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**Women as Victors of the Social Milieu in  
Amy Tan's China**

**Sushil Mary Mathews, Ph.D.**

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**Relationships between the Artist and the Society**

Sociological criticism is based on the conviction that a work of art is related to the society in which it is created and that the investigation of this relationship will facilitate a better understanding and deepen the readers' aesthetic response to the work. The sociological approach to literature explores the relationships between the artist and the society and examines it in the cultural, economic and political contexts in which it was written or received.

This paper is an intensive study of the novels of Tan, from a sociological approach and also investigates the adaptation techniques which enable the women in the novels to face life in a staunchly patriarchal society.

**Embedded in the Chinese Tradition and Culture**

The narrative of Tan's novels is deeply embedded in the Chinese tradition and culture. China, from the early sixteenth century to the recent past, is portrayed in the novels of Tan with myriad experiences of the Chinese. The social milieu pictured in the novels and how the women characters transact in this social milieu and emerge victors is elaborated.

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The application of historical materialism to literary studies is examined and a few other factors that are also considered are the world events, especially wars, the primitive societies, women, marriage, suicide, hunger, religion, sex, education, death, belief in evil spirits, the different society groups and ethics as portrayed in the novels. The sociological study will enable a deeper understanding of the strategic role of the mother in equipping her daughter encounter society and life.

### **World Events as the Background**

The novels of Tan have in its background some **world events** and a few that were of national interest. Orville Schell's review "Your Mother is in Your Bones" emphasises that the millions of Chinese who were part of the diaspora of **World War II**, and the fighting that resulted in the triumph of the Communists were subsequently cut off from the mainland and were left to fend for themselves culturally. The Japanese invaded China in 1949 and this war is cited in almost all the works of Tan, as it had a lasting influence on the lives of the people and it had also altered their attitudes to life.

Tan's novels portray the **First Sino-Japanese war** that was fought between 1894 and 1895. The second war that followed, she pictures, was more destructive and sporadic fighting, lasted on and off throughout the thirties, but large-scale fighting did not begin again until 1937, when Japanese units were attacked at the Marco Polo Bridge outside Peking. In December 1937 Japanese Army units were on the outskirts of the Nationalist capital, Nanking. As many as three lakh Chinese soldiers and civilians were executed, and rape, theft, and abuse were rampant. The Kuomintang had officers who tried to lead the people and the general public hearkened to their words. Suyuan Woo, the protagonist in Tan's, The Joy Luck Club, was the wife of a Kuomintang officer and she received news that the Japanese were close at hand, and that she should escape. She carried all that she held dear to her life, on the way she had to slowly prioritise and leave behind things till she felt she had no strength to go on. When she was certain of her death, she decided to abandon her two daughters by the wayside hoping that someone would take them home. She left money and the address at which the babies were to be returned once the war was over.

### **New Ideas of History and Identity**

Catherine Romagnolo in her "Narrative Beginnings in Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club: A Feminist Study" says, "Like Suyuan, Tan's novel attempts to snip the threads that hold these tightly knitted structures together, unraveling them as it constructs new ideas of history and identity which are at once subjective, personal, and polymorphous"(89). At one point Tan makes a comment that if it had not been for the war with Japan, the people of China would have all been fighting among themselves.

At the time of war, Tan says in her novel, the people who lived in and around Kweilin used to find solace and escape to the mountains there: “We were a city of leftovers mixed together. If it hadn’t been for the Japanese, there would have been plenty of reason for fighting to break out among these different people. Can you see it? Shanghai people with north-water peasants, bankers with barbers, rickshaw pullers with Burma refugees. Everybody looked down on someone else. It didn’t matter that everybody shared the same sidewalk to spit on and suffered the same fast-moving diarrhea. We all had the same stink, but everybody complained someone else smelt the worst.” (JLC 22)

### **Suffering in the Hands of the Communists**

The novels of Tan reveal that at the time of the war the Chinese suffered if there were any Communists in the family. The government refused to give them any benefits or loans but still when life got tough many people opted for the Communist way of life. They were attracted to **Communism** because those who joined were given good education and jobs and most of the youngsters got interested, although it was a rigid life. Tan pictures a character in The Kitchen God’s Wife, Lu, a fisherman’s son who lived a hard life and had no education. He was offered free education by a Marxist and Lu worked hard and took up University examinations, “And because he was so grateful for being able to change his life, he vowed he would someday write about the hardships of peasants and laborers, to be their mouth, to tell their story, to tell them they could change their fate-by revolutionary ideas!” (KGW 105)

### **Family Objections and Interventions – Social Frustrations Leading to Communism**

Weili’s mother had been in love with Lu, but this was objected to on two grounds, one that the society did not approve of a love marriage and the second, that he was a fisherman’s son. She was married off to her father’s friend who took her in place of his dead second wife. The woman had a tough life in the household as a wife among many others and one day she left home to join the revolutionaries and she revealed this great decision to break away from tradition by cutting off her long and beautiful hair which she left behind as a token. Many women, battered in bad marriages, found refuge in Communism though they shuddered to utter the word.

