

## **Heterogeneity Within: Chinese American Women's Writing**

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### **Abstract**

Feminists of color have been questioning the homogeneity of feminism as written about by middle-class Caucasian women and demanding a space for the voices of minority female in order to create feminist discourses which are more appropriate for women of different ethnicities, social classes, political positions and historical backgrounds. This paper, therefore, is devoted to the discovery of heterogeneity within Chinese American women's writing to refute the indiscernibility of their works and to request more visibility for them. Furthermore, in this paper, I have selected Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, two renowned Chinese American female writers for comparison and contrast, which then unveil their similarities but more importantly, their differences as distinct authors. The heterogeneity of writers of seemingly similar backgrounds suggests a need for close reading and understanding of various subjects. Through the identification of the heterogeneity among Chinese American women writers, this paper has offered a way to distinguish the subjectivity of different individuals.

**Key words:** heterogeneity, ethnicity, Chinese American

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## 內存之異質性——華裔美籍女性書寫

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### 摘要

非白人女性主義者，長期質疑中產階級白人女性在書寫女性主義時，同質性高，並爭取弱勢女性發聲的空間，以創造更為適用不同族裔、社會階級、歷史背景的女性論述。本篇論文致力發掘華裔美籍女性書寫之異質性，以反駁華裔美籍女性作品不可辨識之說法，望提高她們的能見度。再者，本文中筆者取湯亭亭與譚恩美兩位著名華裔美籍女性作家，詳加比較其異同，除提出她們相似之處，更為重要的是舉出她們差異。看似來自相同背景的作家卻有其雜異性，這暗示了各個作家的作品，需要更為細緻的閱讀，與對其背景更深刻的了解。經由確認華裔美籍女性作家之異質性，本文提供了一個區別不同個體之主體性的方式。

**關鍵字：**異質性、族性、華裔美籍

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Feminists of color have been questioning the homogeneity of feminism as written about by middle-class white women and demanding a space for the voices of minority women in order to create feminist discourses which are more appropriate to women of different ethnicities, social classes, political positions and historical backgrounds. In resistance to the hegemonic idea of women as a homogeneous group, feminists of color prompt a consideration of the differences between women. Meanwhile, in order to avoid becoming homogenized represented objects, women of color are urged to break their silence and express their particular concerns. African American women, for example, have successfully established their need to articulate their own experiences, and they have received wide public attention; however, Asian American women are relatively less visible, due to the cultural, historical and political restrictions.

### **Women in Asian American Literature**

The canon of Asian American literature was established in the 1970s. Given that the largest Asian American groups at that time were Chinese and Japanese, the literary tradition was initiated by these two groups. Three Asian American anthologies appeared in the 1970s: Kai-yu Hsu compiled *Asian-American Authors* (1972); David Hsin Fu Wand edited *Asian-American Heritage: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry* (1974), and Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Shawn Wong, and the Japanese poet Lawson Fusao Inada created a landmark work in Asian American literature — *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974). According to Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, in this anthology, Chin and his associates' manifesto first articulated an Asian American literary identity; nevertheless, their "anti-Orientalist" stance, preference for the "American-born male" background and interest in "rehabilitating Chinese American masculinity" fermented debates on what should be included into Asian American literature ("Chinese American Literature" 40). To illustrate, these male critics ranked *Eat a Bowl of Tea* as an Asian American literary classic for its well-depicted father-son conflicts and insider's view of Chinatown life from the perspectives of Chinese male waiters and laundrymen. Chin's and his allies' Asian American nationalism was apparently constructed through the sacrifice of women, and their literary canon ignored the wealth of Asian American women's writing. Amy Ling declares in her book *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* that

[in the] literature written in English by ethnic Chinese and Chinese Eurasians and published in the United States, the women not only outnumber the men but the women's books are more authentic, more numerous, quite simply — better. (xii)

The relatively "better" quality and number do not necessarily guarantee public acknowledgement of these women writers. Sucheta Mazumbar argues for Asian

American women's invisibility as follows:

If society has ever thought about these women, it has been in clichés: the depraved prostitute in nineteenth-century San Francisco; the quiet, courteous, and efficient Asian female office worker today. Asian women in America have emerged not as individuals but as nameless and faceless members of an alien community. Their identity has been formed by the lore of the majority community, not by their own history, their own stories. (1)

The indiscernibility of Asian women in America results from their comparatively minor status compared to Americans of European origin and male Asian Americans. Asian American women are rendered a minority while the males endeavor to recuperate their manhood as they are viewed as weak, castrated, incompetent — in short, “feminine” — and inferior people. To assert their manhood, Asian American men made women of their ethnic group even more feminine and submissive. In consequence, literary research and anthologies of Asian American women developed some decades after those of men. The above excerpt by Mazumbar is extracted from *Making Waves*, the first anthology dedicated to the collection of Asian American women's works. In succession, Elaine H. Kim has edited *Making More Waves* (1997) to gather more works written by Asian American women. The writing tradition of Asian American women has been closely examined by Harold Bloom and Helena Grice,<sup>1</sup> and Amy Ling has scrutinized the literature especially produced by Chinese American women in her *Between Worlds*.

