"Becoming Chinese": Reconfiguration of Chinese American Identity in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*[1]

So Fujii

Abstract

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) is one of the best-selling Asian American novels, but it has been criticized for its portrayal of Chinese and Chinese American women and commodification of Chinese culture while enjoying praise from feminist reading for its positive representation of mother-daughter relationships. This academic, specifically Asian American studies' tendency to belittle the novel's handling of Chinese American identity has left a scholarly misconception about authentic Chinese American identity. This paper focuses on one daughter heroine and argues how she remembers and reconfigures images of her Chinese mother and her relationship with her mother in order to reveal her subtle shift away from the idea of authentic Chinese identity. Using a feminist idea of matrophobia, I will demonstrate how she changes self-hatred against her Chinese mother and how this change helps her heal traumatic memories of racism and reconfigures the idea of being a Chinese American woman.

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) has elicited many arguments, both positive and negative, both from Chinese or other ethnic Americans and white Americans, concerning representation of Chinese immigrants, Chinese Americans' identity and their culture.[2] The monologue narratives of three Chinese mothers and four American daughters are triggered by one mother, Suyuan's death, and they tell their stories two times in turn, just like playing mah-jong games, which are a main event of the Joy Luck Club, a gathering formed by the four mothers. Although a literary critic claims that the novel has nothing to do with racial or feminist concerns as if Tan lightly treated them (Grice 44), it tries to redefine what it means to be a Chinese American. "Becoming Chinese," which one of the daughters, Jing-mei, mentions as she enters China, is a quite provocative phrase that challenges the notion of authentic Chinese (American) subject. Despite common readings that the novel follows and reinforces traditional Chinese American images, it actually tries to shift its definitive representation and turns Chinese

American experience as something you cannot define as the one. Jing-mei's optimistic and idealistic solution to the question may not satisfy all Asian Americans, but it still is a way to survive in America, in which she once had to deny her ethnic heritage before coming to terms with it. This paper will discuss how Jing-mei comes to terms with her Chinese American identity while reconfiguring it. I will follow mainly Jing-mei's story to analyze her quest to Chinese American identity in terms of her relationship with her mother as a Chinese cultural reference in order to illuminate elusiveness of ethnic categories.

I chose Jing-mei's narrative as my main interest because it functions as an organizer of all the sixteen stories with two of her stories placed at the beginning and ending of the novel and the other two in the three mothers' sections. Also, Jing-mei is the only daughter who actually visits China, where she mentions this interesting idea of "becoming Chinese." It also must be noted that this reading is not to generalize the other three daughters' narrative. The three daughters' stories actually prove that there is no authentic narrative of Chinese American, which is my basic stance and the point that is going to be proved in this paper. First, I will see how the daughters deal with Chineseness, which is represented not only as those Chinese heritages from their mothers, but also their ethnicity perceived by the mainstream culture, and then I will analyze how she revises her notion of her Chinese American identity through memories.

Chineseness as Metaphor

As some daughters in the novel nonchalantly say, it is somewhat popular to be ethnic American, at least, at the time of the novel's publication in San Francisco. In response to a Joy Luck mother, Ying-ying who insists on calling younger Chinese Americans by English names, Jing-mei says, "In fact, it's even becoming fashionable for American-born Chinese to use their Chinese names" (37). Given the whole plot, in which Jing-mei learns the true meaning of her name, this use of Chinese names is merely a superficial cultural gesture. Lindo also remarks, "My daughter did not look pleased when I told her this, that she didn't look Chinese. She had a sour American look on her face. Oh, maybe ten years ago, she would have clapped her hands – hurray! – as if this were good news. But now she wants to be Chinese, it is so fashionable" (253). This phrase "ten years ago" nods to the ease with which the mainstream perception of minorities changes and, therefore, how unstable their status is. Being Chinese American

can even affect one's body image and self-confidence. As Lena says, "I may not be a raving beauty, but a lot of women in my aerobics class tell me I'm 'exotic' in an unusual way, and they're jealous that my breasts don't sag, now that small breasts are in" (156). To some extent, Chineseness has only changed from social vermin of the 19th century to sexual exotica.