After Weili had suffered a disastrous marriage, she seized an opportunity to escape when she heard that her cousin Peanut had left her marriage and joined the Communists. When Weili reached Peanut’s place, she saw that the place had several other women who had associated with the Communists, “So that’s how I found out that the whole house was an underground hiding place, filled with women and children. Can you imagine? I was scared and excited at the same time. I’m not saying I wanted to become a Communist, no such thing. I was excited because I was in a house with nine women who had once had awful marriages, nine women who no longer had to obey their husbands and mothers-in-law.” (KGW 355)

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## **Communists and Individual Pursuits**

The Communists did not spare anyone when the Japanese attacked. In the novel The Bonesetter's Daughter, Tan introduces a few scientists who were searching for the bones of the oldest man whom they called 'The Peking Man'. During the war, these scientists were also captured by the Communists and in spite of asserting that they were not soldiers, the scientists were taken to help the soldiers with the cleaning and the cooking. They were later set free, but were soon caught by the Japanese troops. They questioned them about the Communists and when they did not yield answers, they were lined up and shot.

In The Kitchen God's Wife, Tan portrays the war in the lives of the pilots serving the Air Force and their families. They had to shift from place to place, at times staying even less than a week in a place. Their possessions had to be abandoned or given away as they were allowed to carry very less luggage. The group grew smaller each time they moved, as many people faced death. The sudden outbursts of bombs pushed people into confusion and rage, "I tell you, that day, when this fear sickness spread, everyone became a different person. You don't know such a person exists inside of you until you become taonan. I saw people grabbing for food, stealing things. Vendors walked away from their steaming pots. I saw fights and arguments, children lost and crying, people pushing to get into the bus then emptying out of the bus when they saw the streets were too full for anyone to move forward." (KGW 215)

## **Transition from Dynasty Rule and Internal Conflicts**

Bella Adams in her article "Representing History in Amy Tan's The Kitchen God's Wife" says, "China's transformation from dynasty to republic(s) is also discussed, as are the internal conflicts that both preceded and succeeded the Sino- Japanese War: "The old revolutionaries, the new revolutionaries, the Kuomintang and the Communists, the warlords, the bandits, and the students-gwah! gwah! gwah!-everybody squabbling, like old roosters claiming the same sunrise."(205).

The Kitchen God's Wife lends itself to "information retrieval"(Spivak, Postcolonial 9) inasmuch as it represents an unknown, if not a forgotten history, which includes the Rape of Nanking by the Japanese: Raped old women, married women, and little girls, taking turns with them, over and over again. Sliced them open with a sword when they were all used up. Cut off their fingers to take their rings. Shot all the little sons, no more generations. Raped ten thousand, chopped down twenty or thirty thousand, a number that is no longer a number, no longer people.(295)"(11)

The Japanese tried to get hold of all the chief people in the villages and they went to Weili's father, Jiang Sao-yen, who owned a great deal of factories and other industries.

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They persuaded him to cooperate with them so that the war would end soon but he did not yield. However two days later, there was a banner declaring Jiang Sao-yen as a supporter of the Japanese and soon although his business flourished, he lost his dear friends and relatives who regarded him as a traitor.

When the Japanese were pushed out, he was sentenced to die and survived only because he had suffered a stroke and lacked coordination. Weili, his daughter, thought about his actions, “But then I thought to myself, how can you blame a person for his fears and weaknesses unless you have felt the same and done differently? How can you think everyone can be a hero, choosing death, when it is part of our nature to let go of brave thoughts at the last moment and cling to hope and life?” (KGW 327)

### **Revolutionaries of Sun Yat-Sen**

There is also a mention of the **Revolutionaries of Sun Yat-Sen** who came in 1911 and overthrew the Manchus and all the official jobs that the Chinese held had to be given up and the new Republic of China came into being. One of the protagonists, Weili gave her view that the World War I began in China, with a shooting north of Peking, when a few people were killed. The fighting also spread diseases; mosquitoes ruled the place and malaria was rampant. The end of the Second World War in 1945 was celebrated: “Firecrackers burst in the streets all day long and this made everyone nervously happy. Overnight the lanes grew crowded with vendors of every delicious kind of thing and fortune-tellers with only the best news” (BD275).

### **The Great Peace Revolution**

The Hundred Secret Senses, is a novel in which Tan talks of the year 1864. It was the time of a crusade- the **Great Peace Revolution**, when the Chinese were all taken into the army of the Heavenly King in exchange for food and clothing. The people believed in this and went forward, but soon the tide changed and there were no more provisions. The news of the death of the Heavenly King created terror and the locals also received news that the Manchus had signed a treaty with the foreigners and that they were on the look out to kill all the God Worshippers.

At the time of the Great Peace Revolution, Tan’s heroine had been left behind with those who were not fit to join the army, the too young, the sick and the old as she had lost an eye in a freak accident. All the others had joined the revolution. She, however, did not sit back content with the food and clothes sent. She cared for her grandmother and after her death, she left the village and walked forth to meet life and faced challenges with a brave spirit.