The majority of early female Chinese immigrants in America, like the male ones, belonged to the working class and had little education or leisure to write; those who wrote came from the upper or middle classes. The first Chinese American writer, recognized by most of the scholars of Chinese American studies, is female: the Eurasian writer Sui Sin Far, the pseudonym of Edith Maude Eaton, who wrote journal articles and short stories. Her sister, Winnifred Eaton, known as her Japanese-sounding pseudonym Onoto Watanna, published some novels. In the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth centuries, the Eaton sisters' choice of writing under Asian pen names stated not only their inclination with regard to their personal identification but also the wish to hide their Eurasian background, which seemed intolerable in both racial worlds at that time.

After the Eaton sisters, the Chinese American women who wrote were upper-class Chinese female émigrés including Helena Kuo, Lin Tai-yi and Hazel Lin. These writers share the same concern about China, either during the Second World War or under communist rule. In the post-war period, some well-traveled female novelists published their works, such as the Amerasian Diana Chang's *The Frontiers*

*of Love* (1956) and Chuang Hua's *Crossings* (1968). American-born Chinese women's writing began with Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*; Wong's tone in her autobiography is reserved and polite, for she was living in a society where racism was pervasive. In contrast, published decades later, the words of Maxine Hong Kingston's semi-autobiographical work *The Woman Warrior* (1976) are bitter and challenging. In recent American-born Chinese women's literary productions, one of the foci is on mother-daughter relationships; a classical example is Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). Contemporary Chinese American female writers have displayed their ability to deal with diverse themes; for example, Gish Jen wrote *Typical American* (1992), which echoes the ethnic minority's constant interest in cultural identity, and Kitty Tsui, who is seldom mentioned in the main critical discussions on Asian or Chinese American women's writing, published *Words of A Woman Who Breathes Fire* (1983), which concentrates on the experiences of being a Chinese American lesbian.

Grice argues that "the critical debate on Asian American women's writing has barely begun" (viii). Although I am suspicious of this argument when I think about the burgeoning productions of critical work in this field, I am also aware that this body of writing is still inadequate and not fully considered the way Chinese American women's writing addresses questions of ethnic and gender inequality.

### **Hybridity for Visibility**

In order to fight against their invisibility, it is important for Chinese American women both to collaborate on their shared project to obtain political power and to represent the heterogeneity within their group so that subjective differences are highlighted. Malini Johar Schueller has suggested that for women of color in the United States, a homogeneous American identity is of little use, and an urgent and difficult task for them is to "articulate a politics of resistance and difference without resorting to purely definitional conceptions of ethnic identity" (4). Lisa Lowe, in her often quoted essay, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Asian American Differences," questions the idea of homogenizing the category of Asian Americans. On the one hand, she affirms the political necessity of forming a homogeneous Asian American culture to counter the dominant mainstream ideology; on the other, she emphasizes the importance of recognizing the differences between ethnic groups. She elaborates the latter point in this essay, which refutes the essentialism of Asian Americans and underscores the diverse forces, including gender, class and nation, which contribute to the formation of Asian American cultures and identities. For Lowe, Asian American identities are incomplete, inconsistent and always in the process of transformation. For instance, once being "free-off-the-boats" in the United States, Chinese American immigrants are exposed to "mixing," whether in work or

through socializing. During cultural mingling, the Chinese Americans' identities are subject to reconstruction: they may assimilate into the mainstream American culture, remain exclusively in Chinatown or live in the borderland of both.

"Hybridity," in Lowe's analysis, is "the formation of cultural objects and practices that are produced by the histories of uneven and unsynthetic power relations"; in her elaboration of this viewpoint, Filipino Americans' racial and linguistic mixings imply "the history of Spanish colonialism, U.S. colonialism, and U.S. neocolonialism" (67). Hence, hybridity "marks the history of survival within relationships of unequal power and domination" (67). An example of these "uneven" power relations is displayed considering the reasons why Asian Americans migrate: Sau-ling Cynthia Wong has recognized the force of im/mobility in the formation of Asian American identities; she describes how the immobility of early Asian American immigrants was coercive since early Chinese immigrants were confined in Chinatowns, and how their mobility was also a forced action, like the imposed interment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War. Thus, Wong encourages a "map-making" strategy to interpret the "mobility narrative," that is, contextualizing Asian American writing in terms of time and space, taking into account the notions of class, gender and ethnicity.

In response to Wong's theory, Lowe suggests that im/mobility is not the only force in the shaping of the hybrid identity. "Hybridization is not the 'free' oscillation between or among chosen identities," and the process of it is "uneven," always subject to change in response to the external violence faced by the Asian Americans from outside. They will have to adapt to changes through "living, inventing, and reproducing different cultural alternatives" (82). Moreover, Lowe marks, in the making of Asian American identities, the significance of different "horizontal" and "vertical" relationships, namely, sisterhood and the mother-daughter bond in her cited examples. The mother and daughter dyad and sisterhood have been the central concerns of minority American women's writing; this is partly derived from a culture where women have traditionally occupied a separate space and partly a new strategy formed by these women to explore the formation of the female subject. It is through the construction of female symbolic that ethnic American women will be able to acquire a sense of belonging and through the alliance of women of similar situations they will draw public attention. Chinese American female writers are also interested in this women-centered genre; however, I would like to note that the contexts in which they situate their works are different from those of other ethnic American women's works. Many Chinese American women writers set their characters in China, American Chinatowns, and Chinese American families strongly attached to Chinese culture. In Chinese American women's works, it is often mothers or sisters who

introduce and awaken the Americanized characters to the Chinese part of their selves. Amy Tan, for example, in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, arranges for the mother to describe to her daughter traditional Chinese society in China, how China changed during wartime and the time of the Japanese invasion, the formation of the Chinese community in America, and how Chinese culture is preserved in Chinese American families. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, it is an elder sister who familiarizes her American half sister with Chinese food, legends, values and beliefs, and who is also the medium carrying the Americanized woman of Chinese descent back to her ancestral land to search for answers to her current problems.

