

*In Her Mother's House: Mother-Daughter Dissonance in Post-1990s Chinese American Fiction**

ZHANG Tong-tong

Guangdong Teachers College of Foreign Language and Arts, Guangzhou, China

This paper attempts to examine the trope of “home” and the depiction of mother-daughter dissonance “in her mother’s house” in post-1990s Chinese American fiction. The research selects four novels in the case study and focuses on how mother-daughter dissonance “in her mother’s house” is presented, what cultural connotations the trope of “home” carries and how they are affected by such extra-contextual factors as racism, sexism and classism. In comparison with two representative mother-daughter narrative works in pre-1990s period, the new characteristics and connotations of “home” in mother-daughter dissonance in post-1990s Chinese American fiction are revealed.

Keywords: Chinese American fiction, mother-daughter dissonance, home, post-1990s

Introduction

“Mother-Daughter” is one of the three recurring motifs in Chinese American fiction (Pu, 2006). Chinese American female writers, who exceed their male counterparts in number, are so invested with mother-daughter stories that a “matrilineal Chinese American tradition” has formed. In *In Her Mother's House: The Politics of Asian American Mother-Daughter Writing* (1999), Wendy Ho observes that these daughter-writers tend to envision their mother-daughter stories in the context of “home” as is constructed by their mothers and grandmothers. Indeed, home is where mother-daughter relationships “resonate most forcefully” (Schultermandl, 2009, p. 108), thus lending itself to be a perfect setting for the representation of mother-daughter stories.

The most celebrated pre-1990s mother-daughter narrative works include Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), in which both writers portray the estrangement and conflict between first-generation immigrant mothers and second-generation Americanized daughters due to the language barrier and cultural difference. In the globalization context in post-1990s era, mother-daughter narrative has exhibited new characteristics and the cultural connotations of “home” have thereby undergone changes.

From this point of departure, this paper aims to investigate the trope of “home” and the representation of mother-daughter dissonance “in her mother’s house” in post-1990s Chinese American fiction in comparison

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ZHANG Tong-tong, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Guangdong Teachers College of Foreign Language and Arts, Guangzhou, China.

with *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club*. Four novels are selected in the case study, namely Mei Ng's *Eating Chinese Food Naked* (1998), Amy Tan's *The Valley of Amazement* (2013), Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* (2014), and *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017). The study focuses on how mother-daughter dissonance "in her mother's house" is presented, what cultural connotations the trope of "home" carries and how they are shaped by such extra-contextual factors as racism, sexism and classism.

Mother-Daughter Dissonance in Pre-1990s Chinese American Fiction

A traditional "home" in pre-1990s Chinese American fiction consists of Chinese-born immigrant parents and American-born second generations, as in *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club*. According to Lisa Lowe, mother-daughter generational conflicts in many Asian-American fiction epitomize the contradiction between the immigrant mothers' "old country and culture" and the Americanized daughters' "new American world" (1991, p. 26). Her mother's house, therefore, tends to be perceived by the daughters as a culturally inferior place, which they cannot identify with and want to escape, as is noticeably represented in these two novels.

The Woman Warrior is Kingston's autobiographical fiction, in which the author has Maxine become the first-person narrator and recount her living experiences as a Chinese American girl growing up in America. The fiction features the estrangement and conflict between Brave Orchid, the traditional Chinese mother and Maxine, the Americanized daughter because of language barrier and cultural difference. Having been taught to master English from kindergarten, Maxine cannot fully understand her mother, who speaks Chinese dialect most of the time. What generates the deep estrangement and intense conflict between them is the contradiction between Chinese traditional culture that Brave Orchid symbolizes and the mainstream Anglo-American culture that Maxine has been assimilated into. In the first place, their conflicts result from Brave Orchid's identification with Chinese patriarchal culture and Maxine's defiance of it. Brave Orchid tells Maxine the story of "No Name Woman" about her aunt, who commits adultery, kills herself and is condemned by the village, hoping to shame Maxine to be chaste, the ideal feminine virtue in traditional Chinese culture: "what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born" (Kingston, 1977, p. 5). However, Maxine strongly empathizes with her outcast aunt, who she thinks subverts the dominant patriarchal system by claiming her own body and subjectivity. Moreover, Brave Orchid's traditional way of teaching children, namely giving orders without any explanations also breaches their mother-daughter ties. When a boy wrongly sends pills to their home, Brave Orchid orders Maxine to return them to the pharmacy and ask for some candies in return. For Brave Orchid, wrongly delivered drugs bring bad luck or even curse to the family while candies could make up for the mistake and remove the curse. Although Maxine follows her mother's order, she feels great humiliation by acting like a beggar and attributes her mother's superstitious act to traditional Chinese culture. In conclusion, Maxine views her Chinese mother/culture as "backward" and "eccentric" and her mother's house as a culturally inferior place that she "would have to leave and go again into the world out there which has no marble ledges for [her] clothes, no quilts made from [their] own ducks and turkeys, no ghosts of neat little old men" (Kingston, 1977, p. 112).

