

About This Volume

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Amy Tan will, it seems, always be most associated with her highly successful debut novel, *The Joy Luck Club*. Yet she has also published five other bestselling novels, two memoirs, two children's books, and has participated in adapting her writing into many other forms of media, including film, television, and opera. This volume offers insights into the full range of her creative work. The next essay, "On Amy Tan," explores Amy Tan's career, work, inspiration, and influence. It is followed by an essay relating her biography. We then turn to four anchor essays that provide further context for Amy Tan's works and career.

In an essay that adopts a deliberately historical approach, Robert Evans explores the history of critical responses to Tan's novels in the popular (rather than academic) press. Surveying reviews of her books, he shows how writers for newspapers responded to her writings and how they often employed approaches also used by academics. Reviewers discussed Tan's works in terms of feminism, race, ethnicity, cultural identity, national and ethnic history, and family relationships. However, they also showed an especially lively interest in thematic, archetypal, and particularly formalist approaches. They often paid more attention than is common in contemporary academe to the successes and/or flaws of the novels as *works of literature*—that is, as works interesting primarily for their strengths or weakness as works of art.

In "Amy Tan and the Critics," Rebecca Harris then provides an overview of critical responses to Tan's novels. She finds that while Tan's works have achieved popular success and have been praised by critics for the clarity and power of her prose, her storytelling abilities, her feminist sensibility, and her close exploration of mother-daughter relationships, the critical reception has also been

of the book”). Her review is unusual in being so concerned with specifically Chinese aspects of Tan’s novel.

Reviews of *The Kitchen God’s Wife*

When Linnea Lannon reviewed Tan’s second novel for the *Detroit Free Press*, she began (in a way typical of many early reviews) by combining thematic, formalist, and archetypal ideas in a single assertion: “‘The Kitchen God’s Wife’ is delightful, a mother-daughter story reminiscent of ‘The Joy Luck Club’ but a far more polished and involving piece of writing.” She said that the new book “begins on a note any daughter can appreciate,” while also commenting that the work tells “a lengthy and fascinating story about [the narrator’s] mother’s life in China.” But she returned to a formalist’s interest in artistic skill by commenting that the new book could easily have been “Grade A trash” but then quickly added that “Tan pulls it off,” admiring the novelist’s talent as a storyteller. Lannon, like a good formalist, did fault Tan for a few artistic slips, but she also ended by stressing the book’s success in archetypal terms: “Though specifically Chinese-American, these women share universal joy, failings and pain.”

Debbie Sontag, in a very widely syndicated assessment, began with a strong formalist assertion, one that managed to combine both positive and negative comments about Tan’s artistry in this text:

Amy Tan stitches a beautiful literary tapestry, rich and dense with color, texture, pattern. But then, blasphemy of blasphemies, she is not content to just hang the thing and let it shimmer. She has to cage her creation, so that its beauty is tainted by the opaque glass and fake wood of a cheap frame job. It is incredible that the same writer who tells the gripping, sweeping, historical story at the heart of *The Kitchen God’s Wife* has also contrived the flimsy framework that surrounds it.

Like Tan’s 1989 bestseller, *The Joy Luck Club*, this is a Chinese-American mother-daughter story in

children who do not (and ideally should not) see their vernacular or nonstandard variety as “incorrect.” However, Wolfram and Schilling note that thanks to the work of linguists, newer standardized tests contain “alternative, vernacular dialect forms” in their questions and tests such as the Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation (DELV) are available for vernacular speakers (317). In Tan’s case, even though she does not explicitly specify dialect differences as a point of contention in her assessment experiences, her description of challenges in the specialized test items urges us to recognize that there are other factors at play, such as individual learner differences in language testing, that affect student outcomes. Through her personal descriptions, we find that Tan in various ways compares herself to her mother: Even though her mother spoke a nonstandard variety of English (which was socially marked), it was a language of Tan’s home and a marker of both their identities. Likewise, even though Tan had her fair share of challenges in achievement tests (a rite of passage, or a social expectation in the US K-12 education system), she has become a celebrated author today.

This essay has attempted to describe some of the key sociolinguistic issues raised in Amy Tan’s “Mother Tongue.” An understanding of the spread of English and its history in China offers insights into many of the characteristics of Chinese varieties of English found in Daisy Tan’s speech. “Mother Tongue” gives readers an impactful sense of the role language varieties played in the development of Amy Tan’s relationship with her mother. At the same time, it dramatizes important insights from sociolinguistics. Specifically, it eloquently presents the ideological turmoil Tan experiences when language values and language realities of her and her mother collide. Sociolinguistically, while standard varieties are regarded higher, we find it impacts personal relationships such as that of Tan and her mother during her childhood years. Later on, Daisy Tan’s English, a nonstandard variety, gradually signifies to Tan as a marker of her own identity, and a reflection of the different varieties of English she uses on a daily basis. It is no wonder that “Mother Tongue,” resonates with many readers because within it we

“two halves of the same song” (144). Schumann’s music thus serves Tan as a metaphor to highlight the relationship between mother and daughter. This relationship encompasses, like Schumann’s music, two phases of human experience. At times, these phases may appear to be contradictory, but, in fact, they are really two natural and complementary aspects of life.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan rewrites the story of past and present relations from the perspectives of both daughters and mothers, either through the voices of daughters speaking for their mothers, or through the voices of mothers speaking for themselves and their daughters, and eventually, in some cases, through the voices of mothers and daughters speaking to one another. In adopting narrative strategies that give voice to silent mothers as well as to the sometimes confused and bewildered daughters, the novel suggests that an acknowledgement of the specificity of maternal experience can offer a perspective crucial to feminist discourse. Rather than daughters having to “speak for” mothers, mothers would be able to speak for themselves, perhaps “with two voices.” Only thus can mothers and daughters speak to one another, and the plots of mothers and daughters become speakable. They thus enact a process described by Hirsch:

Only a probing scrutiny of what separates feminist discourse from maternal discourse can free feminist thinking to define some of the shapes of maternal subjectivity and to study the articulation of specifically maternal voices. Only thus might we envision a feminist family romance of mothers and daughters, both subjects, speaking to each other and living in familial and communal contexts which enable the subjectivity of each member. . . . It is most useful to look at the mother as a subject constructed in a particular relation to social reality, to sexuality, to work and historical experience, to subjectivity. (163–64)

star,” recalling her mother’s story that such a star had fallen into Precious Auntie’s mouth, but GaoLing corrects her by explaining that the word for star is *xing*, while *xin* means truth. Consequently, Liu Xin means “remain True.” Nevertheless, given that *xin* and *xing* seem so easy to confuse with one another, the other meaning of “shooting star” lingers in the background, haunting Precious Auntie’s life story. As GaoLing explains, the latter meaning was derogatory for some family members, who did in fact call her Liu Xing. They did so because they confused shooting stars with comets and the “calamity” they believed such astronomical events to signify. Ruth receives the news of the meaning of Precious Auntie’s true name in positive terms that rebut her denigration by the Liu family:

Her grandmother had a name. Gu Liu Xin. She had existed. She still existed. Precious Auntie belonged to a family. LuLing belonged to that same family, and Ruth belonged to them both. The family name had been there all along, like a bone stuck in the crevices of a gorge. LuLing had divined it while looking at an oracle in the museum. And the given name had flashed before her as well for the briefest moments, a shooting star that entered the earth’s atmosphere, etching itself indelibly in Ruth’s mind (350).

This act of interpretation is stated in terms of religious revelation, or divination. It is also figured as a form of writing (“etching”) in permanent ink (“indelibly”). Ruth’s meditation on Precious Auntie’s personal name is an act of affirmation, since she lays claim to Gu Liu Xin as her grandmother and restores her rightful place in a cherished lineage.

By foregrounding Ruth and GaoLing’s act of interpretation, Tan makes the scene a commentary on her novel and her relationship to her readers. Ghostwriting results in a text inhabited by the ancestral Other. LuLing’s memoir of Precious Auntie provides the means for resolving her torment about Precious Auntie’s suicide. LuLing is haunted by the part she played in the death. This demonic memory

when a whole cooked chicken is brought to the table, head and feet still attached:

Dory: Can't we have something that's never been dead?

LuLing: You say dead, somebody die.

Ruth: (to Fia and Dory, pointing to another dish)

Just try.

Fia and Dory: I won't.

Ruth: Just taste.

Fia and Dory: You can't make me.

You're not my mother!

(Opera, Act I, Scene 1. *Fate! Luck! Chance!*)

Very soon in this scene Ruth gives her mother a long pink mink coat. It is a vibrant, hot pink color. This event happens in both the novel and the opera. The opera consolidates all of Ruth's memories of her childhood into an aria in Act I, Scene 1, explaining why she gives her mother the mink coat, "to show I care, for all she cared. Her worries, endless worries."

To change subjects after Ruth's explanation of the mink coat, Arlene explains that Ruth is a ghost writer and what that means. Ruth tries to correct these impressions of her career by saying she is a "Co-writer" and not a "Ghost writer." This brings in the themes and imagery of ghosts and ghost writers used throughout the rest of the opera. Writing and ghostwriting tie together the generations. Precious Auntie is known for her writing skills. Young LuLing supports herself in Hong Kong writing letters for wives left behind. And Ruth makes her living as a Ghost/Co-writer.

The opera cuts characters (Gao Ling, Baby Brother, etc.) and events (Young LuLing's time in the orphanage after her failed wedding) and changes some events entirely to create a more active and dramatic story for the three women. Again, the adapter needs to consider what needs to be sung in two hours' time to get to the heart of the relationship among Precious Auntie, LuLing, and Ruth.

Remainders. The charity rock group earns over two million dollars for literacy efforts.

1994	Tan publishes a second book for children, <i>The Chinese Siamese Cat</i> .
1995	Tan publishes <i>The Hundred Secret Senses</i> . It is short-listed for the Orange Prize.
1999	Tan contracts Lyme Disease; it is misdiagnosed for a few years. She suffers epileptic seizures and other health problems from the disease.
	With Katrina Kennison, Tan edits <i>The Best American Short Stories</i> .
	November 22, Daisy Tan dies at age 83.
2000	Tan serves as the voice for herself in a twelfth-season episode of the <i>The Simpsons</i> , “Insane Clown Poppy,” airing November 12.
2001	Tan publishes <i>The Bonesetter’s Daughter</i> , a novel.
	On September 3, <i>Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat</i> first appears on PBS. It will run through October 2002.
2003	Tan publishes <i>The Opposite of Fate: A Book of Musings</i> , an autobiographical work.
	Tan helps found LymeAid 4 Kids, an organization supporting the families of children who need care for Lyme Disease.
2005	Tan publishes <i>Saving Fish from Drowning</i> , a novel.
	Tan is awarded the Common Wealth Award of Distinguished Service in literature.
2007	<i>The Joy Luck Club</i> chosen as a “Big Read” by the National Endowment for the Arts.
	Susan Kim adapts <i>The Joy Luck Club</i> as a stage play. It appears at the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre in New York.
