

CREATING AN ASIAN-AMERICAN MYTHOLOGY:
STORYTELLING IN AMY TAN'S FICTION

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....ii

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION: HOW MYTH APPLIES
TO AMY TAN'S FICTION.....1

II. STORYTELLING AS COMMUNICATION:
ORAL TRADITION AND ITS PLACE
IN TAN'S NOVELS.....11

III. RE-MYTHOLOGIZING THE ASIAN-AMERICAN
EXPERIENCE: DECONSTRUCTION AND
RECONSTRUCTION OF CHINESE MYTHS.....31

IV. CULTURAL TENSION IN TAN'S NOVELS:
EVALUATING AND REJECTING
STEREOTYPES OF ASIAN AND
ASIAN-AMERICAN WOMEN.....57

V. FINDING A VOICE IN AMERICA:
DISPLACED MOTHERS, STRUGGLING
DAUGHTERS, AND THEIR STORIES.....80

VI. CONCLUSION: THE EMERGING
ASIAN-AMERICAN MYTHOLOGY.....97

LITERATURE CITED.....106

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION:

THE USES OF MYTH IN AMY TAN'S FICTION

During my junior year of college, one of my professors encouraged me to read *The Joy Luck Club*. My interests in ethnic literature, specifically Asian-American literature, had begun to emerge, and I was hungry for any piece of literature that would satisfy my need for a voice that shared my own experiences as an Asian-American woman. When I finished reading *The Joy Luck Club*, I realized that I had found a novel which contained stories about Asian-American women searching for a means to negotiate both their Asian heritage and dominant American culture, stories that represented my own cultural conflict. I could have easily told the same stories that belonged to the daughters in Amy Tan's first novel, and my mother could have replaced any one of the mothers. In addition, I came to the conclusion that Asian-American women such as myself needed to have these daughters' stories because we need a mythology, a group of stories that reflect the values of our society and represent common ideologies and interests. Amy Tan's narratives serve as this Asian-American mythology because each story represents a typical conflict which many Asian-Americans experience--the conflict of living in one society

and being influenced by it while the expectations of another society intrude with cultural demands and obligations. Also, these stories depict how Asian-Americans, like Tan's daughters, can overcome this cultural conflict by accepting both their Asian and American heritage.

Across cultures, human beings have always exhibited, and attempted to fulfill, a need for mythologies which reflect their ideologies and traditions. Moreover, mythology represents the need to establish identity through answering questions that have no obvious answers. Bill Moyers states in an interview with Joseph Campbell that he believes

Myths are stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance. We all need to tell our story and to understand our story. We all need to understand death and to cope with death, and we all need help in our passages from birth to life and then to death. We need for life to signify, to touch the eternal, to understand the mysterious, to find out who we are. (*The Power of Myth*, 5)

Moyers' comment indicates that mythology reflects humanity's desire to comprehend abstract concepts such as life and death. Although nearly every mythology answers similar questions about the origin of the universe, the origin of humankind, what occurs after death and so forth, each culture has different answers to these questions and

different myths that represent those answers. Also, a society's mythology, the way in which it answers abstract questions, reflect its cultural values and establishes a cultural identity.

Individuals look to myths to reinforce their cultural identity; however, when existing myths do not satisfy a society's cultural needs, the society must develop a mythology that suits it. For Asian-Americans, the process of developing a mythology includes rejecting American dominant culture and Asian myths and reconstructing them so that the ideologies reflected in the myths parallel Asian-American ideology. The resulting mythology incorporates ideas and traditions from both American and Asian cultures because Asian-American identity consists of being both Asian and American.

In Amy Tan's fiction, the Chinese-American daughters feel caught between the expectations of dominant American culture and traditional Chinese culture. Yet, neither can offer a single mythology that reflects the questions, struggles, attitudes, and traditions of the Chinese-American community. Chinese-Americans, like other Asian-Americans, form a hybridized society, one in which both American and Chinese cultural values must be acknowledged and accepted. Therefore, a need exists for an Asian-American mythology, one which incorporates the values of

the Asian-American community, without favoring or negating either Asian or American traditions. Asian-Americans need a hybridized mythology, one that illustrates their hybridized identity.

Yet, simply meshing Asian and dominant American myths into a single mythology is not adequate. In fact, some ideas expressed in traditional Asian and American myths, including stereotypes and patriarchal expectations, conflict with contemporary Asian-American needs. As a result, an Asian-American mythology must challenge existing mythologies and the ideas that they represent. Moreover, an Asian-American mythology must reconstruct those existing mythology to form one that includes both Asian and American traditions while depicting the cultural identity of the Asian-American community.

Asian-American writers often express identity struggles and cultural conflicts in their work. They seek to challenge misconceptions and stereotypes and find a voice that is uniquely both Asian and American. Amy Tan takes her work one step further, not only challenging both dominant American culture and traditional Chinese culture but also re-mythologizing certain stereotypes and myths to form a mythology that is uniquely Asian-American.

Mothers and daughters in Tan's fiction seek to find a voice and a place in American and Asian-American society.

The mothers, displaced from Chinese society for a variety of reasons but mainly because they are women, find themselves displaced in an Anglo-dominated society in the United States. However, they each have stories which are more than simple tales involving their personal history. These tales are a means of communication between mother and daughter. Although the daughters do not initially recognize the significance of the storytelling, the stories portray life experiences, wisdom, and a connection to the Chinese culture. In addition, the tales challenge Chinese patriarchal myths and traditional American stereotypes of Asians. Through the tales, readers see the mothers questioning ideologies and asserting themselves while finding a voice through the act of storytelling. As adults, the daughters then recognize the significance and meaning behind the tales. They also come to terms with their Asian-American identity, which includes incorporating their mothers' stories as part of their culture and heritage.

The different ways in which these tales work in relation to oral tradition, mother-daughter relationships, and mythological patterns all contribute to the re-mythologizing that Amy Tan has undertaken in her novels. The first two novels, *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, address popular Chinese myths, which are then

deconstructed and reconstructed and included in an Asian-American mythology. The final novel, *The Hundred Secret Senses*, does not allude to any specific myths. Rather, the entire novel is a collection of a personal mythology of its characters which, like the tales in Tan's previous novels, contributes to a new, Asian-American mythology with ties to the Chinese and American cultures.

In essence, the primary focus of my argument involves an examination of Amy Tan's use of re-mythologization in her three novels--*The Joy Luck Club*, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, and *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Each novel presents several basic elements which contribute to a rewriting of traditional Chinese myths and immigrant experience myths. These elements are oral tradition, cultural tension, mother-daughter relationships, and use of popular Chinese folktales; all these related elements show a relationship between displaced mothers attaining their voices and the need to find myths that negotiate the cultural conflicts of these Asian mothers and their Asian-American daughters. The chapters which follow discuss these elements in detail and address their significance in creating an Asian-American mythology.

In order to understand how myths function in Amy Tan's fiction, I must first define what I mean by the word myth and the context in which I intend to use it. Popular

notions of myth suggest that it primarily relates to stories about the supernatural, like the myths of Greeks, Romans, and Scandanavians--all of which contain an organized system of deities and explanations that reflect the culture's views on the inexplicable (i.e., creation, death, the afterlife, natural phenomena). Joseph Campbell states that a myth "helps you to put your mind in touch with this experience of being alive. It tells you what the experience is" (6). Campbell's inward, spiritual concept of mythology, foregrounds the interaction between the tales and the recipients of the tales.

For the purposes of my thesis, I will refer to myths in the traditional sense and in Joseph Campbell's terms. The Chinese myths of the Moon Lady and the Kitchen God are central to Amy Tan's fiction. These stories not only express a cultural ideology (particularly in terms of patriarchal attitudes) and contain references to deities and the supernatural, they also work on an internal level by reaffirming those cultural values. Tan's fiction presents these myths and deconstructs them in order to question the values that the original myths are supporting.

In addition, her works contain a personal mythology, one that embodies the mothers' life histories and experiences. Although these stories are not myths or folktales in the traditional sense, their function in the

novels and in terms of the characters' lives parallels the way a culture uses myths. In other words, the mothers attempt to share wisdom, folk knowledge (and this includes superstitions and the supernatural), and ideology with their daughters, and they use personal stories to accomplish this. The storytelling invoked by the mothers in these novels also parallels oral tradition and storytelling in preliterate cultures--when the myths and folktales were told, rather than read. The daughters in the novels are hearing these tales from their mothers and incorporating them into a personal mythology of their own--an Asian-American mythology.

Another usage of the word myth works especially well in terms of discussing cultural ideology and tension because myth also refers to untruths or lies. Amy Tan's novels clearly show women (both mothers and daughters) trapped between cultures as a result of myths or misconceptions. One common myth that Amy Tan indirectly addresses is the American Dream. Like many other immigrants, the mothers in Amy Tan's novels were hoping to live the American Dream once they immigrated. The concept of the American Dream is just one cultural myth that is deconstructed and redefined to fit the needs of a current, more diverse generation.

These various cultural myths, as well as traditional

Chinese myths, are addressed in the mother and daughter narratives in Amy Tan's novels. This thesis looks at the ways in which Tan utilizes oral tradition and how the mother daughter narratives create an Asian-American mythology. First, the mothers use oral tradition to transmit cultural and personal values to their daughters. In doing so, the daughters apply their mothers' wisdom to their own lives, actively taking control of their circumstances. As a result, Amy Tan's characters do not portray typical dominant culture expectations of Asian and Asian-American women. In this way, Tan challenges Western stereotypes and reconstructs the identity of the Asian-American. Moreover, Tan deconstructs and reconstructs traditional Chinese myths as a way of creating an Asian-American mythology. This mythology is necessary for the daughter in her fiction to negotiate their mothers' culture and their own American culture.

Amy Tan's fiction alone is not representative of all Asian-American literature, and her characters do not speak for every Asian-American individual. However, the themes and struggles presented in her fiction as well as her characters represent the experiences of many Asian-American writers and individuals experience and do address their need to construct an identity that includes both Asian and American cultural ideals. As a Korean-American, I identify

with the characters' identity crises and desire to fit into a culture that combines two separate ethnicities, ideologies, and traditions. And as a woman, I feel the need to discard oppressive patriarchal attitudes in favor of a more inclusive mythology. Amy Tan's mothers and daughters experience and strive to attain what Asian-Americans such as myself work hard to achieve.

Rather than simply presenting situations involving cultural tension, Amy Tan, through oral and mythical connections to the Chinese and American cultures, gives readers a glimpse into an Asian-American mythology, a culture comprised of two separate, often opposing ideals. This is not to say that anyone not of Asian descent can enjoy her fiction. Rather, the mythical element of Tan's novels allows anyone of any culture to connect to her characters, to notice real-life situations in her novels and see how the characters resolve cultural and familial conflicts.

CHAPTER II

STORYTELLING AS COMMUNICATION:

ORAL TRADITION AND ITS PLACE IN TAN'S NOVELS

In any oral culture, the storytelling transmits cultural values to a group of listeners, and in Amy Tan's novels storytelling is used for this purpose. The mothers understand this function of storytelling and use it to provide their daughters with a connection to Chinese culture as well as a method for passing on their personal values and advice. In addition, these narratives illustrate the mothers' displacement in American society as well as the daughters' struggle to form an Asian-American identity. Storytelling is the *most effective* means for the mothers to share their personal histories and "all [their] good intentions" (*The Joy Luck Club*, 4).

As a result of listening to their mothers' stories, the daughters take action in their own lives by taking control of circumstances and, most importantly, accepting the hyphenated, bi-cultural role of Asian-American. In order for this acceptance to occur, the daughters must first view their mothers as strong individuals and acknowledge the validity of the advice they express in their narratives. Additionally, they must accept their mothers' culture as

part of their own. Finally, they must take reconstructed Chinese myths and incorporate them into their own Asian-American mythology. All these events happen within the context of storytelling, and I discuss these individually in later chapters. In this chapter, I will discuss the nature of storytelling in Tan's novels, its significance to mother-daughter relationships, and the themes that the stories reflect.