Lowe has stressed the hybridity within Asian Americans, and this paper aims to further hybridize Chinese American women: hybridity highlights differences, emphasizes individualities, and hence reveals the subjectivities of Chinese American women. Chinese American women have long been seen as a homogeneous group, and this misrecognition of differences has strengthened the negative stereotypes imposed upon them. The heterogeneity inside the Chinese American group is noteworthy: the origins of these people are various; they may emigrate from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Mainland China or Singapore, Malaysia and other Chinese diasporic areas in Asia. The differences among them may be identified through their accents, behavior or usages for a Chinese "insider"; to an outsider, unfamiliar with Chinese culture or the language itself, Chinese Americans may be regarded as having the same origin, even though one from colonial Hong Kong may receive a British-style education, a Singaporean may consider English as his or her native language, and a Taiwanese may have grown up in a democratic and modern society, while one from mainland Chinese background may have received a rigid education within a communist state. Even though there is hybridity within Chinese Americans, I argue that their apparent resemblance in terms of racial origin often blocks people of different races from recognizing their differences; hence, literary reviewers may fail to distinguish dissimilar works produced by women writers of Chinese ancestry. For example, due to their popularity, Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan are often mentioned together in discussions of Chinese American writing; nevertheless, their works are actually different in several important ways.

### **Differences between Kingston and Tan**

One of these two writers' differences is relevant to their personal background. Both Kingston and Tan are profoundly influenced by their parents' experiences, and many of the differences within their writing come from this source. Having been born female in the United States to Chinese immigrant parents, Kingston and Tan share the same position as second-generation Chinese Americans; nevertheless, the

backgrounds of their parents are different, despite the fact that they are all from China. Kingston was born in 1940 to first-generation immigrant parents who spoke Cantonese; Tan was born in 1952, also to first-generation Chinese immigrants who used Mandarin Chinese. Therefore, Tan's Chinese usages in her writing are derived from Mandarin while what Kingston describes as Chinese is sometimes Cantonese and sometimes Mandarin. The ambiguity of Kingston's language is exemplified in the naming of the woman warrior who repeatedly appears in her books: she is called "Fa Mu Lan" in *The Woman Warrior* but "Fa Mook Lan" in *The Fifth Book of Peace*.

Moreover, Kingston was born into a working-class family and her texts have touched on how she shared the labor in the family-owned laundry; Tan's father was a minister and her mother came from a wealthy Chinese family — in Tan's works, therefore, the daughters have the luxury of learning to play the piano or chess, and she frequently portrays rich Chinese families: "We were one of the riches families in Wushi. ... We had many riches in that house. Silk rugs and jewels. Rare bowls and carved ivory" (*Joy Luck* 244).

Another significant difference between Kingston and Tan is the issues that attract their attention. The facts that Kingston's father was an illegal immigrant and a laundry worker partly answer why she writes about Chinese men's emigration to the United States and their labor in America since she is interested in the issue of class. By comparison, Tan's emphasis is predominantly on women, and most of her narrators are female. While Kingston wishes to claim full American membership by integrating Chinese men and women into American history, Tan's interest is more in the struggles within one's self and the subtle relationships between women of Chinese origin living in America, and how they, as Chinese immigrant women, come to terms with their pasts in China. Tan is famous for her concern with the mother-daughter relationship while Kingston's depiction of the Chinese immigrant mother and Americanized daughter only occurs in *The Woman Warrior*. Furthermore, a thorough reading of all Kingston's and Tan's works will reveal that these two authors' chosen topics have gradually moved away from one other: Kingston's latest works are on war-related issues and Tan, in her most recent work, *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005), directs her interest to American tourists' cultural confrontations in Burma. Judging from the differences between Kingston and Tan, it is inappropriate to simply group them together as Chinese American women's writing.

Kingston's writing relates to various issues and a comprehensive reading of her works reveals the equivalent importance of male and female Chinese Americans to her; therefore, in her literary productions, the Chinese American women's experience is not always obvious or easy to decipher. In 1976, Kingston published her first book, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, which tells of a

second-generation Chinese American girl's story growing up in hostility and her exploration of self-identity. Kingston's second book is *China Men* (1980), and it accounts the history of Chinese America through Chinese men's sharing efforts to build the nation. Her third major work is entitled *Tripmater Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989), where a five-generation Chinese American man who wishes to even social injustice as expressed in his maniac monologues and to bring the world together through his epic play. In 2003, *The Fifth Book of Peace* was published; this book details how the author lost her book-in-progress and earthly possessions in a fire, how she tried to retrieve the lost work and her participation in a veteran writing workshop. According to the above-mentioned works produced by Kingston, it is obvious that the writer has displayed her interest in various topics, including ethnic identity and history, femininity and masculinity, war and peace, and a general concern about human beings on the earth.

