

# Women's Leaving Home Experiences in Mother-Daughter Narrative in Post-1990s Chinese American Fiction

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## Abstract

This article aims to investigate the trope of “home” and the representation of women’s leaving home experiences in mother-daughter narrative in post-1990s Chinese American fiction. Amy Tan’s *The Valley of Amazement* (2013), Celeste Ng’s *Everything I Never Told You* (2014), and *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) are selected in the case study to illustrate the new characteristics of women’s leaving home experiences and the changing cultural connotations of “home” in Chinese American fiction in the new era.

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

## 1. Introduction

“Chinatown”, “Mother-Daughter” and “Father-Son” are three recurring motifs in fiction by Chinese American writers (Pu, 2006b). “Mother-Daughter” motif, in particular, has been so lovingly hailed by Chinese American female writers, who exceed their male counterparts in number that a matrilineal Chinese American tradition has formed. Interestingly, these daughter-writers tend to situate their mother-daughter stories in the context of “home”, arguably because home is the site where mother-daughter relationships “resonate most forcefully” (Schultermandl, 2009, p. 108).

In Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), the two most acclaimed mother-daughter narrative texts in pre-1990s era, both writers depict the leaving home experiences of second-generation Americanized daughters who are subject to estrangement and/or conflict with their first-generation immigrant mothers. In post-1990s mother-daughter narrative, though, women’s leaving home experiences have been envisioned in different ways and the trope of “home” carries varied connotations.

This article seeks to examine the trope of “home” and the portrayal of women’s leaving home experiences in mother-daughter narrative in post-1990s Chinese American fiction. Amy Tan’s *The Valley of Amazement* (2013), Celeste Ng’s *Everything I Never Told You* (2014), and *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) are selected in the case study. In comparison with *The Woman Warrior*, the study endeavors to excavate the new characteristics and trends of women’s leaving home experiences and the changing cultural connotations of “home” as presented in Chinese American fiction in the globalization context.

## 2. Leaving Home for the Wilderness in *The Woman Warrior*

In most pre-1990s Chinese American fiction, it is primarily the second-generation Americanized daughters who leave home for better education and job employment, as in Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945) and *The Woman Warrior*. For instance, in *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine, the Americanized daughter recounts her living experiences of growing up in the U.S., particularly her estrangement and conflict with her mother Brave Orchid, the traditional Chinese mother due to the language barrier and cultural difference. In the 1960s, Maxine eagerly leaves her home in Chinatown, the token of her Chinese cultural homeplace and diasporic origin to UC Berkeley, a place of “wilderness”. Wendy Ho uses the word “wilderness” when discussing *The Woman Warrior* to refer to “the home of the female avenger and outlaw storyteller, an unexplored space beyond the prison house of racist, sexist images and narratives” (1999, p. 136). “Wilderness” is thus a female-gendered space for women to explore the infinite possibilities in their identity negotiation. Maxine is overjoyed as she can finally

disentangle herself from her “outdated” mother and her “backward” homeplace. She believes she can succeed since she has excellent command of English and receives exceptional education, promising the realization of her American dream.

However, like Jade Snow in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Maxine suffers from the harsh discrimination as a member of the Chinese American community. When she works at an art supply store, she encounters direct racist insult:

“Order more of that nigger yellow, willya?” The boss told me. “Bright, isn’t it? Nigger yellow.”

“I don’t like that word,” I had to say in my bad, small-person’s voice that makes no impact. The boss never designed to answer” (Kingston, 1976, p. 58).

Maxine’s bad, small-person’s voice suggests her feeling inferior as a Chinese American woman in the racist and sexist society. She bitterly realizes that no matter how much she acts like a regular American, she is still treated as an outsider. The oppression in the wilderness awakens Maxine, who decides to renegotiate her cultural identity and reconnect with her mother/cultural origin.

Since *The Woman Warrior* is an autobiographical fiction, Maxine’s leaving home experience is presumably based upon Kingston’s personal experiences. Indeed, like Maxine, Kingston also left her home in Chinatown for UC Berkeley and graduated in 1962 with a bachelor’s degree. Likewise, the racial and sexual discrimination confronting Maxine is largely adapted from Kingston’s real life experiences.