Similar mother-daughter dissonance is also portrayed in *The Joy Luck Club*, where four pairs of mothers and daughters take turns to tell their stories. As a central theme in their various stories, mother-daughter estrangement/conflict abounds in the novel. Like Brave Orchid and Maxine, all four pairs have different degree

of mother-daughter estrangement, which is revealed by Jing-mei Woo: "My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more" (Tan, 1989, p. 37). The deep alienation between these mothers and daughters is, in the first place, attributable to the language barrier. While the working-class immigrant mothers can only speak "broken" English, the well-educated daughters speak perfect English, but little Chinese. The daughters tend to associate "broken English" with "broken thought" and label their mothers as odd and stupid. Admittedly, language barrier is crucially linked to cultural difference, the root cause of their mother-daughter dissonance. Greatly influenced by the mainstream American discourse, the daughters have internalized the orientalist stereotype of their mothers and the Chinese culture. For instance, Jing-mei imagines the "Joy Luck Club" to be "a shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war" (Tan, 1989, p. 28). When Jing-mei's mother criticizes her with the theory of "Five Elements" ("五行") in Chinese traditional culture, Jing-mei directly dismisses such criticism as her mother's Chinese superstitious belief.

As can be seen, the mother-daughter dissonance depicted in the two most representative mother-daughter narrative texts in pre-1990s era suggests that mother-daughter estrangement/conflict is mainly attributable to the language barrier and cultural difference between the two generations. Chinese-born immigrant mothers bring up their daughters in the traditional way and wish to pass on their Chinese cultural and maternal legacy to their daughters, regardless of the fact that their daughters have assimilated into the mainstream American culture and viewed their mothers/Chinese culture as "inferior" and "backward". In this vein, her mother's house is connected with their Chinese cultural origin, which the daughters all feel ashamed and desire to escape.

Mother-Daughter Dissonance in Post-1990s Chinese American Fiction

The above typical pattern of mother-daughter dissonance in pre-1990s Chinese American fiction does not repeat itself so frequently in mother-daughter narrative in post-1990s Chinese American fiction. In addition to the typical family structure of Chinese-born immigrant mother and American-born daughter, various family formations are presented in the four selected novels. Therefore, mother-daughter dissonance in these families arises from a variety of factors apart from/other than language barrier and cultural difference. Besides mother-daughter estrangement and conflict, a deformed mother-daughter symbiosis is constructed in *Eating Chinese Food Naked*.

Mother-Daughter Deformed Symbiosis

Published in 1998, Mei Ng's novel *Eating Chinese Food Naked* is about a young Chinese American woman Ruby Lee, who grows up in her parents' house behind the laundry in Queens and has always wanted to escape with her mother Bell from their unhappy home dominated by her father. She temporarily leaves home for university and then moves back home again after graduation. Ruby's addiction to her own mother situates her in the perpetual tension between being at home and not being at home; and her identity negotiation of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality also revolves around "home": coming home to her Chinese identity and culture while leaving home for Americanness and subjectivity.

The mother-daughter deformed symbiosis between Ruby and Bell is typically exemplified by Ruby's extraordinary physical and emotional attachment to Bell. From childhood, she always wants to touch her

mother's things, her mother's pretty arms, and even has the idea of marrying her mother. Moreover, Ng also manifestly describes Ruby's homoerotic desire for her mother:

Bell reached for Ruby's hand... They held hands, fingers interlaced, and her mother's hand in hers felt small and reminded her too much of the women she had fallen in love with and been rejected by. (Ng, 1998, p. 140)

Ruby associates her mother with the women she has homosexual sentiments to. The word "interlaced" hints a precarious sexual interaction with her mother, which is further enhanced by her dream of having sex with her mother:

Later, she dreamed she was having sex with her mother. Her mother was close to coming, but then her father woke up and was clearing his throat in the bathroom. Her mother pushed her off and said she had to go to work. (Ng, 1998, p. 168)

Some scholars have discussed Ng's portrayal of such a scene. For instance, Wenying Xu cites Foucault's remark in the context of the Western history of sexuality: "Incest was a popular practice... widely practiced among the populace, for a very long time. It was toward the end of the nineteenth century that various social pressures were directed against it" (qtd. in Xu, 2008, p. 153). Xu argues that by envisioning Ruby's incestuous fantasy for her mother, Ng destabilizes the taboo against incest, which is very likely to be agreed by Ng herself, with regard to her response to a reader's comment on her novel of being "grim": "That's the kind of aesthetic I relate to...I'm more interested in that sick world, that twisted-up stuff that's underneath family relations" (Cryer, 1998, p. B11).

