

“Tea and Quilt”: The Study of Thing-Power in *the Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane and Everyday Use*

Xi Chen

Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, 100024, China

Abstract: Taking the tea and quilt as an assemblage, this paper will argue how the thing power of tea and quilt interact or cooperate with mother-daughter relations. Specifically, considering the thing-power of tea and quilt, we can see that the mother-daughter relation completes the identity construction of Li-yan, Haley and Dee, and Maggie and their mother; What's more, with the intra-action of mother-daughter and tea and quilt, the creativity of ethnic minority women and the inheritance of female power has been manifested. Finally, this specific mother-daughter relation, affected by the cultural properties of tea and quilt, embodies the combination of traditional culture and modern ideas. Furthermore, drawing on the thing theory, it helps to free things from the subject-object dualism and allow them to exert their thingness in reconstructing character identities, mother-daughter relationships, and other aspects.

Keywords: Thing-power, Assemblage, Identity, Mother-daughter relation

1. Introduction

As the mother-daughter relation serves as a main topic both appearing in Chinese-American literature and African-American literature, the relevance of matrilineage to issues of gender, race, and identity has been widely mentioned in Chinese-American and African-American literary studies. Regarding the mother-daughter relation as the symbolic meaning of cultural collision, communication, and mixture, Chen Aimin decodes *The Bonesetter's Daughter* and argues that the mother-daughter relation is a retrospection of the friendly relationship of the two countries and contains the author's sincere wish for the future relationship of the two nations. Relating this relation to the identity construction, Marine Heung has argued that in Chinese-American literature, “the maternal voices begin to shift from ‘I’ to ‘you’ to engage the discrete subjectivities of mother and daughter in a tentative exchange of recognitions and identifications.”^[1] At the same time, this kind of kinship has also frequently addressed in African-American literature. Floris Barnett Cash attempts to emphasize the relevance of the quilt to the social and intellectual history of mother-daughter relations and challenges the reader to reconsider the contribution of black women to American society. Though these scholars have addressed the importance of mother-daughter relations in Chinese and African American literature, they generally restrict it to the symbolic meaning of mother and daughter, the human entity, and rarely focus on the non-human entity existing in this relationship. Besides that, Chinese or African Americans, as the minority ethnic group in America, discourse of mother-daughter relations does have some common ground that lacks attention.

In *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane*, Lisa See depicts the three most significant mother-daughter relations: A-ma and Li-yan, Constance and Haley, and Li-yan and Haley. Besides narrating stories and coincidences happening among these relations, See also focuses on the tea culture in traditional Akha Law and the spreading conditions in America. Depending on the tea, Li-yan has the opportunity to go out the mountain learn modern knowledge, and set up her own business. At the same time, Haley finds her birth mother, Li-yan, by exploring her legacy, tea cake. In *Everyday Use*, Walker depicts a black mother, who shows different attitudes toward her two daughters: Dee and Maggie. Besides developing the maternal story-telling, Walker “first articulates the metaphor quilting to represent the creative legacy that African Americans have inherited from their maternal ancestor.”^[2]

Rather than taking tea and quilt as metaphors and cultural symbols, this paper highlights the vital materiality of tea and quilt in mother-daughter relations and gives voice to their thing-power. Besides emphasizing the role of mother and daughter in this relationship, this paper takes relations not as ethnic groups but as an assemblage, which means an ad hoc group of vibrant materials of all sorts: mother, daughter, tea, and quilt. In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett concludes a family resemblance to thing-power:

Spinoza's conatus, David Thoreau's Wild, and Hent de Vries' "the absolute". Then he defines thing-power: "The notion of thing-power aims instead to attend to the it as actant; I will try...to name the moment of independence (from subjectivity) possessed by things, a moment that must be there, since things do in fact affect other bodies, enhancing or weakening their power."^[3] In short, thing-power includes "the ability to make things happen, to produce effects."^[3] Except for nonhuman bodies, human bodies also possess thing-power. Bennett takes the mineralization as evidence to prove that "humans are composed of various material parts." Therefore, he claims that "But the case for matter as active needs also to readjust the status of human actants: not by denying humanity's awesome, awful power, but by presenting these powers as evidence of our own constitution as vital materiality. In other words, human power is itself a kind of thing-power."^[3]

Just because human bodies and nonhuman bodies all possess thing-power or vital materiality, they can be organized into one assemblage. In this organization, "the power of a body to affect other bodies includes a 'corresponding and inseparable' capacity to be affected."^[3] Therefore, there is no superiority in one assemblage. "Assemblage is not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group."^[3] And the assemblage, which consists of the sum of vital force of each affective bodies or actant's thing-power, generates the distinct effect which are "emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something happen."^[3] This effect is also called an agency of the assemblage.

