

# Returning Home for Reunion: Mother-Daughter Reunion in Post-1990s Chinese American Fiction

Tongtong Zhang

*School of Foreign Languages and International Trade, Guangdong Teachers College of Foreign Languages and Arts, Guangzhou, China*

**Abstract:** This paper aims to explore the trope of “home” and the depictions of mother-daughter reunion in post-1990s Chinese American fiction. Mei Ng’s *Eating Chinese Food Naked* (1998), Amy Tan’s *The Valley of Amazement* (2013) and Celeste Ng’s *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) are selected in the case study. In comparison with *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club*, the two acclaimed mother-daughter narrative texts, the research lays emphasis on excavating the new characteristics of mother-daughter reunion and the changing connotations of “home” in post-1990s Chinese American fiction.

**Keywords:** Chinese American fiction, mother-daughter reunion, home, post-1990s

## 1. Introduction

There is an old saying that goes like this: “East or west, home is best”, meaning that there is no place like home, no matter where it is. In fact, “home” has occupied a predominant position in Chinese American literature, as it bears visceral link to Chinese Americans’ cultural origin in China as well as to the sense of “at-home-ness” in the U.S. In particular, “home” constitutes the perfect setting for mother-daughter writings by Chinese American female writers, because “home” is precisely where mother-daughter relationships “resonate most forcefully”<sup>[1]108</sup> and where women’s identity negotiation process commences and ends.

In Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), the two most celebrated mother-daughter narrative texts in pre-1990s era, the estrangements and/or conflicts between the first-generation immigrant mothers and the second-generation Americanized daughters have impelled the daughters to leave home, the symbol of their “outdated” ancestral culture. After having wandered in the wilderness in search of selfhood and suffered from various discrimination due to their doubly-marginalized position (being ethnic minority and women), the daughters finally return home and reconcile with their mothers, since they realize that their quest of identity cannot be accomplished without the identification with their matrilineal and cultural heritage. By contrast, in post-1990s mother-daughter narrative, mother-daughter reunion has been envisioned in different ways and the trope of “home” has carried various cultural connotations.

This paper seeks to examine the trope of “home” and the depictions of mother-daughter reunion in post-1990s Chinese American fiction. Mei Ng’s *Eating Chinese Food Naked* (1998), Amy Tan’s *The Valley of Amazement* (2013) and Celeste Ng’s *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) are chosen in the case study. By comparing with *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club*, the study focuses on the new characteristics of how mother-daughter reunion is presented, what cultural connotations “home” carries and how they are mediated by such extra-contextual factors as racism, sexism and classism.

## 2. Mother-Daughter reunion in pre-1990s Chinese American fiction

A traditional “home” in pre-1990s Chinese American fiction is usually comprised of Chinese-born immigrant mothers and American-born second generations. Mother-daughter estrangements and/or conflicts frequently arise due to the language barrier and cultural difference between the two generations. “Home” tends to be associated by the Americanized daughters with a culturally inferior place, which they desperately wish to leave. Consequently, mother-daughter reunion can only be achieved by breaking down the language barrier and bridging the cultural difference, a collaborative effort by both the mothers and the daughters, as is represented in *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy*

*Luck Club.*

### **2.1 Mother-Daughter reunion in *The Woman Warrior***

In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine, the Americanized daughter relates the estrangement and conflict with her immigrant Chinese mother Brave Orchid owing to the language barrier and cultural difference. In the 1960s, Maxine leaves her home in Chinatown to UC Berkeley, a place brimming with possibilities. Despite her perfect English and exceptional educational background, Maxine still suffers from overt racial discrimination at her workplace, prompting her to reflect on her cultural identity and on her relationship with her Chinese mother/culture. In the end, Maxine returns home and reunites with her mother by listening to her mother's talk-story and talking her own stories.

It is noteworthy that talk-story, a predominant narrative technique in the fiction, facilitates the reunion between Maxine and Brave Orchid. When Maxine is small, her mother talks stories to her night after night, which makes her feel safe and loved. Moreover, Maxine reads the subversive strength of the "rebellious" heroines in these stories, such as Fa Mu Lan, Ts'ai Yen and Brave Orchid herself and resolves to grow up to be a woman warrior.

