“The Great Unsaid”
The Importance of Mother-Daughter Communication in Amy Tan’s
The Bonesetter’s Daughter and The Kitchen God’s Wife

by

Valerie Susan Nicole Fidder

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All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That’s his.
-- Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest

And then I realized what the first word must have been: ma, the sound of the baby smacking its
lips in search of her mother’s breast. For a long time, that was the only word the baby needed.…
A mother is always the beginning. She is how things begin.
-- LuLing Liu Young,
From Amy Tan, The Bonesetter’s Daughter

Amy Tan’s The Bonesetter’s Daughter and The Kitchen God’s Wife both tell the story of
the struggle between a Chinese immigrant woman and her American-born daughter.¹ Often
called follow-ups to Tan’s surprise international bestseller, The Joy Luck Club, these two books
actually accomplish a different goal. In The Joy Luck Club, the stories of four pairs of mothers
and daughters are juxtaposed with each other for the purpose of comparing and contrasting them.
Both The Bonesetter’s Daughter and The Kitchen God’s Wife focus on a single mother-daughter
relationship, and unlike Tan’s first novel, in which the mothers and daughters never actually tell
each other their stories, both plots are driven by the mother’s confession of her life in China.
Beyond plot, however, both novels examine how the American-born daughters come to construct
an identity through their interactions with their mothers – specifically, through hearing their
mothers’ stories.

In these two texts, Tan demonstrates the ways in which mother-daughter communication
is essential to the development of an ethnic identity. Each mother-daughter pair faces
impediments to intergenerational communication, which must be overcome for the daughters to

¹ For simplicity’s sake, I will abbreviate the titles of my primary texts in all internal citations. For The Bonesetter’s
Daughter I will use BSD, and for The Kitchen God’s Wife I will use KGW.
understand their own identities. The daughters must confront language, literacy and translation barriers, secrecy and silence, and most importantly, the absence of a Chinese cultural context in which to construct an ethnic identity. With the mothers’ confession stories, these obstacles are effectively overcome and the daughters can begin to build new, more full identities.

Most of the critical debate surrounding Tan is centered upon whether her books encourage Orientalism and the racist tendencies that go with it, if they exoticise and “other” Asian Americans. There is an extensive body of criticism about these issues, focusing on the ways in which the writers either reject or commemorate their heritage to either assimilate into or critique the dominant white culture. In “(Mis) Reading The Joy Luck Club,” Melanie McAlister focuses on language and translation, and writes that her “strategic reading” is “to read The Joy Luck Club as anti-Orientalist and anti-assimilationist” (107). Claudia Smorada, in “Side-Stepping Death: Ethnic Identity, Contradiction and the Mother(land) in Amy Tan’s Novels” (a psychoanalytic essay), reports of Laureen Mar, who “sees Amy Tan as a ‘product of racism’ and disapproves of what she calls …an ‘attempt to blend in with white American culture,’” while also reporting that Kim and Sara Solovitch write in part to answer “the charge of racism launched against some contemporary Chinese American women writers” (32). Smorada herself remarks, “No wonder…Amy Ling describes the mother-daughter relationship as disintegrating ‘into a battle for power/autonomy’” (34).

Many critics of Asian American literature focus on issues of authenticity and race. According to Elaine Kim, since most modern Asian American writers are “American-born, American-educated Asians whose first language is English,” there is a widespread tendency to look for the ways in which the writers dismiss, belittle, ridicule or otherwise “other” their Asian elders (“Defining” 88). In “‘Such Opposite Creatures’: Men and Women in Asian American
Literature,” Kim writes in large part to counter Frank Chin, who she says “has been waging a vocal campaign to discredit Chinese American writers like Amy Tan” (76), and in “Defining Asian American Realities Through Literature,” she examines how the “claiming of America” in the works of Kingston, John Okada, Louis Chu, and several other writers, can be read as *not* accommodationist. She also writes in “Asian American Literature and the Importance of Social Context,” that “contemporary Asian American writers attempt to challenge stereotypes and assert a unique American identity in their writing” (37). Though Kim is writing to defend Tan and others from accusations about their Orientalism, the fact is that no matter how it is argued or in which direction, the discussion is still centered on or framed around issues of authenticity and political agendas, which too often shifts the focus away from the texts as stories.

In “The Icicle in the Desert: Perspective and Form in the Works of Two Chinese-American Women Writers,” Patricia Lin Blinde examines the structure of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, but first she clarifies under which side of the Orientalism argument each book falls. According to Blinde, Kingston is “the individual who is placed in an essentially hostile environment that necessitates the integration of his/her heritage with the socio-cultural conditions of his/her adopted land,” while Wong is “an alien figure in a foreign land…. [who] contrives a description of the world that she has chosen to accept and by whose terms she has consented to live” (52, 54-55). The characters get lost as characters, and instead become vessels by which the author must be trying to express their views on the epic struggle of socio-cultural issues.

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2 While Frank Chin himself does not really carry much critical weight and will not be discussed in depth in this paper, the fact that so many articles respond to him and his arguments illustrates that he and his agenda still shape and influence, to some extent, what the critical discussion of Asian American literature will be.
Whether some, all or none of these critics has gotten it right is not my concern. It seems that no matter what the original or overt purpose they have for writing about an Asian American author, these critics are preoccupied with authenticity and miss the point of Tan’s work. Before discussing anything else about the text, they must explain whether they believe the author is challenging stereotypes or reinforcing them, claiming America or accommodating it, furthering the advancement of the race or exoticising it. Tan is especially vulnerable to these arguments because of her commercial success with mainstream - meaning white - female readers. There is an unspoken rule that to be a minority and to be a success means selling out. I believe that this view is mistaken, much like the common perception that popular fiction cannot be “literature.” In any case, critical discussions about Tan’s work, and that of many other authors of Asian descent, are almost all situated within this context.

In order to speak authoritatively about Tan, I must, as part of the white female readership she is so criticized for attracting, first address this issue, so that my arguments are not lost in accusations of her accommodation/assimilation agenda. Tan and other Asian American writers are often accused of Orientalist biases, as if she were a modern-day incarnation of Jade Snow Wong, one of the Chinese American writers who draws the most criticism. Wong’s 1950 third-person autobiography indirectly argues that if minorities are not finding success in a white-dominated America, as she had, it was because they were not working hard enough, not applying themselves and adapting to the new culture. Kim writes that it was “valued primarily as evidence that racial minorities had only themselves to blame for their failure” (“Defining, 91). Leslie Bow wrote that Wong considered herself not a writer but a “cultural tour guide,” satisfying the

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3 The most comprehensive discussion of both kinds of critics that I have found, though it is aimed in Tan’s defense, is Patricia Marby Harrison’s “Genocide or Redemption? Asian American Autobiography and the Portrayal of Christianity in Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club and Joy Kogawa’s Obasan.”
curiosity of white America (235). Though at the time it was hailed by (mostly white) reviewers as a comprehensive and informative look at (an exotic, foreign) Chinese culture, it has since been almost unanimously charged by Asian American critics and scholars as a blatant attempt to assuage white guilt while giving them a voyeuristic peek into a “primitive” culture within their own country. Nearly every Asian American writer to follow Wong seems to have inherited this criticism. While including cultural references leads critics like Bow to label them as Orientalist, Asian American writers are paradoxically burdened with the expectation of being a sort of guide to the culture by critics like Chin, who insists on categorizing them as either “Real” or “Fake.” I have found that even Maxine Hong Kingston, who is arguably the canonized author of Asian American literature, has been accused of Orientalism, “othering,” racial pandering, assimilationist tendencies, and inauthenticity by critics like Sheryl Mylan, who point to her use of fantastical and “inaccurate” Chinese myths for evidence. If even Kingston is vulnerable to such dismissal, then what Asian American writer can possibly be said to be “authentic”? Most of the critics who get into these arguments turn every myth or Chinese word into an aspect of the epic power struggle between races, classes, sexes or generations that they assume the author is trying to represent. Rarely do they appear to question this assumption. Though Tan’s novels are fiction, she draws heavily from personal knowledge. Does it really matter if a certain legend she refers to is not completely historically accurate, if it is true to her own experience? Too often, attempting to either prove or disprove an author’s “authenticity,” critics get sidetracked by arguments like these.

I find myself siding with Patricia Harrison when she writes that critics like Chin, who tend to demand that Asian Americans represent accurate and uncritical depictions of the culture,

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3 In “‘Such Opposite Creatures’: Men and Women in Asian American Literature,” Elaine Kim explains the differences between Kingston and Wong, accounting for Kingston’s unique place in the canon.
are almost Orientalist themselves; they insist that each Asian American person must stand for the whole race, and their criticisms need to be “reexamined and qualified” (146). Though this reexamination is not the subject of this paper, it is important to consider. This preoccupation with authenticity is what has made the success of *The Joy Luck Club* a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it has brought to the mainstream an overlooked and understudied category of literature. On the other, it has fulfilled all of the mainstream expectations of the genre. That is, the narrow focus of Asian American literary studies means that possible readings are limited. It is studied as if Tan wanted it to serve as an introduction into the Chinese American world, which in fact, as she stated many times, she did not. It is read as a study of the grand themes of mother-daughter relationships, race and class dynamics, generational and cultural gaps, when in fact it is written from a very specific perspective and experience that merely reflects those issues. The surety with which the critics approach Tan’s work this way is underscored by their inattention to her later novels. None of Tan’s later work has received nearly as much critical attention as her first, and where her other novels are discussed, it is almost exclusively in the context of comparing them to *The Joy Luck Club*. It is as if the prevailing attitude is that to have studied one is to know them all, an attitude that deprives the later novels of their literary due. This is partly why I have chosen to write about *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*.

I wish to propose an argument outside of the contexts of previous arguments. By judging Tan in reference to their own expectations of what Asian American literature should mean, critics have largely ignored the literary value of the novels themselves. The *Joy Luck Club* has been hailed as a “universal” tale for women, immigrants, daughters, and minorities, but it and Tan’s other works are rarely allowed to stand alone, outside of political agendas. Tan’s representation of Asian American identity does not fit perfectly into the critics’ visions because it
is neither totally Orientalist nor is it perfectly realistic and accurate. Tan is not a scholar of the Asian American experience, and the fact of her Asian heritage should not mandate that her work be read as if she were. Doing so sends the message that the work is not valuable other than as an information source about Asian Americans. Novels by Asian Americans need not be treated as ethnic primers any more than those by Dickens or Austen would be.

I propose a new reading of these works that puts aside questions of authenticity and that does not focus only on race, culture, class or gender. Instead, I want to look at how Tan uses story and communication in the novels to bridge the cultural and generational gaps between the mothers and daughters. Communication (both the act and the method) plays a pivotal role in the daughters’ identity formation, but in the particular context of the immigrant parent/American child relationship, it is fraught with complications. Though all mother-daughter relationships are complicated and crucial to the daughter’s developing sense of self, this connection is even more important when there is a cultural, linguistic and historical disconnect on top of the usual generational issues faced by mothers and daughters. In these two books, the daughters are raised in a culture different from that of their mothers, speaking a different language, and utterly ignorant of their family histories. The daughters, in their ignorance of Chinese culture and context, “misread” their mothers all of their lives, and are unable to construct a viable Chinese identity because of it. These misreadings are partly cultural and partly linguistic, and I will examine the ways in which Tan uses these “problems” to illustrate the disconnect between mother and daughter.

