

# On Multimodal Criticism of *The Kitchen God's Wife*\*

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Studying the covers of the three editions of *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Amy Tan, a famous female Chinese American writer, the author finds Chinese cultural elements stood out in publishers' earliest recommendations, but later were replaced by immigrant mother-daughter relationship, and then were overwhelmed by the concern for human beings. It is interesting that this change fits the changing focuses of Chinese American writers in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** multimodal analysis, Amy Tan, Chinese American female writer, *The Kitchen God's Wife*

## Introduction

The two female Chinese American novelists Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan are the most representative in terms of their stylistic features, which best represent the dual cultural identities of Chinese Americans. Their novels have been included in authoritative collections such as *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (7th edition) and *A Companion to American Literature* (2015), and these two women are the most studied Chinese American writers in American literature classes in China and the United States.

The research on the works of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan in China and English-speaking countries mainly focuses on the themes and characters, and there is little research on their formal characteristics. The purpose of this study is to explore the formal characteristics and their meaning potentials in *The Kitchen God's Wife* authored by Amy Tan from the perspective of multimodal stylistics.

This study finds that multimodality plays an important role in the three editions of Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*, because it is prominent both on covers and in the text. The paper argues that the multimodal presentations on the covers show the work has different meanings for readers with the passage of time. Specifically speaking, Chinese cultural elements stood out in publishers' and readers' earliest interpretations, but gradually they were less important than the themes like mother-daughter relationship in immigrant families, and then they were overwhelmed by the concern for human beings. It is interesting that this interpretation is in line with the changing focuses of Chinese American writers in the 21st century. The examination of the graphic mode chronologically employed in different editions, offers a model for "multimodal stylistics" pioneered by Nørgaard (2010a; 2010b).

## Theory and Typical Methods of Multimodal Stylistics

Traditional stylistics studies the meaning construction of literary works by applying various linguistic theories and pays little attention to the ideographic potential of modes which are not verbal language. With the

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development of multimedia technology and stylistic studies being expanded from literature to the nonliterary discourse, it is found to be necessary to combine the theory of stylistics with semiotics research, analyzing the meaning construction of verbal language and other modes (such as font, layout, images, colors, sounds, gestures, etc.) in discourses, thus a new branch of stylistics called multimodal stylistics came into being, which employs the approach to multimodal discourse proposed, for instance, by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) and Baldry and Thibault (2006). Multimodal stylistics, as an emerging stylistic branch in the 21st century, has demonstrated its potential in textual analysis in the following scholars' explorations. Nina N rgaard (2010a, p. 30) proposed the concept of "multimodal stylistics", and believed that multimodal stylistics was a new branch of stylistics that expanded the scope of stylistic analysis to modes and media beyond verbal language, and was a combination of stylistic theory with semiotic theory (N rgaard, 2011, p. 255). N rgaard believes that fonts, layouts, colors, and graphics in printed literary works participate in the construction of literary works' meaning, so it is necessary to construct a framework to study the modal grammar and the synergistic relationship between verbal and nonverbal modes.

Zhang and Mu (2012, p. 3) constructed an analytical framework of multimodal functional stylistics based on the theory of functional stylistics. The framework holds that multimodal discourse is a meaning unit which is the product of the speaker's choice of meaning according to the situational context and communicative purpose. Lei and Zhang (2015, p. 21) supplemented the above multimodal functional stylistic analysis framework, and proposed that multimodal covers have comprehensive characteristics because they have printing, layout, and color mode in addition to verbal mode and graphic mode, and in view of the restrictive relationship of the theme and style of the novel on the style and meaning of covers, put forward a research path to analyze the stylistic features of multimodal covers.

Many of Amy Tan's novels have been reprinted, often with different cover images. From the perspective of multimodal stylistics, these different embodiments of multimodality on covers show publishers' and readers' different understandings of the themes in different periods.

### **Multimodal Stylistic Approach to Covers of *The Kitchen God's Wife***

*The Kitchen God's Wife* was first published by Dove Entertainment Inc. in 1991. As we see in Figure 1, the cover of the 1991 edition features a very typical image of the Chinese Kitchen God. The cover picture includes not only the food that Chinese people often offer to the Kitchen God during the New Year, but also typical Chinese cultural images: Chinese teapots and teacups. The picture faithfully depicts the related image of the Chinese Kitchen God, in which Chinese people pay tribute to the Kitchen God and pray to him to protect the whole family. The verbal modes on the cover are both English and Chinese, indicating that the story in the novel is related to the encounter of Chinese and Western cultures. In Chinese folklore, the two Chinese characters 司命 on the cover, the pinyin of which is "Si Ming", mean being in charge of people's life and fate. The four Chinese characters on the top of the cover are in the order of ancient Chinese, which should be read from the right to the left as "司命灶君", the pinyin of which is "Si Ming Zaojun", meaning the god of kitchen, who is the god of food and drink in ancient Chinese myths and legends. The Chinese characters on the right and left are "有德能司火, 无私可达天", which is Chinese *antithetical couplet* used to praise the virtue and selflessness of the Kitchen God. Judging from the verbal and graphic mode analyzed above, readers are highly likely to think the novel is mainly about the wife of the Kitchen God in Chinese mythology. But, it's not that

simple because in addition to the Chinese characters and objects, there are also English words on the cover. In the English verbal mode, a line of information is attached below the author's name, that is: "Author of *The Joy Luck Club*", which establishes an intertextual relationship between this novel and *The Joy Luck Club*. Readers of *The Joy Luck Club* are likely to immediately recall the main plot of the novel, in which the mother tells her American born daughter her past in China so that the daughter can truly understand her and finally achieve reconciliation with the mother. So before opening the novel *The Kitchen God's Wife*, readers are likely to take the main plot narrated in *The Joy Luck Club* as the reference to imagine what *The Kitchen God's Wife* is about. Thus when readers take all the embodiments of the verbal and graphic mode on the cover into consideration, they may doubt that the novel is not about the story of the Kitchen God as it seems to be, but is probably about the encounter and clash of Chinese and Western cultures, perhaps still focusing on the mother-daughter relationship in the Chinese American family.