Tan, on the other hand, has demonstrated her specific interest in Chinese American women; an interpretation of Tan's works thus pays special attention to female Chinese Americans. Amy Tan, from 1989 to 2005, had published five novels and a collection of essays. Her first work, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), is fictitious account of sixteen stories shared by Chinese American immigrant mothers and American-born daughters. Tan's second novel is *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), which details a Chinese story told by an immigrant mother to her daughter in America. The author released another novel in 1995, *The Hundred Secret Senses*, narrating a mysterious past between a pair of half sisters, one Chinese and the other American. Tan's following work is *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), in which an American daughter shared her Chinese mother's traumatic past. The writer's collection of essays *The Opposite of Fate*, was published in 2003, and she also focused on the mother-daughter relationship while elaborating her views of language and aesthetics. The difference between Kingston and Tan can be further probed through a detailed discussion of the reception of their literary productions and I will start with the reasons leading to Kingston's fame.

### **Kingston's Writing and Reception**

One of the reasons for Kingston's popularity in the United States lies in her concern with ethnicity and gender. Her works involve Chinese American identity, feminist and nationalist points of view, the artistic creation of multi-generic texts, and the linguistic mixing of English, Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese. Soon after *The Woman Warrior* was published and received massive acclaim, its content in relation to ethnicity and gender provoked a "pen war," a Chinese term to describe an exchange of combative articles, between critics. According to Laura E. Skandera-Trombley, the famous Chinese American male critic and playwright Frank Chin was the first to voice

disapproval of Kingston's work by refusing to endorse Kingston's book before its publication; in fact, Chin regarded all autobiographies written by Asian Americans as "bids for white literary and popular acceptance" (5). The pen war formally started with Jeffery Paul Chan's reply to Diane Johnson's review in the *New York Review of Books* in 1977. Chan criticized Johnson for her generalization about Chinese Americans' resistance to assimilation while blaming Kingston for misleading her readers. In return Johnson replied by asserting Chinese Americans' unassimilated culture and the value of Kingston's writing (7).

Chin and other male Chinese American critics claimed that Kingston reinforced the essentialist concept of Chinese chauvinism, sold out Asian America, and distorted Chinese myths and literary masterpieces. The complexity of Kingston's works aggravated the pen war. Her writing is hybrid in generic terms and is a compound of autobiography, memoir, prose, poetry, history and fiction. For example, *The Woman Warrior* was subtitled memoirs by Kingston, classified as an autobiography by the publisher, and considered a semi-fiction, due to Kingston's re-creation of Chinese stories, by many critics. There is dissent about how to name the work as well: for instance, Sidonie Smith categorized *The Woman Warrior* as "autobiography" while Chin prefers to describe this book as "fiction".<sup>2</sup> Readers and critics from different cultural backgrounds have diverse views on Kingston's works: Chin, as an insider within Chinese culture, brings to his reading knowledge about the differences between the original Chinese stories in Kingston's books and her reconstructions of them; hence, to him, *The Woman Warrior* is fictitious and full of Kingston's imaginative re-working, if not distortion; for Smith, as an outsider, this book is unquestionably autobiographical, recording a Chinese American girl's growing-up process.

The issue about the genre and authenticity of Kingston's books has been a battlefield for critics: shortly after *The Woman Warrior* was published as an autobiography and well received by American readers of European ancestry, most of whom wholeheartedly embraced the stories as her Chinese inheritance and as what had truly happened in Kingston's life, Kingston was attacked by Chinese American male critics for her falsifying of Chinese myths and legends to suit her own purpose of assimilation into American mainstream culture by pandering to white readers. Autobiography is seen to be composed of an authentic voice and true stories, and those male critics' fear was that *The Woman Warrior* would lead readers into regarding Chinese men as chauvinists and China as an underdeveloped country with an outdated and gender-biased society. Many Chinese American female critics, however, took Kingston's side and refuted the idea that Kingston was an assimilationist who eulogizes Americanness and despises Chineseness. Elaine H. Kim suggests that those male critics clung to an anti-female stance since they themselves had created Chinese American

male heroes and female heroines very different from those constructed by the female writers (199). King-kok Cheung defended Kingston by declaring that

a writer's imagination should not be circumscribed by potential readers' backgrounds, and it is not the writer's fault if a reader cannot pick up the plethora of allusions that enrich Kingston's texts. Scholars and critics must assume the responsibility of identifying the more esoteric references. (121)

Cheung further points out that to request Kingston to be faithful to original Chinese stories is to "occlude one of her most innovative — and uniquely Chinese American — narrative strategies: Americanizing Chinese tales and Sinicizing Euro-American ones, she in fact takes ample liberties with both" (122). This hybridization of Chinese American texts was not readily approved, however, and the debate between critics has lasted for two decades. Responding to this "pen war," Kingston, as a living author who is concerned about how her works are perceived, defended herself by asserting her aesthetic freedom in her writing. She implied that she should not be "denied an individual artistic vision" ("Cultural Misreadings," 101). Essays about this debate over authenticity were collected in Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's *Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: A Casebook*, and a detailed survey of criticism on Kingston, *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*, edited by Laura E. Skandera-Trombley, was published in 1998. After Kingston's "first fiction" *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Books* (1989), as defined by her publisher, was issued, the pen war gradually diminished. With the publication of Kingston's book *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003), it seems that this pen war has become history.

