how the Huangs almost washed their thinking into my skin ? I came to think of Tyan-yu as a god, someone whose opinions were worth much more than my own life. I came to think of Huang Taitai as my real mother, someone I wanted to please, someone I should follow and obey without question (Tan 50-51).

From the story we can see, women are belongings and possessions to others. They do not have the rights to choose their lives. In this way, they completely lose themselves in patriarchal society.

Such unfair treatment of women seeps into the every corner of Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. In the episode "Magpies," An-mei, one of the mothers, recounts her mother's tragic experience. An-mei's mother is cast out by her own family for breaking rules and parting with social decorum in that patriarchal society. The underlying reason for this severe ostracism is the familial and social perception that she fails to remain a faithful, life-long widow. "A widow in China was worthless in many respects and could not remarry" (Tan 236). A rich man named Wu Tsing covets her beauty and conspires with his second wife to lure her. She is then asked by Wu Tsing to become his concubine or fourth wife. This is a demeaning status for a woman under that social circumstance. In addition, An-mei's mother does not commit suicide, an ideal option for a widow in her predicament. Dishonored and discredited, she yields herself to his demands. Therefore, she is despised by her own family. In her new home, An-mei's mother still has to endure humiliation because of her low position. When she finally realizes that she "cannot eat enough of this bitterness" (Tan 271), she poisons herself. Later An-mei learns, "A girl in China did not marry for love. She married for position, and my mother's position was the worst" (Tan 256).

However, what is the most painful for An-mei is the way in which her own maternal grandmother and aunt filled her head with horrible visions of her mother. Her mother is described as a "ghost" among the living and a "stupid goose" (Tan 33). She is a dead woman, "decayed flesh, evil, rotted to the bone" (Tan 242); She is a *ni*, traitor to the husband and ancestors. Her name is prohibited to mention in the family circle, even including An-mei. "Never say her name", [Popo] warns, "To say her name was to spit on your father's grave" (Tan 34). Like No Name Woman, An-mei's mother is either defined as a forbidden woman, or is not named or defined at all. Even after the death of the father, the household of women continue to internalize patriarchal discourse and learn to "police" themselves. The portrait of the patriarch-father that hung in the main hall still commands respect from his daughter, An-mei, who feels his eyes permanently surveying and policing her every word and action.

The only father I know was a big painting that hung in the main hall. He was a large, unsmiling man, unhappy to be so still on the wall. His restless eyes followed me around the house. Even from my room at the end of the hall, I could see my father's watching eyes. Popo said he watched me for any sign of disrespect (Tan 114-115).

In such a patriarchal society, An-mei and her mother cannot even voice their unhappiness. They can only conform to a male-dominating culture against their own individual and common interest as women. In the face of family's discrimination and social destruction, keeping silence seems to become their unique characteristics.

Meanwhile, in Tan's writing, Chinese women are also trained to be docile bodies in an age of patriarchy. Ying-ying is a case in point. From her childhood, Ying-ying is taught not to ask questions. "Too many questions...You do not need to understand. Just behave, follow your mother's example" (Tan 36). And her mother and nursemaid try to teach her to behave. Her nursemaid tells her that a girl should never "think of [her] own needs" (Tan 68). When she is chasing a dragonfly, Ying-ying's mother, too, warns her to curb her natural tendencies: "A boy can run and chase dragonflies, because that is his nature. But a girl should stand still. If you are still for a very long time, a dragonfly will no longer see you. Then it will come to you and hide in the comfort of your shadow" (Tan 70). Obviously Ying-ying's mother and nursemaid want to socialize her into the traditionally ideal feminine roles of her time.

Undoubtedly, the idea of masculinity has been implanted into the minds of these Chinese mothers. They are gradually trained to become obedient. The power is more concentrated in male hands than in female ones. Even if Chinese mothers set foot on the soil of America full of hope, they cannot still get rid of the fate of gender inequality. Because nearly all existing human societies are basically patriarchal, and oppression of women has been common to all. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan not only exposes the gender inequality in China, but also shows us the gender inequality in American society.