### **The Condition of Women During Wars**

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In spite of these wars and the reactions recorded by the characters, the **women** were able to pick up their life from scratch and move on. It was the indomitable spirit in them that nudged them forward when the future loomed dark and bleak. Suyuan Woo, who had to flee with her two daughters during the war, was the one who started the 'joy luck club', a meeting of four young women who dared to hope and dream of a good future. Winnie, the protagonist in another novel suffered the problems of war and constant shifts with the Air force but she did not complain.

During the time when the war was on and people were all poverty stricken, Weili did not let go of the little silver cutlery that she had, which she knew she could barter anytime. She was a mother destined to face the death of her children who perished by the ravages of the epidemics that the war brought on. She tried her best to be an obedient wife to a terrorising husband, but when she saw a way out, she decided to follow the way that her cousin Peanut and many young women had taken- to become a communist but she was saved by the love of Jimmy Louie.

### **Prisons in China**

Tan gives a very picturesque portrayal of the **prisons** in China. Weili had been arrested on the charges of infidelity. The prison smelt very bad and she was taken to a cell which housed four other women. There was a wooden toilet in the corner which could not be flushed, and with no cover. "Everybody's business just sat there, like one big ugly soup" (KGW 372). There was a thin mattress where three could squeeze in together and they had to take turns sleeping. But soon Weili made a difference in their lives. She got a cover for the toilet, cleaned up the cell, made it free of bugs, taught many other prisoners good etiquette and also to read and write.

Tan also shows how the courts of the time rested solely on evidence. When Weili could not produce the divorce document that Wen-Fu had signed, the court considered it non-existent and passed a verdict in favour of Wen-Fu. But even in the prison, the protagonist of Tan could make a difference, and instead of cursing the darkness, she lit a candle.

### **Stories of Lesser Known Communities**

The novels of Tan also bring in the story of a few **tribes** who form an important part of the society in China. The Hundred Secret Senses talks of the Hakka tribe. The women of the tribe worked as hard as the men – carrying rocks, making charcoal, and guarding crops from bandits at night, "A suitable Hakka bride from our mountains had thick calluses on her feet and a fine, high boned face... And the mothers from poorer families liked to match their sons to hardworking pretty girls from Thistle Mountain... We had a saying: When you marry a Thistle Mountain girl, you get three oxen for a wife: one that breeds, one that plows, one to carry your old mother around. That's how tough a Hakka girl was."(HSS 30-31)

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Tan also introduces a few other tribes like the Punti tribe, who claimed that they were of superior origin and so everything belonged to them, the Zhuang tribe who were warriors and fighters, and the Yaos and the Kuli who were menial workers. In The Bonesetter's Daughter, Tan talks of the bonesetters who had a nine hundred year old tradition. The sons did not go to schools to learn the skills, they learnt it by watching their fathers, and it became their inheritance. They knew the secret location for finding the best dragon bones that they used for treatment and this was passed on as the family heirloom. The tribes were influenced by the missionaries, only to the end that they received food and clothing from them and they did not have any other influence on their ideals or beliefs.

Tan introduces the Karen tribe, in her latest novel Saving Fish From Drowning who lived in hiding in the deepest ends of the rain forest, in 'A Place with No Name'. They had been there for a long time and were self sufficient and had contact with the outside world only through two of their members who brought them supplies from the nearby towns. The tribe awaited the arrival of the 'Younger White Brother' who they believed would save them. They anticipated the unique characteristics of the saviour "He could manifest weapons. He could make the tribe invisible. They would then leave No Name Place, walk openly without being shot, until they reached a patch of land, just big enough to grow the food they needed. There they would live in peace, and no outsider would cause them trouble, and they would cause no troubles to them" (SFFD 202).

Tan portrays how the tribes, whether in China or in Burma, alienated themselves and were satisfied if their basic needs were met. They were willing to follow people who came to help them, missionaries or tourists as long as they received some material benefit. They lived in their traditions and customs and were uneducated and got cheated easily. They stuck on to their superstitions and the ones who felt it imperative to break free were able to achieve prosperity. Kwan related about her earlier birth and said how she was a Hakka and later came to help the missionaries and in the bargain she was able to earn her bread and live a comfortable life. The women in the tribes were always hardworking and helped make life comfortable, but when they knew it was better to leave and find a better livelihood they did not hesitate in taking a bold decision which helped them have better lives.

### **The Mainstream Chinese Society**

The **Chinese society** was very traditional and rigid, in which the women had to adapt to anything handed to them. Even young children knew that they could not ask for too many things; they felt threatened and lived a hard childhood. The families were very loving but also practical. In The Joy Luck Club, when the floods had destroyed the home of a family, they had to leave to a far off place to start afresh and though their daughter Lindo was young they felt it right to leave her behind with the family of the boy to whom she



was betrothed, and the wedding would take place after a few years. Lindo lost her childhood and had to work very hard so as not to displease the new family.

**Marriage** was considered a great and important ceremony, with a lot of pomp and splendour. All the villagers were invited and a great deal of banners was put up and Lindo married Tyan-yu when she was sixteen. The matriarchs in China were set in a society that endeavoured to get them betrothed when they were about two years of age. The important criteria that was looked into is the year of the birth that would help determine the girl's character, the physical strength of the fore fathers or the tribe, and the belief that the girl will care for the mother-in-law and respect the dead ancestors and ensure that their graves are kept clean.