Taking tea and quilt as an assemblage, this paper will argue how the thing power of tea and quilt interact or cooperate with mother-daughter relations. Specifically, considering the thing-power of tea and quilt, we can see that the mother-daughter relation completes the identity construction of Li-yan, Haley and Dee, and Maggie and their mother; What's more, with the "intra-action" of mother-daughter and tea and quilt, the creativity of ethnic minority women and the inheritance of female power has been manifested. Finally, this specific mother-daughter relation, affected by the cultural properties of tea and quilt, embodies the combination of traditional culture and modern ideas. Furthermore, drawing on the thing theory, we can see that the Chinese and African American writers hold some same expressions of mother-daughter relations.

2. Thing Power of Tea and Quilt: Constructing the Identity

The thing power of tea and quilt both produce the effect of constructing mother and daughter's identity in this relationship.

In The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane, considering the Li-yan-Haley relation, tea has the agency to construct their mixed identity and lead them to reunion. For Li-yan, tea helps her shift her attitude towards identity as an Akha Girl from refusal to acceptance. At first, with the ability of a tea tree, Li-yan refuses and fights against her identity as an Akha girl. When she goes into the groove with A-ma for the first time, she sees that her land or her legacy is cracked and "the limbs are bent and gnarled by age and some of the color has faded from leaves."^[4] Li-yan regards these tea trees, which could die tomorrow, as worthless things. By contrast to A-ma, Li-yan "sees not health and cures but superstition and traditions that hurt people."^[4] It means that the thing-power of tea has affected Li-yan's negative emotional attitude toward the Akha Law and helps her to fight against her identification. Under this significance, she begins to "think about what she can do to change her fate."^[4] When she goes into the groove for the second and third time, she begins to accept her identity as an Akha girl, for her groove heals her pain. When Li-yan is dragged to the groove to give birth to Haley, she is too weak and collapses under the mother tree. At this time, her circumstance is calamitous, but "in the mother tree's spreading branches" she "sees a dome of protection."^[4] Tea trees play the role of protector and give Li-yan a sense of safeness. When San-pa dies and Li-yan goes back to the groove, she feels "the age and protection of the trees" again.^[4] Li-yan's attitude toward groove has been changed: "I try to absorb everything that I see with new eyes: the mother tree standing with such dignity, the sister trees offering their protective embrace, the camphor trees hiding them all, the ancient strength of the boulder, the cliff at the edge of the groove, the mountains in the distance."^[4]

Therefore, with the intra-action between Li-yan and tea trees, she feels the blessing of Akha Law for feeding her strength. She finally accepts the identity as an Akha girl and "connect to them more than ever."^[4]

Besides that, tea also helps her complete the construction of identity as an independent modern businesswoman. Tea has an agency of things and it is an intra-actor to bring her the opportunity to get modern knowledge. When Li-yan has her interview in Pu'er College, she is not welcomed. With the

help of Master Sun and the tea, she impresses the interviewers. Master Sun makes tea which is given from Li-yan's A-ma. The special flavor of tea changes those interviewers' attitudes towards Li-yan. She finally is admitted to two programs in this college which enables her to learn professional knowledge about the tea-making process. Apart from bringing her knowledge, Tea also has the thing-power to provide financial support for Li-yan to gain independence. In this process, tea is an intra-actor that provides financial support for Li-yan to help her get away with San-pa someday. When Mr. Huang comes to the village to buy tea, Li-yan picks some leaves of the mother tree and sells those to Mr. Huang to save money to leave with San-pa. Then with the help of the knowledge of trade and tea, Li-yan, different from other villagers, set up her own business in Guangzhou and helped villagers to live better.

For Haley, tea's thing power produces effects which means constructing her mixed identity. As the only Asian face in her family, she doesn't know whether she is Chinese or American. And her tea cake is an essential thing for her to find her roots. This tea cake has the agency to remind Haley about her true identity. In the class presentation, Haley shares her tea cake and writes: "I am the first person in my family to come here. I came from China. I bought a tea cake with me."^[4] She always gets up in the middle of the night to pull it out and sleep with it. Contacting the tea cake, she feels like receiving a message from Li-yan. Thus, within the intra-action between Haley and Tea Cake, it preserves her identity as an Akha girl, the same as her birth mother, Li-yan. Besides, tea also has the thing-power leading her to find her identity as an Akha girl. With the ability of tea's thing power, she goes to the World Tea Expo and coincidentally meets Mr Huang's son, Sean Wong, who is cured by A-ma. With the help of Sean Wong, she finds the groove and Li-yan under the mother tree. As an adopted girl growing up in an American family, she is definitely an American girl, but she also strives to construct her identity as a Chinese Akha girl with the intra-action of tea.