Without a solid connection with their mothers – before learning to overcome the barriers to communication that they face – the daughters are, in a sense, adrift. They are neither “authentic Chinese,” because of their American upbringing and lifestyles, nor are they “real”
Americans, by virtue of their non-whiteness and the cultural stigma of their Chinese families. They are consistently seen as “foreign” by both groups: “because [they] are Asians, [they] are not and cannot be Americans” (Kim, “Such” 68). Identities are made from the intersections of histories, families, and experience. Without knowing from where they come, the daughters not only cannot tell where they are going, but they cannot tell who they are. Both Chinese American daughters are missing crucial parts of this equation; they do not have a sense of what Bow calls their own “Chinese-ness,” that intangible something that makes them “different” (244). Both daughters are operating with incomplete identities, attempting to identify with a mainstream society that will on some level always reject them, while they ignore an entire part of their cultural heritage. They know something about “the Chinese,” but not about what being Chinese means for them. They know that it means being non-white and often being treated as non-American, but they have no intrinsic sense of being ethnically Chinese. To only discuss racial struggles and to ignore ethnicity as it affects an individual is to say that both are essentially “a result of some predetermined, intrinsic and fixed attributes” (Hum 64). Ethnicity is not passed along by genes like hair and eye colors are. It is absorbed through immersion in a culture and through interaction with family. When this process is disrupted for Tan’s daughter-characters, they are left not quite whole.

Through their mothers’ stories, the daughters are able to come to terms with their Chinese heritage and begin to construct an integrated identity. This is the central, ultimate goal of both novels. The daughters learn to be not “Chinese-American” with its problematic hyphen, but Chinese and American. Their mothers’ stories simultaneously provide a cultural context for understanding, which has been largely absent from their lives, and introduce them to modes of communication that are peculiar to Chinese culture, overcoming both the cultural and linguistic
barriers to understanding they have faced and allowing the gaps and misunderstandings that have
plagued their previous attempts at communication to be healed. By incorporating Chinese
contexts and communication “codes” into their own identities, the daughters can feel at peace
with themselves and their mothers, which they have never before experienced. This integration
of the components of their identities is the key to understanding their histories, culture, families,
mothers and, ultimately, their selves. Only when they understand the multiple facets of their
selves can they truly gain a sense of self.

Textual Background and Statement of Purpose

Since the particular novels I am discussing are newer and less widely read than *The Joy
Luck Club*, I feel that I must provide some background and context for my reading. Both books
are stories of a mother-daughter relationship. *The Kitchen God’s Wife* is the story of Winnie
Louie and her American-born daughter, Pearl. Winnie’s mother was a “Double-Second” wife –
after the death of the first wife and the suicide of the second, she was chosen to replace the dead
second wife, a bad-luck position. After her disappearance (because of illness, escape or suicide,
Winnie never finds out), Winnie was sent to live with her aunt and uncle with her cousin Peanut.
Later, she married an abusive pilot named Wen Fu shortly before World War II. Most of the
book is her telling Pearl about her marriage: the abuse she suffered, the children she had given
birth to who had died, the wartime conditions, her being jailed after failing to obtain a divorce.
While married to Wen Fu, she met Helen (a.k.a. Hulan, who everyone in America believes to be
Winnie’s sister) and her Auntie Du, as well as the man who would become her second husband,
Jimmy Louie. After Auntie Du’s death, Helen decides that it is time for Pearl and Winnie to
share their secrets – Winnie’s previous marriage and Pearl’s multiple sclerosis, of which
everyone is aware but Winnie. The biggest secret, though, only Winnie knows – that right before she left for America, she was raped one last time by Wen Fu, and she has always suspected that Pearl is a product of that rape and not Jimmy’s biological daughter.

The Bonesetter’s Daughter follows a similar confessional pattern, though there is more emphasis on the daughter, Ruth, who is involved in an unsatisfactory live-in relationship with an Anglo man and coincidentally comes down with psychosomatic laryngitis every year for a week on their anniversary. Ruth works as a “book doctor” for authors of self-help books. Her mother, LuLing, begins to show the first signs of Alzheimer’s disease, prompting Ruth to hire a translator for a manuscript given to her by LuLing years before but never read. The manuscript, embedded in the novel’s center, is the story of LuLing and her mother, whom she calls “Precious Auntie.”

Precious Auntie was the daughter of a widower bonesetter and turned down the marriage offer of a violent coffin-maker named Chang, to accept one from the son of an ink-making family named Liu. On the day she was to be married, the jilted Chang murdered her fiancé and father, and shortly thereafter, she tried to kill herself by drinking boiling ink. The Liu family nursed her back to health, and upon discovering that she was pregnant, determined that to avoid scandal another female relation would claim the baby, while Precious Auntie, though voiceless and deformed, served as her nursemaid. It was not until Precious Auntie’s suicide years later, when LuLing agreed to marry Chang’s son, that LuLing found out the truth from a manuscript Precious Auntie had given her. Because LuLing pretended to read the manuscript and still want to marry, Precious Auntie thought LuLing had rejected her – LuLing read the manuscript for real too late to prevent the suicide. LuLing was disowned and went on to study and teach at an orphanage, and to fall in love only to lose her lover to war. Later, she provided a haven for her cousin GaoLing, who had been raised as a sister, when she fled from her marriage (to the same
man LuLing had been meant to marry). GaoLing eventually fled to America, and LuLing hid the truth, claiming a different birthday and saying that GaoLing was her sister, in order to gain sponsorship to America. By reading LuLing’s manuscript, Ruth learns the truth about her mother and finds that some of the confusion she had attributed to the disease was really just her mother’s forgetting to lie.

Pearl and Ruth are unhappy in the American lives they have built, cut off from their mothers and the culture they represent. They feel a distance between themselves and their mothers, but do not understand why. While neither story has a fairy-tale ending, hearing their mothers’ stories is a healing event for both daughters. It provides two things that they have been missing: an understanding of Chinese communication styles and codes, and a cultural context within which to situate themselves and with which to understand their Chinese heritage.

These two books approach the problems of communication and identity formation on many levels. In this paper, I will address the ones that I feel are most important to gaining a thorough understanding of what Tan’s books reveal about the intersections of culture, mother-daughter relationships, communication and identity formation. Both *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* present pictures of mothers and daughters living lives that are fundamentally disconnected from one another. They are separated by age, class, culture and language. The daughters have grown up in a society that is still essentially foreign and alien to their mothers, and they, in turn, view their mothers’ customs as foreign and alien. They reject the idea that their mothers and the culture they represent are a part of who they are, and in doing so, reject a part of themselves.

To establish this disconnect, Tan relies a great deal on language and translation. I will discuss the ways in which basic differences between Chinese and English serve to drive a wedge
between the mothers and daughters, preventing meaningful communication from taking place. Related to this idea is that of cultural coding of language. Chinese communicative patterns and codes differ greatly from American ones, compounding the problem of cross-cultural mother-daughter communication.

I will also look closely at the effect of silence on mother-daughter relationships and cultural identification. Both LuLing and Winnie are following in their mothers’ footsteps by keeping secrets, but the geographical and cultural shift to their daughters’ generation means that their silence has the additional effect of disrupting the formation of their daughters’ ethnic identities. I will also show how the mothers’ silence departs from traditional Chinese cultural norms. Storytelling is a central component to Chinese communication, and by keeping their secrets, the mothers have abandoned the usual means of passing along their heritage.

Tan also relies on the structure of the novels to help accomplish their goals, and I will look at the ways in which the frame structure illustrates the changes the daughters undergo throughout the books. By setting the novels up as frame narratives, Tan opens up a multitude of opportunities for comparison and contrast within the books. The structure of the novels also underscores the importance of the mothers’ telling of their stories, in their own voices.

Lastly, I will examine how each novel indicates the successful integration of the mother-stories and their cultural contexts by the daughters. The novels’ resolutions are not necessarily neat and tidy, and both leave open the possibilities of failure and the daughters’ continued rejection of their mothers. However, through the use of symbolism, they give the optimistic sense that both daughters will continue their ethnic “becoming” and successfully accept the construction of a whole ethnic identity.
Beyond Translation: Language, Context and the Communication Problem

Though it is clear that cultural issues play the major role in the distance between mother and daughter in these novels, on one level the trouble with cross-cultural communication is purely linguistic. Through psychological studies of Chinese Americans, May Paomay Tung has concluded “the vast difference between these two linguistic traditions [Chinese and English], plus the language barrier, marks the distance between the young Chinese Americans and their immigrant parents. This distance and its effect on parent-child relationships and on Chinese American self-identity cannot be overstressed” (74). They are literally speaking two different languages. This observation is a key to understanding the development of ethnic identities in these two novels. Because Tan’s educational background is in linguistics, the preoccupation with language in these two novels cannot be purely coincidental. Language is one of the primary ways in which Tan illustrates the disconnect in the mother-daughter relationship. Ruth and Pearl “know” Chinese in that they can hold a conversation (or at least listen to one), but they can neither read it nor speak it fluently, and their true understanding is very limited. Tan herself writes of the misunderstandings that result when Chinese speakers are judged by western standards, resulting in the common conclusion that the Chinese language is circular, indirect, superfluous and unnecessarily complex (Tan, “Language” 84). In the book *Chinese Americans and Their Immigrant Parents*, Tung finds that this feeling is very common among American-born Chinese children; with both generations considering themselves monolingual, misunderstandings are frequent.

Both books place an emphasis on the particulars of the Chinese language. Though written in English, both have Chinese elements, a factor that has fueled some critics’ complaints of Orientalism. I think, though, that the Chinese scattered through the books emphasizes the
importance and centrality of language to the texts. Qun Wang writes, “the use of two-toned [English peppered with Chinese accents] language concretely objectifies Asian-American writers’ attempt to negotiate a ground on which they can find their own identity” (91). So too can it help the characters negotiate a space in which to construct their identity. This preoccupation with language differences gets to the heart of the communication gap. Often, the immigrant Chinese characters have difficulties even translating Chinese into English. There is often no single way to translate a word or phrase. In The Bonesetter’s Daughter, Helen is initially confused at Ruth’s mention of “Precious Auntie” (Bao Bomu). She explains that only LuLing called her that, the rest said bao mu. She clarifies:

Bao can mean ‘precious,’ or it can mean ‘protect.’ Both are third tone, baaaaaoo. And the mu part, that stands for ‘mother,’ but when it’s written in bao mu, the mu has an extra piece in front, so that the meaning is more of a female servant. Bao mu is like saying ‘baby-sitter,’ ‘nursemaid.’ And bomu, that’s ‘auntie.’ I think her mother taught her to say and write it this way. More special. (BSD 382)

The definition of a word is entirely dependent on its context, what words immediately surround it, unlike English, where usage can at most change part of speech, and only a few words have multiple definitions that greatly differ.

