

Out of Her Mother's House: Matrilineal Heritage from Othermothering and Sisterhood in Chinese American Fiction

Tongtong Zhang¹

¹ School of Foreign Languages and International Trade, Guangdong Teachers College of Foreign Languages and Arts, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

Correspondence: Tongtong Zhang, School of Foreign Languages and International Trade, Guangdong Teachers College of Foreign Languages and Arts, Guangzhou, 510630, China.

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Abstract

This article seeks to examine the representation of othermothering and sisterhood in Chinese American fiction. Effort is made to investigate the different forms of othermothering and sisterhood in the selected mother-daughter narrative texts, with particular focus on how women, when out of “her mother’s house”, empower each other and collaboratively preserve the matrilineal heritage and how women’s identity negotiation is facilitated by such matrilineal heritage in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

Keywords: Chinese American fiction, othermothering, sisterhood, matrilineal heritage

1. Introduction

“Mother-Daughter” is a preeminently recurring motif in fiction by Chinese American writers, particularly Chinese American female writers. Surpassing their male counterparts in both the population and volume of works, these writers are so invested with mother-daughter stories that they contribute to the formation of “matrilineal Chinese American tradition”, as is dubbed by Chinese American critic Sau-ling Cynthia Wong. In *In Her Mother's House: The Politics of Asian American Mother-Daughter Writing* (1999), Wendy Ho argues that these “daughter-writers” are inclined to narrate their mother-daughter stories revolving around “home” constructed by their grandmothers and mothers. To be sure, home is precisely where mother-daughter relationships “resonate most forcefully” (Schultermandl, 2009, p. 108), hence an optimal setting for the portrayals of mother-daughter stories.

Envisioned in these narrative texts are mother-daughter estrangements and/or conflicts and women’s varied leaving home experiences. Some of them leave home for better education, employment and marriage while others are forced to be separated from their mothers/daughters. Whatever the reasons, they invariably feel lost, isolated and helpless. Fortunately, they are able to derive strength and inspiration from othermothering and sisterhood in the women community out of “her mother’s house”. As Adrienne Rich notes, women will still be “wandering in the wilderness” until “a strong line of love, confirmation, and example stretches from mother to daughter, from woman to woman across the generations” (1995, p. 252). Othermothering and sisterhood are thus perfect examples of strong line of love and confirmation among women, the integral components of matrilineal heritage that empower women when they leave home for the wilderness.

This article aims to investigate the representation of othermothering and sisterhood in Chinese American fiction. Various forms of othermothering and sisterhood in the selected mother-daughter narrative texts are examined to illustrate how women accompany and invigorate one another and how they concertedly revitalize the matrilineal heritage to strengthen female solidarity. Moreover, how women’s identity negotiation is facilitated by such matrilineal heritage in diverse socio-cultural milieu will also be explored.

2. Outstanding Othermothering in Chinese American Fiction

“Othermothers” are referred to by Patricia Hill Collins as “women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities”, an essential part in the black motherhood (1990, p. 119). Collins underscores the centrality of othermothers in black community as follows:

The presence of othermothers in Black extended families and the modeling symbolized by community othermothers offer powerful support for the task of teaching girls to resist white perceptions of Black

womanhood while appearing to conform to them. In contrast to the isolation of middle-class white mother/daughter dyads, Black woman-centered extended family networks foster an early identification with a much wider range of models of black womanhood which can lead to a greater sense of empowerment in young Black girls (1990, p. 173).

In actuality, these mothers serve to support black women in their lives with protection and nurturance, rendering themselves to be the role models for black girls and black motherhood to be the token of collective empowerment. In the same vein, “othermothering” refers to “acceptance of responsibility for a child not one’s own, in an arrangement that may or may not be formal” (James, 2004, p. 45), a pivotal source of inspiration and rejuvenation in the women community.

Othermothering as a distinctive tradition in African American culture abounds in not only African but also Chinese American literature, as in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945). In this part, the outstanding othermothers in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, *The Valley of Amazement* (2013) and *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) are examined to demonstrate how they, by sharing mothering possibilities, assist their “daughters” to tide over numerous predicaments and facilitate their identity mapping when they are “out of her mother’s house”.