Penetrating into the Ying-ying's world again, we will have a better understanding of Chinese mothers' sexual prejudice in America. Ying-ying St. Clair is immersed in bitterness, hate and despair. She loses herself gradually because of the cruel infidelities of her first husband, and aborts their child as a form of revenge in Old China. After ten years' waiting, she eventually gets the news of her husband's death and gains an Anglo-American St. Clair's love. However, she earns this new life at the cost of "hiding" the past. In her second marriage, she gives up her fierce and cunning tiger spirit to become the passive woman. She is given a new name, a new birthplace, and a new "self" by her second husband, but she becomes more silent, depressed, and alienated in America, and even her words are translated by her husband for her daughter into "I think Mom is trying to say ..." (Tan 10). St. Clair continues the process of erasure of his wife's experiences by changing her identity and appropriating her story. Ying-ying loses her own identity once again in a similar male-dominating society.

Admittedly, The Joy Luck mothers are oppressed, silenced, and alienated by patriarchy both in China and in America. They, as "gender Other," are all victims of the male-privileging system. They can only hide in their own "cage" moaning and groaning.

2.2 Chinese Mothers under Racism

As for these Chinese mothers, who have immigrated to America, having been silenced, alienated and persecuted by the patriarchal society, they cannot avoid the discrimination from the white society. In other words, they have to face the racial prejudice. In fact, racism acts as an accomplice in creating the tragedies of Chinese mothers. Racism continues to silence these normal Chinese mothers; it overlooks their values and gives special emphasis to their unfavorable qualities in order to justify the white discrimination. So to speak, these Chinese mothers are regarded as the role of passive, silent and exotic "Other."

2.2.1 The historical background

Before the arrival of the Joy Luck mothers in 1949, America already had a long and ugly record of discriminatory attitudes and policies aimed against immigrants' successive coming from Asia and China in particular. Besides, numerous Chinese immigration exclusionary laws were enacted between 1882 and 1904, and a number of immigration policies were made to deter the immigration of Chinese women to American, such as the 1875 Page Law and the 1924 Immigration Act. These restrictive forms of social and legal legislation limited the numbers of Chinese families in America.

Although the Immigration Commission reported Chinese first in America in 1820, the first woman to arrive reportedly was Afong Moy who came to New York city in 1834. Three decades later the number of Chinese women in America had reached only to 1,784. Some worked as prostitutes in mining areas, but many were the wives of farmers, grocers, restaurant owners, cooks and laborers. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 checked Chinese immigration, and it was recorded that the number of Chinese women immigrants was frozen at around 4,000 for five decades from 1870 (Yung 118).

Since the first arrival of Chinese women in America, they have been stereotyped by the American public as exotic and seductive dolls. When Afrong Moy arrived in New York city, she was exhibited as a Chinese lady in native costume and was used to show New York belles how different ladies look in widely separated regions according to the *Commercial Advertiser* (Huping Ling 466). An article on Chinese women that appeared in *Harper's weekly* on January 30, 1858, described in detail the appearance of the "celestial ladies" with their supposedly grotesque hair styles, bound feet, and strange manner of dress. This early image of Chinese women as exotic curios persists in some current magazines. In one contemporary advertisement of a stocking sale in the feminist magazine *Ms.*, Chinese American women today are still stereotyped and exploited for their exoticism (Huping Ling 114-115).

Another damaging perception about Chinese women was that those who entered the United States from the late nineteenth to the twenties century were prostitutes. In 1854, for example, Horance Gerrley reported his fears over the immigration of the Chinese, especially Chinese women, into America, "The Chinese are uncivilized, unclean, and filthy beyond all conception without any of the higher domestic or social relations; lustful and sensual in their dispositions every female is a prostitute of the basest order" (Miller 169). In the late 1840s, Chinese men moved to America as gold miners, railway builders, factory workers and agricultural laborers. Chinese social-cultural values as well as the rigors and hostilities of frontier life were factors in discouraging many Chinese women from immigration to the United States. So Chinatowns in the 19th century were primarily male "bachelor" or "sojourner" societies. Moreover, numerous racist, sexist laws and immigration policies enacted against the Chinese resulted in a very imbalanced ratio between men and women in the United States. Many Chinese men were stranded in America and financially unable to return home or to bring their families. As a result, both married and single Chinese men found it difficult to establish conjugal relationships or find female companionship. It is the world of men without women that raised the demand for Chinese prostitutes. And the high profit of the trade was so great that "An estimated 85 percent of the Chinese women in San Francisco were prostituted in 1860, 71 percent in 1870, and 21 percent in 1880" (Yung 19).