Society viewed **daughters** as the wealth of the house into which she was married. When it was time to send her away, the deed was performed without much ado. Marriages were never conducted by a mutual consent of the bride and the groom involved, the families came to an understanding and the wedding was conducted. The women tried their best to adjust with whatever was handed out to them and they either lived there bearing all the difficulties or were even willing to die rather than fight. Society was seen dumb in all these circumstances. There was no helping hand that offered any relief to the women. All the novels of Tan have the difficult past of the mothers, as the background.

The **Chinese women** were forced to move from their own homes to others through arranged marriages or concubinage and were regarded as "objects to be invested in or bartered" (38) says Sue Grunewold in her book Beautiful Merchandise: Prostitution in China 1860-1936 (1985). One of the matriarchs An-mei Hsu's mother, in the novel The Joy Luck Club was cheated into a bad second marriage. She was a widow and could not object to anything, she was tricked into sleeping with a man and then accused of having seduced him. There was no one to help the lady and the only option she had was to marry the man and become yet another wife to him. Society and family disowned her, "She was already as low as a prostitute. And when she returned to her brother's house and kowtowed three times to say good-bye, her brother kicked her and her own mother banned her from the family house forever"(JLC 237). She was one among the five wives but she was never jealous of the other wives because as her daughter realised, "Why should she be? My mother did not love Wu Tsing. A girl in China did not marry for love"(JLC 228).

**The mothers in China** usually never had a way out but they planned what they had to do for the future. An-mei Hsu's mother wanted her children to be respected and brought up as Wu-Tsing's own children and so she committed suicide on the eve of the New Year. She had taken her revenge because she knew that it was a common belief that the spirit would strike in the New Year if all their wishes were not granted. This was a generation who at least tried to save their children from the adverse conditions that they lived in. But



as times moved on the characters got smarter and reacted intellectually and planned a neat exit which would upset nobody and did not require a suicide.

In the novel, The Kitchen God's Wife Weili was brought up by her uncle and the **members of the household** did not care to enquire much about the family into which she would be married into, as they were happy to get her responsibility off their hands. So they arranged for her marriage with Wen Fu. Weili was young and she tried to please her mother-in-law who taught her "To protect my husband so that he would protect her. To fear him and think this was respect"(KGW 168). But her husband mercilessly tortured her physically and emotionally. She had no choice but to obey him and yield to his wishes, yet he used to complain that she was not a good wife that she had no passion and she was not like the other women he knew. And even when he told her this, Weili disclosed to her daughter later, "I was not angry. I did not know I was supposed to be angry. This was China. A woman had no right to be angry. But I was unhappy knowing my husband was still dissatisfied with me, and that I would have to go through more suffering to show him I was a good wife"(KGW 170).

Tan also portrays how **the poor girls in China** hoped to get a good life by marrying a rich person "This poor girl was only trying to change her luck," said Hulan. "Lots of girls did that, hoping to catch a husband who would take them away. She was like every girl in that village, not very pretty, destined to marry an old farmer or the one-eyed pot-mender down the road, a life guaranteed with hard work, no hope for any kind of happiness. So when this girl met a pilot, of course she gave him her own body-for a chance, even a small chance, something to hold onto."(KGW184)

### **Patriarchy**

Judith Caesar in his article "Patriarchy, Imperialism, and Knowledge in The Kitchen God's Wife," comments, "Jiang Weili, the narrator of the central three fourths of the novel, endures the most horrifying abuse from her brutal husband Wen Fu, while traditional Chinese society not only fails to intervene but colludes in her victimization"(165).

On one occasion Wen Fu accused his wife falsely in the presence of all his friends and commanded her to kneel down and beg him to forgive her. When she hesitated, he slapped her; she did not feel the pain but was stung with embarrassment. Weili's friend Hulan, and the others sensed that there was no escape from the fury of the man and they asked her to do as he said. Weili knelt down and begged his forgiveness. Society could do nothing but watch the inhumane act. Another episode that reveals the incapability of society is when Yiku, Weili's child became very sick. Wen Fu had gone to a friend's house to play mah jong, along with the doctor. Weili took her sick daughter there and the doctor agreed to go but Wen Fu would not let him do so and said that his wife always exaggerated. When she contradicted him, he flew into a rage and said "If she dies, I

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wouldn't care!" (KGW265-66) Weili went home but returned soon when Yiku took worse and begged Wen Fu to let the doctor treat the child. He acted as if he had forgotten everything and cursed her for not letting him know earlier but no one told him how she had informed him and soon her child Yiku died. Weili could not accept that other men were a party to his wickedness. The other women who were her friends supported her in other ways but not openly in front of the terrorising husband. They were always ready to render any physical assistance and also helped her in various crises of her life. This web of strength along with the love she found in Jimmy Louie helped her surmount her problems and face life bravely.