In the past, cultures have relied on orality as a primary means of transmission and preservation. Tribes and groups retain their genealogies, histories, and values through oral tradition. With the emergence of print culture, the use of oral tradition has diminished. Although orality exists in the form of contemporary rituals, speeches, and storytelling as an art form, it is not seen as the *only* means of passing on information from person to person, generation to generation. Instead, as Walter J. Ong claims, a "secondary orality" exists in the "present-day high-technology culture" through "telephone, radio, television, and other electronic device that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print" (11). Orality in Amy Tan's novels--as presented through the mothers' stories--is not secondary orality. The mothers live in a print-based culture, but due to linguistic barriers, they must depend on a tradition of

primary orality because storytelling, as it existed before print-based culture, is the only means which they can transmit and preserve cultural values, personal advice, and their own life stories. The mothers rely on primary orality because they read little or no English, and their daughters cannot read Chinese. Sharing information orally is the best option due to these linguistic barriers. In addition, the mothers choose storytelling because, as children, they grew up listening to tales. Storytelling is not only familiar to them but is appropriate when sharing their personal histories to their daughters. Everyday conversation and nagging prevents the mothers and daughters from listening to each other, but when the mothers engage in storytelling, their daughters hear them for the first time.¹

In Amy Tan's three novels, the tales are primarily of the storytellers' personal histories, unlike traditional fairytales (both Western and Asian) which usually include instances of the supernatural, strange creatures, or fantastical events. Like traditional folktales, Tan's narratives contain cultural themes and motifs. In traditional Chinese folktales, themes and motifs reflect

...the display of Chinese values. Some of these common themes are: the triumph of justice over injustice; the supremacy of wisdom over sheer physical strength; examples of cleverness or resourcefulness; examples of filial piety or

examples of moderation--to mention just a few. These are all important Chinese values which are passed from one generation to the next through the telling of folktales. (Federation of Chinese Canadians in Scarborough)

In Amy Tan's novels, the motifs and themes revolve around mother-daughter relationships and cultural identity struggles, and the purpose of the mothers' narratives parallel the purpose of traditional folktales: the transmission of cultural values. Additionally, the tales reflect the mothers' personal values. The mothers share the belief that the daughters can be active agents in their own lives and they wish for their daughters to "have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character" (*The Joy Luck Club*, 289).

As in traditional myths, the narratives in Tan's novels depict several themes and motifs which contribute to their mythological structure. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the narratives are grouped thematically. The novel is divided into four sections, each of which portrays a theme involving the mothers' or the daughters' cultural identity struggle. Furthermore, the title and the opening allegory of each section illustrate the section's theme. Each prologue narrative includes an unnamed mother and daughter because the prologue represents the various characters and their situations in *The Joy Luck Club*. The unnamed mother and daughter symbolically represent the named

mothers and daughters in the novel. The opening allegory that precedes the first section, "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away," introduces the theme of cultural displacement. A mother tells about the journey from China to America and how she wishes for her daughter to have the best of both worlds. The narratives in this section present the mothers' displacement in a foreign country and the conflicts they face between their own Chinese tradition and their daughters' American tradition.

The second section entitled "The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates" portrays the daughters' resistance to their mothers' culture. The prologue contains a scenario in which a mother gives her daughter advice, which is contained in a book called *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates*. Because the daughter cannot read the Chinese text, the mother tells her daughter about the dangers explained in the book. The daughter's refusal to listen to her mother's advice parallels the situation between the mothers and daughter in *The Joy Luck Club*. Because the daughters have no direct connection to Chinese values, linguistically or otherwise, the mothers must resort to storytelling, but the daughters refuse to listen to these stories. This section's theme perfectly illustrates the mother-daughter conflicts present in Tan's subsequent novels, *The Kitchen God's Wife* and *The Hundred Secret Senses*.

Titled, "American Translation," the third section presents the theme of the daughters' personal and cultural identity struggles. In the prologue, a mother admonishes her daughter for placing a mirror at the foot of the bed. The mother then places a mirror above the bed, so that the reflection of the two mirrors will "'multiply [the daughter's] peach blossom luck'" (159). The mother explains that in the mirror above the bed lies her future grandchild. When the daughter looks into the mirror, she sees her own reflection. This opening narrative indicates the daughter's inability to see herself as an agent of her own circumstances. Like the named daughters in the novel, the unnamed daughter does not expect to see herself in the mirror because she does not see herself in control of her life. In showing her daughter her own reflection, the mother intends to make her daughter realize that she is responsible for and can control the circumstances of her own future. Metaphorically, the daughter will give birth to the future; she has the ability to control future circumstances. Moreover, the child symbolizes hope, which the daughter must find in herself. The daughters in the novel, like the daughter in the prologue, do not look for hope in the future until their mothers tell them where to look; they do not take action in their lives until they listen to their mothers' stories.

The fourth and final section, "Queen Mother of the Western Skies," represents the mothers' desire for their daughters to avoid the life of displacement and heartache which they experienced. In the prologue narrative, a grandmother admits to her baby granddaughter that she "'threw away [her] foolish innocence to protect [her]self" and taught her daughter to do the same. She does this in the hope that her daughter would not suffer the way she has. Like the mothers in the novel, this woman knows that her daughter must retain hope when she loses her innocence. When the daughters in the novel face an ugly situation, they must learn to act in their own best interests. Unlike their mothers, they can choose to be active and make decisions. These choices not only include leaving an abusive relationship but embracing one's status of Asian-American, as the individual narratives illustrate.

The same themes emerge in Tan's later novels as in *The Joy Luck Club*. For instance, in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie's story describes her first marriage to an abusive misogynist and how she takes action in her own life to escape the marriage. Her is motivated to tell this story by her desire to disclose a shameful secret. Clearly, the story's theme centers around taking control of one's circumstances, and Pearl's response to the story is no surprise. She discloses her own secret about having

multiple sclerosis and decides to fight the circumstances, taking a cue from her mother's strength. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Kwan's narratives revolve around events from her past lives. When Kwan finally reaches the end of her narrative, Olivia realizes that Kwan's purpose is to show that "truth lies not in logic but in hope, both past and future" (398). Kwan's stories tell Olivia that her fears have blinded her from realizing that she must look to hope and not logic.

One of the major themes found within the stories, which is pertinent to an Asian-American mythology, concerns the mothers' displacement in American society. This displacement is problematized in the mother's language, "broken English," which emphasizes their exclusion from the dominant discourse. Victoria Chen observes that

Speaking a language is inherently political. In the case of Chinese American women, while straddling and juggling along the fault lines of gender and culture, the truth is that the two Englishes that Tan cherished [in her essay "Mother Tongue"] are not valued equally in this society. ...Through Tan's storytelling in *The Joy Luck Club*, the meaning of "perfect English" is transformed from the mother's naive American dream to the daughter's awakening bicultural disillusionment. (4)

Here, Chen alludes to an essay Amy Tan wrote about the different Englishes she uses and how they fit into dialogue in *The Joy Luck Club*. In her two following novels, Tan

employs the same dialect for the Chinese mothers. Although the daughters in Tan's novels comprehend their mothers' speech, much of the dominant culture in America would not understand it. While the mothers' limited linguistic skills hinder communication with their daughters only in terms of cultural meanings and nuances, the daughters still understand the literal meanings of their mothers' statements. However, the mothers' "broken English" marginalizes them from the dominant discourse. They realize this and wish for their daughters to "speak only perfect American English" (*The Joy Luck Club* 3).

Yet, as the daughters discover, speaking perfect American English does not guarantee acceptance by dominant American culture. They remain trapped between two cultures until they accept their hybridized role of Asian-American. In the essays "My Mother's English" and "The Language of Discretion," Tan discusses her mother's and her own personal cultural dilemma with bilingualism, as well as linguistic and cultural barriers between Chinese immigrants and the dominant discourse. For Chinese (and other ethnic) immigrants, learning to speak like the dominant culture poses linguistic and cultural obstacles. The inability to speak standard, grammatically correct English marginalizes these immigrants and separates them from the dominant discourse. Anyone who cannot speak perfect American

English is accused of speaking "broken English" or "limited English." As Amy Tan points out in "Mother Tongue,"

Like others I have described it [her mother's English] as broken or fractured English, but I wince when I say that. It has always bothered me that I can think of no other way to describe it than broken, as if it were damaged or needed to be fixed, that it lacked a certain wholeness or soundness to it. I've heard other terms used, "Limited English" for example. But they seem just as bad, as if everything is limited, including people's perceptions of the Limited English speaker. (190)

Tan emphasizes the relationship between the dominant culture's perception of immigrants' mental capabilities and how it classifies their linguistic skills. Referring to an individual's skills as "limited" or "broken" not only makes a statement about how well a person can or cannot speak English but it also indicates acceptance or rejection by a society. The terms "limited" and "broken" signify that an individual's linguistic skill lack in terms of dominant culture expectations. Claiming that a group speaks "broken" English marginalizes it and indicates rejection by the dominant culture.

In response to the dominant culture's perception of immigrants and their use of English, Tan asserts that no standard of measurement exists to record what she hears in her mother's language. She states,

I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with... and what I imagined

to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English nor a Chinese structure. I wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts. (194)

Unlike the dominant culture which categorizes non-native speakers' use of English as limited or broken, Amy Tan not only comprehends her mother's statements but sees imagery, passion, and intent, which transcends into the mothers' narratives in her fiction. The mothers' inability to use grammatically correct, standard English, does not prevent them from sharing events, desires, emotions, and cultural values in their stories. In addition, the daughters, once ready to listen to their mothers' stories, can comprehend them easily, regardless of the mothers' use of English.

The nature of oral tradition allows speaker and audience to interact with one another on a more personal level. For instance, the mothers use the tales as a way of communicating personal histories and wisdom learned from experience. Telling a story in their native language allows the mothers to communicate with daughters who understand spoken Chinese but cannot read it. Additionally, for the mothers, storytelling is a tradition that is familiar to them. As children, their own mothers, nannies, and aunts told them stories--traditional

folktales, scandals, personal narratives. As a result of linguistic barriers and cultural tradition, storytelling remains the best method of communication between mothers and daughters in Tan's fiction.

An outcome of this interactive relationship between teller and listener, mother and daughter, is the response the tale evokes. For the tale to carry any significance, the listener has the responsibility of comprehending the meaning of the tale. Moreover, the listener has an obligation to respond in some way. Or, as Rafe Martin states

Told tales, after all, aren't neutral but come to us filtered through a teller's background, through his or her insight, emotion, and personality, and through his or her body and voice. And told stories *require* that their listeners *respond*. (143)

The mothers' narratives are not neutral stories. Previous experiences, personal beliefs, and cultural values shape how the mothers tell their stories and *what* they choose to tell.

Likewise, in order for the tale to carry any power, the storyteller must share the story, and the audience must respond in some fashion--through acknowledgment, emotions, or actions. In Tan's novels, the daughters' response to the mothers' tales appear in the form of acknowledgment and action. For the daughters in *The Joy Luck Club*, taking

action means leaving an abusive relationship in one story or in another story, accepting the hyphenated role of Asian-American. Pearl, in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, responds to her mother's tale by revealing a secret of her own. When Olivia finishes listening to Kwan's story, she reconciles with her husband and embraces her Chinese heritage.

Linguistic and cultural barriers, generational gaps, and childhood rebellion all contribute to the young daughters' inability to truly listen and respond to their mothers' tales. As children, the daughters refuse to listen to the stories, seeing no value or significance in them. Conversations with their mothers usually leads to a conflict because the daughters do not want to listen to their mothers' advice. In turn, the daughters do not want to share any personal information with their mothers. For example, in *The Joy Luck Club*, Waverly (who is only one example from this novel) refuses to tell her mother about her boyfriend Rich, assuming that her mother would disapprove and begin to nag her. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Pearl hesitates to tell her mother about her disease. And in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Olivia tries to ignore Kwan and keep any personal details to herself.

The daughters' withholding foregrounds their personal conflicts with their mothers and their cultural identity

struggle. They refuse to share personal details because they believe their mothers will not understand, due to cultural and generational differences. Beyond this generational conflict lies a cultural identity struggle in which the daughters must learn to accept both their mothers' Chinese culture and the dominant American culture as part of an Asian-American identity. Gloria Shen notes

To the daughters, cultural and ethnic identity is possible only when they can fully identify themselves with their mothers through their maturation into womanhood. The sharing of cultural experiences between mothers and daughters through the device of storytelling transforms structurally isolated monologues into meaningful dialogues between mother and mother, daughter and daughter, and, more important, mother and daughter.... (235-236)

So, until these daughters can overcome generational differences with their mothers and accept their mothers' culture as part of their own, the daughters will remain in conflict with their mothers and their mothers' culture. Storytelling serves to bridge both the cultural and generational gap between mothers and daughters.²

As adults, the daughters respond differently to their mothers' stories. As children, these daughters refuse to listen or they undermine the significance of the tales. As adults, however, the daughters are ready to listen and respond to the stories for a variety of reasons. For example, in *The Joy Luck Club*, the daughters find

themselves powerless in a situation. Listening to their mothers' stories encourages these daughters to take action because they learn that they have the ability to control their lives. The four mothers have shared their advice a number of times, but the daughters can only benefit from the narratives during moments of weakness. When Pearl listens to her mother's narrative in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, she does so because her mother has an important secret to tell, one that could not be told when Pearl was a child. After she hears the story, Pearl gains the strength to tell her own secret. The story is told in one sitting, with little interruption, an indication of the mother's readiness to tell the tale and the daughter's willingness to hear it.

Storytelling in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, on the other hand, is interrupted and fragmented. These parts may seem like several tales, yet when Kwan finally concludes her storytelling, Olivia realizes that these fragments comprise an entire story about the two characters' past lives. Kwan's narratives mean nothing to Olivia until she travels to China and listens to the completion of the story. At this point, Olivia is an adult and is ready to listen to the tale in its entirety. What is unusual about this novel is that the listener, Olivia, is an active character in the stories Kwan tells. Yet, since these

stories are about previous experiences in a former life, Olivia does not remember the details and must not only be reminded of the events, she must be told the wisdom and meaning behind the story. In these examples, each daughter must be ready to listen to her mother's story. This readiness does not occur until the daughters reach adulthood and until they need to hear their mother's story. Both circumstances must be met in order for the daughters to be fully ready to listen to their mothers' tales.