Sometimes, there is no translation for a Chinese word at all. When Winnie tries to explain taonan to her daughter, she must define it almost entirely in the negative, listing the things she knows it is not. It does not mean refugee, “refugee is what you are after you have been taonan and are still alive. And if you are alive, you would never talk about what made you taonan” (KGW 260). She can only clarify this explanation by repeatedly telling Ruth how lucky she is not to know the meaning of the word.
When exact translations are offered, they often make no sense to a speaker of English. For instance, *zibuyong*, which means both hermaphrodite and homosexual (or something in between), translates literally as “‘hens-chicks-and-roosters,’ all the male and female ingredients needed to make an egg that turns into a chick” (*KGW* 447). To a native speaker of Chinese, who knows the common metaphorical usage of domestic fowl, and knows the implication of “male and female ingredients,” who, in short, has a cultural context with which to understand the word, *zibuyong* makes instant sense, but to a western speaker of English, it sounds like gibberish. The daughters, should they ever attempt translation on their own, without a mother to explain contexts for them, would find themselves hopelessly confused and frustrated. As it is, such explanations aggravate the daughters so much that at times they conclude that Chinese is gibberish. At one point, Ruth even wonders if one has to be crazy to understand and speak Chinese.

Because of the difficulty in translating for understanding and the futility of exact translations, stories and analogies are often used by the native speakers of Chinese and by the daughter/narrator, speaking to a presumably western audience, to explain the meaning of a word or phrase. Though Ruth does not know what her mother’s exclamation of *Ying-gai* literally translates as, she has a notion of it based upon her mother’s usage. She explains that “*Ying-gai* was what my mother said when she meant, I should have…. To me, *Ying-gai* meant my mother lived a life of regrets that never faded with time” (*KGW* 173).

As children, Tan’s Chinese-born characters must acquire vocabulary as they acquire the cultural context with which to understand it. Thus, Precious Auntie’s explanation of the character for “heart” to LuLing takes the form of a story:
See this curving stroke? That’s the bottom of the heart, where blood gathers and flows. And the dots, those are the two veins and the artery that carry the blood in and out.... Whose dead heart gave shape to this word? How did it begin, Doggie? Did it belong to a woman? Was it drawn in sadness?... “Why do we have to know whose heart it was?” I asked as I wrote the character.... A person should consider how things begin. A particular beginning results in a particular end. (BSD 173)

LuLing tries to pass this concept on to Ruth, saying “writing Chinese characters...is entirely different from writing English words. You think differently. You feel differently” (BSD 58). Her attempt to pass along the importance of calligraphy fails, however, because she and Ruth understand language differently. To English-speaking American Ruth, words are just words, exactly as they appear – one’s handwriting or inflection cannot change their meaning. To LuLing, however, every curve and stroke, every nuance of sound, is important and fraught with meaning. She says “each character is a thought, a feeling, meanings, history, all mixed into one,” trying to explain to her daughter a concept of language that goes far beyond what we would call “connotation” in English (BSD 59). Words in Chinese cannot be encompassed in a short dictionary definition. Each word is a story, and stories are what Ruth does not have.

LuLing tells Ruth that the shape of the ideograph they are working on (meaning “news from the gods”) comes from the old style of temples, “as if this word old would bump the Chinese gears of her daughter’s mind into action” (BSD 59). LuLing concludes with “see how Chinese words make sense?” but it is clear that to Ruth, they do not (BSD 60).

These books make it clear that, while contributing to the problem, language differences alone do not constitute the communication gap. There is a sort of understanding that Ruth and
Pearl are missing, which prevents them from understanding their mothers even when they are speaking English. They do not know the “rules” of Chinese communication – the style, the codes, the contexts. Chinese society is a high-context culture – there are sets of precisely delineated codes and behaviors that are never explained, but are meant to be absorbed through being a part of the culture.⁵ Never having needed the explanations themselves, however, the mothers fail to explain the codes to their daughters, who have grown up outside of the Chinese context. These codes become so ingrained in individuals that they even affect the though process. Blinde writes, “there are vast discrepancies between Chinese and American thought progression: thought connectives that may logically lead to certain conclusions in one culture often progress in surprising directions in another culture. Consequently, the formulation of anything as stable as a self becomes, at best, an elusive task” (61). Without a cultural context for understanding, the daughters not only speak differently, they think differently. They cannot incorporate their Chinese ethnicity into their selves because they do not understand it; they are playing by different rules.

One such “rule” is to know what not to talk about. Both mothers’ tales frequently illustrate the need to hold one’s tongue. Precious Auntie’s suicide becomes something “too bad to say” and LuLing becomes “unable to speak on Precious Auntie’s behalf” (BSD 103, 255). Similarly, the mystery of Winnie’s mother could never be solved, because of its unspeakable

⁵ James A. Schnell writes, “all communication can be placed on the low context – high context continuum” and “each world culture fits on the low context – high context communication continuum” (31). The United States and most western cultures, such as Switzerland, Germany and Britain are “low-context” cultures meaning that “messages are directly stated and draw their meaning from literal statements” (Schnell 31). In contrast, China and most other Asian cultures, such as Japan, Korea and Vietnam are high-context cultures, meaning that messages draw much of their “meaning from the situational context within which the message is conveyed…. It is not explicitly stated. Rather, a general idea is presented” from which the listener is expected to construct the meaning (Schnell 31). In general terms, this difference in modes of communication means that a western speaker might be perceived by an Asian listener as rude, overly direct, or blunt; if the situation is reversed, the western listener might not be able to catch the speaker’s meaning at all, and think them to be confusing, secretive or deliberately misleading. These characteristics often contribute to cross-cultural miscommunication.
nature. “What my mother did was a big disgrace…. That’s why no one would ever talk about her” (KGW 118). These silences are partly due to superstition, as in the belief that speaking a bad thing aloud will cause it to happen, and partly due to trying to keep “face.”

Often read as mere politeness in an extreme form, (perhaps contributing to the myth of the model minority), silence can be a mode of communication in and of itself. There are ways of knowing that do not require explanation among the Chinese characters, such as the understanding between Winnie and Auntie Du about her role in Winnie’s release from prison:

She wanted Hulan to be proud of Kuang An….She did not need to let everyone know she was really the big hero. But I knew, and that was enough for her.

Still there were many, many times when I had to bite my tongue. … And I always knew what favor she [Hulan] was talking about. And Henry [Kuang An] knew too, but in a different way. And I knew – but in another different way.

(KGW 495)

Judged by western communicative standards, these omissions on Winnie’s part may seem like outright deception, but in a Chinese context, they are not. Her silence is related to the concept of “face.” One should never lose face, or unnecessarily cause another to lose face. Winnie cannot admit her mistakes any more than she can shatter Helen’s notions of her husband’s power. To point out the truth would be inconsiderate and unforgivable.

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6 The “model minority” myth is the perception of Asian Americans as the “ideal” minority in that they act the way minorities in America “should” act – that is, the way minorities should act in order to be minimally threatening to the white majority. Characteristics attributed to Asian Americans that contribute to the myth are effeminacy in men, exotic passive sensuality in women, and general quiet politeness, unfailing work ethics and uncomplaining acceptance of life’s hardships. For more on the “model minority” myth in literature, see Wendy Ho’s book In Her Mother’s House and Elaine Kim’s “‘Such Opposite Creatures’: Men and Women in Asian American Literature.” For a thorough and interesting discussion of the model minority myth in real life, May Paomay Tung’s psychological book Chinese Americans and Their Immigrant Parents: Conflict, Identity and Values provides a great discussion on how Asian Americans live with the model minority perception.
Pearl and Ruth see these silences quite differently than their mothers do. At best, they think they are unhealthy, at worst, manipulative. Pearl senses the importance of the things that go unsaid, but she views them cynically. At her cousin’s engagement party, she thinks, “I see Phil trying to make polite conversation with my cousin Frank, who is chain-smoking, something Phil hates with a passion. I see old family friends who are not really friends making toasts to the bride-and-groom-to-be, who will surely be divorced in two years’ time” (KGW 33). She does not see the point in coded speech, avoidance of unpleasantness; she does not see the importance of etiquette or keeping up family connections, which were so integral to the social structure in China in which the older generation grew up. She only sees deception: “everything feels like a sham, and also sad and true. All these meaningless gestures, old misunderstandings, and painful secrets, why do we keep them up?” (KGW 33). But these “gestures” are only meaningless for Pearl because she does not know how to understand them. Her American way of understanding, her American contextual knowledge, leads her to “interpret” things in a very different way than her mother does.

Communication among Tan’s Chinese-born characters cannot be understood as mere words, and its complexities go beyond the relatively simple concepts of face, propriety and filial duty. At times, the intricacies of the coded language can seem outright contradictory. In these instances, “truth is characterized by the logic of the opposite” (Chen 89). The mode of communication is to say the opposite of what is meant, with the understanding that the shared context and history between speakers will allow the real meaning to become apparent. However, as Victoria Chen observes, “this ‘indirect’ approach works only if one knows how to hear the statement within a context of a certain kind of relationship” (89).
For instance, when LuLing is preparing to meet her future husband, she is instructed to “act like you are the least important,” paradoxically to show her future in-laws her worth (BSD 222). When Winnie’s maid quits because of Wen Fu’s sexual abuse, she says it is because she is not a good servant. Winnie interprets this as a request for a raise: “That was the Chinese way, to use yourself as an excuse, to say you are unworthy, when really you mean that you are worth more” (KGW 326-7). When she reveals the true reason for her leaving, the girl continues to blame herself, slapping her own face and calling herself weak for letting Wen Fu touch her. Though her behavior may seem to modern western readers to be the masochistic product of low-self esteem, it is more likely the product of low societal esteem. The scene must be read in its social-cultural-historical context. The society the maid lived in was patriarchal and class-oriented. It would have been inappropriate for her to accuse Wen Fu, as he is a man and her employer. She is lower in the Confucian hierarchy on two counts; “she knew only how to blame herself” (KGW 328). She was also finding a way to leave without costing her mistress any face – Winnie shudders at the thought of others finding out about her husband’s indiscretions.

To those with a shared cultural context, nearly anything can be a code. When Winnie goes to the New Year’s market with Peanut, each instruction they receive means something else. “‘Don’t forget, even with your luxuries, be frugal.’ That meant we were supposed to bargain down the shopkeepers. ‘And do not let your brothers eat too many sweets.’ That meant we were supposed to take Little Gong and Little Gao, who were ten and eleven” (KGW 138). To Winnie, there is no ambiguity in her Aunt’s words, but when she tells the anecdote to Ruth, she must “translate” her meaning. The high context culture in Tan’s books requires that a storyteller say “she did or said X, by which I knew she meant Y,” by way of explanation to an Americanized
Chinese daughter, or, in the case of the daughters’ sections, to a presumably non-Chinese readership.