In addition to the topics she addresses and her writing techniques, Kingston's popularity is also a result of pan-Asian American political movements in the 1960s. As mentioned earlier in this paper, Americans of Asian ancestry had been excluded from immigration into the United States and discriminated against, suffering both mental and economic oppression and even physical violence. It was not until the 1960s that Asian Americans, stimulated by African American protests for Civil Rights, went on demonstrations for their own equal rights. The purposes of this movement, as Sucheng Chan, were to claim their "full membership in American society" (40), have their forefather's contributions to America acknowledged, and request equal rights with those Americans of European ancestry. Moreover, in 1968 and 1969, Asian American students "went on strike for the establishment of ethnic studies programs" in California (198). During the time of radical ethnic movements, Kingston's stay in Berkeley, which Skandera-Trombley names the "epicenter of the Days of Rage and the activist peace movements" (4), influenced her writing about war and peace.

Consonant with this political activism, Asian American literature blossomed. Although there were literary works written by Asian Americans long before this period

of thriving political campaigns, they hardly reached a wide readership. It was during this era of the civil rights movement that American racial minority groups tried to clarify and construct their own identities. The Asian American literary anthologies were finally published in the 1970s, and Kingston's first book was issued in 1976, just in time for this first flourishing of Asian American literature. Several critics, such as Amy Ling, have suggested that Kingston's works are indebted to her forerunners, namely, Chinese American women who wrote before her; for example, in Jody Hoy's opinion, a commonly referred to author is the autobiographer Jade Snow Wong, the only Asian American writer who Kingston admitted that she is indebted to (62). What Kingston inherited from the Chinese American women writers' tradition was writing about personal events and Chinese culture; what she, as a second-generation Chinese American woman, brought as innovation was a unique Chinese American way of writing, a combination of Chinese and American cultures and writing styles. Kingston's works cross the boundaries between genres and languages, and the settings of her books are rich in both time and space, ranging from ancient imperial China, modern democratic and communist China, to contemporary America.

Kingston's success corresponds to feminist concerns at that time as well. After the radical liberation movements for American women's rights in the 1960s, the 1970s was an important period for the development of American feminism: African American feminism began to challenge mainstream feminism led by women of European origin and demanded feminist discussions consider ethnicity and class; simultaneously, the genre of fiction became popular in feminist representations in America in the 1970s. Consonant with the 1970s feminist interests, *The Woman Warrior* articulates the fantasy of a Chinese American girl and the adversities for Chinese American women. As ethnic American feminists have argued, minority women encounter a double adversity, resulting from gender and race. For instance, the narrator in *The Woman Warrior* has to deal with both the traditional Chinese idea that girls are only food wasters and conflicts between Chinese and mainstream American cultures. In fact, for Ling, Chinese American women are "triplely vulnerable: as Chinese in a Euro-American world, as a woman in a Chinese man's world, as a Chinese woman in a white man's world" (15).

Furthermore, the post-war atmosphere also contributed to Kingston's achievement: a common theme of her works is "war"; the Second World War, the Korean War and especially the Vietnam War are mentioned in her texts. Kingston was born in 1940, just before America's declaration of war against Japan and participation in the Second World War, and she consequently grew up in a time of wars. During this time of turbulence, Kingston and other Chinese Americans had to face not only war-time instability but also a fear of connection to Communist China — this fear came from the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War. Connected to Japan,

America's enemy during this war, Americans of Japanese ancestry were interned by the American government, and this was perceived as a warning to other ethnic groups since they might suffer the same fate. Reception of Chinese Americans and their literary productions was subject to the relationship between the United States and various Asian countries. The Second World War, complicated by the Japanese bombing of the Pearl Harbor, had caused thousands of Japanese Americans to be sent to internment camps. In contrast, Chinese Americans are praised as reliable brothers and sisters. Reversely, communists' victory in China, the Korean War and the Cold War changed Chinese Americans' status from trustworthy allies to suspects or spies. It is worth noting that Asian Americans did not passively accept the American government's decisions to go to war against Asian countries: for example, Asian American students took part in "nationwide protests against the American invasion of Cambodia and the broadening of the war in Vietnam" (Chan, *Asian Americans* 198), and Kingston was one of the protesters. The Americans started their involvement with the Vietnam War in the 1950s and sent their troops to Vietnam in the 1960s; two of Kingston's brothers were drafted in this war. Pacifist and ethnic movements in the 1960s have stimulated Kingston's writing. Guan Gong, God of War and Literature in Chinese belief, continually appears in Kingston's texts, and Kingston follows him by combining war with literature: as a warrior fighting for ethnic and gender justice herself, her weapon for the battles is words.

On the other side of the world in Asia, Kingston is deemed to be someone who helps to acquaint Western readers with Chinese culture and history: she introduces Chinese beliefs, stories and also the language itself in her works, which have touched on Chinese history in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. China in this transitional time in a new century was in political turmoil, caused by the corruption of the Qing Dynasty, the invasion of foreign countries, and the revolution led by Doctor Sun Yat-sen, who founded the Republic of China in 1911. The civil war between the Nationalist Party (also known as Kuomintang or KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party occurred in the late 1920s, and the Japanese invasion of China compelled Chinese people to discard the partisan battle and fight together against foreign aggression. However, the war between the two parties resumed in 1940s after Japan surrendered. The communists triumphed in the end, and the democrats retreated to Taiwan. To evade the communist regime, countless Chinese people fled to Taiwan, Hong Kong and other countries. The communists then closed the door to and out of China. Under communist rule, the people of China experienced famine, poverty, terror and torture during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976; political reforms took place after this revolution ceased and China finally opened its door to the outside world in 1979. Setting her texts in the mid-twentieth century, Kingston pictured the past of her parents

and ancestors in China and why they traveled to America; this visit to the past presents a sketch of the Chinese history during their lives, namely, the end of Chinese monarchy to the rise of the democrats and then the communists. Kingston's works not only provide a personal familial record but also a communal history, both Chinese and Chinese American.