In a world where being Asian can be fashionable while apparent racial ignorance and sexism carry through, what does it mean for a Chinese American woman to be Chinese? Jing-mei's attempt to connect culturally with China seems difficult. Although her mother tells her Chinese stories, she always changes the ending. Moreover, the most mysterious part, what happened to her mother's twin daughters, is never revealed. Chinese details are forbidden for Jing-mei. It is little wonder that she had thought the Joy Luck Club was a Chinese version of a Ku Klux Klan meeting (28) when that forbidden past is strongly connected with a place called China. She also does not understand some Chinese phrases, as she admits in the first narrative (19). Jing-mei's connection with China is difficult to maintain on a cultural level. When it comes to the personal level, China is replaced by a Chinese mother. She struggles in the gap between her mother's expectations and her own self-realization. Jing-mei's identity is formed through doing everything opposite her mother's expectations.

Their strained relationship is more about their cultural difference than about a simple generation gap. Suyuan, who lost all her family members in China, pins all her hopes on America, where she believes "you could be anything you wanted to be" unlike in old China (132), although this wistful hyperbole is a total fantasy. Among other issues, her comment overlooks that in America one also can be a disobedient daughter, which is totally out of Suyuan's cultural norm. Jing-mei, who always falls short of Suyuan's expectations and thus thinks she will never get approval from her, has low self-esteem. This is why, after Suyuan's death, she tries to see what her mother really meant when she gave her a jade pendant, a very Chinese present, before her death. Being of Chinese descent is not just political in the narrow sense; for Tan's daughters it is also a metaphor of their personal struggle with their mothers, which is nonetheless political and informed by power structures. Chinese immigrants had to take menial jobs because of the racial stratification in the labor market, and, seeing their parents toiling around the clock, the second-generation children cannot disobey their parents. For this reason, they can never completely separate those two factors out of their relationships:

personal problems have an inextricable political aspect. When they talk about their personal experience, they also talk about the political situation that frames the experience. Their personal experience reflects the political facets of their realities and becomes a metaphor of their political experience. Personal experience is not always written in the kind of political language that people can understand. It is written in emotional language that many people can relate to and makes them identify with characters and understand their realities. Tracing Jing-mei's narrative will help to demonstrate the ways in which they contend with this relationship between the personal and political, particularly in regard to their Chinese heritage.

Jing-mei's first narrative begins when Suyuan is dead and she has to replace her mother's seat in the regular mah-jong games held by the other mothers, called "aunties." As she remembers how her mother bickered with an auntie for bringing better soup to the games, she says, "She [Suyuan] said the two soups were almost the same, *chabudwo*. Or maybe she said *butong*, not the same thing at all. It was one of those Chinese expressions that mean the better half of mixed intentions. I can never remember things I didn't understand in the first place" (19). Although she speaks Chinese, she does not recognize cultural ideas behind it. This minimal understanding does not mean she is free of the cultural influence or any of her mother's saying and doing, though. When she describes how the first Joy Luck Club was formed in China, retelling her mother's story in Kweilin, she says, "Over the years, she told me the same story, except for the ending, which grew darker, casting long shadows into her life, and eventually into mine" (21). Her mother's stories directly and almost physically affect her life and thoughts.

Then, why does she ignore the Chinese part of herself as if she did not recognize it? As for the Joy Luck Club, she says, "before my mother told me her Kweilin story, I imagined Joy Luck was a shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war" (28). It is notable that she mentions stereotypical images of white supremacists and Native Americans as references to the Joy Luck Club. She sees her mother's mah-jong meetings as a racially "shameful" affair. Whether she is aware of it or not, she is ashamed of her Asian ethnicity, which is embodied by her mother's "Chinese" behaviors. As Tara Fickle points out, the mothers in a mah-jong meeting are dressed in a "strange" way (Fickle 69): "She [Suyuan] and Auntie An-mei were dressed up in funny Chinese dresses with

stiff stand-up collars and blooming branches of embroidered silk sewn over their breasts. These clothes were too fancy for real Chinese people, I thought, and too strange for American parties" (28). Strangeness also refers to abnormality, which is linked with Chineseness; what is strange, in this case, is Chinese Americana. It is no surprise that she links this racialized abnormality with the KKK and the Indians' tribal dance.