Firstly, Brave Orchid recounts how she strives to get a proper education in midwifery and becomes a successful doctor in her village despite enormous obstacles in old China. Her perseverance and determination to explore life possibilities win over Maxine's admiration and affiliation to her: "I am really a dragon, as she is a dragon, both of us born in dragon years"<sup>[2]127</sup>. Moreover, the final story of Ts'ai Yen as is jointly talked by Brave Orchid and Maxine symbolizes mother-daughter reconciliation: "here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine"<sup>[2]206</sup>. Ts'ai Yen, a poetess in the Han Dynasty is captured to the barbarian lands. She hears the barbarian music night after night; until one night, she begins to sing her own song about China and her family there in Chinese, full of anger and agony. After twelve years, she is sent back to her homeland, bringing three songs she writes in the savage lands to her future generations.

In fact, Ts'ai Yen, Maxine, Brave Orchid are quite similar to each other. Displaced in the barbarian land, Ts'ai Yen conveys her homesickness by writing and singing songs whereas Maxine and Brave Orchid talk stories to vocalize their living experiences as a dislocated community in the foreign land. In the end, Maxine comes to terms with her mother and her Chinese culture by translating her own experiences in the talk-stories, as is underpinned by the very last sentence of the novel: "It translated well"<sup>[2]209</sup>.

### **2.2 Mother-Daughter reunion in *The Joy Luck Club***

In *The Joy Luck Club*, four pairs of mothers and daughters take turns to tell their stories. Similar to Brave Orchid and Maxine, all of them have different degree of mother-daughter estrangements and/or conflicts due to the language barrier and cultural difference. Reaching adulthood, the daughters invariably leave home for better education, job employment and interracial marriage, which subject them to multifarious discrimination and difficulties. Eventually, the daughters reach reconciliation with their mothers after listening to their mothers' talk-stories, from which they derive strength to grapple with their own life crisis.

Rose is proud of marrying Ted, a white man and tries her utmost to please him, only to find that he gets tired of her and asks for a divorce. It turns out that her mother An-mei gives her courage to remedy her marriage by sharing her own life experience. An-mei gives an account of how her own mother is forced to be the fourth concubine of an old man Wu Tsing after her husband's death and endures years of humiliation. In old China, she has no other options but to commit suicide to end her demeaning life and to intimidate Wu Tsing, fearful of her "revenge", into ensuring An-mei's well-being. An-mei's mother, intends to "to kill her own weak spirit so she could give [her daughter] a stronger one"<sup>[3]240</sup>. Her mother's story significantly inspires Rose, who decides to stand up and fight for what rightfully belongs to her. Strong and confident as she has become, Rose regains her husband's respect and weathers through their marriage crisis smoothly.

By the same token, it is Ying-ying, Lena's mother who discovers the problem of Lena and her husband Harold's so-called "equal" marriage. When Ying-ying sees the long list of items and prices under each of their names on the fridge, she vigilantly feels that there is something wrong with their marriage: they virtually share the cost of everything ranging from house, vacation trip to even ice-

cream. Ying-ying righteously tells Harold that Lena never eats ice-cream but he keeps sharing the cost with her; and it is also Ying-ying's talk-story that awakens Lena's lost tiger soul. She relates how she is insulted and abused by her first husband, how she aborts their child as revenge, how she makes desperate escape and finally meets Lena's father and flees to America. She has buried this painful memory deep down in her heart, only to reveal it to save her daughter's marriage and recuperate their mother-daughter tie: "I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter's tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose"<sup>[3]252</sup>. Finally, Lena is empowered by her mother to confront her husband and assert that their marriage should not be based on balance sheet and they need to change it.

Mother-daughter reconciliation in these two novels is primarily achieved by listening to the mothers' talk-stories and articulating the daughters' own talk-stories. Wendy Ho notes that talk-story is "a heroic and subversive form of verbal expression—passed on from one woman to another across dislocations and relocations, generations, cultures and continents"<sup>[4]135</sup>. In the end, the daughters treasure and inherit the matrilineal and cultural legacy embedded by their mothers in such a subversive form of verbal expression and re-negotiate their identity as Chinese American women.

Actually, returning home for mother-daughter reunion seems to be the common happy ending in most pre-1990s mother-daughter narrative in Chinese American fiction. The reason is that "home"/"mother" embodies homeland/mother culture and the daughters ultimately have to come to terms with them to complete their complicated identity negotiation. Interestingly, both Kingston and Tan eventually re-united with their mothers and Chinese culture by returning to China to trace their ancestral root: Kingston returned to her hometown of Xinhui City in Guangdong Province twice in 1984 and 2006. Tan also returned to Shanghai with her mother in 1990, just like Jing-mei does in *The Joy Luck Club*.