Kingston is well received among the academics in the East, where literary criticism on her writing is less controversial than that in the United States, probably because the menace of losing Chinese manhood hardly exists and readers are able to tell the difference between fantasy and authentic Chinese stories in her works. Kingston once confessed her fear of being unwelcome in China after she converted Chinese stories into Americanized versions; however, to her surprise, she was greeted with delight. Nevertheless, even though most academics in the East applaud Kingston's writing, there are also a small number of critics who hold negative views, for example, Qiong-qiong Yuan, a Taiwanese writer, who stated that popular books about China in the West such as Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Bette Bao Lord's *Spring Moon*, Nien Cheng's *Life and Death in Shanghai*, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*, Hong Ying's *Daughter of the River* and Adeline Yen Mah's *Falling Leaves*, are biographical stories without authorial creativity, and that these writers' success is meaningless to the whole literary world and has no relation to Chinese literature.<sup>3</sup> I have almost exactly the opposite opinion to Yuan's: these writers' works have opened a window to China and Chinese culture for Western readers; examples of their contribution are attracting Western readers' interest in Chinese culture and history, drawing attention to the problems of cultural identity, and providing Chinese readers alternative ways of seeing their own culture and legends. Similarly, Amy Tan's works also provide the same functions.

As a writer, Kingston has her limitations even though she has demonstrated her literary contribution to American literature by enriching it with multiplicity. Being a Chinese American whose ancestors emigrated from the province Canton, south east of China, Kingston's view of Chinese people and China are limited to an extent. Keen to claim her ancestors' historical status in America, she has failed to include Chinese people from other parts of China and to recognize other reasons for emigration. For example, there were overseas students studying at American institutions; some of them stayed and became Americans. When Kingston mentions where Chinese Americans come from, she indicates Canton and when she talks about Chinese people, most of them are Cantonese. It should be noted that Cantonese people cannot represent the whole population of Chinese people, and Cantonese language cannot stand for Chinese, which is composed of numerous dialects. It is confusing in Kingston's texts that she adopts both Cantonese and Mandarin. As mentioned earlier, for the same woman

warrior, it is “Fa Mu Lan” in *The Woman Warrior* and “Fa Mook Lan” in *The Fifth Book of Peace*. Moreover, Kingston’s use of the Chinese language and Chinese stories are sometimes different from the original Chinese ones: Kingston claims that Chinese people do not distinguish the colors green and blue; in fact, there is a Chinese word *Chin* for both green and blue, and also specific and precise words like *Lu* for green and *Lan* for blue as well. Another example is that in *Journey to the West*, the Monkey King is imprisoned by Buddha in the original Chinese version, not Tripitaka. Either being unaware of some parts of Chinese culture or to avoid interruption of her style, occasionally, Kingston is unable to fully explain Chinese customs — for instance, she writes about a Chinese behavior in *The Fifth Book of Peace*: “He tagged the house all over with Contentment, a few upside down, which some Chinese say gives more luck, like a horseshoe upside down” (166). To be more precise, the words are upside down because the sound of “arriving” is the same as “upside down” in Chinese; arranging “Contentment” upside down suggests its arrival. Besides, in order to reduce negative images about Chinese Americans and glorify her ancestors, Kingston sometimes over-romanticizes Chinese Americans: she asserts, “the difference between us and other pioneers, we did not come here for the gold streets. We came to play” (249-50). Moreover, even though Kingston has set out her goal to overturn biased views about Chinese Americans, she falls into stereotypes sometimes herself: she mentions one of Asian people’s disabilities in speaking English — “Earll’s name is impossible for an Asian to say in one syllable” (371). However, it may be Kingston’s intention to satirize the stereotypes by providing “inauthentic” Chinese information: for instance, in saying that “all Chinese are gamblers” (*Tripmaster Monkey* 249), Kingston may have intended to mock a common stereotype about Chinese Americans.

Although Kingston has her own limitations and sometimes offers confusing and misleading Chinese concepts, she has provided valuable texts depicting American life from the standpoint of a Chinese American woman. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Kingston’s writing cannot represent every Chinese American’s experience, the idea which was a reason for the pen war; Elaine Kim has taken a similar view: “It is important to remember that Asian Americans who write are not necessarily ‘typical’ or ‘representative’ of their nationality or racial group” (xviii).

It is intriguing to think that articles on and comparisons between Kingston’s first two books, *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* (1980), are abundant, but the quantity of critiques of *Tripmaster Monkey* is relatively small, and discussions of the shift in her writing are few. After a thorough survey of Kingston’s books, Skandera-Trombley finds that “there is scant published criticism addressing Kingston’s latest book [*Tripmaster Monkey*]” (20). Why do Kingston’s readers lose interest in her works? Is there any change in her content and writing that made readers and critics turn away? In the same

year when this novel was published, Tan's first book, *The Joy Luck Club*, was released and achieved immediate success; under the shadow of Tan's achievement, Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* received much less notice. In addition, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong calls Tan's works "less taxing to read' than Kingston's" (*Kingston's Woman Warrior*, 51); this may be one reason why readers prefer Tan's writing: the diminishing popularity of Kingston's writing probably comes from its complexity, which cannot be easily understood outside the context of Chinese American history. On the other hand, Tan has been attacked by critiques for her simplicity.