In Tan's well-known essay, "Mother Tongue," she says she uses different types of English in and outside her family and does not like to describe the English in her family as "'broken' or 'fractured' English" (274). When she was younger, however, she was "ashamed of her [her mother's] English" (274). Tan says:

> I believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say. That is, because she expressed them imperfectly, her thoughts were imperfect. And I had plenty of empirical evidence to support me: the fact that people in department stores, at banks, and in restaurants did not take her seriously, did not give her good service, pretended not to understand her, or even acted as if they did not hear her. (274)

There is also a long list of shameful things Suyuan does, such as "haggling with store owners, pecking her mouth with a toothpick in public, being color-blind to the fact that lemon yellow and pale pink are not good combination for winter clothes" (267). In light of these embarrassing behaviors, she explains, "I had vigorously denied that I had any Chinese whatsoever below my skin. I was a sophomore at Galileo High in San Francisco, and all my Caucasian friends agreed: I was about as Chinese as they were" (267). Jing-mei wanted to be the same as her white friends. Being Chinese is to be her mother, who belongs to a culturally shameful class in America. "And when she [Suyuan] said this ["Someday you will see... It is in your blood"], I saw myself transforming like a werewolf, a mutant tag of DNA suddenly triggered, replicating itself insidiously into a syndrome, a cluster of telltale Chinese behaviors, all those things my mother did to embarrass me ..." (267). In her adolescence and under peer pressure, those "Chinese" behaviors of her mother "embarrassed" Jing-mei "in public," so devastating her ethnic identity that she whitewashed her Asian identity. Jing-mei should have had a negative perspective on her own ethnicity. As a result, she wants to emphasize the fact that her Caucasian friends recognize her as their fellow, namely, a white. For Jing-mei, who chose to live as white in the name of being normal, being Chinese encodes her as a physiological anomaly, "a mutant tag of DNA" (267). It is inevitable, but Chinese are

déclassé.

The negative images associated with being Chinese are based on more than her mother's peculiar behaviors. When she is younger, Jing-mei and Suyuan are keen on searching for a prodigy model for Jing-mei (134). In search of the right model, she thinks, "I was filled with a sense that I would soon become *perfect*" (133). The prodigy inside her talks to her: "If you don't hurry up and get me out of here, I'm disappearing for good... And then you'll always be nothing" (133). For a Chinese girl, just being herself does not mean she is whole. The sense of lacking something is also mentioned by grown up Jing-mei, who says, "My mother and I never understood one another. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more" (37). As literary critic Walter Shear points out, "[g]enerally, the daughters tend to perceive cultural blanks, the absence of clear and definite answers to the problems of family, whereas the mothers tend to fill in too much, often to provide those kinds of cultural answers and principles that seem to empower them to make strong domestic demands on their daughters" (194). The Chinese mothers know too much, which troubles their American daughters, while the American daughters think they lack something cultural; they are made to feel handicapped on a cultural level while if they are too Chinese, they feel alienated in American society. This sense of lack easily leads to a sense of inferiority, which becomes a source of self-loathing. Her search for a prodigy to model herself against reveals Jing-mei's hope to be culturally perfect in America while satisfying her mother's desire for the American Dream.

At first, this search for a model resembles the world of the pre-Oedipal period, in which there is no difference between mother and child. Suyuan asks a question and Jing-mei is expected to provide the correct answer. They should share the same ideas about everything. Of course, it does not work that way, and every time she gives a wrong answer, "something inside of me [her] [begins] to die" (134). What dies inside her is the fantasy of being the perfect Chinese daughter. She says, "I hated the tests, the raised hopes and failed expectations. Before going to bed that night, I looked in the mirror above the bathroom sink and when I saw only my face staring back – and that it would always be this ordinary face – I began to cry. Such a sad, ugly girl! I made high-pitched noise like a crazed animal, trying to scratch out the face in the mirror" (134). A mirror is a typical motif of the moment of self-recognition and identification (such as Lacan's mirror stage), and what she sees first is a "sad, ugly girl," a negative image of a