Robb Forman Dew in his review "Pangs of an Abandoned Child," says, "As Weiwei's story encompasses the deaths of her first three children and the further disintegration of her first husband's boorish and finally psychotic personality, we begin to understand that this is a chronicle not only of a woman's victimization, but of the unwitting conspiracy within society to ignore and therefore perpetuate the condition" (9).

### **Women in China**

The **women in China** were considered a commodity and they usually had to suffer without a murmur, but when the women wished to change circumstances for their children they were ready to achieve it even through their own deaths. Precious Auntie, the matriarch of The Bonesetter's Daughter had been in love with Baby Uncle, but on the way to the marriage, her father and Baby Uncle were killed by Chang the coffin maker who had wanted to make her his next wife. She attempted suicide and was badly burnt and the family kept her alive only because they believed that the ghost of Baby Uncle would not forgive them if they did not care for his child that was already growing in the womb of the woman. When the child was born, Precious Auntie was given the role of a nurse maid and LuLing her daughter, loved her but did not know her true identity. Later, when it was arranged that LuLing marry Chang's son, Precious Auntie tried her best to stop the proposal. But the family did not relent and Precious Auntie found that the only way she could assure a good future for her daughter was to put an end to herself and stop the marriage. She even sent a note to the Chang family that she would take revenge on them in spirit if they did not stop the wedding.

Suicide seemed the only answer for many in China. Radio Free Asia reported in 2003: "China has the **highest rate of female suicide** in the world, with most women who decide to end their own lives coming from less well-educated rural backgrounds, according to Chinese scholars and health officials."

"In China, women account for more than half of the people who commit suicide," Zhang Jie, assistant professor of sociology at New York State University in Buffalo, said in an interview. "The higher female than male suicide rate is unrivalled in the world. No other country has more women than men who kill themselves."... (2003, 9, 17) Asia News

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China further reported in 2007, “Only in China is the suicide rate higher in women. Every year some 287,000 people commit suicide, 58 percent women, especially in rural areas. Depression and isolation are main causes. Till recently government did little.” (20 Nov 2007).

### **Servant Class**

The **maids** who worked in homes were considered only as a commodity and they lived to offer any kind of satisfaction to the family members. The servant girls in China seemed to take the blame on themselves for everything. The conditions of these women were even worse than the women they served. And when they could take it no more, they just left their jobs and were usually found dead somewhere. The fourteen year old servant girl of Weili wanted to leave work abruptly, and after a lot of coaxing, she revealed the fact that she was leaving only because of the master of the house, Wen-Fu. Weili said, “I had to ask her many times: The bruise on her face that she claimed was her own clumsiness-was that the time he had tried once before? The times she had claimed to be ill, always in the morning-was that after it happened? Each time the girl confessed something, she cried and slapped her own face.” (KGW 259).

Wen-Fu had also let in another girl Min, who had been a dancer and singer, when Weili was in confinement. Weili wondered what could have endeared such a person to the girl. “I decided the reason she stayed with him was not love, couldn’t be that. It was something else: perhaps a way to give up her life slowly rather than all at once. Here she would have a place to sleep, food to eat. Everything else did not matter much. The war had many people that way, full of fear, desperate to live without knowing why” (KGW 272). These characters, the servant maid and Min, later commit suicide.

### **Hunger and Food**

**Hunger** was rampant especially in the time of war but the Chinese villagers were very smart and adept at making the best use of nature. When the war was on and there was no food, the missionaries still had food because of the ingenuity of the Chinese workers, Nunumu reported, “Every day Lao Lu and I searched for food. Since I had once been a poor girl in the mountains, I knew where to look. We poked in the places beneath tree trunks where cicadas slept. We sat in the kitchen at night, waiting for insects and rats to come out for crumbs we couldn’t see. We climbed up the mountains and picked wild tea and bamboo. Sometimes we caught a bird that was too old or too stupid to fly away fast enough. In the springtime, we plucked locusts and grasshoppers hatching in the fields. We found frogs and grubs and bats. Bats you have to chase into a small place and keep them flying until they fall from exhaustion.(HSS184)

Frogs were a delicacy in China and the women tried to earn money selling them and they were also skilled in preserving duck eggs. They learnt the value of food when they were

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very young, Kwan revealed, “To me a duck egg was too good to eat. That egg could have become a duckling. That duckling could have become a duck. That duck could have fed twenty people in Thistle Mountain. And in Thistle Mountain, we rarely ate a duck. If I ate an egg-and sometimes I did- I could see twenty hungry people”(HSS171-72).

Kwan remembered how in 1864 when an American General came to their village claiming to be the friend of The Heavenly King, many people joined his army and as a mark of peace when he set free two doves from a cage, the people pushed and fell over each other in an attempt to catch the birds, “They ran and pushed, jumping to catch the creatures before they could fly away. One man fell forward onto a rock. His head cracked open and his brains started to pour out. But people jumped right over him and kept chasing those rare and precious birds. One dove was caught, the other flew away. So someone ate a meal that night”(HSS 34).