Meanwhile, Bell is also emotionally attached to Ruby. After Ruby has graduated from high school, Bell insists that Rudy should stay at home and go to Queens College. Despite their mutual attachment to each other, Ruby is in fact ambivalent about her mother and her mother's house. On the one hand, Ruby ascribes Bell's pathetic life to Chinese patriarchal system, which results in women's submission to their husbands. She does not want to duplicate her mother's obedient womanhood and wishes to distinguish herself from her mother and be a regular American girl by leaving her mother's house, the symbol of patriarchal dominance. On the other hand, Chinese mother Bell symbolizes Chinese ancestral culture and the diasporic homeland that Ruby has never visited. Born and raised in America, Ruby naturally links her mother's house to a culturally different location, where her parents' traditional way of life reminds her of her socially inferior status in America. In a word, her mother's house behind the family laundry is a confusing site where Ruby begins her intricate negotiation of her ethnicity and gender identities.

Mother-Daughter Estrangement

Mother-daughter estrangement is a common type of mother-daughter dissonance in Chinese American fiction. While such estrangement is mainly ascribable to the language barrier and cultural difference between the two generations in both *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club*, that in *The Valley of Amazement* has less to do with cultural discrepancy. In this novel, Tan amazes the reader by envisioning mother-daughter estrangement in a different manner: her conventional first-generation immigrant mothers and second-generation Americanized daughters are replaced by white or mixed-race mothers/daughters. It is the mothers' lack of attention to their daughters that alienates them from their daughters; and her mother's house is a place without love and sweetness.

Specifically, Tan depicts the mother-daughter estrangement between two pairs of mothers and daughters: Harriet and her daughter Lucia, both white Americans as well as Lucia and her mixed-race daughter Violet. Firstly, Tan frames the estrangement between Harriet and Lucia in a middle-class American family in San Francisco at the end of the 19th century. Harriet is a scientist and her biggest interest is holding a magnifying glass to examine the dead insects in the amber for hours every day. Lucia talks about her mother's obsession with the dead insects with obvious disgust and contempt, saying that if she allowed her mother to guide her interests, she would wind up in an "asylum" (Tan, 2013, p. 438). Lucia firmly believes that her mother devotes more attention to the dead bugs than to her living daughter. Therefore, she is greatly surprised when her mother asks about her health when she is sick.

A few minutes later, Mother entered my room—a surprise—she rarely visited me here. She asked if I had caught an illness. Did I have a stomachache? Were there chills and fever? How strange that she took an interest in my symptoms. I think I have a fever, yes. (Tan, 2013, p. 455, my emphasis)

The underlined exclamatory sentence starting with "How strange" reveals Lucia's free indirect thought and highlights her astonishment and satire for the long-lost attention from her mother. Such stylistic feature enables the reader to have immediate access to Lucia's emotional fluctuation and easily sympathize with her, a girl who has been ignored by her mother for such a long time that her mother's unexpected attention seems to be so unconceivable.

Similar to what Lucia encounters with her mother, Violet is also deeply alienated from her mother Lucia, both of which stem from the mothers' lack of attention to their daughters. Tan portrays the estrangement between Violet and her mother Lucia in "Hidden Jade Path", a courtesan house run by Lucia in Shanghai as their "home" instead of the conventional setting of America, thus a major breakthrough in Tan's latest novel (Cai & Shi, 2017, p. 97). Lucia is a business woman and does not leave much time for Violet, who feels bitter loneliness in such a loveless home: "That house of flowers was my entire world. I had no peers or little American friends" (Tan, 2013, p. 2). Tan skillfully makes Violet become the first-person narrator-focalizer to "accuse" her mother of being negligent of her.