Regarding tea as an "assemblage", tea produces the effect of making Li-yan and Haley reunion. In the article "The Agency of Assemblage", Bennett claims that "each member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force."^[3] In the work, Lisa See implies that tea plays an essential role in the connection of Li-yan and Haley and they will reunion with the help of tea and meet under the tea tree. When Li-yan starts giving birth, "the cord still spirals from her belly to my (Li-yan) interior, She's covered with the white wax that's protects her inside my (Li-yan) body, smeared with blood, and speckled with yellow thread that has shaken loose from the mother tree."^[4] What's more, A-ma buries the cord, which connects Li-yan and Haley, under the mother tree. It means that the tea tree can preserve and nurture this mother-daughter relationship, which implies the place of their reunion. Therefore, after their identity construction, Li-yan and Haley, with the help of the tea tree, finally reunite.

In Alice Walker's *Everyday Use*, within the assemblage of mother-daughter relations, quilt produces the effect to construct Dee and Maggie's identity. For Dee, the quilt helps her affirm the African roots and reconstruct her identity as an African not an African American. Dee's hate for the house and her refusal of family names manifests her resistance to her identity as an African-American and family member. Barbara T. Christian argues that "For Dee was the name of her great-grandmother, a woman who had kept her family together against great odds. Wangero might have sounded authentically African it had no relationship to a person she knew, nor to the personal history that had sustained her."^[2]

She couldn't bear it any longer, "being named after the people who oppress me(her)."^[2] She also tries to integrate into the white society, but she loses to "a cheap city girl" who attracts Jimmy, a boy Dee is courting with. Therefore, she begins to find her African roots to gain independence. "Everything, (preserving from the ancient), delights her"^[2]. And quilt plays an essential role in helping her affirm her roots and construct her identity as an African girl. She wants the quilt, for it is made by their grandma Dee and Big Dee, which means this quilt is an original African thing in her mind. She was inclined to hang them and show off her African roots. Barbara T. Christian said that "black power ideologues emphasized the African cultural past as the true heritage of African Americans."^[2] Therefore, the quilt, as a heritage, produces the black power ideologues and influences Dee to construct her African identity in the intra-action with it. Quilt affirms Maggie's identity as a true family girl who is qualified for her heritage. Because Maggie can sew quilts, she can interact with the vital materiality (thing power) of quilts, and thus pass on the family cultural heritage in the mother-daughter relation. Therefore, the mother's recapture of the quilt from Dee and handing it over to Maggie is a recognition of her identity as an African-American family daughter.

3. The Thing Power of Tea and Quilt: Reviving the Creativity of Female

Besides constructing the identity, the thing-power of tea and quilt refers to the intelligence of females. Within the intra-action between human and non-human bodies, this creativity is inherited in the assemblage of mother-daughter relations. In *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane*, the tea tree, which shows the power preserved from the female ancestors, produces an effect that enables Li-yan “endures against all odds with her intelligence.”^[4] When she tastes all the pain resulting from her stupid ignorance of Akha culture and her groove, she goes back to A-ma and enter the groove again. She looks at the mother tree in a new way, no longer trapped in man’s words. Her groove is not worthless but priceless, which preserves the lineage of an intelligent female. Seeing tea as a vibrant matter, with the intra-action between tea and the female ancestors, their courage and power, which supports them to overcome the hardship of Tea Horse Road, cooperate with the thing power of tea, which they picked up on the way and bring back to the groove. Therefore, the thing power of tea, which means the intelligence of the female lineage, has an effect on other villagers. “For generations, the nima and ruma of Spring Well and so many other villages have sought the help of the women in our family. We give them leaves, bark, and even the yellow parasites from the mother tree to use as medicine.”^[4] When Li-yan accepts the values of groove, she finally embraces the vital materiality of tea which endows her with a special ability to change her fate. She is the first one who can enter college. Li-yan, not like her sisters or other women in the village who depend on their husbands, gains her own money from Mr Huang by using her intelligence. Depending on her ability, she sets up a business in Guangzhou and helps the village to live better. Besides that, the vital materiality of tea has already been passed to Haley since she was born. The thing power of tea cake, which is preserved by many generations of women in their family, brings the strength to her to overcome the diseases. “Haley, rarely in my(doctor) professional life have I(he) seen such a fighter. She’s not only responded to treatment, she’s begun to thrive.”^[4] Hence, in the assemblage of mother-daughter relations, tea, as an actant, its thing power, which means intelligence, strength, and courage, has been inherited from generation to generation.