### **The Poor in China**

The **poor in China** could be easily convinced with food and the promise of better times. Food was meager during the war and yet the people tried to pretend that everything was alright. They had dumplings that were stuffed with stringy squash or oranges spotted with wormy holes. Money could never buy much food then and a thousand yuan could only buy half a bag of rice. When Weili was freed from prison her friends could only give her a small party, they explained, “The new paper money is worthless,” said Hulan. “If you want a bag of rice-maybe you have to pay six million yuan in new money. Ridiculous! The money weighs more than the rice!”(KGW 386) The pilots returned home every time in smaller numbers Weili prepared meals for them with her dowry money, she never grudged spending it because they never knew how many more such meals they would have.

### **The Economy**

The earliest times, as Tan portrays in her works, was a nation gripped in poverty and strife and people waited for any chance for a better life. The later years saw an improvement in the **economy** but this was highly unpredictable because of natural disasters like floods and the wars that overthrew powers. The coveted government jobs offered no security and people died with the sudden changes of fortunes. The children were forced to do physical labour to add to the income of the family. People also had no scruples or fear of law and they murdered those whom they saw as rivals. There were people who had no food, clothing and shelter, living in the outskirts of the villages with no sanitation or medical care to help them. There was a vast difference in society and people who were rich lived in extravagance. They wore rich and fashionable clothes, they had the best of food, automobiles and shoes from all parts of the world. The shopping for the wedding trousseau for the rich was on for weeks, a day each allotted for furnishing, clothing, cutlery, linen, etc.,

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## Little about Religion

The novels of Tan speak little about **religion** and more on the customs of the society. In 1864, the tribes of the Thistle Mountain heard of the Heavenly King and the Great Peace that his followers struggled for. Some missionaries came there when they heard that they were all God worshippers, and they did not realise that it was different from Jesus worshippers. The Heavenly King sent his messenger General Cape to their village along with fifty soldiers and most of the villagers joined the army which ensured them food, shelter and clothing. The missionaries distributed pamphlets every week, and though the people were illiterate they were happy, “They used them to stuff inside their winter clothes. They put them over rice bowls to keep out flies. They pasted them over cracks in walls” (HSS 76). The missionaries had to send in reports of the number of converts and they gave huge figures though there was not even one genuine convert.

## Sex, Love, Fertility and Inheritance

**Sex** is another aspect of life that Tan expresses in her novels and it reveals the true picture of the society. The girls were engaged to be married when they are very young and they knew nothing of the boys they were to marry. Lindo married Tyan-yu and soon realised that he was like a little boy who had never grown up. They never had any physical relationship and so she loved him not as a wife loved her husband but as a sister who protected her younger brother. But when his mother troubled him for grand children he was able to turn the blame on Lindo and his mother confronted her, “My son says he’s planted enough seeds for thousands of grandchildren Where are they? It must be you are doing something wrong” (JLC 62).

The society believed that it was important for a man to have sons, and when it did not happen, in desperate conditions, the other wives, of the person involved, just tricked another woman into marrying their husband as in the case with An-mei’s mother. Wu Tsing’s second wife had invited An-mei’s mother, who was a widow, to their house and as it was late, she compelled her to spend the night with them. The women slept together but in the night Wu Tsing took the place of his wife and raped An-mei’s mother and then later took her as another wife.

Another protagonist, Ying Ying was born into a well to do family but had a bad marriage. The man who wished to marry her asked her publicly if he could “Kai gwa?” which literally meant –open the watermelon, but this had sexual undertones that Ying Ying did not understand. Her husband was one who drank too much, cracked vulgar jokes and soon after marriage, left her for other women when she had conceived. She was smart and did not want to live a hard life like many other women in China. “I took this baby from my womb before it could be born. This was not a bad thing to do in China back then, to kill a baby before it is born... When the nurses asked what they should do with the lifeless baby, I hurled a newspaper at them and said to wrap it like a fish and throw it

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in the lake.”(JLC248) But it did not mean that this character was heartless, this deed of hers haunted her even years later when she was in America, and when she lost a baby there she said, “It looked right through me. I knew he could see everything inside me. How I had given no thought to killing my other son!”(JLC 112)

### **Love that is Pure**

Sex and love was not always bad, the love that was shared by some of the characters Tan portrays, was pure and beautiful. Tan talks of an affair in The Hundred Secret Senses that happened in the 1800’s. Nunumu worked for the missionaries and she was preserving duck eggs that she believed would last more than a lifetime. She needed some earthen jars to preserve them and she bought them from Zeng, the potter and in exchange she did his laundry. They fell in love and she related, “Zeng asked me to marry him. Actually, he didn’t use this word “marry.” He said in a rough voice: “Hey tonight I’m going to the mountains to hide in the caves. You want to come with me or not?” To you this may sound clumsy, not so romantic. But if someone offers to save your life, isn’t that as good as going to church in a white dress and saying “I do”?” (HSS 214)

When LuLing lived in the orphanage she fell in love with a scientist Kai Jing, who was the son a teacher there. He loved her truly and revealed his love to her through a series of paintings he had done for her, and he called them the four manifestations of beauty. He explained to her that any form of beauty had four levels of ability. The first painting was competence and it represented an ordinary ability. The second level was magnificent, which he described as something beyond skill. The third was divine, and a person who viewed this should be left without words to describe it and the painter himself would not be able to capture the same feeling. The fourth level was called effortless. He explained it to her “... it is within each mortal’s nature to find it. We can sense it only if we do not try to sense it. It occurs without motivation or desire or knowledge of what may result. It is pure. It is what innocent children have. It is what old masters regain once they have lost their minds and become children again” (BD 243).