Chinese girl. In this scene, the mirror is a sign of self-splitting: she recognizes herself not as she knows it, not as her mother wants her to be. She uses the same mirror image to reinvent herself:

> And then I saw what seemed to be the prodigy side of me – because I had never seen that face before. I looked at my reflection, blinking so I could see more clearly. The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. This girl and I were the same. I had new thoughts, willful thoughts, or rather thoughts filled with lots of won'ts. I won't let her [Suyuan] change me, I promised myself. I won't be what I'm not. (134)

She uses her anger over her mother and being unable to be a perfect Chinese daughter in order to identify herself ("This girl and I were the same"). She decides to be who she sees in the mirror and not to be her mother's ideal. In this moment, she discovers her rebellious side and decides to disobey her mother. She says, "I failed her [Suyuan] so many times, each time asserting my own will, my right to fall short of expectations" (142). Jing-mei's subject is based on anger at her failed Asian body, and that means she is split between a failing self and one that is angry at that self.

Jing-mei's split self is reinforced by an incident: one day Suyuan is "entranced" by the music played by a Chinese a girl on TV (135). The girl has a Peter Pan haircut, which Jing-mei unintentionally had worn earlier in her life when Suyuan tried to make her look like Shirley Temple (another "remarkable" child), and the girl also "had the sauciness of a Shirley Temple. She was proudly modest like a proper Chinese child" (135). The girl is an epitome of a Chinese American girl. Suyuan hires an old guy to give piano lessons to Jing-mei, who is now utterly unwilling to learn the instrument. Refusing to identify herself with the girl, she fools the deaf old man and does not practice hard. While practicing a piano piece called "pleading child" for the show, she "daydreamed about being somewhere else, about being someone else" (139). Again, she invents her other self to escape the reality. She pleads with her mother to let her be as she is, not a piano genius.

At the talent show, despite her dislike of playing the piano, Jing-mei feels intoxicated by dressing in *white* on the stage ("I was caught up in how lovely I looked" (139)) and looking down at people ready to applaud her as a genius, until she hits a wrong note and everything collapses. This incident shows irresistibility of the perfect Chinese daughter fantasy for Jing-mei despite her loathing of it. Even after the blunder

at the show, Suyuan does not give up the hope that her daughter may become a professional pianist. When Suyuan forces Jing-mei to practice the piano, she shouts back, "I wish I were dead! Like them [the babies Suyuan has lost in China]" (142). Immediately afterward, her ambivalence intensifies. She says, "As I said those things I got scared. It felt like worms and toads and slimy things crawling out of my chest, but it also felt good, as if this awful side of me had surfaced, at last" (142). These "slimy" things within herself uncannily resemble a "mutant tag of DNA" that waits in her body for its release (267). The DNA refers to her being Chinese, while the slimy things describe the American behavior of exerting her own will.

Jing-mei's internal division also informs the mother-daughter dyad. The struggle arises in her mother's assessment about what constitutes appropriate behavior from daughter to mother. Suyuan says, "Only two kinds of daughters... Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!" (142). In this light, Jing-mei's move to keep betraying her mother's expectation is a sign of independence from her Chinese mother. However, her subject formation succeeds with a sense of guilt because she uses her mother's trauma and continues to betray her to achieve the subject formation. Her independence is based on the sense that she had done a horrible thing to her mother, and because of the unspeakable Chinese story (the twins are not taboo, but Suyuan never discusses them in detail), Jing-mei never learns why her mother is so obsessed with having a prodigy. On Jing-mei's thirtieth birthday, Suyuan surprises her with a piano as a gift, and she considers it "a shiny trophy I [she] had won back." For the moment, it seems like bad feelings between them disappear (143). After her mother's death, she plays the tune that she played at the talent show and another tune on the next sheet of that score, only to realize they are "two halves of the same song" (144). This realization is linked with the aforesaid Chinese expression that means "the better half of mixed intentions" (19), suggesting that Suyuan only hoped the best for her daughter even if she is one of the daughters "who follow their own mind."