Because in the old patriarchal China, "it is more profitable to raise geese than daughters" (Young 1). Many Chinese girls were sold by starving parents or relatives in China for little money and then resold to America for more money. They were brought to the United States, usually through San Francisco.

Upon arrival in San Francisco, the young women, generally between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five...After being sold, they were forced to sign service contracts in which they agreed to prostitute their bodies for a specific term...If the woman tried to run away, she would remain a slave for life...Alone in an alien country with an alien culture and language, they were unable to avoid what awaited them...(Young 85).

This recorded history responded to the plight of the enslaved Chinese women. In spite of later rescue raids with the help of the police, ironically, the rescue also encouraged public prejudice against these Chinese women. These women were of racial prejudice, yet meanwhile they bore the blame for corruption.

This oppressive history is carried over into literary and visual stereotypes of Chinese women. Similar to their white sisters and male compatriots, Chinese American women have long suffered from Euro-American stereotypes. Following the patriarchal perception of white women either as the “angel in the house” or “mad woman in the attic,” Chinese American women have been cast into a similarly bifurcated role: the “China Doll” or the “Dragon Lady.” Like the white “angel in the house,” the China Doll is demure, modest, devoted, and deferential. As Amy Ling depicted vividly in her *Between Worlds*: “She should be modest, tittering behind her delicate ivory hand, eyes downcast, always walking ten steps behind her man, and best of all, devoted body and soul to serving him” (Ling 11). At the opposite end of the spectrum is the Dragon lady, a “mad woman in the attic.” This dangerous and treacherous woman has talon –like six-inch fingernails, and she can poison a man as easily as she seductively smiles and puffs on her foot-long cigarette holder. These two stereotypes of Chinese women as depraved sex slaves of white men have been ingrained in American minds for a long time. They also become symbolic of all Chinese women at that time.

After Chinese Exclusion Act being repealed, some Chinese women, like the Joy Luck mothers, gradually make their way to the United States. But these Chinese women are still oppressed and silenced by racism and haunted by the history of immigration policies that excluded earlier Chinese from entry into America. Also, these pervasive stereotypes make the experiences and histories of Chinese American women invisible; if they do appear, they are ironically often as the exotic Other.

2.2.2 Mother as ethnic Other

Given this long history in the United States, it is not difficult to understand the Joy Luck mothers’ fear of the police, deportation, and backlash in white society. Foreign aggression, civil war and discrimination against women in Old China urge the Joy Luck mothers to leave for America to look for a new life. Unfortunately, in this “hopeful” new land, these women find themselves again being stripped of self and devalued as Other in a Eurocentric America.

As soon as they step on this new land, the Joy Luck mothers receive a hostile treatment. The prologue of the first section contains a rich image that resonates throughout the entire novel: “The old woman remembered a swan she had bought many years ago in Shanghai for a foolish sum. This bird, boasted the market vendor, was once a duck that stretched its neck in hope of becoming a goose, and now look!—it is too beautiful to eat” (Tan 3).

In this parable, the beautiful swan sails across an ocean many thousands of *Li* with the mother, stretching its neck toward America. It is an emblem of the mother's experience in China and her dream of a new life in America, as well as an indication of Chinese immigrants' encounter in America. When the woman from China arrives in the United States, an American immigration official pulls her swan away from her, which not only breaks the ties between the mother and her native culture, but also gives her a cureless trauma: "as if someone had torn off both my arms without anesthesia, without sewing me back up" (Tan 211). Under the guise of this fairy-tale-like story, Tan mirrors the painful process and new dilemmas the mothers experience in coming to America in 1949. Speaking specifically, this fairy story reflects the mothers' difficulties—the racism they encounter, the loneliness, fear, and anger they confront on their arrival in the United States.