Without the stories, the daughters would have no connection to their mothers and a culture from which they are at least partially separated. Not only do the daughters eventually acknowledge the tales and the wisdom found in them, they incorporate them into a personal and collective Asian-American mythology--one that bridges gaps between two conflicting traditions (a dominant culture and a minority culture).

Storytelling in Amy Tan's novels reinforces mother-daughter bonds. Not only is it the most accessible form of communication due to language barriers, but it is a way for mothers and daughters to learn about one another. The mothers use oral tradition to tell their daughters secrets and information that no one else knows. This information exchange is not one-way. The daughters, once they finally realize that their mothers' stories are valid and that they

must tell their mothers about themselves.

The daughters never reach a point where they tell their mothers complete stories, but each piece of information is a beginning in the ritual of tale-telling. The daughters' positive responses to their mothers' tales allow them to communicate with one another and to maintain a relationship with each other. The daughters actively engage in a relationship with their mothers, truly learning to take control of various situations. Rather than being victimized by circumstances, the daughters take an assertive role in making decisions about their lives.

The daughters learn to appreciate their mothers' stories and share more of their personal lives with their mothers. The storytelling ritual begun by the mothers encourages trust and interaction between the mothers and daughters, and perhaps these daughters will tell stories to their own children. The storytelling provides the mothers with a voice that allows them to tell their daughters about Chinese values and their personal histories. Orality enables these mothers to share their stories. Furthermore, storytelling furnishes the daughters with a cultural voice. As author and storyteller, Amy Tan narrates the daughters' Asian-American stories. In effect, the daughters' stories are being told to a world-wide audience.

Although many traditional folktales have been

preserved in a written format (and these novels are obviously included in the written category), the roots of the mothers' stories in Amy Tan's novels lie with oral and aural tradition. That is, they were originally meant to be spoken and heard by an audience. The storytellers' tales in Tan's novels also have a style and pattern consistent with oral tradition. The mothers tell their daughters these stories, and Amy Tan presents the stories as if they were spoken aloud. This is most noticeable in *The Joy Luck Club* where the novel's structure compares to a collection or anthology of folktales and personal narratives. Readers can certainly visualize the characters engaging in the storytelling as one character shares with another character--teller and audience.

The method of telling stories orally is a choice, not a requirement. Although they are coming out of a culture where oral tradition is held in high esteem, the mothers in Amy Tan's fiction must utilize it because it is the best means of communication with their daughters. The language barriers make orality the only option for the mothers, and the mothers choose to use storytelling as a way of transmitting personal and cultural values. This form of tale-telling is not limited nor does it inhibit the mothers when sharing secrets, personal information, and wisdom. Oral tradition, in fact, liberates the mothers, and gives

them an opportunity to share their stories when no other medium suffices.

Notes

¹ See Chapter V for a detailed discussion about storytelling and mother-daughter relationships.

² See Chapter V for a detailed discussion about storytelling and mother-daughter relationships.

CHAPTER III

RE-MYTHOLOGIZING THE ASIAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE: DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF CHINESE MYTHS

In *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, various references to Chinese myths appear within the mothers' narratives. *The Joy Luck Club* alludes to the myths of the Moon Lady and the Queen Mother of the West. *The Kitchen God's Wife* addresses the myth from which Tan took her title: the myth of the Kitchen God. These tales are well-known stories in Chinese mythology, and rituals celebrate these deities. Amy Tan exposes a darker side of the tales; she analyzes and deconstructs them in order to show how these myths can no longer maintain the illusions they once held. In addition, Tan reconstructs the myths, creating new stories for displaced Asian mothers and their Asian-American daughters. Hence, she has re-mythologized the Asian-American experience by drawing upon the old tradition and rewriting the folktales to make them more realistic and more applicable to the characters and to readers.

Throughout *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan utilizes oral tradition and stories exchanged between mothers and daughters to create a mythology within the novel. These stories, chiefly about the mothers' histories and

experiences, allow the mothers to communicate personal and cultural values to their daughters. In other segments of the novel, Tan actually introduces folktales from Chinese mythology, but these tales are distorted; they do not exist within a collection of typical Chinese myths. Instead, the folktales sprinkled throughout *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife* illustrate themes and symbols connected to the storytellers'--the mothers'--histories and lives. These myths also serve to dispel traditional stereotypes and illusions that exist in an anglo-dominated society.

For instance, in *The Joy Luck Club*, Ying-Ying St. Clair recounts the myth of the Moon Lady, recalling a time in her childhood when she attended the Moon Festival, became separated from her family, and then came upon a drama depicting the myth. In Chinese folklore, the Moon Lady, or Chang O, is a mortal woman who steals the pill (also referred to as a peach or elixir) of immortality from her husband. Her husband discovers what she has done and chases her to the moon, where she is forced to live (Werner 184-185). On the night of the Moon Festival, she is said to grant secret wishes. Some versions of this tale suggest that Chang O and her husband Yi were once immortals who were banished to earth. The Queen Mother of the West gave Yi the elixir to share with his wife, but she grew impatient and disobeyed her husband's orders to wait (Knapp

193).

As a child, Ying-Ying comes upon the little stage where the Moon Lady's drama is portrayed according to Chinese legend. She is caught up by the story of this woman who was "'flung from the earth by [her] own wantonness'" (*The Joy Luck Club* 81). Crying and emotional, Ying-Ying "did not understand her entire story [but] understood her grief" (82). She identifies with the Moon Lady character at this moment because she has lost her family and feels alone. Her sense of despair increases when she attempts to receive a secret wish from the Moon Lady. As she walks closer to the woman, Ying-Ying's illusion of the kind and beautiful Moon Lady deconstructs immediately. She sees that her face had

shrunken cheeks, a broad oily nose, large glaring teeth, and red-stained eyes. [It was] a face so tired that she wearily pulled off her hair, her long gown fell from her shoulders. And as the secret wish fell from [her] lips, the Moon Lady looked at [her] and became a man. (83)

As an adult, when she is telling this story, Ying-Ying tries to remember what it was that she asked the Moon Lady and discovers that she, like the Moon Lady, "wished to be found" (83).

Clearly, Ying-Ying identifies herself with the Moon Lady because they are both displaced women in exile. Yet when the character in the drama is revealed to be a man,

the illusion of a beautiful, mournful ally is shattered. The Moon Lady is no longer the last hope for a secret wish, even for "'a small monetary donation'" (82). Ying-Ying's perspective of the Moon Lady changes from "beautiful, ablaze with the light from a dozen kerosene lamps" to a hideous, unexpected image. As she moves closer to the Moon Lady, she notices physical attributes that she could not see under the illusion of the drama. The drama hides the dark nature of the Moon Lady myth. When Ying-Ying realizes that the character is really a man, all her hope in the Moon Lady vanishes.

Amy Tan has taken this myth from Chinese folklore and rewrites the myth, presenting it not as one of many stories indigenous to a culture but in light of a personal narrative of an individual or a displaced segment of the larger culture--in this case, the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club*. Ying-Ying identifies with the Moon Lady as a child and as an adult. She learns the Moon Lady cannot grant any secret wishes because she is only a legend, a false character in a drama, and so the power of the myth is destroyed. The Moon Lady tale is no longer a story but a story about displaced Asian mothers who "wish to be found." The illusion of the story, like the illusion of the Moon Lady in the drama, is thus destroyed.

Readers familiar with *The Joy Luck Club* know that

Ying-Ying remains lost and displaced in adulthood. She is married to a kind, yet unaware, Caucasian man, a man who does not know the traumatic past Ying-Ying has suffered. Ying-Ying exemplifies a reversal of the "good mother/good wife" figure in mythology and folklore. The figure of the "good mother/good wife" appears in the tales of many cultures, and she is just one persona defining the figure of the Great Mother. This Great Mother figure is also an Earth Mother symbol--the epitome of femininity and motherhood. Her role is to give birth, nurture her children, and then release them into the world. If she rejects her role, she becomes a "terrible mother," a woman characterized as a witch or a whore (Neuman 21). In Western, Judeo-Christian mythology, the figure is often associated with the Virgin Mary. Patriarchal societies, including Chinese society, expect all women to fulfill the role of the "good mother/good wife."

Ying-Ying St. Clair *appears* to be the "good mother/good wife." She is subservient and fulfills the needs of her husband, faithfully taking care of their only son although her husband is unfaithful and disrespectful. However, when she can no longer remain in this abusive relationship, she decides to act against her role as the "good mother/good wife." She recognizes that the "good mother/good wife" image is sexist and unfair.

In comparison, the Moon Lady in Chinese mythology does not fit the characteristics of the good wife symbol. She disobeys her husband and steals the pill of immortality (some versions indicate that it is a peach or an elixir of immortality) from her husband. As a result, she must remain in exile on the moon for her misconduct. She has discarded the expected female role, and according to one version of the original Chinese tale, she was fated to disobey her husband (Werner 185). Other versions indicate that both she and her husband were to share immortality, and Chang O, in her impatience, decided to drink the elixir first. When her husband walks in on her, she panics and tries to fly to heaven.

In addition, other symbols appear in the tale which link the Moon Lady to traditional women's roles and concepts of femininity. An example of this occurs in the hare's appearance in the original myth and its association with the moon. The hare symbolizes immortality; its reproductive structure allows it to constantly propagate, giving the appearance of "birth, death, and rebirth--or immortality" (Knapp, 194). Although Chang O attains immortality, she receives it at a cost--banishment and exile and the inability to leave her new home.

Ch'ang-O's forced residence on the moon--a virtual incarceration for her--was, according to some scholars, her punishment for her impulsive

and thoughtless theft of a brew which she had not the wisdom to handle. (195)

Despite the differences in the way the Moon Lady and Ying-Ying accept traditional gender roles, parallels can be drawn between these two figures, especially when Ying-Ying realizes that the patriarchal model is deficient and destructive. Although Ying-Ying initially follows the "good mother/good wife" model, she later rebels when the model does not prove to be in her best interests. Chris Boldt states,

Ying-Ying is discovered by her family but never really found. She will play her role, wear her clothes, be chosen by a husband, and become "pretty for him." But though she tries to accept her position, much as she tried to clean her blood-splattered clothes, her true nature, however repressed, cannot be concealed. (10)

Like the Moon Lady, Ying-Ying cannot remain as the subservient "good wife." Repeatedly abused by her first husband, she rebels and kills his only son.

Additionally, Ying-Ying realizes that her silence and her acceptance of the subservient wife role have affected her daughter's self-image. She opens her narrative by stating, "For all these years I kept my mouth closed so selfish desires would not fall out. And because I remained quiet for so long now my daughter does not hear me" (64). Ying-Ying understands that her silence has made communication difficult with her daughter Lena. Without

open communication, Lena cannot hear her mother's stories and advice and gain the knowledge she needs to have a positive self-image. What Lena does not know and what Ying-Ying clearly sees is that they "are lost... unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others" (64). Yet, although Ying-Ying continues to feel lost, to feel the need to be found, she knows that her daughter's survival in a patriarchal society means that she must stand up for herself and refuse the "good mother/good wife" model.

Unfortunately, Lena has already begun to follow the traditional, subservient gender model. Lena's husband does not treat her with respect, and she remains silent, taking on the "good wife/good mother" role that her mother and other women have portrayed. During a visit to Lena's house, Ying-Ying notices evidence of a conflict between Lena and her husband, a conflict that Lena refuses to acknowledge openly or resolve. She notes that "They say words that mean nothing. They sit in a room with no life in it" (287). Ying-Ying also understands that Lena must come to terms with her situation, instead of remaining silent. Lena "will hear the vase and table crashing to the floor. She will come up the stairs into my room. Her eyes will see nothing in the darkness, where I am waiting between the trees" (287). Like a tiger waiting in the

trees, hidden until someone or something comes upon it, Ying-Ying will wait until her daughter finally notices her mother's survival instinct which enables her to survive abusive circumstances. When Lena learns about her mother's stories, she takes that knowledge and sheds the "good wife/good mother" role.

Ironically, the consequences of the Moon Lady's actions and the possible consequences of her own actions remain constantly in Ying-Ying's mind. In her second marriage, she is merely a shell of a woman, self-banished in a world of her own guilt and misery. Although she loves her husband Clifford, she states that her love "was the love of a ghost. Arms that encircled but did not touch. A bowl full of rice but without my appetite to eat it" (286). Ying-Ying has left a destructive relationship only to find herself broken and unable to fully appreciate a kinder husband. In this second marriage, Ying-Ying finds herself unable to communicate with her husband. In a sense, she remains banished like the Moon Lady because, although she physically sees and remains with her husband, she has no real emotional connection to him. He does not know about her abusive first husband nor is he aware of the dead child.