This redemptive ending still misses something: what happened to Jing-mei's split self, the Chinese side of her? Even though her negative perspective on being Chinese American is not the subject of this piano chapter, these uncanny similarities between dependence/independence and Chineseness/Americanness or abnormality/normality cannot be overlooked. If Chineseness is used as a metaphor of obedience, then how does

she contend with Chineseness as abnormality?

Becoming Chinese

As argued above, Chineseness is linked to Suyuan and Jing-mei appears to search for a solution to the conflict between herself and her deceased mother within her Chinese identity itself. This is also why critics tend to make slight of the novel: the resolution seems shallow. Jing-mei's search for her identity is embodied in the end of the novel when she visits China to meet the long lost twin sisters whom Suyuan had abandoned before coming to America. E.D. Huntley's view of this voyage shares a lot with those of other critics. She writes, "she [Jing-mei] journeys to her mother's ancestral homeland, China, and completes the circle of her heritage by claiming her Chinese half-sisters" (Huntley 73). Claiming her Chinese half-sisters is equated with claiming her Chinese identity, as if the sisters are the missing link of a "circle." Does Jing-mei appeal to the discourse of "authentic" Chinese that can be verified only through blood when she enters China and says "I am becoming Chinese" (267)? It is clear that this rediscovered Chineseness has nothing to do with those negative images she had of China, nor with the exotic representation of it in popular culture. Then, what does it mean to become Chinese? How can being a Chinese American daughter of Chinese immigrants' parents be explained and resolved?

Jing-mei's visit to China at the end of the novel implies that the visit and reunion with her sisters is the goal and the purpose. But in the framework of the overall novel, there is more to this. Of Jing-mei's visit to China, Huntley says as follows:

> Jing-mei brings closure and resolution to her mother's story as well as to her own. For Jing-mei, the journey is an epiphany and a discovery of self: finally aware of her mother's meaning, she is able to give voice to Suyuan's story as well as to the story that they share as mother and daughter... The aunties [of the Joy Luck Club] encourage Jing-mei to make Suyuan come alive for her other daughters through narrative. (48)

The moment or sign of the revelation comes as she and her father enter China. This is the first time she recognizes her Chinese identity:

> The minute our train leaves the Hong Kong border and enters Shenzhen, China, I feel different. I can feel the skin on my forehead tingling, my blood rushing through a new course, my bones aching with a familiar old pain. And

> I think, My mother was right. I am becoming Chinese.
>
> "Cannot be helped," my mother said when I was fifteen and had vigorously denied that I had any Chinese whatsoever below my skin ... But today I realized I've never really known what it means to be Chinese. I am thirty-six years old. My mother is dead and I am on a train, carrying with me her dreams of coming home. I am going to China. (267-268)

Jing-mei at first literally interprets her mother's saying, "[o]nce you are born Chinese, you cannot help but feel and think Chinese... Someday you will see... It is in your blood, waiting to be let go" (267), and believes she might transform into a Chinese person as one transforms into a werewolf. Her bodily sensations of tingling forehead or blood rushing through veins surely evoke something like a werewolf transfiguration. But what is a "familiar old pain" exactly? Following the werewolf imagery, this would mean she was actually once a werewolf and the experience was painful for her. Right after she feels this pain, she remembers those high school days when she tried to become a white, to deny her Chineseness. The "familiar old pain" is like an old wound that still hurts, meaning that she still has difficulty coping with that racial memory of denying her own Chinese identity.

This is also when she remembers the long list of embarrassing things her mother did in public. This series of thoughts, combined with meeting the twins of her deceased mother as well as her denial of Chinese identity and rejection of her mother, suggest that her trip to China is her atonement for betraying her mother due to her ethnicity. Her betrayal of her mother ultimately leads to the betrayal inflicted on herself, her own self-hatred. Since the twins still do not know her mother's death and Jing-mei has to tell them about her mother, she also tries to become her mother. Matrophobia is a fear of the maternal inside, and Jing-mei is afraid of becoming *like* her mother and doing some of the terrible things her mother did. Matrophobia in this case is mixed with racial inferiority and could be called matro-xenophobia. In her thirties, after the death of her mother, she seems to have come to terms with her Chinese identity, and, at the same time, to overcome her matrophobia. Her expression "familiar old pain" indicates that she is still in the process of healing and leaving it behind. Becoming Chinese is not the natural or automatic change that she supposed it to be, but rather her intentional shift to resolve the complex web of her mother and ethnic identity. It is a metaphor for her redemptive act to forgive herself for rejecting her mother and her ethnic identity.