Used more subtly, coded language can also be used to avoid or get out of embarrassing social situations. When Old Widow Lau mixes up LuLing’s meeting time, her father deftly dismisses them by calling himself rude for detaining them, since surely they had other things to do. In this way, he still gets to play the gracious host, but he gets rid of unwanted guests because Old Widow Lau cannot argue without admitting her mistake. It is important to note however, that just as in previous examples, both parties are fully aware of what is really being said.

Similar tactics can be used to get one’s way without seeming pushy or greedy. When GaoLing comes to LuLing’s orphanage, she doesn’t ask to be taken in. Instead, she asks for advice in such a way as to prompt LuLing to invite her, thinking, “what could I do except insist four times that she stay with me? And what could she do except insist three times that she did not want to be a burden?” (BSD 287). Had LuLing not persisted, she would have appeared insincere. Had GaoLing given in right away, she would have seemed too eager to accept charity, though if she had denied assistance once more, the matter would have dropped.

Throughout these books, these codes used are primarily cultural, and could seemingly occur in any tale of China. In these two novels, however, Tan places even more emphasis on the importance of coded communication by making the characters rely on it even in their most intimate relationships. For the entire early part of LuLing’s life, she communicates with her mother through a code only they know. “Hand-talk, face-talk, and chalk-talk were the languages I grew up with, soundless and strong” (BSD 2). In The Kitchen God’s Wife, Winnie’s rescue comes through code, a “secret code” she and Jimmy worked out. She was to call him with the code phrase, and then they would meet to escape. Less extreme but just as pertinent is Winnie’s
only real connecting moment with her father. Like Precious Auntie, he too has been rendered voiceless by catastrophe. When she tells him she wants to leave, she considers all the possible meanings of his showing her his stash of gold, but not one of them is that he was only trying to show her gold, or that he’s crazy:

I was struggling so hard to understand his meaning…. as if he wanted to say to me, ‘you foolish girl, finally you’ve made the right decision’…. I do not think my father was saying that he loved me. I think he was telling me that if I left this terrible man, then maybe this terrible man would leave his house too. Maybe my father and his wives would no longer have to suffer…. Of course, maybe he was telling me that he loved me a little, too. (KGW 460-1)

Only when her father is deprived of his voice and must revert to a sort of coded body language does he finally manage to really communicate with his daughter.

As shared context increases, as happens within a family, the coded nature of their communication increases rather than decreases in intensity. This is an idea that directly conflicts with the western values the daughters have internalized, which prize emotional honesty and openness in intimate relationships. Ruth notes wryly at one point, “in our family, ‘proud’ is as close as we get to saying ‘love’” (KGW 11-12). What she does not understand is that this is not a quirk of her family but a norm of the culture.7

Winnie remembers that “giving threats to children was the custom…. this was how you made children behave…. how you drove selfish thoughts out of their foolish heads…. how you

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7 The number and types of code usage in Chinese culture is nearly endless. Money, poetry, aphorisms, art and jewelry are all heavily codified. Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, in her book Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance, has a very interesting article about food codes in Chinese American families. Indeed, whole books could probably be written tracing a single code through Tan’s novels, so by no means should my discussion be considered extensive. I am merely trying to show the nature of the Chinese mothers’ speech as it contrasts with that of their American daughters.
showed you were concerned for their future” (KGW 163). In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, criticism is treated as the highest sign of parental love. LuLing knows her father is proud of her because he criticizes her “in small ways about unimportant matters” (BSD 232). Precious Auntie tells LuLing of mother Liu, “If she didn’t love you, why did she bother criticizing you for your own good? And then Precious Auntie went on to say how selfish I was…. She criticized me so much I did not consider until now she was saying she loved me even more” (BSD 206). When the Liu mother no longer has to put on the pretense of parental love, she stops criticizing LuLing altogether.

To their American daughters, however, their codes do not work in the same way. As Marina Heung writes of the *Joy Luck Club* mothers, Winnie and LuLing’s language “possesses multiple, even contradictory meanings. As an assertion of cultural identity, it both communicates and obfuscates” (34). The daughters do not know how to “hear” their mothers’ language. The “incomprehension” between mother and daughter “keeps the mothers ‘othered’ in the eyes of their daughters” (Heung 34). Where the mothers mean love, the daughters see adversaries. *The Kitchen God’s Wife* begins with Pearl’s statement, “whenever my mother talks to me, she begins the conversation as if we were already in the middle of an argument,” the “already” indicating that an argument is bound to occur (3). Similarly, Ruth’s portion of *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* is full of the mother-daughter conflicts of her youth. She describes how the two escalated “their torment of each other” and “flung out more pain” in their arguments (158, 165). But LuLing’s “torment” is yelling at Ruth for smoking – it is an expression of her love. Ruth does not understand her mother’s threats. She does not understand LuLing’s fascination with death – her constant request to converse with the ghost of Precious Auntie, her lamentation of the curse she lives under, and her frequent prediction of her own demise. Ruth
does not know where these “delusions” of her mother’s come from without having heard her story. She does not see how LuLing wants to be valued and listened to – she thinks her mother only wants to make her fearful.

Chinese forms of communication are much more contextually and culturally dependent than western ones. Without the cultural background of their mothers, Pearl and Ruth are denied access to such communication codes. They cannot really understand their mothers; even when they speak the same language, “the daughter understands the words but not the meanings” (McAlister 112). In order to understand their mothers and their stories, they must learn to understand and use these culturally marked modes of communication.

**Talk Me a Story: The Oral Tradition and Cultural Context**

In the China where LuLing and Winnie grew up, these codes for communication are acquired through both life experience and storytelling. Children are taught morals through didactic tales. Such stories – fairy tales, legends, histories, myths, it does not matter which – teach people what it means to be Chinese, to be rich or poor, male or female, old or young, to have honor or lose face. Both books are full of such stories, especially in the mothers’ sections. Though this custom is common in most cultures it is especially prevalent in Chinese culture due to the “indirection” that characterizes their communication in general. That is, stories are not relegated only to bedtime; they are staples of everyone’s communication.

Though it comes from one of the oldest cultures with recorded history, Chinese storytelling is an oral tradition, with some tales dating back thousands of years. In these books, stories are passed down through families, kept alive because they serve an important purpose.
Stories are used on an as-needed basis, to the point that their truth or accuracy sometimes becomes irrelevant, and their endings can be changed to suit the teller’s purposes. As a child, Winnie imagined a thousand endings to her mother’s tale, all equally valid. In some she was a martyr, in others, she was liberated – it depended on what Winnie needed to believe. Winnie says, “they are all the same, all true, all false. So much pain in every one. I tried to tell myself…just forget it. That’s what I tried to believe” (KGW 130). But she cannot forget; she keeps telling herself her mother’s story. Precious Auntie managed to tell LuLing dozens of versions of her accident, passing along a different message in each, without ever telling her the “real” story. LuLing remembers that she liked the “made-up” stories the best, not knowing that they were all made-up (BSD 3). These stories are the only things that LuLing did not share with the rest of the family, they were only between mother and daughter.

The “talk-story” tradition is especially central to Chinese women’s culture – it is the oral tradition in Asian cultures by which women would pass along their wisdom by telling stories that mixed legend, myth, and truth. Historically denied an education, women could use talk-story to learn history, religion, literature, and filial duty, while developing a strong sense of identity. The tradition has carried over to Chinese America. Cheng Lok Chua writes about how, in The Woman Warrior (a hybrid of autobiography, memoir, legend and talk-story), Kingston uses the form to claim an ethnic voice and thus an identity. The women of Tan’s novels do the same thing. In fact, as Steven Sondrup points out, the fact that neither daughter can read Chinese puts a special emphasis on this oral aspect of the culture. For Ruth and Pearl, learning about their

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8 I say that this story telling tradition is common to most cultures, and by this I mean both eastern and western ones. One needs to look no further than Aesop, the Brothers Grimm, or Disney to see how western cultures use storytelling to teach their young.

9 This is a term used primarily by critics; Kingston is the only author I’ve seen use it, though others, like Tan, unfailingly employ the genre in their writing. Though I do not know who coined the term, Cheng Lok Chua, Wendy Ho, and Steven Sondrup have written interesting essays about the tradition.
cultural identity in a library is impossible, even in translation; they must form the long-missing connection with their mothers in order to truly understand it.

The talk-story mother-daughter narrative is the driving force behind these novels. The real “plot” of the books – the mothers’ stories – is only revealed in the context of the talk-story. It is secondary to the act of telling. Through talk-story, “the mother guides her daughter to claim greater agency in her own life” (Chu 143). Without ever overtly saying so, the mother is telling her daughter, “don’t live my life.” Though race is present in these novels, it does not and cannot equal ethnicity or identity. The mother-story, the narrative, is the “prime medium for transmission of the maternal legacy” and of a “gendered, ethnically marked identity” (Chu 144).

Stories are a central component in Chinese communicative patterns. They do not serve only to entertain – indeed, they rarely serve only to entertain. Instead, they are used regularly to educate, illustrate, and illuminate conversation. Winnie grew up surrounded by stories; they informed all of her knowledge of the world. She learned about romance from “trashy” novels, not from experience. She learned about sex from Peanut, who told her the story of a woman with too much *yin* who killed her husband by stealing all his *yang*. Winnie and Helen, on the road during wartime, would swap stories of the star constellations, and the differences in their versions illustrate their far different upbringings. Winnie’s tale is full of the stories of her youth, almost all of them passed along orally and changing in the process. Without them, she would have been little more than an ignorant girl.

Stories are given as explanations even to the most direct questions, and often are in both *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* and *The Kitchen God’s Wife*. The combination of difficult translation and the mothers’ Chinese impulse to rely on storytelling means that, at times, even the simplest explanations take story form. Ruth does not want to ask her mother to help translate her
manuscript precisely because of the form her mother’s answers would take, which Ruth
describes as “rambling.” To translate “secret,” she pictures LuLing explaining:

“Secret not just mean cannot say. Can be hurt-you kinda secret, or curse-you
kind, maybe do you damage forever, never can change after that…. ” And then
came rambling about who told the secret, without saying what the secret itself
was, followed by more rambling about how the person had died horribly, why this
had happened, how it could have been avoided, if only such and such had not
occurred a thousand years before. (BSD 14)

Ruth’s get-to-the-point American style of discourse does not mesh with her mother’s. She does
not see the relevance of her mother’s digressions, but in context, LuLing’s explanation is in
perfect harmony with both the moralistic storytelling impulse in Chinese culture and the intricate
nuances of the language. LuLing feels that it would be wrong of her to give Ruth an inaccurate
or incomplete understanding of the word. If Ruth does not understand the word “secret,” how
can she understand all of the implications of the secret? LuLing was raised with stories; they
were how Precious Auntie taught her everything, from writing to behavior.