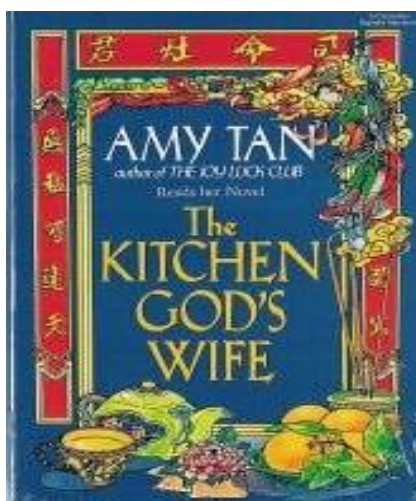


Figure 1. The cover of *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991) by Dove Entertainment Inc.

The cover of the 2004 edition published by Pearson in the UK is shown in Figure 2. In the place of the Chinese characters and the image of the Kitchen God in the previous version, there is an image of a long-haired young woman holding a little girl's hand. This image shows that the novel is mainly about the relationship between mother and daughter. The mother and daughter are presented in black shadows. We can only guess that they are an Asian mother and daughter by their black hair color, so the element that this graphic mode wants to highlight is the relationship between the Asian mother and daughter. In addition to graphic mode, the verbal mode on the cover is presented as "From the Bestselling Author of *The Valley of Amazement* and *The Joy Luck Club*", giving readers the hint that the book is perhaps related and similar to *The Valley of Amazement* and *The Joy Luck Club*. Like what is on the cover of the first edition, the verbal mode here establishes an intertextual relationship between *The Kitchen God's Wife* on the one hand and *The Valley of Amazement* and *The Joy Luck Club* on the other. Therefore, it is possible that the story in this novel also goes like this: the Chinese-American mother and daughter are the protagonists, and the mother and daughter reach mutual understanding through the mother's narration of the past. The combination of the verbal mode and the graphic mode of the mother and daughter shows that the novel is mainly about the story of the Chinese American mother and daughter.

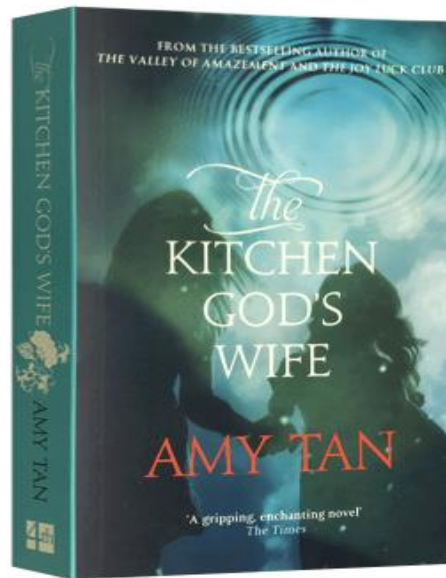


Figure 2. The cover of *The Kitchen God's Wife* (2004) by Pearson.

But, when examining the mother and daughter on the cover (Figure 2) and the mother and daughter image on the cover of the 2018 edition of *The Joy Luck Club* (Figure 3), we find the difference. The cover of the 2018 edition of *The Joy Luck Club* foregrounds the love of mother and daughter, with the silver-haired mother and a young daughter with long hair flowing down her shoulder embracing and leaning on each other. The cover of *The Kitchen God's Wife* (Figure 2), however, shows a young mother running with her little girl, looking up at the bright blue sky. This graphic mode represents not only the love between mother and daughter, but also the attitude towards life symbolized by the act of mother and daughter running towards the light. When we put these verbal and graphic mode together, we guess that although this novel is similar to *The Joy Luck Club* in telling the mother and daughter stories, it is different in its emphasis on the mother and daughter's worship of the sky symbolized by the Kitchen God's wife and hope for something good to happen in their life.

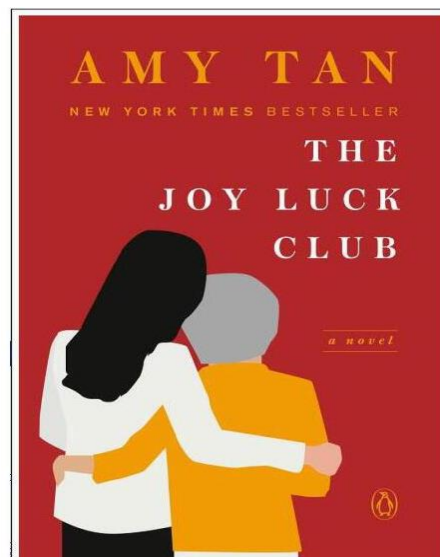


Figure 3. The Cover of *The Joy Luck Club* (2018) by Penguin Group.

### Conclusion

This paper is a multimodal stylistic analysis of Amy Tan's masterpiece *The Kitchen God's Wife*, analyzing the diachronic changes of the covers. In order to justify our understanding of the graphic mode on the cover and in the text, we analyze the verbal mode. This multimodal stylistic analysis conducted in this paper shows once again that the nonverbal modes can join hands with the verbal mode to express and enhance the thematic connotation of a literary work. In addition, since the meanings of nonverbal modes such as graphic mode are multiple, practitioners of multimodal stylistics had better combine the interpretation of verbal mode and nonverbal modes with that of other features in the work, preferably narrative structure, to make sure that the multimodal stylistic features are explained against the specific context and are thus reasonably interpreted.

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