### **Tan's Writing and Reception**

Amy Tan has been criticized for her simple solution to the complex identity issue that she explores in her novels; her answer to the confusion of hybrid identity is to ignore differences through cultural understanding: "The three of us [Lindo, Waverly, Rich], leaving our differences behind, stepping on the plane [to China] together, sitting side by side, lifting off, moving West to reach the East" (*Joy Luck* 180). At the end of all her four novels, the main protagonists reach a better state of mind by acknowledging maternal love and their link to Chinese culture. However, according to Ben Xu, the trip to China is "temporary and disillusioning," suggests "no more than a 'visit'" and entails "a painful realization of 'going home as a stranger'" (17). Hence, I argue that the visit to one's ancestral land does not necessarily imply a sudden clarification of her confusion about cultural identity.

Stephen Souris confesses that his initial response to Tan's ending of *The Joy Luck Club* was "overly sentimental and facile resolution" (114), but he refutes himself by examining the cultural factors in the closure of the novel and suggests that it is Tan's desire for "an ending that brings the resonating diversity and conflicting positions to a tidy close" (116). However, it should be noted that there are continual conflicts within Tan's mother-daughter relationships, and the characters still have to face their hybridity and confusion in the real world in America. As identity is always shifting, the hyphenated characters are constantly under construction. The daughters still have to deal with their inner conflicts though they achieve understanding with their mothers to some degree. Tan's intention in creating easy and happy endings, nevertheless, is understandable; she writes to release her traumatic experiences and search for compensation in the happiness of the protagonists. Perhaps it is Tan's wish to create a simple and easy resolution to a complicated identity issue and thus give hope to those who suffer from the confusion of hybrid identity like herself. Conscious of Tan being attacked for her simple endings, I would like to complicate Tan's writing by discussing her own identity, her adoption of hybrid settings and the reception of her works.

Like the American daughters who she has created in her novels, Amy Tan herself is also an American-born subject of Chinese ancestry. As discussed by some critics, Chinese (-) Americans are trying to avoid the negative influence caused by the hyphenation. King-Kok Cheung reads the term "Asian American" as a recognition of the "American status" of the Asian immigrants and their descendants but simultaneously, she states that the overt indication of their Asian ancestry is a "racist treatment," as it excludes Asian Americans from the notion of "pure Americans," which is used to indicate the mainstream Americans of European origin (5). With the addition of ethnic origin, the term "Asian American" emphasizes the condition of being both Asian and American; hence, an Asian American is neither fully Asian nor American. Tan has expressed her discomfort about being labeled as a "Chinese American" writer in *The Opposite of Fate*:

If I had to give myself any sort of label, I would have to say I am an American writer. I am Chinese by racial heritage. I am Chinese-American by family and social upbringing. But I believe that what I write is American fiction. (310)

Tan stresses her Americanness in her writing. However, even though Tan feels uneasy being labeled a hyphenated American author, the influence of Chinese culture on her works and the hybridity of the environment in which she grew up cannot be denied. From childhood, Tan has been ashamed of Chinese culture and has tried to assimilate herself into American society, and the cost of her assimilation is distance from her mother. It was not until her mother, Daisy Tan, was sent to a hospital that Tan, who was spending her vacation in Hawaii, determined to take her mother back to China and carefully examine her relationship with her own mother. The trip to China has a profound meaning for Tan's identity and writing since she found a sense of belonging in China. Because of the China trip and her deeper understanding of her mother, Tan is more aware of her hybrid identity. For Tan, it is writing which helps her to release her inner emotion and overcome psychic stress; writing is also a way for her to explore the mother-daughter relationship.

Morris suggests that "much current women's work moves continually across the boundaries of autobiography, realism, experimentalism and earlier traditional forms of fairy tale and rhyme" (188), and she calls this form "multiply intertextual" as it transcends the classifications of texts (178). Huntley suggests that Tan, like Kingston, fabricates a "hybrid multigeneric and multiperspectival text" (69), mingling the narratives with other genres such as poetry, myth, memoirs, and Chinese talk story.

Not only Tan's style but also the settings of her novels are hybrid. For example, Chinatown is a site of hybridity: in the territory of America, a group of Chinese immigrants refuse to assimilate into American society or are forced to inhabit this

borderland; they build oriental and exotic surroundings, speak Chinese or Chinese American patois, cook Chinese food and attach themselves to Chinese culture and traditions. Tan's settings in China are hybridized as well: in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Weili's mother dresses in western-style clothes, eats English biscuits and uses French perfume, and lives in Shanghai before communist rule, an international city which encompasses both Chinese and western cultures: "That day we also went to all the places where the best things in the world could be found. ... French-style leather shoes, ... American ice cream sundae, ... any kind of newspaper, Chinese and foreign too" (95). Tan's style of writing projects her as a mixture of the East and the West. In Suyuan's story, Kweilin is "a city of leftovers mixed together" because of the refugees fluxing into the city to evade the Japanese intrusion (*Joy Luck* 11). The structure of the novel *The Joy Luck Club* itself is also hybrid, with four tales inserted in front of every four short stories in this book. Hence, Bella Adams asserts that Tan's writing is a hybridized representation, consisting of "the Chinese American experience," "the post-colonial experience," and "the postmodern condition" (167). The reception of Tan's writing is extreme like Kingston's, as reviewers either highly praise her works or consider them obsequious products for white readers; it seems that the authenticity of ethnic minority's writing is unceasingly debated.