Storytelling is literally central to these two books. Tan emphasizes the cultural trend of
storytelling by foregrounding storytelling’s importance to the plots. Aside from the mothers’
narratives, stories appear many times throughout the novels. Only after Winnie tells her story to
Jimmy is she truly free of Wen Fu: “He thought I was a strong person. I had never thought
about myself that way” (KGW 442). In The Bonesetter’s Daughter, Ruth wonders if the self-
help authors she works for see “their books as symbolic forms of immortality,” as in some way
Precious Auntie and LuLing see their manuscripts as immortality (43). Not having an ingrained
cultural affinity for storytelling, Ruth adopts this family tradition unknowingly and incompletely
in her job as a book doctor. She has a preoccupation with words, but does not write her own stories. Instead, she fixes others’ prose and lives with Art, a sign-linguist whom she calls “an expert on silence” (BSD 28).

The storytelling tradition is an essential component in the formation of a Chinese ethnic identity. Through stories, cultural contexts and histories are absorbed. In China, LuLing and Winnie took in stories from the moment of their births – they devoured and processed them as much as the rice that they ate every day. Not having had such stories in their childhood, Ruth and Pearl are ignorant of many truths that their mothers take for granted. The remedy that both books offer is healing through talk-story. It simultaneously bridges cultural and generational gaps, while reaffirming ethnic matrilineal ties. Their mothers’ stories are offered to the daughters as keys to redemption and to their claiming or construction of ethnic selves.

**What Gets Left Behind in the Silence? A Lack of Cultural Context**

Having grown up in a culture situated around storytelling, how is it that in the more than thirty years that their daughters have been alive, neither LuLing nor Winnie has related her own life history? The “stories” most essential to their selves, their identities, the most crucial information is simply left out of their daughters’ upbringing. These stories are what pass along heritage, cultural ties and family history. To attempt to raise a daughter without them would seem unreasonable. The silence changes the daughters; their mothers don’t understand them and they do not understand their mothers. They don’t understand themselves.

Both mothers had reasons to believe that they were doing what was best for their daughters, though in some cases, their reasoning was misguided. However, by not sharing these stories, they remove the context of understanding that the stories provided in their own youth.
They consign themselves to a lifetime of miscommunication with their daughters, despite their good intentions. Parts of both women’s stories are considered very “shameful,” by both Chinese and western standards, at least in postwar America, and this fact is behind much of their secrecy. LuLing was the bastard child of a deformed suicide-maiden – even her own family considered her story an embarrassment. Winnie’s ultimate secret is similar – she killed some of her unborn babies while in China, and her remaining daughter may be the child of an evil man. Even parts of their stories that would not have made them pariahs in China are unacceptable in their new circumstances. Winnie says, “I couldn’t tell our church friends that my father had five wives. How could I say that? I was the wife of a minister” (*KGW* 82).

Aside from worries about their honor, both women, like many immigrants of all different cultures, had emotional reasons for burying their past. People do not generally uproot themselves and start from scratch in a foreign land for no good reason, and often their reasons are unpleasant. Even when she finally shares the truth with Pearl, Winnie says that she cannot say the worst things, the most painful things, and instructs Pearl to use her imagination. By coming to America, she thought, “I can think a new way. Now I can forget my tragedies, put all my secrets behind a door that can never be opened, never seen by American eyes” (*KGW* 81). Winnie deals with her past by repressing it.

LuLing, however, makes her past her private torture, never sharing the “curse” on her family, but refusing to forget, too. Ruth gets angry with her mother for her constant threats of death and references to the family curse, but her anger stems from a misunderstanding. She does not know the stories of her mother’s youth, nor does she know how much heartache, pain and death LuLing has had to deal with during her life. LuLing turns her silence inward, begging to speak with Precious Auntie’s ghost, predicting her own death or threatening suicide, complaining
of the wrongs that have been done to her, and wearing her pain as a badge of honor but never sharing it with her daughter. To Ruth, who doesn’t know the truth behind her mother’s complaints, LuLing appears to be overly dramatic, superstitious, and sometimes delusional, long before the Alzheimer’s sets in.

Both women’s secret keeping can be traced back to practical problems involved with the immigration process. Though she may not have known she was pregnant when she immigrated, Winnie feared that revealing that Wen-Fu could be Pearl’s father could jeopardize both Pearl’s citizenship and her own new marriage. In addition, Winnie had to lie about her relationship with Helen – declaring her to be a sister to the officials, a sister-in-law to her friends – in order to sponsor her. LuLing lied on her application too, changing her birth year and claiming to be GaoLing’s biological sister in order for GaoLing to sponsor her. LuLing’s fear of being deported forced her to keep up the lie even years after GaoLing told her she was safe. Neither mother could begin to tell her daughter about her life and history without also revealing these outright lies. Winnie thinks that if Pearl knew the secrets she has kept, “how could my daughter believe me anymore?” (KGW 97). They believe silence is, once again, the best course of non-action. In this new country, they believe they can protect their daughters from the life’s hardships, from the fear and pain they have gone through in their own lives.

What neither LuLing nor Winnie realize is that they are continuing a pattern begun by their own mothers, and perhaps, even by their mothers before them. They think that their silence will guarantee their daughters’ happiness (echoing the superstition of not voicing negative thoughts), but they do not see how their own mothers’ silences contributed to their heartache until they begin to break the cycle.
Winnie regrets that her mother was absent while she was growing up because of the advice and guidance she imagines she would have had. She even partially attributes her horrible match with Wen Fu to not having a mother to advise her on marriage. Yet, in the same breath, she discounts the value of a mother’s advice, saying, “sometimes, even a mother cannot help her daughter, no matter what” (KGW 132). She reminds Pearl of a boy she had dated who served himself first for dinner. Winnie tried to warn Pearl, saying that if he “considers himself first, you second, and maybe later you will be third or fourth, then never,” but when he breaks Pearl’s heart, she says nothing (KGW 133). In her story, Winnie recalls telling her baby Yiku to be good to avoid Wen Fu’s wrath, but reflects “How could I know that this is how a mother teaches her daughter to be afraid?” (KGW 326). What she does not reflect on is how her parenting – holding back, lying, saying nothing – is like her mother’s silence.

Winnie’s mother disappeared when she was a child without any explanation. She reflects on her mother’s characteristics, thinking, “maybe that’s why I was the same way” (KGW 121). Her mother was also silent – maybe that is why she was the same way. Unlike LuLing, Winnie never got to learn the truth about her mother. If Winnie’s mother had stayed around, taught her more about her situation, would Winnie have ever married Wen Fu? More importantly, if Winnie had told Pearl about her marriage, would Pearl have let the selfish boy hurt her? These implicit questions never cross Winnie’s mind, though they may appear to the reader to be of great importance. Just as Winnie’s story remains untold, questions about the repercussions of her silence remain unasked, but implied.

The link between Precious Auntie’s silence and LuLing’s is even more explicit, and yet LuLing follows her mother’s path even more closely. Almost all of LuLing’s tragedy can be traced back to the secrecy about Precious Auntie’s story – her near-marriage into the Chang
family, her horrible treatment of Precious Auntie, her guilt over Precious Auntie’s suicide, her orphan/bastard status. Precious Auntie’s sole attempt at sharing her story is futile – her voicelessness forces her to write it out, too easily allowing LuLing to ignore it. LuLing’s reading and the understanding she gained though it came too late to do any good. Many years later, having kept her own secrets from her daughter, LuLing replicates her mother’s attempt at communication, only to have her manuscript ignored as well. Ruth thinks about how, when she was a teenager, LuLing drove her to keep secrets by demanding openness, but wonders if this really only made it easier for LuLing to hide her own secrets. “They could not trust each other. That was how dishonesty and betrayal started, not in big lies but in small secrets,” perhaps secrets like birth dates and family names (BSD 157). As LuLing slips into dementia, Ruth reads her mother’s story – but, echoing her mother’s tragedy, she is almost too late.

Neither mother knew how detrimental her omissions would be. They assume that their daughters will be fine without their explicit intervention, because that was true in their own lives. Winnie survived without her mother ever having passed on to her the “codes” of the culture. Winnie’s mother disappeared and her cultural understanding was all secondhand, yet she learned the “rules,” the codes, the language patterns. Similarly, LuLing learned cultural awareness through her mother’s “code” talk – often indirect in and of itself. Precious Auntie rarely gave her explicit instructions about anything – for which LuLing curses her when she finds she cannot even dress herself alone – yet LuLing survives. Because they did not need their ethnic or cultural identity explained to them, they assume that they do not need to explain it to their daughters. They are wrong. Both LuLing and Winnie had the advantage of growing up immersed in the high-context Chinese culture – no one explained it to anyone. But Ruth and Pearl grew up in a low-context culture, disconnected from their mothers’ Chinese heritage.
Without their mothers; stories, they cannot know the importance of their history and culture. Thus the mothers’ omissions lead to gaps in their daughters’ ethnic identities. Without the crucial understanding that the mothers have failed to pass on, the cycle of silence threatens to continue into another generation. Pearl keeps her illness from her mother, always intending to tell her “someday,” but avoiding it all the same, not knowing that her mother is keeping secrets too. Ruth unknowingly imitates her grandmother’s deformity with the annual loss of her voice. She is effectively silenced for several days out of the year, and yet has no way of connecting this silence with Precious Auntie’s, since she is ignorant of her mother’s true story. Another generation is setting out to follow in her silent mother’s footsteps, only this time, the effect of the mothers’ silence is compounded by a language barrier and a cultural vacuum.

At heart, both of these books are stories of mothers and daughters and the trials they face trying to communicate with each other. Neither the mothers nor the daughters have a fully realized conception of each other. Both Winnie and LuLing want the best for their daughters. As Wendy Ho writes of Tan’s *Joy Luck Club* mothers, “they attempt to turn out college educated, yuppie daughters who can acculturate and assimilate into mainstream American society – who can speak perfect English, get a good job, maintain a comfortable, financially secure lifestyle, fit in as they themselves could not” (155). To the extent that they know how to define American success, Winnie and LuLing have achieved this goal. Pearl and Ruth are both successful, middle class Chinese American women.

Still, though, the mothers are not satisfied with their daughters. By achieving American success, they are no longer good Chinese girls. What they had actually been trying to create, whether they were aware of it or not, were daughters “with a Chinese mind/character like theirs but in new circumstances” (Ho 156). The daughters, meanwhile, “can identify themselves for
sure neither as Chinese nor American” (Xu 56). The mothers become dissatisfied with their daughters because they have failed “to realize an American version of the ideal Chinese daughter” (Ho 157). Ho attributes this disappointment to their own failure to “consider carefully their daughters’ dilemmas and what their needs and hopes might be as second-generation Chinese women in America” (Ho 157).