In Alice Walker’s *Everyday Use*, the thing power of quilt refers to the creativity inherited from the mother-daughter relation. In the essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”, Alice discovers an interesting thing: “Black women whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so unconscious, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held.”^[2] At this time, “Walker wonders whether, instead of looking for a clearly defined African American female tradition of ‘art,’ perhaps we should look for the female folk creativity that sustained our maternal ancestors.”^[2]

The vital materiality of the quilt produces the effect on black women to “devise something beautiful and functional out of throwaways, from what the society considers to be waste.”^[2] In the text, the scraps, bits, and pieces of the quilt are from “dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago”, Grandpa’s “Paisley shirts”, and Grandpa Ezra’s “uniform that he wore in the Civil War.”^[2] All these wasted pieces have been sewed into the quilt, and in Walker’s view, it becomes a “high art” and a creative legacy of black women. In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett argues that “a vital materiality can never really be thrown away, for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity.”^[3] Hence, the thing-power of the quilt also produces the effect on Maggie, who has been transformed from “nothing” to “something.” Dee is lighter than Maggie with nicer hair and a fuller figure. In Walker’s words, Maggie is “a lame animal”, who is “ashamed of the burn scars” and “eyes her sister with a mixture of envy and awe.”^[2] Although Maggie lacks a better figure or confidence, she possesses a kind of creativity which Dee doesn’t understand. Because Maggie is taught by Grandma and Big Dee how to quilt herself, she can cooperate with the thing-power of quilt to inherit the most important heritage: the creativity of black females. In the assemblage of mother-daughter relation, when “I” hugs Maggie to “me” and “dumps the quilt into Maggie’s lap,” the thing power of the quilt has completed its effect on Maggie: she is no longer inferior to Dee and she inherited the essential legacy of family.

4. The Thing Power of Tea and Quilt: Combining Traditional Culture With Modern Ideas

Another thing-power of tea and quilt is the ability to combine traditional culture with modern ideas. Tea, as a drinkable antique, embodies the combination of tradition and modernity, because the aged tea should be processed in a modern way to release the flavor that is preserved from ancient times. The quilt, as a family heritage, is created from generation to generation, combining traditional and modern ideas. In *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane*, under the effect of tea, the relationship between Li-yan and A-ma leads to the combination of traditional Akha culture and modern ideas. As mentioned above, from A-ma’s introduction of tea, Li-yan understand the true value of her groove and the tradition of

Akha culture. On the other side, traditional tea culture is coalesced into modern ideas. Li-yan “passes on” to family members what she learned at the tea college, and selects and progresses teas in modern ways. Besides that, the tea produces the effect on the compromise between Li-yan and A-ma about the issue of making Groove go public. In traditional idea, tea is to heal, but it can’t be sold to the man. And no man can come to their groove. But Li-yan’s words manifest a kind of combination: “Yes, the women in our line, including you and me, are linked by these yellow threads. You and the generations before you protected the mother and sister trees from wars, caravans, and nomads that passed across Nannuo Mountain over many centuries. But now people—maybe callous men, maybe evil women, maybe deceitful dealers, maybe ruthless scientists—are going to come here with their GPS whether we want them to or not. Maybe our line has been protecting the mother tree for this moment.”^[4]

With the combination of traditional lineage and modern ideas, the healing elements of tea can be scientifically explained and re-created to help more people. Hence, in the assemblage of this relation, the thing power of tea can combine the tradition and modernity and creatively develop the Akha culture.

In Everyday Use, the quilt also achieves this combination. The thing power of the quilt completes the combination of traditional African culture and modern American spirit. As African-Americans, whoever grand Dee or Maggie, They, influenced by the double identities, unconsciously mix the features of traditional African culture into the American spirit and manifest in sewing the quilts. Besides that, the quilt also combines family tradition and modernity. Under the influence of the modern American spirit, Maggie will sew the new pattern based on her ancestor’s quilt. “Her act is in keeping with her knowledge of the meaning of the quilts, the spirit that they embody, and her need to make decisions based upon her values.”^[2] Hence, this quilt provides an opportunity for black women to show their creativity and produce a constantly innovating “high art.”

5. Conclusions

Within the assemblage of mother-daughter relations, the thing-power of tea and quilt, the same as mother and daughter, can act and cooperate with humans and produce an effect. Under this influence, this assemblage constructs their identity, inherits the intelligence of females, and produces the effect of the combination of traditional culture and modern ideas. In the practice of discussing the thing-power of tea and quilt, we have observed that the Chinese-American and African-American discourses have some sameness in dealing with the issue of mother-daughter relations. Furthermore, it helps to free things from the subject-object dualism and allow them to exert their thingness in reconstructing character identities, mother-daughter relationships, and other aspects.

References

- [1] Heung M. Daughter-Text/Mother-Text: Matrilineage in Amy Tan's "Joy Luck Club" [J]. *Feminist Studies*, 1993, 19(3): 596-616.
- [2] Walker A. *Everyday Use* [C]//Christian B T (Ed.). *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994.
- [3] Bennett J. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* [M]. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
- [4] See L. *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane* [M]. New York: Scribner (an imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.), 2017.