Mother had been too busy to eat her late-midday meal with me. She had to dash off to some unknown place to meet an unknown person... I had noticed that she was often too busy to pay any attention to me. Her gaiety and smiles were now reserved for the men at her parties. They were the ones she had hoped to see. (Tan, 2013, p. 27, 29, my emphasis)

As the first-person narrator-focalizer, Violet keeps complaining her mother of being "too busy"; "dash off" vividly depicts her mother's hurry to attend to something urgent, whilst the two "unknowns", loaded with satire, markedly illustrate her discontentment with her mother's priority for someone and something else. It is Violet's belief that her mother has given all her love and attention to her work. By utilizing first-person narration and focalization, Tan successfully delineates Violet's resentment with her mother's negligence and the consequent mother-daughter estrangement.

Mother-Daughter Conflict

Mother-daughter conflict constitutes another predominant type of mother-daughter dissonance in Chinese American fiction. As is aforementioned, mother-daughter conflict is deeply-entrenched in the cultural clash between the two generations in *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club*. By contrast, such conflict is ascribed

to different factors in *Everything I Never Told You* and *Little Fires Everywhere*. Mother-daughter conflicts in these two novels embody the oppositional stance between the two generations: while mothers nurture their daughters to comply with patriarchal or social norms, daughters revolt against their manipulation in various ways; and her mother's house signifies the bondage of women's individuality and subjectivity.

Everything I Never Told You and *Little Fires Everywhere* were both written by the emerging Chinese American woman writer Celeste Ng and were published in 2014 and 2017 respectively. The former tells the story about solving the mystery behind the death of a sixteen-year-old girl Lydia Lee, who grows up in a mixed-race family in Ohio in the 1970s. Ng in this novel constructs the acute mother-daughter conflict between a white mother's "institutionalized motherhood" and a white daughter's rebellion against it, which diversifies the mother-daughter dissonance in Chinese American fiction.

Doris Walker is iconic of the traditional motherly role in the patriarchal society. She teaches home ec for sophomore girls at a high school, asserting that it is a young lady's responsibility to keep a house and she is dedicated to keeping house too, although her husband has dumped her. In her favorite cookbook "Betty Crocker Cookbook", Doris carefully underlines the sentences about how to bake a pie and makes an egg to please a man. Not only does she strictly conform to the patriarchal norms, but also eagerly conditions her daughter Marilyn to follow the same code of conducts, leading to the severe conflict between them. Growing up in the 1960s and influenced by the women's liberation movement in the West, Marilyn strongly detests her mother's submission to male domination and desperately struggles to achieve personal success. Specifically, Marilyn is delineated as being highly satirical about her mother's home ec class:

a. So she had slouched in the back row of the home ec classroom, waiting out the first-day welcome speech her mother had given for a dozen years and drumming her fingers as her mother promised to teach them everything a *young lady* needed to keep a house. As if, Marilyn thought, it might run away when you weren't looking.

b. *Keeping house*, she had thought. Each day she watched her classmates, clumsy in thimble fingers, sucking the ends of thread, squinting for the needle's eye. (Ng, 2014, pp. 27-28, italics in original, underline mine)

In Excerpt a, Marilyn is characterized as being absent-minded in her mother's class and feeling bored, with reference to "slouched", "a dozen years", "drumming her fingers" and the italicized "young lady" with ironic tone. In Excerpt b, the word "clumsy", indicative of the shift to Marilyn's internal focalization, mocks the girls' silly gesture of doing the needlework. Moreover, the italicized "keeping house", her mother's pet phrase, loaded with satire, adequately highlights its centrality in her mother's class and life.

On the other hand, Marilyn intentionally messes up her housework to subvert her mother's discipline, such as tangling the thread when using the sewing machine and leaving eggshell fragments in the batter when making pancakes. All she does is meant to prove that she is not cut out for a submissive housewife. Moreover, Marilyn desires to be a doctor, a profession that is the male's preserve in her time and the "furthest thing she could imagine from her mother's life" (Ng, 2014, p. 30). Marilyn wants to free herself from the patriarchal ideologies of motherhood and achieve career success. All in all, it is the contradiction between Doris' alignment with patriarchal norms and Marilyn's rebellious spirit that sets them worlds apart.

In *Little Fires Everywhere*, Ng also describes the mother-daughter conflict between a white mother and a white daughter: it is Mrs. Richardson's strong desire to discipline her daughter to abide by the social norms and

Izzy's open subversion against her mother in search of freedom that situate them on oppositional sides. Their conflict has more to do with ethical choice between rules and freedom than with cultural discrepancy between the two generations, indicative of such characteristics as universality and de-racialization in Chinese American fiction in the new era.