Vision of Mother

Jing-mei's attempt to become her mother is predicted when she replaces her in her mother's seat of the mah-jong games, but what does this substitution really mean and is it really possible? As for Jing-mei's depiction of China, it is probably strongly affected by Tan's actual visit to China before writing the novel (Bloom 201). It is realistic and portrays the consumerist society of China full of commercial products, and American-born Jing-mei is surprised by the ubiquitous Western products. Tan's work is based on immediate information, her mother's stories, and historical studies of China (Huntley 17). In this realistic China setting, becoming her own mother seems an unrealistic task. In an effort to "revive" her mother, Jing-mei often imagines ("dreams" in her words) things her mother might do if she could see her twins (270) and repeatedly simulates the reunion scene with the twins; however, she always ends up imagining tragedy or disaster (270, 274).

Jing-mei enters China with her mother's unfulfilled dream and, despite her attempts, she still has no revelation about being Chinese. Her understanding of China is still quite superficial; she says, "This is more like it... This is China" when she notices that the hotel's shampoo's consistency and color is of hoisin sauce while remaining unimpressed by the hotel room filled with Western brand products (278). Consumerist and commercialized China surprises Jing-mei, whose China is still the old, Asian country in Suyuan's stories. Her inflexible expectations about China indicate that she still clings to firm, if singular, understanding about her mother. Her fixation on old China is also apparent when she imagines the twins, older than her, to be babies or girls (269). In addition to this culture shock, she learns the origin of her name and the true story of how Suyuan abandoned the twins through her father, Canning. At this point, she realizes how much she has not known about her own mother, which makes her question her authenticity as a daughter and intensifies her anxiety about the meeting the twins. In fear of disappointing the twins and with her materialistic understanding of China, how can Jing-mei fulfill her mother's dream and learn what it is to be Chinese in the end?

To understand the last scene of Jing-mei's revelation, there is one Western product that disillusions Jing-mei's imaginary China in her mother's stories. This product, a Polaroid camera with its pictures, plays an important role at key moments. The gadget was quite popular during the 1980s, and it is no wonder she brings it with her for the

trip. A camera in hands of Western travelers is usually considered to be a symbol of the (Western) gaze and fixation on (non-Western) subjects, but the device here functions to connect subject and object. The first time it is introduced in the text is when Aiyi, Canning's auntie, finds him in the crowd of the train station in Guangzhou (273-74). She is able to find him easily because he sent the Polaroid picture of himself beforehand. Jing-mei also takes a picture of Canning and Ayiyi with the Polaroid camera. The next is when Jing-mei uses the camera to socialize with Lili, Aiyi's great-granddaughter. Jing-mei does not know much Cantonese and cannot communicate with Lili, but when she holds up the camera, Lili immediately strikes a pose and, by the time they leave the station, holds onto Jing-mei's hand (275). The third time is when the twins find Jing-mei at the Shanghai airport; they hold a Polaroid picture Jing-mei sent which helps them find Jing-mei. It is not mentioned who is in the picture, Jing-mei or Suyuan, but it helps the twins to identify Jing-mei. The last is when Canning takes a picture of Jing-mei and the twins (288). The first thing we may notice about the function of Polaroid camera and its pictures is that it brings family members together regardless of time, space and language. The most significant case is when Jing-mei and the twins somehow see their mother's face in theirs in the Polaroid picture (288). There is more to these practical uses of the camera and pictures, and the significance lies in the introduction of a Polaroid camera, specifically. Moreover, in some cases, the process of developing the image can be more significant moment than the act of taking pictures.