However, there is more to this problem than the mothers’ misunderstandings of their daughters’ American needs. What is really missing in the daughters’ lives is a cultural context. The mothers have not shared their stories or communication modes with the daughters. Both daughters “need to ethnicize their experience and to establish an identity” (Xu 56). Without this context, the daughters cannot even be comfortable in their own Chinese skins. Tung writes that it is common for Chinese Americans to feel incomplete in a western identity, even as they feel they are in some way “elevating their status” (40). Since, for the most part, they “have no knowledge of the cultural and social factors that conditioned them in their youth,” they attribute these feelings to something inherently wrong with them (Tung 41). The result is that the mothers and daughters communicate not with but past each other throughout the novels. The daughters are left feeling disconnected from and frustrated with their mothers without really knowing why. They hear words but not meanings. When their mothers try to help them they resent it, hearing only criticism because they “don’t hear the love or understand the whole context of their mothers’ advice” (Ho 158). By not sharing their stories, and thus their cultural context, the mothers have fostered miscommunication, leaving their daughters to live with what Ho terms “the dis-ease of the great unsaid” (Ho 19). Though the mothers tend to write off all of their daughters’ undesirable behaviors as “American,” in truth, they have given them little choice but to be American.
This is not to say that the daughters are completely ignorant of Chinese culture. Perhaps even more unfortunate is that they possess a sort of half-known, half-understood conception of what it means to be Chinese; their understanding comes equally from their experience and mainstream Orientalized representations. Ruth knows that her mother worries about a “curse,” but she has no knowledge of the specifics – the whole concept of curses is alien to her American mind. She has no idea how deeply the belief in the curse affects her mother. With no explanation from LuLing, Ruth fills in the gaps herself: “because the subject of the curse so often came up when LuLing was displeased with Ruth, as a child Ruth thought the curse and her father’s death were related to her” (BSD 97). Though Pearl knows some of the details of a Buddhist funeral ceremony and can therefore follow along at Grand Auntie Du’s funeral, she knows nothing of the custom’s significance. She says, “I feel silly, taking part in a ritual that makes no sense to me” (KGW 47). Tung writes that this experience, too, is common among descendants of immigrant Chinese. Since the meaning of the ritual has never been explained to them and the practices differ so much from those of the mainstream, they contribute to the younger generation’s condescension towards their parents, and are ultimately unsatisfying experiences. Though their mothers have passed on bits and pieces of Chinese culture, in the absence of the mother-stories and the contexts they provide, Ruth and Pearl have no real Chinese understanding – all of their “knowing” is in “perfect American English” (Sondrup 401). Though LuLing and Winnie often try to explain to their daughters why “Chinese thinking is best,” it is no wonder they fail, since their explanations are “rooted in their own lived experience, in past mistakes” (Ho 158). Without sharing these experiences with their daughters, they cannot provide them with access to understanding within a cultural context.
The mothers’ attempts to raise their daughters the Chinese way inevitably backfire. Young Ruth, who has no grasp of the importance of ghosts in her mother’s belief system, and has no idea who Precious Auntie really is, uses her mother’s most cherished beliefs against her, citing the mother-ghost as giving permission for everything from not doing chores to watching television – even, once, to move to another city. Reflecting on a regretful journal entry that LuLing had read, Ruth wonders if LuLing “had ever told her own mother that she hated her” (BSD 166). Had LuLing shared her story before, Ruth would not only have known the answer to that question, she would have known its tragic consequences. Winnie, trying to keep Pearl safe from life’s hurts, constantly admonishes her daughter to “be careful, be careful,” but since she never tells her the reasons and experience behind her admonishments, she must watch her daughter make mistakes anyway (KGW 133). Winnie acknowledges how much America has influenced her daughter’s thinking, as when young Pearl insists on the difference between Chinese and American history, but she does not see how she could change this.

Chua illustrates the gap between what the mothers want for their daughters (an understanding of their heritage) and their unwillingness or inability to help them achieve it (by sharing their stories) when he writes that Chinese Americans are “hyphenated between the nostalgia and apprehensions of the homeland and the tug of assimilation” (46). That is, they want the best of both worlds for their daughters, but find themselves walking a fine line; how much can they share with their daughters without jeopardizing their access to the privileges of mainstream America, and how much can they keep secret without sacrificing “Chinese-ness”? Neither mother succeeds at striking this balance.

Because they do not understand their mothers’ perspectives and situations, Ruth and Pearl do not understand their mothers. Mylan says in her discussion of Kingston’s The Woman...
*Warrior* that the daughters in Chinese American texts deliberately Orientalize and “other” their mothers.\(^\text{10}\) Though I disagree with the tone of her critique of the daughters, Mylan has a point. The daughters look down on their mothers as superstitious and old-fashioned, declaring to the world, as Ruth does at one point, “I’m an American!” (*BSD* 158). They fear the thought of one day becoming like these alien mothers that they do not understand. A more sympathetic description of Pearl and Ruth’s reactions to their mothers is that they are simply struggling against imported “foreign” ideas and values while they attempt to construct their own “American” identity (Hom 44).

Some of the daughter’s condescension stems, again, from language use. Having “translated” for their mothers all of their lives, both have taken to initially dismissing anything their mothers say. Indeed, even as a child, Ruth had taken to revising her mother’s speech in translation, as when she drastically alters LuLing’s letter to the minister, which was intended to get him to punish Ruth. This is the same impulse she resists years later in the doctor’s office, when she wants to “correct” LuLing’s answers. It never occurs to her that her mother is really telling the truth, for a change. The messages both daughters get about Chinese while growing up is that it is an inferior, “gobbledygook” language, from which they must distance themselves to fit in (*BSD* 77). Tan wrote about the effect her own mother’s language had on her perceptions in her essay “Mother Tongue” – because her mother had a limited command of English, she grew up thinking her mother had limited mental capacity as well.

The result of the myriad of miscommunications and misunderstandings, the “dis-ease” of the “unsaid”, is that the daughters are adrift, unable to understand either their mothers or

\(^{\text{10}}\) Mylan’s argument is framed as an “investigation of Western society’s attempts to contain and represent non-Western cultures” and is meant to “explain the negative responses to *The Woman Warrior* received from Asian American critics like Katheryn Fong, Benjamin Tong, and Frank Chin” (132, 133).
themselves. They are, to borrow a phrase from *The Joy Luck Club*, *hulihudu* – confused, with no cultural or historical context in which to situate themselves, and with no center with which to be grounded (210). Ruth finds herself grateful for her annual voicelessness because she is released from the need to explain herself – released from explaining what she herself does not understand. She avoids talking to LuLing, despite her mother’s complaints that no one will listen to what is in her heart, because she does not wish to encounter anything else of which she cannot make sense. There is so much resulting distance between Pearl and her mother that Winnie is even afraid to go through Pearl’s childhood things. “What if I opened this box and saw a stranger, what then? What if this daughter inside this box was nothing like the one I had imagined I had raised?” (*KGW* 96).

Ben Xu writes that in Tan’s novels, ethnic awareness as given by mother-stories provides a context for understanding ethnic identity and “represents a higher form of self or self-awareness,” but he writes that this awareness is brought about by juxtaposing oneself with and ultimately transcending others, like the mothers (56). I propose that knowledge of the mother-stories within social and historical context is the *only* way for Tan’s characters to have a fully developed ethnic identity, and that it is accomplished when the daughters absorb and integrate that knowledge with their own existing identities. Without these stories, Pearl and Ruth are in a hyphenated space in which, forced to choose between American and Chinese cultures, they have lost any sense of their own “Chinese-ness.” They have instead adopted unsatisfactory American identities, out of a necessity born of ignorance and silence, leaving a part of their selves, the part that comes from the mother, neglected and forgotten. They live in a culture that marginalizes them, in which they will always be considered foreign, different or exotic. If the daughters are to
escape “othering” by white America, they must learn all of their stories and reclaim their subjectivity by proclaiming themselves to be Chinese and American.

**Framing the Mother: Opportunities for Contrast**

Scholars who write about Tan – by which I essentially mean those who write about *The Joy Luck Club* – almost inevitably get caught up in discussions about narrative structure, form, and voice. Many of these discussions lead directly back to the issues of authenticity and Orientalism that, as I have said before, tend to preoccupy some critics. They argue about whether foregrounding the daughters’ voices “others” the mothers, whether the mother-tales and daughter-tales are given equal weight, and whether the frame structure elevates the western/white/ American/middle-class/young in a dichotomy with the mother. Most arguments about structure come back to racial politics. However, I do not believe that Tan’s intentions for the structures she chooses are political. She is neither a sociologist nor an Asian studies scholar, nor even a literary scholar, as she declares in the opening line of “Mother Tongue,” saying “I am not a scholar of English literature” (32). She is a daughter, a writer, and a Chinese American woman. I think, then, that a discussion of story structure and framing should center upon what purpose they serve in illustrating the characters’ transformations, not on Tan’s politics.

Admittedly, these books have a much simpler and more straightforward structure than *The Joy Luck Club*. Both are frame narratives, with the daughter’s story as the outer layer, though both disrupt this frame. In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, LuLing narrates the first chapter, as if it were an excerpt from her manuscript, and in *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, the final chapter is narrated by Winnie instead of Pearl. These disruptions lead me further to believe that political arguments about the frames are misguided; these books do not fit neatly into theoretical boxes.
Instead, I think that the frame is used primarily for illustrative purposes, emphasizing the mothers’ stories and inviting us to evaluate their effects on the daughters.

There are significant differences between the ways in which the device is used in these two novels. In *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, Pearl’s narrative encompasses a mere 84 pages of the 532-page novel (about one-seventh of it) – almost the entire body of the book is devoted to Winnie’s tale, and both mother and daughter speak from a first-person point-of-view. In contrast, LuLing’s written story takes up little more than a third of *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*. However, Ruth’s majority section of the book is narrated in third person, while LuLing’s autobiographical manuscript is written in first person, making the mother’s relatively short tale feel much more immediate and genuine. Heung writes that “despite Tan’s explicit embrace of a daughter’s perspective, *The Joy Luck Club* is remarkable for foregrounding the voices of mothers as well as of daughters” (27). I think that this observation holds true for *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* as well. Despite the daughters’ framing, the mothers’ voices stand out, strong, vibrant and real. Kathleen Wall writes that frames are an essential component of women’s writing – they exhibit the ambiguity and double-voicedness inherent in women’s texts.\(^{11}\) She says that the frame obscures and challenges ideas about “what is marginal and what is central”; the central tale holds the “meat” of the story but the framer holds the authority (186). While this tension is evident in Tan’s framed novels, I do not think it is as politically charged as Wall describes. In *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, the brevity of her appearances diminishes Pearl’s “authority” as the framer, and in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* Ruth is distanced from the reader through point-of-view. It is as though Tan wants to allow readers to identify with the daughters,  

\(^{11}\) In “Frame Narratives and Unresolved Contradictions in Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, Wall does not actually address Asian American literature. However, I believe that like W.E.B. DuBois’s idea of double-consciousness, her theories about framing transcend the genre about which they were conceived (mainstream women’s literature) and apply quite well to Tan’s work.
though still implore them to listen to the mothers. Both mothers’ intensely personal, first-person tales are at the heart of the novels, and a casual reader would be much more likely to remember their stories than those of the daughters.

The structure of the books also underscores issues of language. In some ways, the frame ensures that the daughters are still in some sense translating their mothers. After all, the mothers express themselves in Chinese, not English. The reader is constantly aware that the narration is indirect and mediated. At the same time, both elder women pointedly tell their own stories, in their own voices, in first person. Though they are constantly aware of their daughter-audience, offering explanations and amendments, the tale belongs to them in a way that their daughters’ translations in the frames never did.