Despite all her years in the United States, An-mei lives with fears of deportation. She once considered bringing her brother to the United States, but failed. Because "She has heard through friends that she may bring trouble to her brother in China; that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) will give her trouble for the rest of her life; that she will not get a home loan because people will think she is communist" (Tan 30). It is true that the United States government will harass, deport, or imprison the Chinese during 1940s and 1950s.

Another Joy Luck mother Ying-ying who marries an American Caucasian is renamed as Betty St. Clair by her husband, and she loses her Chinese name and identity as Gu Ying-ying and gains a new birth date. Even by doing so, she never gains Americans' admission and acceptance. Upon her arrival in America, Ying-ying is interned for three weeks at Angel Island Immigration Station. American law "didn't have rules for dealing with the Chinese wife of a Caucasian citizen" (Tan 107), and agents process her papers and try to figure out her classification: "war bride, displaced person, or wife of a Chinese-American citizen" (Tan 107). "In the end, they declare her as a Displaced Person, lost in a sea of immigration categories" (Tan 107).

The racial prejudice and persecution teach Lindo Jong to act as a trickster. She is advised to say she admires America, and she has no children and does not plan to have any; she is advised to marry an American citizen to ensure her stay in America. In such circumstances, she has to hide her truthful Chinese face. Another mother, Suyuan Woo, arriving in America as an unwanted immigrant, is forced by her husband to hide her shiny Chinese clothes and has to put on a plain brown-checked Chinese dress until the Refugee Welcome Society gives her two hand-me-down dresses. Her husband does not want to call others' attention to her as a "Chinese woman" who was a prostitute or an indentured slave in most Americans' minds at that time. For the sake of safety, Suyuan Woo is forced to become invisible in America.

For all the Joy Luck mothers, living in America is a harsh survival, for the racial prejudice nearly deprives them of livelihood. They are excluded from the mainstream society of America and have to live and work in isolated Chinatown all their lives after their arrival in America. Ying-ying St. Clair describes her earlier life in America: "I lived in houses smaller than the one in the country. I wore large America clothes. I did servant's tasks" (Tan 286). Lindo Jong tries to find a job to support herself. However, as a Chinese woman, she can only find a job as a Chinese hostess, which in fact is as bad as the fourth-class prostitute in Old China. Since she does not want to "rub her hands up and down foreign men" (Tan 298), Lindo has to try another job, cooking in a factory. Another mother Suyuan Woo does the same hard and boring work with Lindo Jong. In reality, these Chinese mothers are inevitably trampled down at will by racism.

Living in a society full of “white ghosts,” the Chinese mothers always lack a sense of security and stability. Therefore, they cling to Chinese traditions and customs, and gather regularly in their Joy Luck Club to play mahjong, eat Chinese food and gossip about their children. In this way, they get the spiritual comfort. As a reaction against the hostile treatment, they also show the biased attitude towards white Americans from time to time. They view all the white men as *WaiGuoRen*; even their own family members cannot eliminate the racial mark imprinted on their minds. For example, when Ying-ying thinks of her husband who lives with her for nearly half a life time, she says: “He was clear and pleasant. But he smelled like a foreigner, a lamb-smell stink that can never be washed away” (Tan 284).

3 Conclude

To conclude, according to Said’s *Orientalism*, the West depicts the Orient as an exotic and silent Other, incapable of defining itself. In another word, China is an exotic and degraded place and the Chinese are ignorant, uncivilized and barbarous. The Orientalists purposely vilify China and the Chinese from the standpoint of the West, thus putting them in the Other place. Facing this difficult situation, these Chinese mothers cannot come out of the shadow of the Other under the racial and gender oppression.

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