### 3. Women’s Leaving Home Experiences in Post-1990s Chinese American Fiction

On the contrary, in post-1990s Chinese American fiction, both mothers and daughters leave home and they do so for diverse purposes. In the selected novels, women leave home for interracial marriage, in quest of individuality and for ultimate escape. The representation of these experiences gradually transcends the writers’ real-life scenarios and infuses with more literary and visionary elements, displaying the characteristics of border-crossing and diversity.

#### 3.1 Leaving Home for Interracial Marriage and Lost in the “Valley of Amazement”

In *The Valley of Amazement*, Amy Tan’s latest novel published in 2013, Tan amazes the reader by replacing her conventional protagonists, namely, first-generation immigrant mothers and second-generation Americanized daughters as in *The Joy Luck Club* with white or mixed-race mothers/daughters. Particularly, she portrays the mother-daughter estrangement between Lucia and her mother Harriet, both white Americans. Instead of language barrier and cultural difference, it is the mother’s lack of attention to her daughter that sets them worlds apart. Harriet is a scientist and her biggest interest is holding a magnifying glass to examine the dead insects in the amber for hours every day. Lucia firmly believes that her mother devotes more attention to the dead bugs than to her living daughter. Therefore, when Lucia falls in love with a Chinese man Lu Shing, she determines to follow him to China, to the “Valley of Amazement”, a desperate escape from her “spiritual malaise and loveless life” (Tan, 2013, p. 460) in her mother’s house without love and warmth.

It is not the first time that Amy Tan has depicted interracial marriage: most Chinese American daughters in her novels marry white Euro-Americans and have to cope with severe challenges from different races. However, interracial marriage in her new novel centers upon a white woman Lucia and a Chinese man Lu Shing. Interracial marriage was forbidden and a series of anti-miscegenation laws were legislated in the U.S. in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was also unacceptable in Chinese feudal families at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the story took place. Although Lucia is determined to pursue her love in spite of her parents’ disapproval, she is lost in the “Valley of Amazement”.

Initially, Lucia has faith in winning over Lu Shing’s parents with her personality and the baby she is pregnant with. When they finally arrive at Lu Shing’s home, Lu Shing asks her to stay in the rickshaw and he goes to meet his family members in the cabs across the street to smooth the way first. She deems it wrong for him to just leave her there, so she asks the coolie to take her bags to the rickshaw and goes after him:

Damn the bags! I marched without them toward the battalion of cabs and rickshaws. Lu Shing ran toward me and blocked my way. “Lucia, please wait. Let’s not add to a difficult situation.” I was exasperated that Lu Shing was more concerned with his family’s feelings than mine. I needed to let his family know from the start what kind of woman I was. I had brought with me my American free will and enterprising nature. I was accustomed to dealing with people from all walks of life... (Tan, 2013, p. 480, my emphasis)

Lucia’s free (in)direct thought and the taboo language in the first sentence reveal her fury about Lu Shing’s way of handling their matter, as if she was a disgrace to his family. The five sentences starting with the first-person pronoun “I” as the subject highlight Lucia’s subjectivity and agency: “I marched” indicates her resolution to

confront his family; “I was exasperated” shows her anger; “I needed to” emphasizes her determination to fight for her status in his family; “I had brought with me” and “I was accustomed to” display her strong will and assuredness. This excerpt suggests that Lucia at the beginning is confident enough to stand up to Lu Shing’s father and his family rules.

It turns out that marrying Lu Shing is entirely Lucia’s wishful thinking, as their marriage is by no means accepted by the social customs and family traditions in the feudal patriarchal China: the son has to obey his father’s commands and fulfill family obligations at all cost. In the end, Lu Shing surrenders to his father’s authority, keeps Lucia as a secret lover and marries a woman arranged by his father.

The “Valley of Amazement” serves as a crucial trope in the fiction: it is the name of Lu Shing’s painting, which allures Lucia to China in the first place; it is also Lucia’s image of fairyland which captures her hope and love. However, after her son is taken away from her by trick by Lu Shing’s family but he is too weak to do anything, she is entirely disillusioned: “I had let infatuation guide me and choose my direction in life—toward a golden vale that did not exist...I went to that imaginary place and suffered the near demise of my mind, heart and soul” (Tan, 2013, p. 521). She comes to the bitter realization that the “Valley of Amazement” is nothing but a mirage.