Another interesting aspect of the Moon Lady tale indicates a conflict with gender. Not only is the Moon

Lady herself in conflict with her husband but Ying-Ying's relationship with both her first and second husbands depicts strife between the gender roles. Clearly, gender conflicts exist when a woman does not accept the model of the "good mother/good wife." The Moon Lady's tale and its connection to Ying-Ying's personal history indicates to readers how the tale and traditional female roles are being challenged. In Chinese mythology, the Moon Lady disobeyed her husband's order to keep away from the pill of immortality. When she swallowed the pill, she felt "that she was freed from the operation of the laws of gravity... as if she had wings" (Werner 185). Thus, the Moon Lady feels a sense of liberation when she casts off the "good mother/good wife model." The Moon Lady challenged her husband's authority, yet the patriarchal society does not recognize her liberated actions as valid or worthy (although her actions evoke some sympathy from the God of the Immortals). In fact, the God of the Immortals rewards the Moon Lady's husband, giving him the Palace of the Sun. His place is on the sun, a much higher and more noble station than the moon.

Curiously, the aspect of gender appears in the fragmented and distorted drama of the Moon Lady. Readers cannot ignore that the character of the Moon Lady is actually a man in disguise. The obvious significance of

switching gender roles exists in light of the women's refusal to accept the patriarchal model, and what is even more important is that Ying-Ying has reached a point (when the Moon Festival instance has occurred) when she is expected to behave not as a child but as a responsible young woman. As Chris Boldt suggests, the Moon Festival incident marks a transition for Ying-Ying, when she must begin acting like a lady and forsake her boyish ways (8). Behaving like a woman means remaining passive, quiet, inactive. She can no longer mess up her pretty clothes running and playing with other children.

The gender transformation at the end of the Moon Lady drama indicates a reversal, visually, of what Ying-Ying is expected to do. Additionally, it indicates, more specifically, the masculine nature of the Moon Lady's actions. By stealing what belonged to her husband, the Moon Lady has asserted a sense of authority over immortality and her life. She has attempted to place herself in a higher station, even that of her husband. So, in essence, she has acted like a man. Unfortunately, because she is still a woman and must answer to the laws of a patriarchal universe, she must remain on the moon--a cold, barren place. She cannot survive unless her husband returns to the moon and builds her a palace made out of cinnamon.

Another reference to a Chinese myth in *The Joy Luck Club* occurs not within the mothers' or daughters' stories, but in the section narrative and as a section title--"Queen Mother of the Western Skies." Many readers would miss this reference because, unlike the Moon Lady tale, the reference is only a few lines in the section's pre-narrative. A grandmother tells her laughing baby granddaughter,

"You say you are Syi Wang Mu, Queen Mother of the Western Skies, now coming back to give me the answer! ...Then you must teach my daughter this same lesson. How to lose your innocence but not your hope. How to laugh forever." (239)

Despite this ambiguous allusion, the significance of this reference cannot be ignored. In Chinese mythology, the Queen Mother, or Hsi Wang Mu, holds the power of immortality. In her garden exists a peach tree that "put[s] forth leaves once every three thousand years, and it required three thousand yeas after that for the fruit to ripen" (Werner 138). Any individual who ate the peaches would attain immortality. Other references to this goddess figure state that she is representation of Yin, and her own immortality was achieved through copulating with young men or boys (Knapp 188).

Readers should note that Hsi Wang Mu gives Yi, Chang O's husband, the pill (or peach) of immortality to share with his wife. Also, she could give the peaches or elixirs to whomever she felt deserved immortality. This power over

death empowers this goddess. As a female deity, she can dole out immortality to men or women, and she alone can decide who is worthy to receive it. Immortality (or, as the grandmother states, "'how to laugh forever'") is something that the mothers and daughters must reclaim for themselves. In other words, the mothers find themselves as displaced individuals with no connection to a familiar culture or one that recognizes them beyond the typical and limiting stereotypes. Their daughters risk a similar sense of displacement unless they can resolve the cultural conflict between their Chinese heritage and their American customs and ideologies. The stories the mothers tell provide a sense of immortality. Not only do the daughters receive a part of their mothers' personal histories and thoughts but they obtain a connection to Chinese culture--their mothers' culture--which becomes valuable in establishing an Asian-American identity.

Additionally, readers must look at the Hsi Wang Mu figure and her implications in light of the final section of the novel. The final section of *The Joy Luck Club* includes narratives of empowerment, where the mothers discuss the knowledge they have gained from their own mothers and how their daughters can benefit from learning how to be self-sufficient and independent. Like the Queen Mother of the Western Skies, the daughters have the ability

to control their destinies and mortality. Rather than slipping away into displacement or even non-existence as a result of cultural conflicts or relationships with domineering husbands, these women learn how to define themselves instead of being male-defined. Few Chinese myths exist where a female deity retains as much power and respect as Hsi Wang Mu. Unlike the Moon Lady myth (and the Kitchen God myth), the story of the Queen Mother provides a positive representation of a female figure, and this myth can be incorporated into the daughters' Asian-American mythology.

Although the tale of the Moon Lady self-deconstructs, Tan does not leave the myth in fragments; she allows the daughters in the stories to reconstruct or re-mythologize the stories into their own experience, thereby creating an Asian-American, or specifically, Chinese-American, mythology. The daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* are able to take this myth of the Moon Lady and the other stories which their mothers have told and make them part of their own Asian-American tradition. The daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* repeatedly refuse to acknowledge their mothers' tales. However, the mothers, although they feel a sense of betrayal when the myths they once held in esteem have failed them, can help their daughters reconstruct the useless mythology into a system controlled by their

daughters. The daughters have the power to recreate a mythology that signifies hope and strength for Asian-American women. The daughters do this when they accept their mothers' histories and culture. They reach into their Chinese heritage and make it a part of the American culture they, as children, have claimed as their own.

The mothers know that the daughters have the means to survive in a contemporary American society, yet since they are also Asian women, they cannot ignore their mothers' cultures. As children, the daughters claim themselves to be American, and they choose to live by American standards, ignoring their mothers' Chinese ways. As adults, the daughters recognize a need to maintain a positive relationship with their mothers, and the relationship includes accepting the part of their heritage that is Chinese. Readers see evidence of this most clearly with June when she travels back to China to regain her mother's lost history. She understands that she cannot take her mother's place--her role is not to take her mother's place even if it were expected of her. Instead, she must continue a tradition that her mother began (in the mah jong games) and learn about the secrets that her mother kept for so long. June says to herself, when she meets her half-sisters,

I look at their faces again and I see no

trace of my mother in them. Yet they still look familiar. And now I also see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood. After all these years, it can finally be let go. (331)

June recognizes not only the physical attributes of her Chinese-ness but also the cultural characteristics of her Asian heritage.

In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, re-mythologizing occurs not only within the text, but also with the title of the novel. The title stems from a Chinese myth about the Kitchen God, and the version that appears in Amy Tan's novel is a well-known story about an ungrateful husband who leaves his faithful wife and pursues a beautiful but wanton woman. After his material possessions dwindle and he is forced to beg, his wife has pity on him and serves him his favorite dish. Once the man realizes who has saved him, he feels such shame and remorse that he throws himself into the kitchen fire. Amy Tan's version also states that the man became a god as a reward for his repentance; his duty was to make an annual report to Heaven concerning mankind and based on his report, families would receive good luck or bad luck. Therefore, families must bribe him with sweets and liquor at New Year's.

Interestingly, in Tan's novel, the teller of the Kitchen God myth is Winnie, the protagonist's mother. She tells the story when her daughter Pearl receives the

Kitchen God altar as an inheritance from a dead family friend. Winnie notes the double-standard presented in this myth: the idea of a man being rewarded and forgiven despite his actions and the figure of the lonely, forgotten housewife who remains faithful regardless of how she has been treated. Winnie states to Pearl, "'Why should I want that kind of person to judge me, a man who cheated his wife? His wife was the good one, not him'" (*The Kitchen God's Wife* 61-62).

Moreover, Winnie was abused emotionally and physically by her first husband, and she is aware of similarities between herself and the Kitchen God's wife.

... When Jesus was born, he was already the son of God. I was the daughter of someone who ran away, a big disgrace. And when Jesus suffered, everyone worshipped him. Nobody worshipped me for living with Wen Fu. I was like that wife of Kitchen God. Nobody worshipped her either. He got all the excuses. He got all the credit. She was forgotten. (322)

The myth of the Kitchen God can no longer remain a fairytale embodying a mirthful New Year's tradition. Rather, it is a realistic personal narrative about women like Winnie whose husbands saw them as sub-human objects. Tan deconstructs the original myth, questioning the values of a patriarchal tale, leaving her readers to wonder, "What about the Kitchen God's Wife?"

The Kitchen God's wife, like all women in a

patriarchal society, is expected to remain faithful and subservient to her husband, despite his infidelity. This ideology is present not only in Chinese cultural attitudes but in American stereotypes of Asian women as well. Asian women are usually associated with passivity and quiet acceptance of their circumstances. The mythology reflects this in both the Moon Lady and Kitchen God tales. The Moon Lady accepts her exile on the moon. The fact that she is associated with the moon, which receives its light from the sun, symbolizes a passive role also (Knapp 195). Although she rebels against the "good wife" image, she still remains banished in a cold, barren environment. The Kitchen God's wife never questions whether she should take action on her husband's infidelity. She does not challenge the patriarchal status quo; therefore, she neither gains nor loses anything (except her sense of identity, which did not exist at all).

Patriarchal attitudes and stereotypical conceptions of Asian women shape the figures in these myths. What the mothers and daughters eventually learn, however, is not to depend upon these images to define what a woman's characteristics should be. The mothers are displaced because they do not fit into American culture (which expects them to assimilate and remain passive). Also, they have physically left their Chinese culture, and they have

found fault in its ideologies and mythologies. Finding fault in these stories and looking toward positive female figures (such as Hsi Wang Mu) enables the mothers and daughters to construct their own identity as individuals and as Asian and Asian-American women.

Unlike the Moon Lady who attempts to challenge patriarchal attitudes, the Kitchen God's wife obediently accepts her misfortune, and she does not take it upon herself to become empowered or challenge her husband's authority, even when he is reduced to begging in the streets. When he is rewarded with god-hood, she does not complain or ask for vengeance. In fact, no more mention is made of her in the original Chinese tale. Her identity remains connected to her husband--she is known as the Kitchen God's wife. She has no name of her own and no status other than being a wife.

The Kitchen God, on the other hand, is rewarded with immortality and god-hood. Ironically, he has the power to determine other people's fates, and he maintains a place within each family's home. The Kitchen God is sometimes known as "the God of the Stove" because his "temple is a little niche in the brick cooking-range" (Werner 166). What is traditionally known as woman's space, the kitchen, is where this god's place and authority exist.

Amy Tan revises the original myth by reconstructing

it. In the last chapter of this novel, Winnie, Pearl, and her friend Helen go to a shop to purchase a replacement goddess for Pearl's altar. After rejecting several statues, Pearl tells the shop owner, "'I am looking for a goddess that nobody knows. Maybe she does not yet exist'" (530). The shop owner then retrieves a statute of a goddess, flawed because the factory "forgot to write down her name on the bottom of her chair" (531). The ladies immediately claim the statue, and Winnie writes down the goddess' name herself, revealing that "...no one would call her Mrs. Kitchen God. Why would she want to be called that, now that she and her husband are divorced?" (531)

In purchasing a flawed statue and claiming an identity for the forgotten Kitchen God's Wife, Winnie and Pearl rebuild the tale. It is no longer a one-sided story about an unfaithful and undeserving man; it is now a tale about a woman who regains her identity and worth--much like the women in Amy Tan's fiction. It is a myth for daughters like Pearl who are caught between the tales and traditions of their mothers' pasts and their own modern, American traditions. The Kitchen God's Wife cannot claim this identity for herself because she does not have the means to do so. The Chinese culture which favored the Kitchen God to his wife has displaced her, for she is not worthy enough to have a place or station within Chinese mythology. Pearl

and Winnie must claim an identity for the Kitchen God's Wife, and although she originally has no name, her identity is no longer shaped by her husband. She has gained the much deserved status of goddess, and she becomes an icon of hope for displaced, silent women. Just as the statue was a flawed mistake, unclaimed by anyone, the Kitchen God's Wife is not claimed by her husband or by the Chinese myths. The displaced women in Amy Tan's novel must claim the Kitchen God's Wife.

Winnie and Pearl both see a problem with the original Kitchen God myth; they clearly see a harmful patriarchal influence in the very customs and traditions of Chinese culture. If mythology has the power to influence customs, it certainly has the power to shape attitudes. As long as these patriarchal attitudes remain in place, women like Winnie will fall prey to abusive husbands and remain silent. When they remain silent, their daughters are in danger of repeating similar patterns. With Pearl and Winnie, silence forms a distance between mother and daughter. The daughter must negotiate the Chinese and American cultural traditions and claim an identity that includes both.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Amy Tan does not make reference to popular folktales or myths as she does in her first two novels. Instead, she depends upon superstitions

about ghosts, the afterlife, and reincarnation to show a cultural tension between Chinese folkways and American customs. The narratives found within the novel can be viewed as a collection of folktales or myths. When examined and restructured as whole stories (because in the novel they appear as fragmented pieces of a whole tale), Kwan's narratives form a collection of stories about several individuals who have lived a number of lives.