Images developing are images in production, which is the opposite of fixed images. Stereotypical images are often used in the novel. Because she refers to KKK or Indian's tom-tom dances on TV in comparison to the Joy Luck Club, the representation of Chinese Americans is probably strongly influenced by mainstream description of them as mysterious and unassimilated. Unlike these images, the appearing images of the Polaroid pictures are described as images in production. When she takes a picture of her father and his auntie, Jing-mei says, "Aiyi and my father still stand together, each of them holding a corner of the picture, watching as their images begin to form. They are almost reverentially quiet" (274). Also, after Jing-mei takes a picture for Lili, she is "jumping and giggling every few seconds as she watches herself appear on the greenish film" (275). They are all anxious to see the development, waiting together. It is as if they were taking part in the process of development. These moments of anticipating the developing Polaroid pictures is likely about more than checking to learn whether

pictures were successful, especially in the last scene.

When Jing-mei first sees the twins, she "sees" her mother (287) and remembers a childhood memory with her mother. It was when she was five and slept under the bed while her mother frantically looked for her, worrying that she was dead until she found Jing-mei. It is a memory of loss and recovery, indicating that this meeting of Jing-mei and the twins is also a reunion. This retrospection also suggests that Jing-mei and the twins can potentially connect through memories. When they finally meet and embrace each other, they "murmur," " 'Mama, Mama,' as if she [Suyuan] is among us [Jing-mei and the twins]" (287). Jing-mei's plan to "resurrect" her mother is accomplished here because now she learns that these tiny bits of memories suffice to tell the stories of her mother. Then comes the moment of revelation to learn what it is to be Chinese. "My sisters look at me... 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" (287-88). Jing-mei sees the resemblance of her mother in the twins' faces and probably vice versa. The twins, of course, wanted to see their biological mother, and Jing-mei rediscovers her mother through her father's account of the twins. All three of them think about their mother, which leads to a moment when Suyuan might resurrect as an illusory image. The vision of her mother provides Jing-mei with a revised idea about being a Chinese American: it is to share memories as family. And as she released a suppressed Chinese part of herself, she finally accepts her Chinese identity, not as a media caricature, nor as a political category, but as a way to cherish personal memories with others. The novel provides further evidence that sharing memories does not mean fixing them in time and space:

> The flash of the Polaroid goes off and my father hands me the snapshot. My sisters and I watch quietly together, eager to see what develops.
>
> The gray-green surface changes to the bright colors of our three images, sharpening and deepening all at once. And although we don't speak, I know we all see it: Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish. (288)

Jing-mei and the twins not only participate in the development of the image, but they also read more than the image as it is. They interpret the simple images of themselves and see their mother. This simple moment of looking at the emerging image is a

moment of reconfiguration and redefinition.

For Jing-mei, the idea of being Chinese American has dramatically changed. It is no longer than the source of self-hatred. It is to share family memories. Jing-mei's management of her ethnic identity might be easy prey to the self-romanticization of Asian Americans as a successful second generation of immigrants, a myth of seamless Americanization. It is understandable that some critics such as Sau-ling Cynthia Wong or Chae Youngsuk are annoyed at this easy solution to ongoing racial problems and the replacement of them with personal matters. It may seem haphazard and to give no solution or consolation to their racial matters. At worst, Jing-mei's solution could be considered avoiding the problem. Throughout the novel, however, the narrators constantly ask themselves what it means to be Chinese, and each time they conceive different answers to meet the context of the moments of their lives.

Conclusion

Many scholars of Asian American studies have been criticizing Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* for its inauthentic, exoticized portrayal of Chinese and Chinese American and their cultures, and in so doing, they reinforce a fantasy of authentic Chinese and Chinese American, which easily turns into stereotypes. Despite the scholars' criticism, the daughter heroines' narratives carefully unpack what it means to be Chinese American women and reproduce different meanings of being Chinese American women. An alternative interpretation suggests that replacing or shifting is a way to reconfigure issues of race and avoid concretizing them as facts or truth, as if race were the only factor that defines a person. Jing-mei's solution seems based on biological facts, but since it is mostly about sharing memories and healing her traumatic experience, "Chinese" becomes a nominal definition, which could also annoy those who think that being Chinese American is a solid, physical experience. "Chinese" is a tentative description, but a necessary modifier to define her personal experience and her identity because simply being "American" or "Asian" is not enough.