2.1 Miss Mullohand’s Unusual Othermothering for Jade Snow

Originally published in 1945, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is Jade Snow Wong’s autobiographical fiction in which she relates how Jade Snow, the fifth daughter in Wong’s family strives to stand out and achieve personal success as a Chinese American woman in America. In her fiction, Wong recounts an incident in which Miss Mullohand, Jade Snow’s teacher at primary school provides a sort of brief yet unusual othermothering for her, prompting her to reflect on the different ways of behavior between Chinese culture as is represented by her parents and American culture.

One day after school, when Jade Snow is watching a group of girls playing baseball, she is accidentally hit by the hat carelessly flung by a batter. She cries out as a result of great pain and numb hand. Miss Mullohand as the umpire there instantaneously leans down, holds her closely, rubs her fingers and wipes her tears gently. A sudden wave of strange feelings strikes her, as she “could not remember when Mama held her to give comfort” while she is now being so closely “held to a grown-up foreign lady’s bosom” (Wong, 2019, p. 20). Understandably, Jade Snow finds it so wonderful to be embraced by Miss Mullohand. However, such comfort soon turns into embarrassment and even panic, as she cannot grapple with Miss Mullohand’s caring questions, so she pulls herself from her and flees from the schoolyard.

Miss Mullohand’s unusual othermothering has far-reaching implications on little Jade Snow. In the first place, she is so acutely exposed to cultural differences that she begins to contemplate on her mother culture. Growing up in the traditional Chinese family, she is seldom embraced by her parents even when she needs consolation. She recalls a time when she and her sister, at the age of only three or four are locked in her father’s factory in the dark. They cling to each other weeping out of panic until their parents return, but they do not hold them up in comfort; instead, her father cooks Chinese food for them and gives them as much as they want as an unusual treat to relieve their hurt. Miss Mullohand’s unusual othermothering makes her realize that Chinese people are not so accustomed to bodily interaction like hugging and kissing as Americans do. However, Jade Snow’s parents express love in a more covert way of cooking and serving Chinese food—the token of both affection and Chinese culture—for their daughters.

Moreover, Miss Mullohand’s unusual othermothering contributes to recuperating Jade Snow’s intimacy with her own mother. In 1934, when Jade Snow’s father is gravely ill, she, for the first time, witnesses her mother losing poise and sobbing with swollen eyes and uncombed hair. Although Jade Snow is also plunged into anxiety and misery, fearing that her father would die and her mother would remarry, she still tries her utmost to comfort her mother. It is precisely Miss Mullohand’s action of embracing her from memory that gives her the cue of how to comfort her mother: “she awkwardly put her arm around Mama’s bowed shoulder and timidly patted her” (Wong, 2019, p. 81). Such move generates an unexpected and exotic closeness to her mother, with whom she scarcely has any physical contact from childhood. Moreover, it sheds new light on her perception of her mother: her stern and serious mother unprecedentedly reveals her innermost secret, the fragile part of her to her daughter. In this vein, Miss Mullohand’s unusual othermothering serves to bridge the gap between Jade Snow and her mother both physically and mentally.

2.2 Magic Gourd’s Enduring Othermothering for Violet

Amy Tan, the renowned “daughter-writer”, has published several novels centering upon mother-daughter stories,

including *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001). Her latest novel *The Valley of Amazement* also pivots around mother-daughter relationship and her female protagonists encompass not only mother and daughter but also othermother. Violet, the mixed-race daughter is forced to be separated from her white mother Lucia and sold to a courtesan house called "Hall of Tranquility" by trickery. Magic gourd, a former courtesan in Lucia's "Hidden Jade Path" (also a courtesan house) begins to assume the mothering role for Violet. Her enduring othermothering spans over 30 years through the different stages of Violet's life, from girlhood, womanhood to motherhood and it primarily falls into two categories: mentoring and companionship.