Olivia struggles to accept the stories of her half-sister Kwan, and ultimate rejection of the stories implies a rejection of the cultural heritage of Kwan and her Chinese father. Kwan tells Olivia stories of her childhood and what appear to be past lives. When Olivia acknowledges the stories as truth, she acknowledges the past lives she has lived with Kwan. Interestingly, in her past lives, Olivia has rebelled against different traditions, especially patriarchal tradition. At one point she is a woman traveling alone, an unbeliever among Christian missionaries seeking to convert "pagan" Chinese.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Kwan represents a scapegoat figure, a common symbol in traditional mythologies. When she first arrives in America, Olivia rejects her and the Chinese culture Kwan represents. Rather than simply ignoring Kwan, Olivia makes Kwan into a scapegoat by projecting blame upon her for being Chinese

and strange. When some children tease Olivia and call Kwan a "dumb chink," Olivia responds by shouting "I hate her! I wish she'd go back to China!" (12). Another example occurs when Olivia betrays Kwan's secret and tells her mother about Kwan's conversation with ghosts. As a result, Kwan is institutionalized. Her strange, foreign customs not only frighten Olivia but interfere with her desire to fit into dominant American culture. The children's teasing, and Kwan's inability to assimilate bothers Olivia. She blames Kwan for being Chinese.

Another instance in which Olivia makes Kwan into a scapegoat occurs because of Olivia's strained relationship with her biological mother. Olivia, angry with her biological mother for ignoring her, projects the anger onto Kwan. Olivia comments "I should have been grateful to Kwan. ...But instead, most of the time, I resented her for taking my mother's place" (12). Kwan takes on the blame and anger that Olivia feels toward her mother. Instead of confronting her mother, Olivia resents Kwan and tries to ostracize her. Like a typical scapegoat figure, Kwan has done nothing to deserve this maltreatment, nor does she resist this role.

At the end of the novel, Kwan sacrifices herself. Once she finishes her narrative, she retreats into a cave and never returns. No one finds any trace of her

existence, including her body. Kwan is a Christ-figure because, like the Judeo-Christian image, she shares her teachings, receives undue blame, sacrifices herself, and then dies. As Joseph Campbell states in *The Power of Myth*, this sacrificial death is significant because it leads to life.

Somebody has to die in order for life to emerge. I begin to see this incredible pattern of death giving rise to birth, and birth giving rise to death. Every generation has to die in order that the next generation can come. (106)

Kwan's purpose in this last lifetime is to "right" past wrongs, to prevent Olivia from repeating the mistakes of her former lifetimes. Once she fulfills her purpose, she sacrifices her life, giving Olivia the opportunity to pass on personal and cultural wisdom to her daughter. Life emerges symbolically when Olivia acknowledges and receives Kwan's wisdom, and it occurs literally through the birth of Olivia's daughter.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Tan progresses from using actual Chinese myths in the re-mythologizing process to using personal stories pertaining only to Kwan and Olivia. This personal mythology in Tan's third novel includes references to Chinese superstition, as well as several mythological motifs. Kwan's individual narratives, which actually form a whole narrative about her past lives, function as a new mythology by providing a group of tales

which narrate the Asian-American experience, from Olivia's life as Miss Banner to her present life as a woman seeking to negotiate both her Chinese and American heritage. This Asian-American mythology is comprised of stories about displaced women who are struggling to find their identities, both personally and culturally, in a dominant culture that tries to assimilate them.

The use of popular folktales indicates that Amy Tan's stories and characters are rooted in Chinese traditions, but the manner in which she has deconstructed and reconstructed them also exemplifies that these tales are unsatisfactory in their original representations. As a result, readers will find that in order for the stories to maintain any sense of power and significance, they must be rewritten and re-mythologized to fit an Asian-American tradition--one in which displaced mothers and questioning daughters must search for and find their identities. These identities cannot be found in the traditions of the Moon Lady or the Kitchen God; they are found in rewritten versions of the earlier tales. Moreover, this Asian-American mythology results from personal myths, the mother and daughter narratives in all three of Tan's novels. Her earlier novels, *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, weave personal myths with reconstructed traditional myths; however, *The Hundred Secret Senses* develops a

personal mythology into an Asian-American mythology containing stories about and for Asian-American women negotiating two separate and distinct cultures.

CHAPTER IV
CULTURAL TENSION IN TAN'S NOVELS: EVALUATING
AND REJECTING STEREOTYPES OF ASIAN
AND ASIAN-AMERICAN WOMEN

Because of stereotypical representations of Asians in literature, many Asian-Americans such as Frank Chin (co-editor of *Aiiieeeee!*) and the Asian Women United of California have edited anthologies which challenge those clichés. The purpose of these writers, stated by Elaine H. Kim, was to "assert an ethnic American identity and to challenge old myths and stereotypes" (173). Asian-American writers have criticized many publishers for rejecting manuscripts that depart from traditional representations of Asians and Asian-Americans. These stereotypical characters range from passive, subservient women, geisha girl images, and the dragon-lady to the more hostile "yellow rat" or the ungodly heathen.

Since these stereotypes still exist, Asian-American writers continue to address and reject them. In each of her three novels, Amy Tan deconstructs Chinese myths and tales and reconstructs them in order to create an Asian-American mythology. Part of creating this mythology involves dispelling myths and stereotypes associated with Asians and Asian-Americans. Like her predecessors, Amy Tan

confronts stereotypes of Asian and Asian-Americans by creating characters who experience identity struggles due to their hyphenated roles as Asian-Americans.

Here and throughout my thesis, I use the term identity struggle to describe the conflict that Amy Tan, other Asian-American authors, and their characters encounter when negotiating two cultures into the hybridized identity of Asian-American. The struggle is both internal and external. The former indicates the characters' inner turmoil over their identities. Moreover, the struggle is externalized into a conflict between a character in Tan's novels and a stereotype of Asians found in dominant American culture's representations.

One of the most obvious stereotypes that Tan works with is the portrayal of Asian and Asian-American women. Traditionally, Asian and Asian-American women were viewed as either passive and servile or as "dragon ladies." These stereotypes have been perpetuated by film, television, and fiction, and they represent the Western world's idea of a typical Asian woman. Rarely is an Asian or Asian-American female character dynamic and multi-faceted, with a role that goes against the servile or dragon-lady image. Amy Tan's, characters, however, go against this status quo of Asian-American representation. Like her predecessor Maxine Hong Kingston, Tan creates female characters who do not

portray Western stereotypes. Both mothers and daughters reveal a variety of character traits, none of which exemplify dragon lady or servile imagery. In fact, when readers closely examine the characters, they realize that any passivity on the part of mothers or daughters is a result of cultural displacement and identity struggles.

Passivity is only temporary or an exterior trait in these characters. Beneath the outer layer, mothers and daughters demonstrate strength--even if the individual is not aware that such strength exists. This usually occurs when mothers encourage their daughters to take charge of their lives, to act in such a way that will allow them to take control of a damaging situation. One example, in *The Joy Luck Club*, occurs when Ying-Ying tells Lena that she must stop letting her husband control the marriage. Another similar instance involves Pearl, in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, who decides to tell her mother about her disease and fight it. She has just finished listening to her mothers' narrative about a previous, destructive marriage and as a result, she applies her mother's example of self-reliance to her own situation. Both daughters' actions represent what each of the daughters in all three novels experience. When the mothers and daughters find themselves in either culturally binding or emotionally limiting experiences (such as when they are in unhappy

marriages or abusive situations), their first reaction is passivity. Traditional Chinese and even Western culture expects Asian and Asian-American women to be subservient and passive. However, when these women realize that they cannot accept dominant culture expectations, they aggressively remove themselves from the damaging situations. As a result, the characters' initial passivity dissolves. The strength they exhibit is a positive trait, not the trait of a dragon lady whose aggressive nature is a negative representation of a self-sufficient, sexually liberated woman.

Two extremes exist within stereotypical Western representations of Asian and Asian-American women. On one hand, Western society expects an Asian woman to serve as a passive "geisha girl," remaining silent and sacrificing her own needs to those of her husband.. The other extreme is the sexually aggressive "dragon lady." Both the dragon lady and the geisha girl depict fantasy images where the woman is knowledgeable about all the arts of sexual pleasure, contributing to the exoticization of the Far East. According to Elaine H. Kim,

Stereotypes of racial minorities are a record of prejudices; they are part of an attempt to justify various attitudes and practices. The function of stereotypes of Asian in Anglo-American literature has been to provide literary rituals through which myths of white

racial supremacy might be continually reaffirmed, to the everlasting detriment of the Asian. (21)

As Kim states, these stereotypical images have resulted from racist or ignorant attitudes about Asians, and although contemporary representations are not as hostile or reductive, American culture continues to include such stereotypes in various media, either by continuing to include them in current work or through supporting pre-existing work.

American movies and television, as well as fiction, often represent Asian women through these stereotypes. For example, Woody Allen's film *Deconstructing Harry* (1997) includes an Asian female character, a prostitute who wears red silk, has long black hair, and services her client with exceptional sexual aggression and skill. The television show *M.A.S.H.*, on the other hand, utilizes the subservient, ignorant Asian image, in addition to perpetuating the myth that "all Asians look alike." As a Korean-American, I notice that the Asian actors portraying Koreans are either not Korean or cannot speak the language. Average Anglo-Americans would not notice this, nor would they be bothered by the fact that the heroes are all Caucasian, American soldiers. Moreover, the show rarely includes any grisly details of war when it concerns Korean civilians. The audience does not see the mass exodus of families leaving North Korea, hungry and poor. Few Korean characters enter

the scenes, and when they do, the appearance is brief, fleeting. Even in this show about the Korean Conflict, the Korean is viewed as "other." Although *M.A.S.H.* originated in the 1970s, major networks continue to show re-runs. The Asians in *Deconstructing Harry* and *M.A.S.H.* are only two of many such representations in Twentieth-century American culture.

Clearly, the portrayal of Amy Tan's characters differs from stereotypical portrayals of Asian women. The mothers have suffered greatly, and instead of simply accepting the role of victim, they have chosen to overcome these obstacles and work hard to ensure that their daughters do not encounter the same situations. As a result, the mothers tell their daughters stories which will teach them life lessons and encourage them to be independent and strong, despite the many obstacles they must face. Through the stories, the daughters see their mothers as strong women who do not fit the expected norms of Chinese culture or American stereotypes.

Another way in which Amy Tan's mothers depart from traditional, stereotypical representations of Asian women is that her characters do not depict the standard "model minority" myth. In this myth, the term model minority is assigned to Asian-Americans who have successfully assimilated into white, middle-class American society by

achieving material wealth and rising above the minority "underclass" status. Amy Tan's mothers do not in any way exemplify the model minority image. Their personal success in no way equals the material success expected when one attains the American Dream. Moreover, the mothers do not want to emulate American society. They see harm and danger in becoming "too American." Similarly, the mothers want their daughters to enjoy the opportunities of American society without losing their "Chinese face," probably a self-contradictory hope, creating for the daughters a double bind (*The Joy Luck Club* 294).

As a result, a cultural conflict and identity struggle arises. The daughters want to be American and want to be successful by American standards. They often reject Chinese standards, ideology, language, etc. because being "too Chinese" will hinder their opportunity for acceptance by their peers. Living in America and immersed in American culture, the daughter cannot help but be influenced by American ideology. Tan's younger generation feels the need to reject their mothers' preferences and customs because their mothers are Chinese (and therefore different). In Chapter V, I discuss in detail the mother-daughter relationship in light of such conflicts and identity struggles. For the purposes of this chapter, I will discuss instances where mother-daughter conflicts play out as a

result of stereotypical representations of Asian-American women.

One clear example of a daughter's rejection of her mother due to stereotypes and expectations occurs in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. In this novel, Olivia and her family await the arrival of her half-sister, Kwan, who later becomes a mother-figure to replace Olivia's biological mother. Olivia finds Kwan frightening and repulsive the moment she steps off the plane. Not only does Kwan deviate from Olivia's personal expectations, she does not fit the stereotypical images of an Asian woman. Kwan dispels any exotic stereotypes of the far east. Olivia and her mother expect a waifish teenager who would be "more Chinese" than Olivia (8). With this image in mind, Olivia pictures "an older self who danced and wore slinky clothes, who had a sad but fascinating life, like a slant-eyed version of Natalie Wood in *West Side Story*" (9). Kwan fits none of the descriptions that Olivia and her mother conjure in their imaginations. Instead, she "looked like a strange, old lady, short and chubby.... She was dressed in drab gray pajamas, and her broad brown face was flanked by two thick braids" (*The Hundred Secret Senses* 10).