Here Jing-mei tries to redefine "Chinese" as something more than a nationality or a political and ethnic category. It does not mean that she forgets how she has been made to feel inferior as a Chinese American woman. Her comment about internal racism might be brief, but it is sufficient to recognize the degree to which she had been ashamed of her identity. Instead of staking out a claim to her identity by insisting on

the problems she faces as a racialized individual, she starts to heal those traumatic wounds by sharing them. As she says "it [Chinese part of Jing-mei's identity] can finally be let go" (288), for Jing-mei, be(com)ing Chinese seems ultimately a personal act. However, redefining one's ethnicity can also be a political act.

Jing-mei, by remembering her exchange with her mother, carefully unpacks her idea of being a Chinese American as a social and cultural déclassé, and turns it into a healing process of sharing memories with her family members. She turns being Chinese American, a solid, physical experience and a political category, into becoming Chinese American, a process performed for a personal purpose. Jing-mei's personalization of her experience is, however, not a regressive manifestation of the famous slogan "the personal is political" because in this process, it is implied that she will share her memories with the twins who were abandoned during the World War II. The twins' story, Jing-mei's father's story and Jing-mei's memories of her mother compensate with each other so as to represent Suyuan in a historical context. Sharing memories is to situate oneself in a history, which is important for Chinese Americans who are often described in mainstream media as ahistorical, romanticized characters.

Previously, Jing-mei's Chinese American identity had been a source of self-hatred, but now she considers it to be more than an identity. It affords her a chance to share her memory to heal and to situate her mother and thus herself in history. As Jing-mei's father tells the story of the twins to reveal the meaning of Jing-mei's name, through sharing memories, she reconfigures her own idea of Chinese American identity as well as the images of her mother. At the same time, she can finally grieve for her mother. Jing-mei and the twins look at the picture and read more than the picture describes, thereby defying and even expanding the significance of the original. Their act of interpretation exceeds what is given, and this can be applied to their interpretation of their identities. Their Chinese and Chinese American identities are not defined entirely by blood, but also by shared memories. This ending, under the disguise of blood as the most important factor to define being Chinese, suggests that one can redefine their ethnic identity, just like "becoming," not being, Chinese.

Notes

1. This paper is originally written as a chapter of my dissertation submitted to Nagoya University in September 2016.
2. Tan is often criticized for inauthentic representation and commodification of Chinese culture by cultural nationalist Frank Chin or literary critics who usually praise Maxing Hong Kingston's cultural mixture that characterizes Chinese American communities, such as Sau-ling Cynthia Wong and Youngsuk Chae. A lot of the critical praise for Tan usually comes from feminist reading of her novels; e.g. an article by Marina Heung or a book by Wendy Ho.

Works Cited

Bloom, Harold, editor. *Modern Critical Interpretations: Amy Tan's* The Joy Luck Club. Chelsea House Publishers, 2002.

Chae, Youngsuk. *Politicizing Asian American Literature: Towards a Critical Multiculturalism*. Routledge, 2008.

Chin, Frank. "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake." *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*, edited by Jeffery Paul Chang, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, Meridian, 1991, pp. 1-92.

Fickle, Tara. "American Rules and Chinese Faces: The Games of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*." *MELUS* vol. 39, no. 3, Fall 2014, pp. 68-88.

Grice, Helena. "'The beginning is hers': The Political and Literary Legacies of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan." *China Fictions/English Language: Literary Essays in Diaspora, Memory, Story*, edited by A. Robert Lee, Rodopi, 2008, pp. 33-55.

Heung, Marina. "Daughter-Text/Mother-Text: Matrilineage in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*." *Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publishers, 2002, pp. 25-41.

Ho, Wendy. *In Her Mother's House: The Politics of Asian American Mother-Daughter Writing*. AltaMira, 1999.

Huntley, E.D. *Amy Tan: A Critical Companion*. Greenwood Press, 1998.

Shear, Walter. "Generational Differences and the Diaspora in *The Joy Luck Club*."

Critique vol.34, no.3, 1993, pp. 193-99.

Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club*. Penguin Books, 1989.

---. "Mother Tongue." *The Opposite of Fate*. Penguin Books, 2003. pp. 271-79.

Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. "'Sugar Sisterhood': Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon." *Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publishers, 2002. pp. 83-110.