In Morris's view, postcolonial women writers seek to form a collective and positive female identity by articulating their history and cultural tradition, and by constituting a sense of national belonging. However, there is meanwhile a need to object to the "essentialist national metaphors of feminine identity," which usually signifies passivity and inferiority (179). To illustrate this point, while men construct a sense of manhood within an oppressed group, women are shaped as the docile and relegated to the domestic roles. Therefore, minority women writers who claim the men from the same minority group as sexist oppressors are deemed betrayers, undermining the nationalist discourse. For instance, as mentioned in the last chapter, Chinese American women writers like Kingston and Tan are accused of being assimilationists by the nationalists, such as Frank Chin; they are considered as selling out their own identity by flattering white mainstream ideology and helping essentialize Chinese patriarchal society. Chin claims that Chinese American writers have the responsibility to convey a "politically right" sense of Chinese culture in their books. In *The Opposite of Fate*, Tan responds to this accusation by declaring her freedom and creativity as a writer. Moreover, Jinqi Ling deems "ethnic authenticity" a "necessary but weak choice," for ethnic American writing involving a political process of being "America's racial other" (147).

Lowe's viewpoint helps to explain the debate between textual authenticity and a writer's responsibility — she points out that Chin's charge is a "false opposition of

'nationalism' and 'assimilation'" (71) and "the dialogue between nationalist and feminist concerns animates a debate about identity and difference, or identity and heterogeneity, rather than between nationalism and assimilationism" (76). Lowe suggests that the debate between the nationalists and female writers is a false opposition because their main concerns are different: the nationalists emphasize the political status of the ethnic groups while the female writers focus on ethnic women's experience; the heterogeneity, such as differences between men and women, within ethnic groups needs to be taken into consideration. Therefore, she argues that to differentiate the male and female in ethnic groups help to increase political strength and the urge to cooperate with other minority groups in order to subvert the mainstream. It is Tan's popularity that brings both attention and accusation; she has made her readers who are unfamiliar with Chinese culture become aware of it and those brought up in Chinese culture to re-examine it.

Tan's works are well received both in the West and the East. Her success raises questions about both the reason why her works are so well received and who her intended readers are. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong discusses the existing "Amy Tan phenomenon" in her essay "Sugar Sisterhood" and analyses the reasons for Tan's popularity via the contexts of "mainstream" feminist writing, Asian American matrilineal literature quasi-ethnography about the Orient, Chinese American "tour-guiding" works, post-civil rights ethnic soul-searching, the "Chinese *Gone with the Wind*" genre, multiculturalist rhetoric, and Regan-era critiques of materialism' (202). Instead of completely applauding Tan's literary achievements, Wong has suggested several alternative aspects of Tan's sensational success.

Of her five books discussed here, Tan dedicates three of them to her mother. In *The Opposite of Fate*, she describes her intention to write for her mother, and her decision to write in simple English which is easy for her mother to understand. Her intended readers also include those who are not familiar with Chinese culture since she often tries to explain the meaning of the Chinese words and culture in her narratives: " 'O! Hwei Dungsyu' — You bad little thing — said the woman" (*Joy Luck*, 209). Nevertheless, it should be noted that translation has its limitation as cultures are sometimes untranslatable, and Tan's translation is sometimes problematic as her Chinese is limited. For example, Tan translates the phrase "*lihai*" into "Wild and stubborn" while it should be formidable, powerful and knowing (*Joy Luck*, 241). Although there are limitations to Tan and negative comments to be made about her works, it is undeniable that her writing has provided a valuable vehicle to examine the issues of gender, hybridity and identity.

## Conclusion

The comparison of written works created by Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan unveils their similarities but more importantly, their differences as distinct authors. The hybridization of writers of seemingly similar backgrounds suggests a close reading and understanding of various subjects. In her reading of Chinese American mother-daughter stories, Wendy Ho asserts that through both Tan's and Kingston's

various narratives of a self-in-process, the Chinese American mothers and daughters learn to name and to compassionately understand their differences as well as similarities as women and to gradually extend this critical political practice to an understanding of men, family and community. It can therefore be empowering and heroic for women to tell their diverse stories and attend to one another. (23)

I would like to extend Ho's notion of Chinese American women to all human beings since the main characters in Kingston's works are not limited to Chinese American females; telling diverse tales, Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan have led their readers into a world full of confession, compassion, and understanding, a world which acknowledges heterogeneity of different individuals and therefore brings more attention to diverse discourses from the minority groups. The homogenization of distinct individuals in minority groups often leads to negative stereotypes and therefore, this paper has endeavored to elaborate the hybridity within the Chinese American women writers through the case study of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. Pleading with readers to scrutinize the various styles of authors from seemingly indistinguishable background, this paper asserts the needs for opening up space for minority voices and recognizing the subjectivities of different ethnic individuals.

## Notes

1. See *Asian American Women Writers*, edited by Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1997) and Helena Grice's book *Negotiating Identities: An Introduction to Asian American Women's Writing* (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 2002).
2. Frank Chin was willing to accept *The Woman Warrior* under the condition that it was read as fiction, instead of an authentic work.
3. See Yuan Qiong-qiong, "[After Myth Comes Reality]." *United Daily News*

4 October 1999 (my translation).

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