Despite the issues of translation and mediation, the mothers’ stories act to counterbalance the daughters’ ingrained notions about the mothers’ language use. There is a marked shift in tone and style when the mother’s voice takes over. Both mothers show a command of language not evident in other dialogues. It is as if to refute the daughters’ impulse to assume that their mothers are inferior because of their English ability. Tan says she tried to write her books using “all the Englishes I grew up with,” and that the language her Chinese mother characters use to tell their stories is what she imagined her own mother’s language would be if she could perfectly translate her Chinese thoughts – it is what she imagines to be her mother’s “internal language” (“Mother” 37). It is not the dialectical “broken” English of a Chinese person learning a new tongue, which the mothers use in other sections of the books, nor is it quite standard, “perfect American English.” It’s certainly not Chinese, nor is it a pinyin rendering (indeed, some critics find it significant that Tan doesn’t use the standardized pinyin to represent Chinese words,
instead using a sort of hybrid, instinctual phonetic spelling). It captures “what language ability tests can never reveal: [the mother’s] intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts” (“Mother” 37). It is the realization of LuLing’s wish that someone listen to her heart. The mothers’ “internal language” strips away many of the barriers to communication which they had been trying to overcome, giving a whole new meaning to the phrase “heart to heart.” With the walls between them torn down, the daughters can hear their mothers’ true voices and understand what they have to say.

Besides contrasting their stories and voices, the frame structure invites readers to compare distinct “before” and “after” portraits of the daughters. The structure emphasizes the goal of the novels: to enact some kind of change in the daughters that will enable them to construct complete, multifaceted identities. Prior to their storytelling session, the mothers can sense the daughters’ “dis-ease.” Winnie and LuLing both sense that their daughters are not quite whole, not quite happy. Winnie knows that Pearl does not open up to her – it’s a pattern going all the way back to Jimmy Louie’s death. Pearl ran away from the funeral rather than cry, not because she didn’t care about her father, but because she cared too much. When Pearl declared that the corpse was not her father, Winnie misunderstood her meaning and slapped Pearl in the face. Going through Pearl’s things and finding her memento of the funeral, Winnie thinks, “right away I wanted to call Pearl and tell her, ‘now I know’” (KGW 97). She understands much of Pearl’s pain and trouble, but she has never told her. In contrast, without being explicitly told

Pinyin refers to the official system, adopted by the People’s Republic of China in 1979, of rendering Chinese words phonetically into the Roman alphabet. However, not all of pinyin is what English speakers would call truly phonetic. For example, x is pronounced sh and zh is pronounced j (Mah xv). Tan does use pinyin, as in Precious Auntie’s name, Gu Liu Xin. However, she occasionally uses phonetic spellings that would be easier for an English speaker to know how to pronounce, such as using j in “jiao-zi” instead of zh (as in Zhao, which would be pronounced the same way, jow) (KGW 44, Mah xv).
about her mother’s life, Pearl cannot understand her mother, much less her pain, heartaches and regrets.

Given the choice, Winnie would prefer to remain silent. However, Winnie is being forced by Helen to tell her secrets. On some level, Winnie seems to know that her silence has contributed to Pearl’s “dis-ease,” but she cannot bring herself to tell the truth. Winnie struggles with this decision, weighing the consequences of her disclosure. She considers telling her children the partial truth, listing the “safe” parts of her story in her mind – “I could tell them…. I could tell them….,” (KGW 99). But she knows that once she began telling, Pearl would guess the worst, “she would know everything, not the lies, but the truth” (KGW 99). Winnie imagines Pearl’s reaction to her story, accusing her of unequal treatment because Wen Fu might have been her father, but Winnie says that it was only because, by being her mother’s daughter, “you [Pearl] broke my heart the hardest, and maybe I broke yours the same way” (KGW 100).

LuLing knows firsthand the pain of being a daughter at a distance, shut off from her mother’s truths. In the first chapter of The Bonesetter’s Daughter, presumably taken from her manuscript, LuLing begs of Precious Auntie, “Are you still mad at me? Don’t you recognize me? I am LuLing, your daughter” (BSD 6). Precious Auntie’s silence led to the tragedy that has haunted her all of her life. She laments not reading the manuscript earlier; she regrets not asking Precious Auntie about her family, and she mourns her loss. Precious Auntie’s silence caused her more pain than anything else in her life did. She does not want this same pain for her daughter, but does not realize the ways in which her silence is so like her own mother’s.

This fear of passing along the pain of a silent legacy is what finally drives the women to tell their stories. Phillipa Kafka writes of the ways that women are peripheral to traditional Chinese storytelling, but that Tan substitutes the male-female dynamic to a mother-daughter one.
This dynamic allows a “never-ending, circular flow of continuity” (192). However, the mothers have to realize that “unless the older generation’s stories are transmitted to the next generation of women, all their struggles will go for naught” (Kafka 192). The life lessons they have learned will be futile unless they are shared. The daughters will not know how to be strong Asian American women because they won’t realize the struggles and history behind their mothers’ strengths, if they even realize that that strength exists. “There will then exist the gap between each woman in an endless discontinuity of generations …instead of the flow” (Kafka 192).

The effect of the stories, however, would not have been as potent had not Pearl and Ruth been ready to hear them. Prior to their mother’s confessional sections, both daughters slowly prepare themselves to seek out their mothers, to hear the truth. At Auntie Du’s funeral, Pearl begins to realize “there’s a lot I don’t know about my mother and Aunt Helen” (KGW 53). Later, as Winnie tells her granddaughter the story of the Kitchen God, Pearl is struck with the memory of being a child, “eager to believe everything my mother has to say” (KGW 59). The memory primes her to receive her mother’s astounding tale and to understand its implications.

Ruth’s choice to seek her mother’s stories is more conscious and deliberate. Kim describes how children of immigrants will seek out the wisdom and understanding of the elderly before it is “too late” for them to “be understood and appreciated” – it is this sense of urgency that motivates Ruth (“Asian” 38). With her mother’s mind slipping away right before her eyes, Ruth decides to have the manuscript translated, but, more importantly, she seeks out a connection with her mother:

She would ask her mother to tell her about her life. For once, she would ask.
She would listen. She would sit down and not be in a hurry or have anything else to do…. She wanted to be here, as her mother told her about her life, taking her
through all the detours of the past, explaining the multiple meanings of Chinese words, how to translate her heart.  (*BSD* 168-169)

By sharing their histories, the mothers hope to fix the holes in their daughters’ hearts, to take back some of the pain and confusion that has been with them for so long. Sharing, talking, and storytelling are healing processes. In Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, storytelling seems to carry the “power to reshape reality” (*Singer* 333). In these two novels, telling stories and unveiling secrets has the power, in some way, to undo the past by ensuring that it will not be repeated. The mothers have found that their silences cannot protect their daughters from life, but perhaps their stories can help prepare them for it.

It is only when they are empowered with the mother-stories that Ruth and Pearl can begin to forge an identity. M. Marie Booth Foster insists that “regardless of how much the daughters try to deny it, it is through their mothers that they find their voice, their mind, their selfhood” (211). Only by listening to their mothers do they develop a context for understanding their ethnic identity. Hearing their mothers’ stories makes their mothers “real” to the daughters, as opposed to some embarrassing Orientalized “other,” for the first time. She’s had a childhood, a past, some lost loves and tragedies. She is strong, someone of whom they should be proud rather than ashamed. They can incorporate their mothers’ life lessons into their own outlooks. They can situate themselves on a continuum of women, historically and culturally, in a family. By incorporating the mother-stories into their lives, they can accept and understand their mothers’ messages, and understand their own identities.
Symbolic Resolution: Finding the Mother in the Self

Both books, in keeping with Chinese mythic tradition, are highly symbolic in showing the daughters’ changes. Each book indicates the changes that have taken place in the daughters through a series of symbolic revelations. These symbols can almost be read as another “code” – though Tan never says so, they represent the achievement of the novels’ goal for the daughters to finally accept and understand their own “Chinese-ness” in a way that will lead to the formation of an ethnic identity. They provide the sense of resolution to the books, especially as tracing them reveals the path the women follow toward better communication and understanding.

Of the two books, The Kitchen God’s Wife has more subtle symbolism. Though the title indicates the primary motif – the nameless Kitchen God’s wife – there is another minor aspect of the novel which symbolically indicates Pearl’s transformation. Pearl suffers from multiple sclerosis, but has never told her mother. This disease of Pearl’s represents the daughter’s side of the “dis-ease” of the communication problem. Winnie’s silence has bred into her daughter a tendency to keep secrets, making their potentially one-way communication a no-way sharing. Pearl’s reluctance to tell her mother about her illness illustrates the wall that has been built between them. Only when lines of communication are restored is Pearl able to voice her secret.

Undoubtedly, the legend of the Kitchen God and his nameless wife are the primary symbols of the book. Before Winnie’s part of the book begins, she tells Pearl’s daughter the story of the Kitchen God, a wealthy farmer named Zhang who neglected his good wife to favor his concubine. After his wife left him and his fortunes turned, Zhang found himself a beggar on his wife’s doorstep. Killed while trying to hide in her stove to avoid the shameful confrontation, Zhang was forgiven in heaven because he had felt remorse, and promoted to a god who watched people’s kitchens and dispensed good or bad luck. Auntie Du had willed to Pearl the shrine to
the Kitchen God, but Winnie promises to find a new God to fill it. She hates the story, saying, “his wife was the good one, not him” (KGW 62). As the rest of Winnie’s story is of her own wifely martyrdom, her reaction to the tale is understandable. At times she makes references to the story, but always with an indication of sympathy with the neglected wife.

In the last chapter of the book, Winnie shops for a replacement god to live in the shrine, one who no one has heard of before. She buys a goddess statue, a manufacturing mistake with no name on its pedestal. When the statue is at home Winnie “decrees that she should be worshipped as Lady Sorrowfree,” writing her new name in gold on the pedestal, saying, “no one would call her Mrs. Kitchen God” (Kafka 192, KGW 531). It is her gift to her daughter, named for the stillborn daughter she lost a lifetime ago, the baby Mochou (Sorrowfree). Winnie tells Pearl, “when you are afraid, you can talk to her. She will listen. She will wash away everything sad with her tears…. See her name: Lady Sorrowfree, happiness winning over bitterness, no regrets in this world” (KGW 532). The goddess is “empowered …with a name” while Pearl is empowered by the goddess (Smorada 42).

The Lady Sorrowfree represents not only Winnie’s hardship, but also those of an entire culture of women from which Pearl has been divided, the goddess’ triumph in her altar signifies Winnie’s triumph over Wen Fu. She compares her life to the Kitchen God’s Wife’s – “nobody worshipped me for living with Wen Fu. I was like that wife of Kitchen God. Nobody worshipped her either…. She was forgotten” (KGW 322). Giving Lady Sorrowfree a name gives her a self, and like her, Pearl and Winnie will no longer be defined on others’ terms, as a wife, or an invalid, or a hyphen. Lady Sorrowfree will listen to the woes of women, ensuring that they no longer go on in silence. Winnie encourages Pearl to talk to her. She assures her that the goddess knows English, effectively eliminating prior problems of language.
And talk Pearl does. Her mother’s story – a tale of abuse, oppression and silence – gives her the power to tell her about her illness. All of the fears Pearl had had about the disclosure were true – her mother’s reaction was even worse than she’d expected – but finally she was free. She has come to the “altar of the mother” to lay her burdens down (Foster 225). By sharing the fact of her disease, she freed herself of the “dis-ease” she had been carrying alone.