Olivia later notes (reminiscing as an adult) that she and her mother "modeled [their] hopes after actresses

who spoke in accents that weren't their own" (9). White-American expectations and fantasies shape stereotypical images of immigrants, including Asian-Americans. A white actress playing the part of an exotic foreigner reinforces existing stereotypes, especially the stereotype of the young immigrant woman who needs to be rescued. This image does not depict the sense of displacement that immigrants feel as a result of these stereotypes and expectations that alienate them. Louise's (Olivia's biological mother) expectations about Kwan depict the traditional European-American exoticization of Asia. Her desire to "rescue" a poor Chinese girl from poverty not only indicates how she perceives herself to be in a superior position as a Caucasian, American citizen but it also shows that she thinks of Kwan as a foreign plaything who will entertain her. Olivia comments "I suspect she thought of Kwan as a foreign exchange student she would host for a year, a Chinese Cinderella, who would become self-sufficient and go on to have a wonderful American life" (7). The key elements in this statement are the words "Chinese Cinderella," "self-sufficient," and "wonderful American life." Olivia knows that Louise has romanticized notions of rescuing Kwan, who would benefit from living in America and would live the life that all Americans enjoy. However, when Louise meets Kwan, she realizes that her

expectations will not be fulfilled. Because Kwan does not represent the exotic Chinese Cinderella image, she becomes a convenient baby-sitter for Louise.

Kwan's strange and unique behavior, especially her ability to see ghosts, frightens and alienates the American family she lives with. She is sent to a mental hospital and given shock treatment when she remains silent, and she refuses to be assimilated. Once she leaves the mental hospital, Kwan continues to act strangely, although her behavior is unacceptable by traditional standards. Kwan, like Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, and countless other women characters in literature, is a "madwoman in the attic." Because of patriarchal and Puritanical Western ideals, Kwan becomes an outcast, viewed as a crazy woman because she sees ghosts. As the exotic other, Kwan inspires both awe and fear. Before arriving in the United States, Olivia and Louise safely imagine that she will be a Chinese Cinderella. When she crosses cultural boundaries and departs from stereotypical expectations, Kwan is institutionalized and given electric shock treatments because she remains silent. Kwan refuses to tell the American doctors or anyone else (except Olivia) about her ghost-friends, and her silence is a defense against assimilation. The doctors' attempts to break this defense reflect ignorance and fear of the exotic other. Although

Kwan eventually leaves the institution and continues to reject cultural assimilation, Olivia thinks Kwan is strange and crazy.

Kwan's character clearly serves to dispel common stereotypes of Asian women--the myth of the dragon lady, the sex goddess, and the subservient housewife. She does not fit any of these molds, and as a result, others feel uncomfortable with her unique and unpredictable ways. Even in her past life as Nunumu, she "refused to become what people thought [she] should be" (40). As a result, Kwan finds herself in a position of displacement when she arrives in America. Louise's and Olivia's expectations are shattered, and Kwan becomes the outcast. However, Kwan does not behave or feel like a displaced woman. Rejection and institutionalization does not change Kwan into a passive woman, nor does she assimilate into dominant American culture. She continues to assert herself into Olivia's life, knowing that her stories must be told because they contain important information that Olivia must hear.

In each of her lives, Kwan finds herself in a position of alienation and displacement due to various circumstances. During one life, she is disfigured; in another life, Kwan is thrown out of her body. In her present life, she is an immigrant woman in a society that

rejects or attempts to change or ignore her culture. In each life, however, Kwan casts off her displaced status and manages to find ways to overcome a potentially bad situation. She preserves her entire history through the act of storytelling and passes onto Olivia the wisdom she has gained from her experiences. Whether the reader buys into the idea of reincarnation or not does not change the significance of the layers of histories which Kwan tells to Olivia.

Because she is ethnically and biologically both Chinese and Caucasian-American, Olivia faces cultural tension when struggling to form an identity that negotiates the two traditions. As a child, she encounters a set of expectations perpetuated by her mother, her peers, and Western ideologies. These expectations include a combination of typical stereotypes of the Asian individual—the exotic foreigner or the dirty and strange intruder. Olivia hopes to fulfill the exotic foreigner image and expects Kwan to help her attain this goal. However, when Kwan arrives and does not herself fit the stereotype, Olivia begins to reject both Kwan and her own Chinese-ness.

Olivia cannot, however, escape her Chinese roots. Through her storytelling, Kwan is able to share not only the tales themselves but her native language as well. Olivia views this knowledge of Chinese as an infection and

only uses the language when she has to explain something to Kwan. She states

That's how I became the only one in our family who learned Chinese. Kwan infected me with it. I absorbed her language through my pores while I was sleeping. She pushed her Chinese secrets into my brain and changed how I thought about the world. Soon I was even having nightmares in Chinese. (13)

The language is also associated with thought, and Olivia distinguishes between Chinese thinking and American thinking. Kwan has introduced a new way of perceiving the world, and Olivia resists her views because they threaten the image that Olivia accepts. The possibility of being known as a "dumb Chink" frightens Olivia into hating Kwan and building up resentment toward her Chinese culture (12).

The only connection Olivia has with Chinese traditions exists through Kwan. Her biological mother's distorted view of Asians prevents her from understanding and accepting her father's culture until she is an adult and travels back to China. The journey to China completes an emotional quest to find and understand a part of her ethnic heritage that Olivia has been undergoing since childhood. Her journey is similar to June's journey in *The Joy Luck Club*. June goes back to China to find her mother's lost daughters and reclaim a part of her mother's past. Olivia travels back to China, she later discovers, to reclaim her

lost history.

The shared language gives Kwan a more comfortable and accurate medium in which to share stories. Like the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Kwan must share her stories in Chinese because it is a language that she comprehends the most fully.¹ English is especially difficult and clumsy for Kwan, and she has trouble pronouncing English words. This difficulty in speaking English only embarrasses Olivia further. In a way, Olivia exerts a sense of power over Kwan because of her knowledge of English. When Kwan asks her to say the American word for pear, Olivia responds by telling her it is called "'Barf'" (13). Through this play in language, Olivia can distance herself from Kwan and her inability to speak English.

In addition to addressing traditional Chinese myths and ideologies in her works, Amy Tan also addresses the myth of the "American Dream." The American Dream is a common notion that any hardworking individual, but usually a white male, could achieve success through perseverance. This myth has been perpetuated by Horatio Alger stories and success stories of other individuals such as John D. Rockefeller. In fact, the original basis for coming to America, since Colonial times, can be linked to the idea of the American Dream. Immigrants sought passage to the

United States in order to pursue the same dream, yet many immigrant groups were denied the right to do so based on their ethnic and cultural backgrounds. However, this did not discourage groups of people from continuing to hope in the American Dream, and this hope for success is shared by immigrants today.

The mothers in Amy Tan's fiction have come to the United States to escape hardship and begin a new life of success, and the myth of the American Dream remains in their minds. Tan opens *The Joy Luck Club* with a narrative (one that could speak for all the mothers in the novel) which states

In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow! (3)

The mother's concept of America indicates many immigrants' notion of America: that it is a paradise where one can escape cultural bonds (like patriarchy) and never hunger or feel pain--a "land of milk and honey," so to speak. Moreover, all their wishes and expectations are for their daughters, not for themselves. Their daughters must succeed by living an American way of life in order to avoid situations they would face if they grow up in Chinese

culture. In America, the daughters have the ability and opportunity to challenge the patriarchy, whereas in China, they would not have the same chance (as the mothers' narratives have shown). Nevertheless, these mothers do not want their daughters to lose sight of Chinese culture altogether, so the mothers constantly tell their daughters stories about China and instill Chinese customs and folklore into their daughters' lives. They want their daughters to enjoy the advantages of being American without forgetting their Chinese heritage.

What the mothers discover, however, is that the United States is not the land of prosperity and equality for all. They become displaced because they are unable to speak English or comprehend American ideology and traditions, and they are unwilling simply to discard their own traditions in order to assimilate into white, middle-class American society. Nor do they express a desire to become like an average American individual. In fact, the mothers work hard to make sure their daughters remain aware of Chinese traditions and ideologies, and much of the daughters' identity struggle occurs because they are trapped between Chinese and American cultures.

American dominant culture is based on a Judeo-Christian and Western ideology, one which has traditionally advocated patriarchal attitudes and preference toward

Caucasians. The construction of the American Dream myth is an indication of this. What Americans traditionally accepted as an ideology of hope and success is now only a misconception, especially in terms of minority cultures. Amy Tan's mothers and daughters eventually realize that they cannot buy into a false reality. They come to see that America is not a paradise, and that in a so-called progressive nation, oppressive attitudes toward women exist.

Despite this cultural critique, Amy Tan does not simply "bash" America. She recognizes that dominant culture ideology must be evaluated and deconstructed in order to make way for a new set of traditions compatible with a generation of people who are not simply American. The daughters in Amy Tan's fiction are both Chinese and American. Their own culture is a combination of the two, and they must embrace both in order to avoid the sense of displacement their mothers feel. However, simply embracing both cultures is not enough for the daughters. They will continue to feel cultural tension because the dominant culture's expectations have not changed.

The daughters must do more than just claim an Asian-American affiliation. They must claim a mythology that reaffirms their sense of being Asian-American because an Asian-American mythology, like the mythology of any society

or culture affirms the group's values, needs, concerns, and ideals. For Asian-Americans, the mythology includes connections to Asia and America, and depicts cultural identity struggles, conflict with patriarchal attitudes, and how Asian-Americans have resolved these issues. The mother and daughter narratives in Amy Tan's fiction embody all these elements. Little need exists to have a mythology based on superstition or the supernatural because an Asian-American audience is contemporary. The Asian-American mythology includes traditional mythological elements such as oral tradition, cultural values, and universal applications but exists in a contemporary timeframe, valuable to an Asian-American audience because it includes stories that were reconstructed to make them applicable.

The mothers recognize this need for a mythology, and they know that this mythology should include ties to Chinese traditions. Their narratives provide these ties for their daughters because they reflect Chinese culture and ideology. Through the storytelling, the mothers not only convey personal facts and histories, they convey a connection to a culture that the daughters have no exposure to otherwise. When the daughters accept their mothers' tales and acknowledge them to be valid expressions of personal truths and cultural knowledge, they resolve a cultural conflict between their mothers' culture and the

American culture.²

Amy Tan is not the only author who challenges cultural and stereotypical expectations. Other contemporary Asian-American writers construct their Asian-American characters much like Tan. Even as early as the 1970s, writers like Maxine Hong Kingston in *The Woman Warrior depicted* Asian and Asian-American women as dynamic, non-stereotypical characters. Like Kingston, Tan utilizes storytelling and mother-daughter relationships to portray cultural identity struggles and hybridization. A more contemporary Korean-American author, Chang Rae Lee, has written about a Korean-American man whose lack of connection to his Asian heritage results in guilt and the inability to maintain a close relationship with his wife and his father. By creating characters that depart from traditional Western stereotypes, these writers challenge the dominant culture's expectations of Asian-Americans. Or, as Helen Tiffin suggests,

Post-colonial counter-discursive strategies involve a mapping of the dominant discourse, a reading and exposing of its underlying assumptions, and the dis/mantling of these assumptions from the cross-cultural standpoint of the imperically subjectified "local." ...Neither writer is simply "writing back" to an English canonical text, but to the whole of the discursive field within which such a text operated and continues to operate in post-colonial worlds. (33)

Although Tiffin refers to post-colonial works arising out of British colonies (works such as *Wide Sargasso Sea*), the writers of these works and Asian-American writers share the same goal. (The case can be made that ethnic-American writers are post-colonial; however, I will not address this topic in my thesis.) Like British post-colonial writers, Asian-American writers "expose" and deconstruct traditional stereotypes and representations currently used in contemporary works.

Because many Asian-American writers' goal consists of challenging Western stereotypes and expectations--a political and cultural goal--judging their works by a purely aesthetic standard is inappropriate. Nor should the works be judged by a colonial culture's expectations concerning whether they reach the standard of the dominant discourse, a standard which Esther Mikyung Ghymn uses in her examination of Asian-American representations by Asian-American women authors, including Amy Tan. She asserts that Amy Tan "writes in the same tradition as Nabokov, Ken Kesey, John Hawkes, and John Barth," yet "the use of wit and humor takes away from the intimacy of the first-person narration" (95-96).

At first glance, this statement appears applicable. However, as one reads further into her argument, serious misinterpretations and inaccuracies emerge. For example,

she states that Winnie's narrative voice is "unreliable... [but] able to gain the reader's sympathy...like listening to the madwoman's voice in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' by Charlotte Perkins Gilman" (96). The language Ghymn uses for her interpretation reveals an attitude about Gilman's main character, that she is a madwoman. However, many feminist critics argue that the main character is not a madwoman but a woman suffering the limitations of a patriarchal society and an unhappy marriage.³

Moreover, she claims that

...the effect of such tales [as told by Winnie] can be confusing. This is especially true in this case because the narrator speaks in broken English. The reader at times finds it difficult to trust Winnie's voice. (96)

This critique indicates that the use of broken English hinders the narrative voice. Yet, Winnie is a Chinese immigrant, and to write her voice using standard, grammatically correct English would be inappropriate. Ghymn glowingly compares Tan to major literary figures. Perhaps because of this, she does not account for the Asian-American literary tradition in which Amy Tan works, an alternative means of interpretation other than traditional Western literary critique.