### 3. Mother-Daughter reunion in post-1990s Chinese American fiction

In the selected novels, by contrast, not all daughters return home for mother-daughter reunion. While some daughters return home and re-identify with their mothers after realizing the importance of matrilineal and cultural legacy, as in *Eating Chinese Food Naked* and *The Valley of Amazement*, whether Izzy in *Little Fires Everywhere* will return home remains to be seen, an open ending devised by the author. Generally speaking, the depiction of mother-daughter reunion in the selected novels display such characteristics as diversity and universality in post-1990s Chinese American fiction.

#### 3.1 Mother-Daughter reunion in *Eating Chinese Food Naked*

In *Eating Chinese Food Naked*, Mei Ng's novel published in 1998, the young Chinese American woman Ruby Lee who grows up in Queens is constantly caught in the dilemma of "being at home" and "not being at home", indicating her ambivalence about her mother and her "home". On the one hand, she is emotionally attached to her mother Bell, with whom she has always wanted to escape from their unhappy home dominated by her father. On the other hand, her mother, like Brave Orchid in *The Woman Warrior*, is the token of traditional Chinese culture and womanhood, which Ruby eagerly wishes to distinguish herself from and be a regular American girl. Therefore, leaving home portends symbolically ridding herself from both her ancestral culture and submissive womanhood. She temporarily leaves home for university, but after four years' study at Columbia University, the nagging feeling of "coming home" pops up again, plunging her into severe internal struggle:

a. Ruby was fighting mad to be home again (she felt coerced, as if someone or something had twisted her arm behind her back).

b. The nagging feeling was stronger than ever (what was it she had forgotten?) and it was then that she realized that it was her mother she had forgotten; it was her mother she had left behind and had finally come back to get.<sup>[5]15-16</sup>

The above excerpts, particularly the two sentences in bracket explicitly demonstrate Ruby's intense internal struggle. In the first sentence, the omniscient narrator/focalizer unveils the irresistible forces that impel Ruby to return home; and the second sentence reveals her free indirect thought, her self-reflection about what on earth she has left behind at home. Here, Ng specially underscores the prominent position of Ruby's mother in her heart: her mother is the ultimate driving force of her homecoming, in spite of her perpetual vacillation. In fact, such an "oscillating pattern between intimate attachment and fierce detachment" between mothers and daughters is also found in *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club* and it determines the daughter's "gender consciousness"<sup>[1]109</sup>.

Finally, Ruby returns home and reunites with her mother. It is noteworthy that Ng utilizes Chinese food as a medium of cultural and matrilineal legacy to construct Ruby's eventual re-connection with her mother. As a traditional Chinese mother, Bell believes that cooking food for her family is the best way of expressing her love to them. Bell embeds her care and affection in her Chinese food; and by sharing them around her family, she is spreading her maternal love. After Ruby's homecoming, she rebuilds intimacy with her mother via Chinese food. In the kitchen, Ruby sees and touches the "dried salted flounder hung on a string"<sup>[5]13</sup>, a typical Cantonese style food. Bell immediately asks: "Remember you used to love salty fish? These are almost done. They have to get good and dry first"<sup>[5]13</sup>. Ruby instinctively responds, "I still like it"<sup>[5]13</sup> and asks her mother how to make salty fish. Furthermore, Bell continues to describe how she makes salty duck on the farm, which reminds Ruby of a sauce that goes with the duck she once tastes. To be sure, their "food" conversation arouses their shared feelings and memory of Chinese cuisine; and it is precisely through such food talking that they "communicate their mutual trust and reestablish their intimacy"<sup>[6]150</sup>. By returning home to re-identify with her mother, Ruby symbolically reunites with her Chinese cultural and matrilineal heritage.

Different from *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club* in which the stories end happily at mother-daughter reunion, Ruby leaves home again to start anew. From childhood, Ruby has been dreaming about taking her mother away from her father to start a new life. To her great disappointment, Bell, a traditional Chinese woman has never thought about leaving her husband or leaving home, despite her prolonged agony in marriage. Eventually, Ruby resolves to leave home again and moves into an unconventional all-women's building, a brand new concept of "home", marking her entrance to "modern, progressive, independent womanhood", which "subverts normative structures that rely on the patriarchally governed nuclear family"<sup>[1]112, 121</sup>.

At the end of the story, Ruby signs up for a Chinese cooking course and calls her mother to ask for the recipe for cooking sea bass. In the last paragraph of the fiction, Bell leaves a message on Ruby's answering machine, explaining the procedures of cooking sea bass. Apparently, Ng aims to once again highlight the value of Chinese food/culture in Ruby's identity negotiation and in mother-daughter bonds. In asking recipe from her mother, Ruby expresses her love for her mother and her (re)connection to her ancestral culture, as food is their "medium of communication"<sup>[6]157</sup>.