### **Education of women in China**

**Education of women in China** as Tan portrays was very rare. Very few women had a chance to study at Missionary schools. Weili’s mother had learnt English at such a school. Old Aunt was jealous of her because she was from a feudal, traditional family that presumed, “The girl’s eyes should never be used for reading only for sewing. The girl’s ears should never be used for listening to ideas, only to orders. The girl’s lips should be small, rarely used, except to express appreciation or ask for approval” (KGW 102). Weili also learnt at a boarding school in Shanghai and this earned her a lot of appreciation in the later years.



The Bonesetter's family had a great lineage of being the best in the field, the trade handed down from father to son. But Precious Auntie's father, the bonesetter, lost his wife and son, and so he gave his daughter a free hand and taught her all that he knew and she helped him in his work. "By the time she passed from childhood to maidenhood, she had heard every kind of scream and curse. She had touched so many bodies, living, dying and dead, that few families considered her for a bride" (BD165). Education of women did not have much importance in the China of the olden days, when the women had to be satisfied with whatever was handed to them by the society.

## **Death**

**Death** was a great event and the funeral was a great experience for outsiders. Big Ma's death in China brought the American tourists Simon and Olivia into a close encounter with the customs practiced. The body was kept in the community hall where many people painted white funeral banners and decorated the walls and tables with white curtains and candles. The body of the deceased was covered with a white paper sheet. Kwan said that this was done for practical reasons; if the paper moves then they knew that the person was breathing and so was still alive. The dead person was dressed in various layers of clothes for her journey to the next world. They further believed that a rooster should be tied to the lid of the coffin so that the ghost's body could enter the rooster and fly away. A few notes of money were also laid in one hand of the dead with which the dead person could buy a better life in the next world and in the other hand they placed the dead person's favourite food. In the earlier days people mourned for seven weeks but later they mourned only for a few days for convenience.

Auntie Du's **funeral** was also conducted according to the Buddhist customs. The body was laid in a casket and there was a long table laden with food which was believed to be provisions to help her on her way to heaven. There were banners with good luck thoughts written on them. Two Buddhist monks carried out the ceremony, with some chants and incense and they had also hired people to mourn. "And now they're doing the old custom, crying out loud and acting like they don't want the dead person to leave so fast. This is how you show respect" (KGW 43).

## **Evil Spirits**

Tan portrays how the Chinese society believed that **evil spirits** haunted places and when the Missionaries wanted to settle down in a Merchant's House, the locals warned Lao Lu, "Don't live there. It's haunted by fox-spirits"(HSS 39). The evil spirits governed the thinking of most of the Chinese, and they were frightened to displease a spirit. This inspired the women to plan and devise their suicides so that the people would be terrified and fulfill the desires of the dead spirit.

The people imagined that spirits spoke through various mediums to convey their wishes and that it was the duty of the living to ensure that their dreams came through. They were gullible and there were others who claimed that they could catch ghosts and rid them of all their problems. The belief in the spirits helped the people to be wary of their behaviour and this was a solace that many women found. They could take no refuge in the living, but sought help from the spirits or turned into spirits themselves to ascertain a good future for their children.

### **Ghosts of the Ancestors**

One of the main fears of the older generation was that the **ghosts of the ancestors** would haunt them. This would happen if they had done something to offend the souls or left promises undone. When Precious Auntie was alive, she had wanted her daughter LuLing to help her return the bones they had got from a cave because they had mistaken the bone of an ancestor's to be a dragon bone, that they used for medicinal purposes.

The government offered a big price for such bones which they believed belonged to the Peking Man and so LuLing wanted to part with the bones and earn the reward that the government offered. But Precious Auntie said that such an action would incur the wrath of gods.

When Precious Auntie lost her life, LuLing assumed that there was a curse and always lived in fear of it. The family also brought in a ghost catcher who arrived with an assistant and after he collected his enormous fee, placed a bottle on the ground and with the comb that Precious Auntie often used, he caught her in the bottle, very dramatically, with the beating of a wooden bell. The uncle only hoped that the ghost would not escape. "Not possible," said the Catcher of Ghosts. "This jar is guaranteed to last more than several lifetimes." "It should be more," Mother grumbled. "Stuck in a jar forever wouldn't be too long, considering what she's done. Burned down our shop. Nearly killed our family. Put us in debt." (HSS 224)

However, it was later known that this Catcher of Ghosts, was a fake and not a monk at all. He lived with his wife and three sons, one of whom went with him as his assistant and they used the same bottle to catch several other ghosts.

### **Ethics**

Tan in her novels also incorporates **ethics**. Filial love was considered very sacred to Tan and the society. The daughters especially had a great regard for their mothers.