Amy Tan's three novels provide an opportunity to represent Asian-American women apart from traditional

Western stereotypes and misconceptions. Her characters and their narratives challenge the standard images of Asians and Asian-Americans, in addition to confronting cultural myths such as the American Dream and the model minority. Rather than characterizing passive, subservient women whose goal is to assimilate into Western culture, Tan depicts the cultural and personal identity struggle of hybridized, displaced individuals. For Asian-American writers like Tan, "a clear understanding of the stereotypes and their role in perpetuating illusions can contribute to the dynamic process of changing those realities" (Kim 22). This includes challenging illusions and misconceptions in order to forge an identity not based on the dominant culture's expectations, as Tan does in her novels. As a result, the American Dream becomes a dream to attain personal satisfaction, to find an identity in a world that seeks to shut out immigrant women and their daughters, rather than a dream of material wealth based on hard work.

Notes

¹ In Chapter II, I discuss, in detail, language and storytelling.

² This conflict resolution is discussed in Chapter V.

³ See the work of Mary A. Hill and Ann J. Lane.

CHAPTER V

FINDING A VOICE IN AMERICA: DISPLACED MOTHERS, STRUGGLING DAUGHTERS, AND THEIR CONFLICTS

Mothers and mother figures appearing in Amy Tan's fiction use oral tradition to find a voice in a culture that displaces them, and they find their voices through the use of folktales and stories from their pasts. Unable to read, write, and communicate in English, the mothers utilize oral tradition in order to share their lives and wisdom; the stories they tell form a complex web of language that empowers these women in two ways. First, storytelling enables the mothers to find a voice with which to express themselves, and the daughters' acknowledgement of this voice contributes to its value and strength. Second, storytelling allows the mothers to share their lives with their daughters and in doing so the mothers teach their daughters to be active agents in their own lives.

The act of storytelling enables the mothers to attain a voice by allowing them to articulate circumstances that have not been told. Or, as Victoria Chen asserts,

By having all the women narrate their own stories, Tan treats language not just as a tool to reflect upon the past or to celebrate the present, but as a political means to allow

Chinese American women to articulate their silenced lives, their otherwise voiceless positions in this society. (6)

As an author, Tan brings the mothers' stories to a larger audience. The mothers achieve a political voice because in telling their own stories, they also tell the stories of many displaced Asian women living in dominant American culture. This political voice is significant because dominant culture has traditionally suppressed the voice of the marginalized woman. Marginalized women do not share the values of American dominant culture, and as a result, their stories have not been represented until the emergence of Asian-American voices in literature.

In the tales, the mothers reveal themselves as women outside their own culture who cannot be assimilated into the American society where they live. In *The Joy Luck Club*, one mother, Lindo Jong, states, "It's hard to keep your Chinese face in America. At the beginning, before I even arrived, I had to hide my true self. I paid an American-raised Chinese girl in Peking to show me how" (294). Lindo goes on to explain that the girl tells her she must claim to admire American schools and ways of thinking. Finding an American citizen for a husband was also considered a necessity. Another story in *The Joy Luck Club* shows Rose's family "trying to act like a typical American family at the beach" (130). In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie Louie does

not always understand her daughter's American ways. Like the other mothers in *The Joy Luck Club*, she finds that her customs and traditions are foreign to her daughters. Winnie practices speaking English phrases, so her daughter will not think she is stupid or embarrassing. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Kwan, not a biological mother but a mother-figure to Olivia, quickly becomes an outcast the moment she steps off the airplane. Olivia finds her embarrassing because she has so many questions and knows nothing of American customs or language. The mothers in all three novels struggle to fit in, but they cannot become as American as their daughters. Olivia mentions, in *The Hundred Secret Senses* that "time did nothing to either Americanize [Kwan] or bring out her resemblance to our father" (22). This comment applies to the mothers in Amy Tan's previous novels as well. Regardless of how long the mothers live in the United States, they prefer Chinese customs, traditions, and ways of thinking over American ways. Many Asian women living in dominant culture society experience these circumstances, and the mothers' stories articulate the sense of displacement to a larger audience.

When telling these tales, the mothers do not intend to reach a larger audience. For these mothers, the power of the voice rests in telling tales to their daughters because the daughters do not know about their mothers' experiences.

As a result, the mothers attain a private or personal voice which the daughters later acknowledge by finally listening to their mothers' stories. The mothers' motivation for telling their daughters about their lives stems from the fear that their daughters are strangers to them, best illustrated in a scene in *The Joy Luck Club*. In this scene a number of mothers confront one daughter, June, about visiting China to see her half-sisters. Since her own mother has passed away, the other mothers encourage June to meet her half-sisters and tell them about her mother. She panics, asking, "'What will I say? What can I tell them about my mother?'" (31). The mothers respond with "'Tell them stories she told you, lessons she taught, what you know about her mind that has become your mind.'" June then realizes that these mothers

...see that joy and luck do not mean the same to their daughters, that to these closed American-born minds "joy luck" is not a word, it does not exist. They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation. (31)

This passage illustrates the cultural differences between the mothers and daughters. The daughters' American thinking does not make room for the term "joy luck," because they have no concept of its meaning as understood by their Chinese mothers. For the mothers, joy and luck symbolize the hope they have from overcoming harsh

circumstances. The daughters, living a relatively painless existence in America, do not see the value of joy and luck nor do they understand their mothers' Chinese thinking. Unless, the mothers act quickly, their daughters will never understand their mothers and they will not have any Chinese thinking to pass to their own children. As a result, the mothers decide to tell stories about their lives, in the hope that their daughters will no longer be strangers to them. Also, the mothers want to provide a cultural connection for their daughters, and they know the only way they can pass those values to their American-born children is to tell them about their pasts.

In order for the mothers to attain their personal voice, the daughters must acknowledge the meanings present in their mothers' stories. The daughters must then apply their mothers' wisdom to their own lives and use that knowledge to attain a voice of their own. M. Marie Booth Foster notes that

The *Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife* are studies in balance--balancing hyphenation and the roles of daughter, wife, mother, sister, career woman. In achieving balance, voice is important: in order to achieve voice, hyphenated women must engage in self-exploration, recognition and appreciation of their culture(s), and they must know their histories. (209)

Listening to their mothers' tales provides the daughters with a connection to their mothers' histories, which also

are a part of their own heritage. The daughters then engage in self-exploration by applying their mothers' wisdom to their own lives. As a result, the daughters not only learn to appreciate their mothers' culture but they recognize that it is a part of their own Asian-American identity.

Learning about their mothers' lives teaches the daughters to become independent women who can make decisions about their own lives. Due to various circumstances, the daughters find themselves in situations where they are not in control. For example, both Lena and Rose have husbands who do not appreciate them, and in order to avoid arguments and conflicts, they each let their husbands make the decisions in their marriages. Both June and Waverly constantly strive for their mothers' approval, which they depend upon to build their self-esteem. Pearl has been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and Olivia does not have enough faith in herself to achieve her goals. As a result of their own past experiences, the mothers know that their daughters need to be self-dependent, and so they tell their daughters stories in order to teach them that "In America, nobody says you have to keep the circumstances somebody else gives you" (*The Joy Luck Club* 289). When the mothers tell their daughters about their their own struggles to overcome abusive relationships or tragic

circumstances, the daughters realize that they must be active agents in their own lives. The daughters then take control of their circumstances by confronting the unappreciative husbands, by working to achieve what they want, or by fighting a disease.

The daughters cannot learn from their mothers' stories until they resolve generational and cultural conflicts in their relationships with their mothers. In their narratives, the daughters often indicate that their mothers' ways appear foreign, different, and undesirable; frustration results because the daughters are inextricably bound within the American culture. At certain points, the daughters clearly see themselves as American and unlike their mothers. For example, in *The Joy Luck Club*, Rose simply tells her mother, "I'm American too" when she is upset because Rose is dating an American (124).

This declaration of American-ness is not limited to Rose. The other daughters also inform their mothers, through harsh statements, that they refuse to follow their mothers' wisdom or even acknowledge themselves as their mothers' daughters. After Jing-Mei gives a disastrous performance in a talent show, her mother Suyuan still expects her to practice the piano. Jing-Mei thinks, "I wasn't her slave. This wasn't China. I had listened to her before and look what happened. She was the stupid one"

(152). Jing-Mei decides, at this point, to reject her mother's wishes for her, her mother's "Chinese perception," and to go on her own way, shouting, "'Then I wish I wasn't your daughter. I wish you weren't my mother'" (153). In a similar situation, Waverly tells her mother, "'I wish you wouldn't do that, telling everybody I'm your daughter'" because she feels embarrassed that her mother is, in her opinion, using her to show off (101). In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Pearl misinterprets her mother's cultural attitudes as criticism of her, indicating that, although she does not openly protest against her mother's Chinese traditions, she does not share her mother's perspective. And in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Libby candidly expresses her distaste of Kwan's cultural attitudes and behavior. On one occasion, she points out that Kwan could never conform to American culture. On another instance, she shouts, "'...I hate her! I wish she'd go back to China!'" (12)

Other instances within the stories show readers that the Chinese culture, too, is inextricable from the daughters' identities. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Lena St. Clair mentions in one narrative how, as a child, she saw terrible things with her "Chinese eyes, the part of [her] that she got from [her] mother" (106). She saw "things that Caucasian girls at school did not" (106). Unlike the other daughters' fathers, Lena's father is a Caucasian, so

she is both Chinese and White. Additionally, Lena is aware early on of both aspects of her heritage and comprehends that she is part of both cultures, a realization the other daughters have later on in the novel.

Until the daughters confront the cultural conflicts in the relationships with their mothers, they will not acknowledge the value of their mothers' stories. According to Victoria Chen,

For Chinese American women such as Kingston, Tan, and the female characters in *The Joy Luck Club*, speaking in a double voice and living in a bicultural world characterize their dual cultural enmeshment. While striving to maintain a relationship with their Chinese immigrant parents, the Chinese American daughters also live in a society where one is expected to speak in a "standard" form of English and to "succeed" in the middle class Euro-American way. (3)

Like their mothers, the daughters in Amy Tan's three novels feel a sense of displacement because of cultural expectations and boundaries. On the one hand, the daughters are expected to succeed by Chinese standards. In other words, there is pressure to stand out above other individuals, to become prodigies, and achieve goals that their mothers could not achieve in their present circumstances. On the other hand, the American standard of success is more individualistic--the idea of the self-made person. Growing up as teenagers in America, these daughters feel a need to conform to American society and

reject their mothers' standard. They even become embarrassed by their mothers' inability to speak standardized English and their inability to understand American cultural ideals. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Olivia clearly rejects Kwan because she is a cultural outsider. Any association that Olivia has with Kwan jeopardizes acceptance by her peers.

Daughters such as Waverly, June, and Pearl misinterpret their mothers' pressure as a commentary on their failure. Because of the tension between their mothers' expectations and American society's expectations, these daughters feel as if they must please both. When June's piano recital ends in disaster, she refuses to practice the piano again. Her mother pressures her to continue, and only when June is an adult does she understand that her mother's pressure existed not because she expected failure but because she expected success--that Suyuan had faith in June's abilities and talents. Similar situations occur with the other daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* and in Tan's later novels. Pearl feels inadequate by her mother's standards and as a result, is afraid to tell her mother about the multiple sclerosis.

Only when the daughters are adults and finally confront the cultural tension do they realize that their mothers do not expect a certain cookie-cutter pattern of

success or believe that their daughters have failed in any way. Rather, the mothers have urged their daughters to fulfil their highest dreams, to never give up even when obstacles arise. When this occurs, the daughters incorporate their mothers' wisdom and cultural attitudes and apply it to their own lives. Daughters such as Lena can confront misogynistic husbands, and daughters like Pearl can battle a life threatening disease. Moreover, all the daughters shape their identities as a result of confronting the cultural conflicts. When they no longer resist their mothers' traditions in favor of American traditions, and when they can identify themselves as both Chinese and American, these daughters find an identity and a mythology that is uniquely Asian-American.

Each of the daughter's narratives include a reinterpretation of her mother's story and wisdom. That is to say, as the daughters tell their own tales; they reiterate their mother's advice, thinking upon the stories from the *Twenty-Six Malignant Gates*, a text mentioned in *The Joy Luck Club* which the daughters could not read because of language barriers. Instead, the mothers told the daughters about the stories, which the daughters did not understand, stories which the daughters did not believe or comprehend until adulthood. As each narrative progresses, the conflict unravels as the daughters talk

themselves out of this struggle, moving toward a sense of individual liberation and balance. They realize that life does often consist of twenty-six malignant gates that conceal "bad things that can happen to [them] outside the protection of [their mothers' houses]" (87).

Once they come to this awareness, their mothers' mythology becomes a part of their own, and the daughters reconstruct and reinvent their cultural identities to include their mothers' tradition and the American tradition which they are so much a part of. The new mythology, then, is a combination of the two cultures, and this mythology gives the daughters a cultural balance, the ability to be Chinese-American without choosing one or the other.