### 3.2 *Leaving Home in Quest of Individuality*

Individuality is the distinctive traits that make people different from others and it is integrally linked to one’s identity negotiation. The quest of individuality is one purpose that Celeste Ng in *Little Fires Everywhere* envisages her protagonist Mia as leaving home for. Trapped in her mother’s house of confinement and frustration, Mia leaves home to search for her individuality in the wilderness.

*Little Fires Everywhere* was written by the emerging Chinese American woman writer Celeste Ng and published in 2017. The story revolves around how the free-spirited and “outcast” single mother Mia and her teenage daughter Pearl come to a placid bourgeois suburb of Shaker Heights in Ohio and crack this carefully ordered community, especially Mrs. Richardson’s family. In Ng’s depiction, Mia has a clear sense of self even from childhood. At the age of eleven, she begins to be infatuated with photography and pursues her dream despite enormous difficulties. She devotes most of her time and money to learning and practising photography while reducing her living expenses to the minimum. However, her pragmatic middle-class parents consider photography as idle pastime and refuse to pay her tuition fee at university. After her scholarship has been curtailed, she has to earn her tuition fee by surrogacy. Ultimately, the death of her most beloved brother and her experience of pregnancy impel her to keep the baby to herself and leave home to pursue her photography dream.

Mia drives his brother’s Volkswagen away from home and starts a new life “on the road”: she drives across the country and stops whenever she feels like to. Her daughter Pearl, even in her bassinet, could feel that “they were headed for great and important things” and could see “all the way across the country and through time to everything that was coming their way” (Ng, 2017, p. 271). Whenever Mia finishes a photography project, she would pack up and move to the next stop to start a new project. They seldom stay long or keep any social networking to avoid interfering with their on-going journey of self-discovery.

Ng’s delineation of Mia perpetually on the move in her “mobile” home—her car and never permanently settling down challenges the traditional concept of “home” as a fixed and static location. Moreover, her “bohemian idyll” of roaming on the road is markedly intertextual with Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957). Kerouac in his novel describes a group of rebellious youngsters wandering on the road and driving across the vast continent of America to seek freedom and individuality. They challenge social conventions and dominant culture and experiment with avant-garde living experiences. By the same token, Mia embarks on an adventurous journey of thrilling exploration in search of creative artistic inspiration and unique subjectivity. The intertextuality with Kerouac is further evidenced by Ng’s explicit reference to the author and his book: Moody, Mrs. Richardson’s son always daydreams about “leaving school, travelling the country à la Jack Kerouac” and digs out the “well-worn copies of *On the Road* and *Dharma Bums*” in old bookstore (Ng, 2017, p. 35).

Moreover, Du and Su ascribe their bohemian lifestyle to Mia’s “cosmopolitanism” by citing Victor Hugo’s remark in *Didascalicon*: “The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong” (qtd. in Du & Su, 2020, p. 44, Note 1). This remark explicates the relations between homeland and the world and concurs with what postcolonial theorists term as “cosmopolitanism”. They also cite Ruoqian Pu’s interpretation of such remark in light of “cosmopolitanism”: “the world is humankind’s common homeland shared by each and every one of us; and therefore, any place on the earth could be our homeland” (qtd. in Du & Su, 2020, p. 44). In this vein, Mia is the exact personification of “cosmopolitanism” as she is not restricted by the conventional concept of “home” and seeks to create the sense of “at-home-ness” on every possible soil as she sees fit.

It is noteworthy that many Chinese American writers/critics have expressed their aspirations for “cosmopolitanism”. Ruoqian Pu, for example, contends that Kingston embeds her idea of “cosmopolitanism” in *The Woman Warrior* by having Maxine express her craving for being a “global citizen”: “We belong to the planet now, Mama. Does it make sense to you that if we’re no longer attached to one piece of land, we belong to the planet? Wherever we happen to be standing, why, that spot belongs to us as much as any other spot” (qtd. in Pu, 2006a, pp. 91–92). This last sentence is also cited by Amy Ling in “Whose America Is It?” (1998), followed by her yearning: “And, at long last, we can all be at home in this global village called Earth” (19), indicative of her inclination to “cosmopolitanism” too. While being a “global citizen” might be Maxine’s only option since her family has lost their (home)land in China after all, Mona in *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996) subjectively and consciously lives up to “cosmopolitanism”. Gish Jen has characterized Mona as freely converting to Jew or any other identities as she desires, completely transcending the boundary of race and ethnicity, iconic of the border-crossing trend in post-1990s era. By conceiving Mia’s “mobile” home and nomadic lifestyle, Ng prompts the reader to reflect on the concept of “homeland” and coincides with Kingston’s and Jen’s “cosmopolitanism” writing in the new era. To be sure, their concerns with “cosmopolitanism” in literary creation highlight their longing to establish their “homeland” in the foreign land and their appeal for cultural equality and diversity in America.