Ng sets her story in a placid middle-class suburb called "Shaker Heights", a carefully planned community governed by rules: "There were rules, many rules, about what you could and could not do" (Ng, 2017, p. 10). Rules are even laid down for such trivialities as garbage collection and grass mowing to preserve the city outlook—these are the perfect testimony to the city's motto: "Most communities just happen; the best are planned" (Ng, 2017, p. 12). Mrs. Richardson is a typical personification of Shaker Heights: she devoutly follows these rules and lives a regimented life; she makes plans for everything and follows them strictly. In addition, she pressures her children into the same kind of perfect life, regardless of their different personality, putting herself in direct confrontation with her daughter Izzy, who seems to collide with her in every way.

As Mrs. Richardson's youngest child, Izzy is the most unpopular and unhappy one in the family: her mother constantly finds fault with her, her brother and sister tease her and her father is always absent. Izzy is characterized as a typical outlier as she is utterly deviant from the Shakers, opposite to her mother and rebels against the bonds of manipulation. The tension between Mrs. Richardson and Izzy can be traced back to the time when Mrs. Richardson is pregnant with Izzy and undergoes unprecedented sufferings. Later, Izzy's premature birth derails Mrs. Richardson's orderly life, giving her the "feeling of things spiraling out of control... like a muscle she didn't know how to clench" (Ng, 2017, p. 126). Therefore, Mrs. Richardson pays excessive attention to Izzy, always criticizing her behavior and amplifying her mistakes. However, Izzy does not become an obedient child as her mother wishes; instead, she resents her mother's undue attention and responds by "needling her mother even more, pushing her buttons with the expertise only a child could" (Ng, 2017, p. 104). As she grows up, Izzy begins to make her own ethical choices to pursue freedom and justice. She sneaks into the Humane Society to free all stray cats, because she feels sympathetic to them; she writes "NOT YOUR PUPPET" across her forehead before the stage performance to defy against her mother's coercing her to attend dance classes; and she gives all those colorful dresses bought by her mother to some homeless people on the street.

In fact, the confrontation between Mrs. Richardson and Izzy is deeply rooted in their ethical conflict. Mrs. Richardson desperately tries to restrict Izzy's behavior by authority and nurture her into a rule-abiding daughter, regardless of her peculiar personality traits. Izzy in turn reacts in extreme ways to subvert her mother's manipulation in search of her freedom and justice. The root cause of their ethical conflict is that Izzy's behaviors run counter to Shaker Heights' rules and are thus severely suppressed by Mrs. Richardson as the steadfast gatekeeper. In fact, Izzy's behaviors, albeit radical, are ascribable to her depressing growing environment—her mother's house without love and understanding. Without proper guidance, Izzy is very likely to become increasingly rebellious, waiting to completely rid herself from the overmastering imprisonment in her mother's house.

Conclusion

The new characteristics of mother-daughter narrative in post-1990s Chinese American fiction are emblematic of the shifts in the overall Chinese American literature in the new era, which are integrally linked to

America's changing socio-cultural situation and the writers' personal experiences. Born in the 1940s and 1950s, Kingston and Tan grew up in a relatively harsh social environment with serious racial and sexual discrimination that they endeavored to retaliate against in their early writing. Moreover, as the second-generation Americanized daughters, they tend to reconstruct their estrangement/conflict with their first-generation immigrant mothers due to the language barrier and cultural difference in their literary creation.

By contrast, Chinese American female writers of the new generation grew up in a more relaxed environment, so they are inclined to express more about individualistic living experience, which is particularly true with Mei Ng, the "Generation X" writer and Celeste Ng, the second generation of a middle-class new immigrant family. In the globalization context of multiculturalism, Amy Tan, Mei Ng and Celeste Ng attempt to experiment with diversified and border-crossing writing in terms of characterization, plot arrangement and themes. On top of the political and racial agendas, they attach more significance to issues of universal concern.

As the traditional preserve of mothers, "home" carries profound cultural connotations. In pre-1990s Chinese American fiction, home tends to be portrayed as the symbol of traditional Chinese culture that Americanized daughters cannot identify with; in post-1990s Chinese American fiction, though, the trope of home becomes more diversified in line with the new characteristics of mother-daughter dissonance. Mother-daughter stories narrated by Chinese American female writers center upon "homeplace" and epitomize their distinctive mothering experience. The study of these stories in post-1990s era sheds new insights into the trends of this motif, the changing connotations of "home" as well as the Chinese Americans' evolving living experiences in the new era.

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