### 3.2 Mother-Daughter reunion in *The Valley of Amazement*

Admittedly, Amy Tan tends to frame a "happy-Hollywood-ending" for the mothers and daughters in her novels. In addition to *The Joy Luck Club*, Pearl in *The Kitchen God's Wife* re-identifies with Winnie after sharing secrets with one other and accepting her mother's gift of a Chinese goddess statue as a gesture of reunion. In *The Valley of Amazement*, too, Tan depicts the separation and reunion of three generations of women: American woman Lucia, her mixed-race daughter Violet and her granddaughter Flora. They all experience mother-daughter estrangement and separation from each other across China and the U.S. at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the end, they reunite with each other in Shanghai after numerous obstacles.

Firstly, Lucia, falling trap of her lover Fairweather is accidentally separated from her daughter Violet, who is sold to a courtesan house by trick. Tan envisages their re-connection after fourteen years of separation by employing letter writing, a technique widely used in her novels as an effective means of expressing the characters' affections and hidden mentality. In this case, Violet utilizes letter writing as an ice-breaking gesture to take the initiative in contacting her mother. She confesses in the letter that she used to hate her mother who "abandons" her, albeit unintentionally. However, the experience of being a mother and losing her daughter Flora enables her to travel to her mother's world and understand her mother's sorrow and love.

Similarly, Lucia unveils her strong affections to Violet by letter writing. In her reply to Violet's letter, Lucia candidly uncovers her most vulnerable part of life to win over her daughter, as is narrated by Violet: "She allowed me to see who she was through what made her vulnerable to losing her heart, losing her soul, losing her way in the world, and losing me"<sup>[7]543-44</sup>. The parallel syntactic structure of "losing sb./sth." delineates the tremendous sufferings Lucia has endured in her life. The list of phrases, "her heart", "her soul" and "her way in the world" serve to foreground the centrality of "me", which forms an end focus. Such stylistically deviant feature underscores Lucia's most painful experience of losing her daughter: Violet is the most precious person in her life. In a word, letter writing serves as an integral catalyst for the reunion between Lucia and Violet.

Just like Jing-mei who returns to China and reunites with her twin sisters in *The Joy Luck Club*, Lucia and Flora also return to China and reunite with Violet for a transnational reunion of three

generations, attesting to Tan's acknowledgement of China as her "home". After Lucia has successfully found Flora, Violet's daughter who is forcefully taken away from Violet at about three years old, they board the boat from San Francisco to Shanghai to meet Violet.

When Lucia finally meets Violet, she immediately tells her daughter how much she loves her, before anything else: "... I have kept seventeen years of your absence inside me, and I cannot hold back the words I had wanted you to hear. I love you so very much"<sup>[7]559</sup>. Violet used to be neglected by her mother who is busy with work and is later tormented by sorrowful separation, so she always doubts about her mother's love for her. Such affectionate affirmation clears up all her doubts and assures her the intensive maternal love.

Violet feels herself to be a stranger to Flora at first, who seems to be indifferent to her after years of separation. They get closer to each other after spending more time together and sharing their life stories. Violet recalls how she falls in love with Edward, Flora's father and how Flora is taken away by Edward's legitimate wife Minerva to America since Flora is the only heir to Edward's inheritance when he passes away. Flora recounts how she grows up with Minerva and is bewildered by her identity—she does not love Minerva and does not know who she is, so she desperately rids herself from her family in extreme ways, such as shoplifting and hanging out with bad guys. Only at this moment is her true identity revealed and revived: "I found you, Mama. I'll never lose you again. My mama came back from a memory, and Little Flora came back, too... I love you, Mama"<sup>[7]588</sup>. As O' Reilly suggests, a daughter's identity as a woman, "is acquired through connection to, and knowledge of, her mother and the motherline of which she is a part"<sup>[8]</sup>. Only by reconnecting with her mother, her grandmother and the motherline she is part of can Flora recuperates her true identity as a woman. In the end, the three generations of women across China and America return home and reunite with their mothers/daughters, hence the continuity of transnational matrilineality.

### 3.3 Mother-Daughter reunion in *Little Fires Everywhere*

In *Little Fires Everywhere*, Celeste Ng's novel published in 2017, the author describes the acute mother-daughter conflict between a white mother and a white daughter in "Shaker Heights", a carefully ordered community governed by rules. Mrs. Richardson, a human embodiment of Shaker Heights, lives a regimented life by making plans for everything and following them strictly. Moreover, she also forces her children to lead the same orderly life, disregarding their different characters, situating herself in direct confrontation with her daughter Izzy, an "outcast" in the family, who rebels against her in extreme ways. After Mrs. Richardson has evicted her tenant Mia, a free-spirited photographer, the only who understands Izzy's "peculiar" personality and inspires her gifts, Izzy burns down her mother's house, the token of imprisonment and embarks on an adventurous journey in search of Mia and her subjectivity.