An-mei learnt about the love a daughter had for her mother. Popo, An-mei's grandmother was very sick and dying. It was late at night and everyone had gathered round Popo's bed. An-mei saw her mother cooking soup with some herbs and medicines. She also saw her

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mother cut a piece of meat from her arm and add it to the soup, hoping to cook magic in the ancient tradition. She fed Popo the soup but she died. An-mei learnt, “This is how a daughter honors her mother. It is so deep it is in your bones. The pain of the flesh is nothing. The pain you must forget. Because sometimes that is the only way to remember what is in your bones. You must peel of your skin, and that of your mother, and her mother before her. Until there is nothing. No scar, no skin, no flesh.” (JLC 48)

The daughter respected her mother although she had thrown her out when she had been cheated by Wu Tsing, and this was the reason for the sorrow in An-mei’s mother’s life; yet she returned to prove her loyalty.

### **Living with Bad Marriage**

Most of the older generation of mothers in China had bad first marriages. But they never ran away from it, thus defaming their parents. The promise and the honour of their parents were so important to them and each had to devise their own strategy to escape the bad marriages. Lindo Jong reminiscences, “I once sacrificed my life to keep my parents’ promise. This means nothing to you, because to you promises mean nothing”(JLC 49).

### **Festivals**

The Chinese celebrated various **festivals**, and an important one was the Festival of the Moon, when the moon lady would grant them a secret wish. Ying Ying remembered the Moon Festival that was celebrated when she was four years old. The entire household was on a house boat on Tai Lake, and they were to have a ceremony that night when they could see the moon lady. Ying Ying was attracted to a play of the Moon Lady being enacted nearby. The Moon Lady in the play told them her sad tale of how she was banished to live on the moon while her husband lived on the sun. The Moon Lady would grant wishes on the day of the festival when the moon lady would see her husband on the night of the mid-autumn moon.

The **Chinese New Year** was always a welcomed festival because it meant three days of no rebuke from any one, but the days of preparation ahead of it was filled with hard work. According to the custom, when the New Year began, not a single speck of dust from the previous year could remain. It was a time when one could change one’s luck.

### **China of the Twentieth Century**

The **China of the twentieth century** was not very different from the China of the eighteenth century, as the American daughters viewed it during their visits. Jing mei Woo took a trip to China and she first noticed that there were not many telephones available, the taxi drive was nerve racking as the driver dodged trucks and buses, honking constantly. There were many rows of apartments, cluttered with laundry hung out to dry.

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In The Hundred Secret Senses, Olivia and Simon had an opportunity to visit China when the travel magazine wanted a photo essay on the village cuisines of China. Kwan, Olivia's sister was excited at the chance of revisiting her country and went along as their guide. They learnt that life started very early in the day in China and as they begrudgingly left the hotel at five in the morning the whole place was bustling with activity as if it were the middle of the day. And as she reached Changmian, she was awestruck, "As I look through the view finder, I feel as though we've stumbled on a fabled misty land, half memory, half illusion. Are we in Chinese Nirvana? Changmian looks like the carefully cropped photos found in travel brochures advertising "a charmed world of the distant past, where visitors can step back in time."... There must be something wrong, I keep warning myself. Around the corner we'll stumble on reality..." (HSS 205)

### **More Choices Now**

The circumstances in China changed after many years and even the people of China now had a choice. An-mei Hsu recollected the sad state of people in China in the olden days and rejoiced when she heard how time had changed the scenario. She narrates, "My mother she suffered. She lost her face and tried to hide it. She found only greater misery and finally could not hide that. There is nothing more to understand. That was China. That was what people did back then. They had no choice. They could not speak up. They could not run away. That was their fate. But now they can do something else. Now they no longer have to swallow their own tears or suffer the taunts of magpies. I know this because I read this news in a magazine from China." (JLC 241)

An-mei read that for thousands of years birds had been tormenting the peasants, eating up their seeds as soon as they had planted them. This led to famine and poverty. But the peasants made up their minds to fight against these birds and they clapped their hands and banged on pots and pans confusing the birds with the loud noise. The birds were exhausted, as they were unable to land or eat. And this continued for many days, until all those birds fluttered to the ground, dead.

### **Tan's Description of China in Its Entirety**

Tan has thus through her works portrayed the society of China in its entirety. She has been able to picture this realistically as she has visited China and is associated with it through her forefathers. She feels a oneness with her mother who had undergone most of what has been pictured in the novels. Tan wishes to show the world how the women have emerged victors in spite of the difficult times that they lived in and even though they did not have any help from the society, they fended for themselves and worked towards a better life.

Even the women of the earlier generation, who could not escape, helped their daughters on to the path of freedom. They set patterns for their future generations and equipped them to meet the dissents of society and the world at large.

The study of the society in which the women lived in China and their later lives in America has proved how women are able to rise above the circumstances. They have been able to remain strong and hold their family together in spite of poverty, war, indiscriminatioin and marginalisation.

This has been possible only because of the strong maternal figures in their lives. They have shown through their life and sometimes death, what it is to live a full life, and they have left a legacy of hope even in the earlier generation in China. This is what helped the women to move to America in the hope that their children would have a better life and that they would not have to bear any of the tortures that they underwent.

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