### 3.3 Leaving Home for Ultimate Escape to Reclaim Agency

In addition to interracial marriage and quest of individuality, there is another purpose that women in the selected novels leave home for. Similar to *Little Fires Everywhere*, Ng has her protagonist Lydia in *Everything I Never Told You* leave home to get rid of the imprisonment and depression; different from Mia, though, Lydia leaves home for ultimate escape in the most extreme manner: she drowns herself in the nearby lake to reclaim agency. For Lydia, her home symbolizes the fetter that restricts her body and soul, from which she fiercely struggles to free herself forever.

*Everything I Never Told You* was also written by Celeste Ng and published in 2014. The novel is about solving the mystery behind the death of a sixteen-year-old Chinese American girl Lydia Lee, who grows up in a mixed-race family in Ohio in the 1970s. As the only child among the three that inherits her white mother Marilyn’s blue eyes, the embodiment of American identity, she is imposed by both her parents’ hopes and ambitions to realize the American dream. On the one hand, Marilyn wants her daughter to “stand out”, to fulfill her doctor’s dream which has been thwarted by successive pregnancy. She pressures Lydia to study science and nurtures her by her best effort on a daily basis. On the other hand, James Lee, Lydia’s Chinese father, wants her daughter to “blend in”, to become sociable by attending parties and hanging out with friends, and assimilate into the white-dominated society, which he himself has failed to achieve. Being the center of attention, Lydia endeavors to live up to both her parents’ expectations despite her great reluctance, resulting in her loss of self-identity. As Shenmei Zhang observes, the conflict between her identity constructed by her parents and her true identity is so intense that Lydia is overwhelmed by a severe identity crisis and seeks to resolve this conflict in her own way (2020, p. 29).

Firstly, Ng describes a scenario about Nath, Lydia’s brother accidentally pushing Lydia into the water of Middlewood Lake. Instead of feeling panic-stricken as she cannot swim, Lydia finds peace with herself:

When his palms hit her shoulders, when the water closed over her head, Lydia had felt relief so great she had sighed in a deep choking lungful. She had staggered so readily, fell so eagerly, that she and Nath both knew: that she felt it too, this pull she now exerted, and didn’t want it. That the weight of everything tilting toward her was too much (Ng, 2014, p. 154, my emphasis).

The underlined sentence unveils Lydia’s immediate feeling when sinking into the water. The surprisingly great relief she feels is revealed by the two uncommon collocations of “staggered so readily” and “fell so eagerly”. The two adverbs of “readily” and “eagerly” sharply contrast with the two verbs of “staggered” and “fell” that they do not normally modify. These two paradigmatic foregrounding devices are utilized to describe the ease and freedom she feels in the water. To be sure, the weight and pressure on her are so heavy that she feels unexpected relief in the water. Such incident might also explain why she eventually chooses to end her life in the lake to find ultimate peace.

Furthermore, Ng uses a gift from Lydia’s father as a metaphor to demonstrate Lydia’s initial attempt to defy her parents with her awakening of selfhood. When James puts a necklace, a popular style on her neck, Lydia feels “the metal cut a line of cold, like a ring of ice, around her throat” (Ng, 2014, p. 227). This sentence reveals Lydia’s point of view that the necklace is like a cold metal, a ring of ice that shackles her. She understands that it is nothing more than a symbol of her father’s expectation of her to “blend in”. She tears down the necklace

behind her father and tucks it beneath her bed, an embodiment of her silent refusal of her father's intention. On top of that, she also forbids her sister Hannah to wear it and warns her to stay true to herself: "Don't ever smile if you don't want to...Remember that" (Ng, 2014, p. 261). Fang Wang maintains that Lydia's initial defiance against her parents' will can be perceived as the starting point of her self-discovery (2017, p. 86).