With the symbolic realization of an ethnic history comes a practical ability to communicate. Winnie says, as Pearl tries to formulate a question about her biological father, “I know what you are thinking,” and answers the question before it is asked (KGW 511). Pearl and Winnie begin to finish each other’s sentences, and Pearl even tells Helen that her New Year’s resolution is to have no more secrets. Both women begin to realize how little they have really ever understood each other’s meanings. Winnie says of Jimmy “maybe you see things in an American way, and I see the same thing in a Chinese way. You are saying, ‘look at the pretty fish in the bowl.’ And I say, ‘look at the pretty bowl with the fish’…. It is the same pretty bowl, same pretty fish” (KGW 435). Pearl begins to use this as a guide for understanding her mother.

As Winnie makes arrangements for Pearl to see a new doctor, she thinks “I was going to protest, to tell her she was working herself up into a frenzy for nothing. But all of a sudden I realized: I didn’t want her to stop” (KGW 515). She realizes that this is her mother’s Chinese way of showing her love. She begins to take her mother’s actions in context, to understand what they really mean. In doing so, she will eventually incorporate this cultural context into her own communicative style and her identity.

*The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, as the more mystical of the two books, is more highly symbolic. I will look at three major symbols in it: names, voicelessness, and oracle or dragon bones. As a bonesetter – an amalgam of doctor, surgeon and apothecary – Precious Auntie’s
father used “dragon” bones for medicinal purposes. In reality, these are the bones of prehistoric people, the location of which they family kept secret to avoid a curse from the ancestors. They were called “oracle” bones if they had been carved – the ancient people were said to have written questions on them, in a language that no one now knows, then cracked them with heat and interpreted the cracks as answers from the gods. Though they had been considered precious before, during LuLing’s youth scientists discovered the truth of the bones and they became extremely valuable. The Changs had stolen Precious Auntie’s dowry of dragon bones on her wedding day, and it was a desire for these bones that made Chang want his son to marry LuLing. By consenting to marry into the Chang family and giving them the secret location of the bones, LuLing would have unknowingly sold out her family and her ancestors.

LuLing sold the only oracle bone in her possession, which Precious Auntie had given her long ago, once she was old enough to “know how to remember,” to gain passage to America (BSD 183). Losing possession of the oracle bone symbolized her family’s curse and its downfall. Her preoccupation with the curse is never explained to Ruth however, and by failing to pass on the heirloom, LuLing fails to pass on the family history.

Though losing the bone was voluntary, losing her family name was not. Throughout her tale, the absence of a family name haunts LuLing. She cannot comfortably keep using her father’s name (Liu) because she was born out of wedlock. Early in the novel, in her “preview” chapter, LuLing laments the loss of her mother’s name. She says, “Precious Auntie, what is our name? I always meant to claim it as my own” (BSD 6). What is anyone without a name? Ruth also grieves for the loss of Precious Auntie’s name, saying “she had existed, and yet without a name, a large part of her existence was missing, could not be attached to a face, anchored to a family” (BSD 382). A family name gives a sense of place, belonging and identity. By forgetting
the true name and passing along only lies, LuLing denies Ruth the chance to claim these things as her own.

These two symbols converge in the museum scene, after Ruth has read LuLing’s story. When LuLing sees the bone on display, her memory clears for a moment. She says, “My mother found one of these. It was carved with words of beauty. She gave it to me when she was sure I would not forget what was important. I never wanted to lose it” (BSD 393). The oracle bones, carved with important messages, have lost their significance to modern people because they forgot how to read the words. Like Precious Auntie’s name and the tale she kept secret, the oracle bones represent lost heritage. Whatever important meanings they once held have been lost and forgotten. Upon seeing the bone and remembering what it represents, LuLing also remembers her maternal family name: Gu. Ruth, however, dismisses the name as another product of the dementia: “she realized her mother had said the Chinese word for ‘bone.’ Dr. Gu, Dr. Bone, bone doctor” (BSD 394). Not much later, though, Helen found a photo of Precious Auntie with her name on it, Gu Liu Xin, explaining once again how central the language is to understanding: “No, no….Gu as in ‘gorge.’ It’s a different gu. It sounds the same as the bone gu, but it’s written a different way. The third-tone gu can mean many things: ‘old,’ ‘gorge,’ ‘bone,’ also ‘thigh,’ ‘blind,’ ‘grain,’ ‘merchant,’ lots of things. And the way ‘bone’ is written can also stand for ‘character’” (BSD 398). What was so important to LuLing had really been there the whole time – she was the bone doctor’s granddaughter.

Ruth, too, finds that what she has been missing – a familiarity with her Chinese heritage – was with her the whole time. She has a Chinese name, Luyi, which she did not even know about. She had always assumed that it was her mother’s mispronunciation of “Ruthie.” Helen explains, “your Chinese name comes from Sister Yu, Yu Luyi. Luyi, it means ‘all that you
wish’’ (BSD 379). Thus Ruth learns her Chinese given and family names simultaneously. By learning and understanding her Chinese name, Ruth literally and symbolically claims her Chinese self. She sees herself in a new light, realizing how de-centered she had been. She protests to Art that she does not guard herself and keep secrets, but then admits, “I don’t have anything left inside me to figure out where I fit in” (BSD 389). She felt dead, hollow, like a non-entity. Only after visiting the museum and talking to Helen does this change. She cries. She realizes that “her grandmother had a name…. She had existed. She still existed. Precious Auntie belonged to a family. LuLing belonged to that same family, and Ruth belonged to them both. The family name had been there all along, like a bone stuck in the crevices of a gorge” (BSD 399-400).

With the symbolic return of the oracle bone and the reclaiming of their Chinese name, it seems as if the Gu women have come full circle. In doing so, another family “curse” is overcome. Ruth’s part of the novel opens during her annual bout of silence. Though she has never understood the malady, she tried to cope by making “her voiceless state a decision, a matter of will, and not a disease or a mystery” (BSD 10). However, like Pearl’s silence about her illness, Ruth is only covering up her “dis-ease.” She finds herself feeling grateful that she cannot argue without her voice, because she cannot even explain to herself what she would argue about. She accepts passivity because assertiveness requires a strong sense of self, something she does not have.

In light of Precious Auntie’s deformity and LuLing’s silence, Ruth’s voiceless periods almost seem like a family trait, passed through generations like smooth skin or a good metabolism might be. After learning the truth about Precious Auntie, after LuLing breaks her silence, Ruth has a new understanding of voice and language, and with it, a new understanding
of her mother and her self. In the epilogue, the time for Ruth’s “Days of No Talk” has come, but she can still speak. “Her ability to speak is not governed by curses or shooting stars or illness” (BSD 401). She has integrated the lessons of her mother and grandmother’s stories and learned to integrate them into her own identity. Ruth also sees her relationship with her mother in a new way. She understands how the language works, and no longer sees it as alien. After hearing Helen’s explanation of gu, she thinks, she “had once thought Chinese was limited in its sounds and thus confusing. It seemed to her now that its multiple meanings made it very rich. The blind bone doctor from the gorge repaired the thigh of the old grain merchant” (BSD 398-399). This understanding extends to Chinese communication modes as well. Only after hearing her mother’s story does Ruth feel the need to join the tradition of storytelling and write, “for her grandmother, for herself, for the little girl who would become her mother” (403). Once she stops looking down on her mother’s “Chinese-ness,” she can begin to accept her own Chinese identity.

**Conclusion**

The significance of these two novels lies not in their critique or explication of Chinese culture, as a review of the criticism might seem to indicate. I think that though it is interesting, the body of critical work on Tan’s fiction is too narrowly focused to do her justice as an author. The focus on race and politics in discussions of Tan’s work is misguided, and could be considered as even bordering on racist in its demands. With the prevailing trend of Asian American literary criticism, critics are forced to declare a stand for or against a particular work and then spend all of their time defending that position. In doing so, they rarely discuss what goes on in the text itself, or the author’s personal intentions for the work.
The approach to criticism of Asian American literature is to read each piece as a statement about how the minority culture reacts to/defies/relates to the white majority. By framing nearly all discussions this way, critics are essentially saying that Asian American literature only has value if it makes a statement about the Asian American experience in relation to non-Asians. The richness and depth of the texts themselves can get ignored or glossed over in the process. In this framing, Asian American literature can never be read as pure “literature,” but is instead studied and scrutinized as if it were sociological observation. The same syndrome is evident in studying women’s literature (a genre in which Tan’s work belongs, though I have not addressed it) and other “special” literature. If the texts of marginalized people are studied solely for their discussions of marginalization, then they will never be truly read as literature. The critical debate about Tan’s work has, I feel, missed the point. The driving forces behind these two novels are not race, class, gender or discrimination on the large scale, but issues of a more personal nature, drawn from Tan’s own experiences as an American-born Chinese daughter. The novels attempt to articulate something important about that state of being, not necessarily about how that state relates to society. These books are about coming to terms and accepting one’s own ethnic identity, including the history, culture and family that go with it.

*The Kitchen God’s Wife* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* address a specific problem among Chinese American women, based on knowledge culled from Tan’s life experience. Though other, wider, perhaps “universal” issues are present in the books, the central focus is on communication and identity, something that often gets overlooked in interpretation. Tan’s novels illustrate the disconnect within a family that can occur when language, cultural ignorance, and silence get in the way of intergenerational cross-cultural communication. Without the whole picture, without the full story, the American-born daughters cannot situate themselves in their
mothers’ worlds. They are adrift, caught between two cultures with which they are not really comfortable, caught between languages they feel they should understand.

In hearing their mothers’ stories and, for once, focusing on what they mean, Pearl and Ruth fill in the gaps in their selves. By accepting their mothers and all that they represent, both daughters come to understand their mothers and their histories on a new level. Learning their stories and heritage allows the daughters to claim Chinese contexts and communication codes and styles as their own. These are tools that will empower them, enabling them to fully explore their own ethnic selves, and to learn and grow as they do. Pearl says Winnie is peeling back the surface layers of her being, “putting all of this into her own heart, so that I could finally see what was left. Hope” (KGW 515). These books are “not about silence and despair, but about communication and hope” – hope for the daughters and for daughters everywhere, even those who do not face these obstacles to the same extent as Tan’s characters (Smorada 36). The self is not static, it is never too late to uncover new facets of it. The daughters have embarked on a journey of becoming, and are learning who they really are.

In accepting their mothers – their stories, their histories, their cultures, their modes of communication, their language and codes – they accept themselves as Chinese, too. They can eliminate the hyphen and be both Chinese and American at the same time. They can accept the struggle of becoming, the constant changing of the self. They find a way to be whole.
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