The only way the daughters can learn about their mothers' histories and their cultural heritage is to listen to their mothers' stories, yet, as children, they resist listening to their mothers or they do not understand the wisdom. Lena asks her mother why she cannot understand her mother's stories. The mother simply states, "'Because I have not put it in your mind yet'" (109). The mothers cannot teach their daughters about cultural values until the daughters have the experience and knowledge necessary for understanding their mothers' stories. When the daughters reach adulthood and are ready to listen to their mothers' stories, the mothers can then put the wisdom into

their daughters' minds.

Often the mother's ability to communicate her story is hindered because her language has been robbed. One situation in particular involving Lena and her mother Ying-Ying clearly illustrates the mother's silencing. Ying-Ying, who is married to a Caucasian man, cannot speak the Cantonese dialect which everyone in her neighborhood speaks. In addition, she could not speak English fluently, so often she must speak "in moods and gestures, looks and silences" (108). Her husband "would put words in her mouth" (108). Her daughter Lena is the only one who can understand the literal meanings of what she said. Mother and daughter have a connection, exclusive of the husband-father, "saying things that [he] could not possibly imagine" (109). Despite the fact that Lena and the other daughters do not comprehend their mothers' stories beyond the literal meanings, the storytelling itself creates a bond between mothers and daughters, between their mothers' traditions and their own.

When the daughters fully comprehend the stories, they are reaffirming the power of their mothers' voices. The mothers have attained their voices not only in the act of storytelling but in their daughters' acceptance of the stories' values. After listening to and understanding their mothers' stories, daughters like Pearl, Olivia, and

June can take action in their own lives by refusing to let their own voices and needs be suppressed.

Once the daughters accept the tales as part of their own cultural experience, they acknowledge not only the existence but also the power of the story. Acknowledging the story recognizes the voice of both mother and daughter, and it reaffirms the mothers' wisdom and values. The tales are valid expressions of ideas, and they are more than adequate forms of communication that enable the mothers to break their silence and tell the secrets that no one else but their daughters must hear. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie has been afraid to tell her daughter the truth because Olivia "would know how weak [she] was" (510). In actuality, Winnie's tale and the telling of the tale illustrates her strength as a mother and a woman. The tale shows how Winnie overcomes an abusive marriage, and her daughter Pearl recognizes her mother's strength in doing so.

Clearly the storytelling in Tan's three novels creates a bond between mothers and daughters, one that is both cultural and matrilineal. Telling and listening to stories allows the mothers and daughters to bridge a gap caused by generational and cultural conflicts. However, according to Leslie Bow,

In *The Joy Luck Club* [and Tan's other

novels], the cultural distance between immigrant mothers and American-born daughters becomes resolved not through the characters' confrontation with contrasting cultural values but through their recognition that a matrilineal heritage transcends the generation gap caused by the daughters' integration into American culture. (236)

Certainly, the daughters eventually recognize the importance of maintaining a matrilineal connection. Yet, I argue that Bow's statement fails to acknowledge the cultural tension present in the daughters' narratives. The daughters do indeed confront the contrasting cultural values by accepting their mothers' culture as their own. Although the cultural tension is never fully resolved, various instances indicate that the daughters begin to forge an identity as a result of confronting cultural differences. For example, June and Olivia both travel back to China and learn to accept their own Chinese-ness. Pearl shows acceptance by purchasing and naming a Chinese goddess, which serves as an icon of cultural displacement.

Although Leslie Bow makes an accurate point about matrilineal heritage, her argument is limiting because it presents a narrow feminist reading of Tan's novels which can not see beyond matrilineal confines. To ignore the cultural aspect of Tan's novels would be to ignore

The most significant theme of the new cultural politics of difference...the agency, capacity and ability of human beings who have been culturally degraded, politically oppressed

and economically exploited by bourgeois liberal and communist illiberal status quos. (West 34)

Cornell West seeks to move beyond simple "identity politics" and wants to move towards a study of difference that neither "romanticizes nor idealizes marginalized peoples." Amy Tan's mothers are neither privileged above other women nor are they portrayed as martyrs. Where Bow would seek to make feminist "sheroes" of matrilineal discourse, West insists that we see the complex situations of cultural identity-- like those facing Tan's characters. It is imperative, then, that we reject one-dimensional feminist readings and instead recognize the complex cultural forces at work on Tan's female characters.

On the surface, the mothers' tales appear *only* to be about displaced Chinese women in American society who have lived and continue to live lives of hardship and heartache. This is true only to a certain extent. While the mothers in Tan's novels are displaced and feel excluded from American culture and values, they manage to attain voices which speak to their daughters and to a larger community. By finding this voice through tale-telling, the mothers not only share their experiences, they find a means to communicate and be heard. Through storytelling, the mothers not only share their personal histories, they share wisdom and cultural attitudes which the daughters would have no connection to otherwise. Caught in a cultural

identity crisis, the daughters must accept their mothers' culture and make it part of their Asian-American identity. The storytelling enables mothers and daughters to communicate, allowing the mothers to obtain a voice and helping to provide the daughters with an Asian-American mythology comprised of personal narratives, allusions to folklore and myths, and solutions to cultural conflicts.

CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION: THE EMERGING
ASIAN-AMERICAN MYTHOLOGY

As I have shown throughout my thesis, Amy Tan's fiction challenges traditional Chinese and dominant American cultures' ideologies and values. Her characters do not represent stereotypical images of Asians and Asian-Americans, and they reject traditional, patriarchal Chinese ideologies. Moreover, the mother and daughter narratives describe cultural displacement, identity struggles, and conflicts with either Chinese or dominant American traditions. Neither Chinese nor dominant American myths represent the mothers' marginalization and the daughters need to fit into a hyphenated role. Thus, the stories told by both the mothers and daughters help to create an Asian-American mythology that defines the role of the Asian-American.

In Tan's novels, this hyphenated role of Asian-Americans is addressed in a variety of ways. The mother and daughter narratives clearly illustrate the cultural tension that the Asian-American daughters experience when confronting cultural differences. Moreover, the way Tan addresses stereotypes, dominant culture myths, and Chinese myths indicates an Asian-American literary tradition of

challenging both dominant culture and traditional Asian culture ideologies.

For example, Tan portrays strong Asian and Asian-American women who do not exemplify the dominant culture's typical expectations. Her mothers and daughters are not dragon ladies or geisha girls, and characterizing these women as agents of their own circumstances deconstructs and reconstructs Western stereotypes. Tan engages in deconstruction and reconstruction when addressing Chinese patriarchal myths. Since the cultural attitudes behind certain Chinese myths carry no significance for the mothers and daughters, the myths are re-interpreted and re-written to pertain to displaced Asian and Asian-American women. These instances of deconstruction and reconstruction, as seen through cultural tension and mother-daughter relationships, work to establish an Asian-American identity and mythology. In addition, storytelling is the primary means which Tan uses to create an Asian-American mythology.

For centuries, storytelling has been a means of transmitting myths and traditions from one generation to the next. In Amy Tan's novels, the mothers tell stories to their daughters as a way of communicating their histories and Chinese cultural values. When the daughters have occasion to tell their own stories, the narratives describe their struggle to live as both American and Chinese women.

Each of these stories in Tan's fiction, as well as the stories of other Asian-American writers, contribute to the formation of an Asian-American mythology. Without the mother and daughter narratives, displaced Asian women and their struggling Asian-American daughters would have no voice which to express their marginalization. Asian-American writers such as Amy Tan have used these narratives to tell the story of Asian-American experience to a larger audience.

Rather than depending upon a Western Judeo-Christian mythology or a Chinese Buddhist mythology, Asian-Americans must look to a mythology that defines their experiences and identity as a culture. What Asian-American writers like Tan offer is "the living experience of Asian American people, to the everlasting benefit of... future generations" (Kim, 278). An Asian-American mythology should reflect the experiences of Asian-American people, and as with any other mythology, these experiences should be passed on to future generations. Amy Tan's narratives provide clear insight into the lives of Asian-American women. The mothers' stories inform the daughters, who also tell their own stories about their lives as Asian-American women to a wider audience of readers.

Asian-American readers such as myself can identify with the daughters in the stories because their stories

represent what many Asian-Americans struggle to attain--a place in American society without compromising Asian heritage. Identifying with Tan's characters also indicates that her stories function the way most myths function. Identity quests and character identification contribute to the power a myth has in a culture. The relationships between the mothers and daughters in Amy Tan's novels follow a mythological pattern of the identity quest. Each daughter must accept her mother's wisdom while developing a wisdom of her own. In other words, by embracing both their mother's culture and the modern American culture, the daughters are achieving a sense of balance with their identities. The ritual of storytelling allows the daughters to reach this point of being Chinese-American, rather than Chinese or American women.

Once the reader realizes this mythological structure, he or she experiences a "mythological identification" with the characters (Campbell 72). That is, the quest of the daughter's search for identity becomes the reader's quest because a reader recognizes similarities in his or her own life to that of the daughters' conflict with Chinese and American cultures. Or, as Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty states,

When we stumble upon the familiar pattern of a myth in our own familiar life, or the familiar pattern of our life within the familiarity of a story that we know well, we are shocked by what is most familiar (155).

It is this realization that enables the novel to function as myth, rather than as simple fiction. Tan herself has stated in a *Salon* Interview

that literature has to do something to educate people. I don't see myself, for example, writing about cultural dichotomies, but about human connections. All of us go through angst and identity crises. And even when you write in a specific context, you still tap into that subtext of emotions that we all feel about love and hope, and mothers and obligations, and responsibilities.

Tan is asserting that her novels, though written within the context of a Chinese-American situation, transcends cultural boundaries because of its archetypal nature, hence the mythological identification. Understanding the mythological identification is important in light of mother-daughter relationships because of the daughters' need to find a mythology that represents their Asian-American identity along with the mothers' need to tell their stories. Beyond the Asian-American ties, the mothers and daughters in Amy Tan's novels bear resemblance to any group of individuals searching for identity and representation.

To some mythology critics, my description of Amy Tan's narratives may appear more like folktales than myths. A common theory about myths is that they "concern gods, and are associated, for the most part if not always, with

rituals" (Kirk 35). In light of Amy Tan's novels and the creation of an Asian-American mythology, I would argue that in contemporary American society, where issues about ethnicity and assimilation concern bicultural individuals like the daughters in Amy Tan's novels, mythology must represent the voice, needs, and traditions of Asian-Americans. This includes representing displaced Asian and Asian-American women and showing how they work to overcome their marginalized status.

Unlike the stories found in established mythologies, the individual stories that constitute an Asian-American mythology should not include typical creation or afterlife tales. Those questions can be answered a number of ways and is not the main concern of contemporary society, especially contemporary Asian-American society. Rather, the unanswerable question is "How do I define myself?" This is a major concern to the Asian-American community because, as I have mentioned, many Asian-American find themselves caught between dominant American culture and Asian culture. Therefore, the stories of an Asian-American mythology should depict those cultural identity struggles as a way of revealing, according to Joseph Campbell, the "experience of life" (The Power of Myth 5).

The Asian-American mythology I define does not depart entirely from traditional conventions of mythology. The

daughters in Tan's novels are the heroines whose quest for cultural identity is their holy grail. Like any heroine in traditional myths, the daughters are imperfect and must face conflicts and struggles before they can acknowledge the validity of their mothers' culture. This rite of passage the daughters undergo parallels many rite of passage themes found in traditional mythologies. Also, the ritual of storytelling is an important element both within the context of Tan's novels and in the context of Asian-American mythology. Like the mothers and daughters who engage in the ritual to share experiences and values, Asian-American writers engage in storytelling to voice the concerns of the community. The event that takes place within the novels is an event that takes place in "real life," in much the same way rituals have formed from existing mythologies.

Amy Tan's novels do not represent a complete Asian-American mythology but rather a move toward creating one. What currently exists is a group of stories written by Asian-American writers, including Amy Tan, that exemplify the experiences, needs, and concerns of the Asian-American population. Collectively, these stories contribute to a formation of an Asian-American mythology because they fulfill the function and purpose of mythology. Amy Tan's individual narratives may never appear in an anthology in

the way that Greek or Norse myths appear. However, this does not negate the impact her stories have in the Asian-American community. Elaine H. Kim notes

Contemporary Asian American writers are in the process of challenging old myths and stereotypes by defining Asian American humanity as part of the composite identity of the American people, which, like Asian American identity, is still being shaped and defined. (279)

So, Asian-American mythology, as represented by Asian-American narratives, continues to evolve and develop into a sophisticated genre of tales representing Asian-American experience.

Although Amy Tan rejects the idea of calling herself an ethnic writer, her works follow a tradition of Asian-American writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Jade Snow Wong, and Frank Chin. These writers challenge dominant American culture's stereotypes and clichés about Asians and Asian-Americans, and their works portray how dominant American culture marginalizes and displaces Asians and Asian-Americans. Despite Tan's point against ethnic literary classification, her novels center around Chinese-American society, and they depict Asian-American cultural identity struggles and conflicts. The mother and daughter narratives represent Asian-American society's need for community and identity. The presence of these stories, how they work in Tan's fiction, and their significance to the

Asian-American community show how they contribute to an Asian-American mythology.

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