Later, a series of blows exacerbate Lydia's identity crisis and eventually draw her to the lake. First, Nath as Lydia's only companion leaves home for Harvard University. He is the only one that understands the delicate balance in his family, giving Lydia "confirmation and consolation in a single blink" (2014, p. 164). After Nath leaves home, Lydia feels increasingly vulnerable and constantly shrinks under her parents' strict surveillance. Of course, the most severe blow comes from her mother. When Lydia fails her physics test, her mother is infuriated and reviles her: "Do you think you'll just find a man and get married? Is that all you plan for your life?" (2014, p. 171). When Lydia fails her driving test, once again disappointing her mother, she feels the time has come.

In the middle of the night, Lydia quietly leaves home and walks to the nearby Middlewood Lake. Before she steps out of the boat into the lake, Lydia makes "a new set of promises, this time to herself. She will begin again. She will tell her mother: enough" (2014, p. 274). She wishes to correct her mistakes by telling her parents what she has never told them and doing what she really wants. She has awakened to reclaim her lost agency by enacting her death in her own way, a choice that is not forced onto her but is made by herself.

Obviously, Ng has employed water as an essential metaphor to visualize Lydia's rebirth. In the Old Testament, there are as many as 626 references of water with primarily three types of connotations: life, rebirth as well as crime and punishment. Especially, rebirth is connected with the baptism of Christians, which marks the end of an old life and the beginning of a new life (Jiang, 2010, pp. 115–116). From this perspective, by drowning herself in the water, Lydia rids herself of her old life and embraces a brand new (after)life.

Fang Wang also interprets Lydia's death as the rebirth of her new self and a way to regain her subjectivity (2017, p. 86). Such interpretation concurs with the sentence on the book cover of its Chinese version: "Our life is all about letting go of others' expectations and finding our true self". Nevertheless, it is still a painful tragedy that Lydia opts to trade her life for her subjectivity; and her family are traumatized by the loss of their most beloved daughter/sister in the rest of their life. Erich Fromm asserts that "any form of restraint, regulation and intervention, though often in the name of love, is doomed to be tragedy" (1995, p. 127). When the restraint, regulation and intervention disguised as love in Lee's mixed-race family are interwoven with racism, sexism and classism, the corollary is the tragic death of their daughter with the bluest eyes.

#### 4. Conclusion

The portrayal of women's "leaving home" experiences in the selected novels remarkably exemplify such characteristics as border-crossing and diversity in post-1990s Chinese American fiction, which is viscerally linked to the changing socio-cultural milieu, the writers' personal experiences and the influence of postmodernism and cosmopolitanism in the new era. Firstly, with the advancement in transportation, immigration, overseas study, businesses, etc. have made transnational population migration and cultural hybridization become increasingly evident in post-1990s era. For Chinese American women, leaving home for interracial marriage and forming mixed-race family are getting more common nowadays, emblematic of their border-crossing and diversified living experiences. It is also very likely that Amy Tan's and Celeste Ng's own experiences of interracial marriage and mixed-race family have impelled them to underscore these issues in their novels.

Secondly, in the context of globalization, the concepts of "homeplace" and "homeland" need to be re-theorized. As a woman writer of the new generation, Ng infuses her rethinking and reflection of these two concepts by envisioning Mia's "cosmopolitanism" in her novel. In addition, Lydia's leaving home for ultimate escape is Ng's artistic creation of the extreme form of leaving home and searching for selfhood, iconic of Ng's effort in creating more literary and imaginative elements in her writing. Moreover, postmodernism has affected the literary representation in the new era, with new female images created, who opt for more personalized living experiences, such as being single mother with bohemian lifestyle, which are getting more common nowadays.

As Longhai Zhang comments, Chinese American writers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are more concerned with Chinese Americans' self-growth in the multicultural context, the current American social issues and the cosmopolitanism development (Wang et al., 2018, p. 155). In this vein, the mothers'/daughters' leaving home experiences constructed by the two Chinese American female writers in the selected novels precisely embody these concerns in the new era.

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**Authors contributions**

Zhang was solely responsible for conducting the research and writing the manuscript.

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No additional data are available.

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### Notes

Note 1. From Victor Hugo's *Didascalicon* (2003, p. 259). Originally quoted in Edward W. Said's *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books.

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