Izzy's action has shaken Mrs. Richardson's belief in the rules and order she has followed all her life and rekindled the little fires that used to flare in her heart. It is noteworthy that Ng employs the trope of fire to depict Mrs. Richardson's hidden subjectivity and its awakening. When the Civil Rights Movement breaks out in the U.S. in 1968, a spark is ignited in the fifteen-year-old Elena's heart: she is on the verge of joining Jamie Reynolds, the boy she admires to drop out of school and participate in demonstration to fight for social justice and equality. It is the pragmatism of Shaker Heights that quenches the little fires in her heart: "A lifetime of practical and comfortable considerations settled atop the spark inside her like a thick, heavy blanket"<sup>[9]183</sup>. Mrs. Richardson has also put out the little fires of her career pursuit: she gives up the chance to be a renowned reporter in Chicago and remains an obscure journalist in her small town to trade for a steady and comfortable family life.

Additionally, Mrs. Richardson's direct confrontation with Mia has also rekindled the little fires in her heart. When Mia is evicted from her rental apartment, she sharply debunks Mrs. Richardson's behavior of punishing anyone different from her: "It terrifies you. That you missed out on something. That you gave up something that you didn't know you wanted... What was it? Was it a boy? Was it a vocation? Or was it a whole life?"<sup>[9]350</sup>. By juxtaposing the different ways of life by different characters, Ng raises the thorny issue of making life choices, an issue confronting people in contemporary society, a theme of "universality" in her literary creation.

Lastly, Ng designs an open ending: whether Mrs. Richardson would reunite with Izzy remains to be seen, but Mrs. Richardson has changed: the loss of her daughter enables her to see Izzy through a new lens: her daughter that she used to consider as her opposite actually "inherited and carried and nursed that spark her mother had long ago tamped down, that same burning certainty that she knew right from wrong"<sup>[9]388</sup>. She now has the courage to confront her weakness in the past to quench the flares that

used to flame in her heart. She determines to spend the rest of her life looking for her lost daughter, “searching for the face of every young woman she met for as long as it took, searching for a spark of familiarity in the faces of strangers”<sup>[9]388</sup>. The spark will navigate her way to search for her lost daughter and her lost self. Ng has embedded her message in the end: if Mrs. Richardson were to reunite with her daughter and recuperate their mother-daughter ties, she must re-claim her true self in the first place. As Debold et al. argue, if mothers wish to join with daughters who are coming of age as women, they “must first reclaim what they themselves have lost” and “reintegrate the vital parts of themselves that they discarded or drove underground”<sup>[10]</sup> Such “vital parts of themselves” are their subjectivity and agency as free and independent women that will eventually reconnect them with their daughters and resume the matrilineality.

#### 4. Conclusion

The representation of mother-daughter reunion in the selected novels remarkably demonstrate such new characteristics as diversity and universality in mother-daughter narrative in post-1990s Chinese American fiction. Firstly, Amy Tan frames a “happy-Hollywood-ending” in *The Valley of Amazement*, the common coda in her mother-daughter stories. Different from her other novels, though, such ending has less to do with the Americanized daughters’ cultural identification with their Chinese mothers via talk-story, iconic of her effort in diversifying her writing in the new era. Secondly, by having Ruby move into an all-women’s building while simultaneously learn to cook Chinese food as the ending, Mei Ng, a representative of “Generation X” writer in her fiction points to a new direction for the Chinese American women of new generation: they can endeavor to strike a proper balance between embracing individualized living experience while inheriting their Chinese ancestry and culture. Thirdly, Celeste Ng, the second generation of a middle-class new immigrant family draws our attention to the thorny issues in the contemporary society, namely the search of selfhood, rules vs. freedom and life choices, etc, emblematic of her inclination to “de-racialization” and universality in her literary creation.

Meanwhile, “home” as the traditional preserve of mothers is precisely the site that mother-daughter stories revolve around. In most pre-1990s Chinese American fiction, home tends to be associated with traditional Chinese culture by Americanized daughters. Consequently, returning home for mother-daughter reunion embodies re-connection with cultural and matrilineal legacy. By contrast, in post-1990s Chinese American fiction, the trope of home becomes more diversified, such as the embodiment of confinement and imprisonment, in line with the new characteristics of mother-daughter reunion. Generally speaking, the changing connotations of “home” epitomize the evolving literary creation of Chinese American writers in the new era.

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