Firstly, Magic gourd, now a courtesan in "Hall of Tranquility", serves as Violet's mentor and is responsible for teaching her how to become a popular courtesan. The "Hall of Tranquility" constitutes a typical institution of what Foucault terms as "carceral archipelago", where a woman's body, as the "object and target of power" is "manipulated, shaped, trained" to "obey, respond, and become skillful" (1995, pp. 297, 136). And Magic Gourd's primary task is to train Violet to obey and become a skillful courtesan to cater to the demand of patriarchal power. Initially, Violet strongly subverts any forms of disciplines, as is exemplified by her symbolic gesture of discarding a tiny pair of embroidered shoes for small feet. However, she is severely punished by Mother Ma, who slaps her hard until she falls to the floor. And it is Magic Gourd that bails her out of trouble: she advises her to seemingly follow Mother Ma's instruction to survive first. Later, Magic Gourd begins to train her rigorously, such as forcing her to practice tiptoeing on a pair of stiff slippers to imitate tiny hobbled feet and most importantly, teaching her all the etiquette for courtesans, especially the skills of singing love songs and making the best use of her body. Magic Gourd's mentoring practices not only assist Violet to survive the hardships in the courtesan house but also mould her to become the most-wanted lady with glamour and fame in Shanghai.

Moreover, Magic Gourd also nurtures her soul and ensures her well-being by preservative love. She passes on to Violet all the wisdom from her own experience to shield her from going astray, such as distinguishing between "patrons" and "cheapstakes" and guarding her against the four ways to damage her career, including sickness, pregnancy, addiction to opium and drink. Above all, she reminds her that a sweet voice and beauty would not last forever and it is "a mix of strategy, cunning, honesty, patience, and the readiness to grab every opportunity" that matters the most (Tan, 2013, p. 165). These "survival rich" strategies from Magic Gourd's othermothering constitute a crucial part of the invaluable matrilineal legacy to Violet, keeping her safe and sound in the motherless house.

In addition to mentoring, Magic Gourd also serves as Violet's companion and continues to assume the mothering role after Violet leaves the courtesan house. When Violet is pregnant and in labor, Magic Gourd nurses her tenderly; when Edward, Violet's husband dies from Spanish influenza, she assists her to take charge of the bereavement sensibly; when Flora, Violet's daughter is taken away from her, she affectionately relieves her pain and soothes her soul. Moreover, it is Magic Gourd that strongly opposes her marriage with Perpetual, since she knows too well that Violet is so eager to find a man to rely on that she trusts his wooing words blindly. Violet's yearning for men, especially for those she hardly knows can be explained along the line of psychoanalysis, as is supported by Nancy Friday's opinion that if women did not get enough mothering, they "tend to go through life not knowing how to relate except symbiotically" (1977, p. 351). Violet's lack of maternal love from childhood due to her mother's lack of attention and abrupt separation has rendered her emotionally vulnerable and driven her to establish symbiotic relationship with whoever comes along.

Despite Violet's rejection of Magic Gourd's warnings, Magic Gourd still accompanies her to Perpetual's home in Moon Pond Village. It turns out that Perpetual has lied to her about virtually everything: she has to be one of his concubines instead of his only wife and has to live in a shabby house instead of a decent home. Worse still, she is incessantly abused by Perpetual. Magic Gourd, as her dearest othermother, tries her utmost to protect her in every possible way: looking after her when she is beaten, encouraging her to keep hopes alive by maternal wisdom, and assisting her to make the desperate escape from the Moon Pond Village eventually.

To sum up, Magic Gourd has always been there for Violet, nurturing her with full dedication, sharing her sweetness and sorrow and helping her to tide over the thick and thin. In turn, Violet fully acknowledges Magic Gourd's outstanding othermothering:

- a. She had worried, sought to protect me from danger, guided me toward the best. She had looked out for my future, assessed the worthiness of everyone to be in my life. And in that way, she had taken me as her purpose in life, the one who gave her meaning. I had had constant love all along.
- b. I could finally see what had always been there. She had been more than an attendant, more than a friend, more than a sister. She had been a mother to me (Tan, 2013, p. 255, my emphasis).

In the above two excerpts, Tan uses distinctive stylistic features to highlight Magic Gourd's predominant role as an othermother. In excerpt a, the repetition of "she" as the subject underlines the active and irreplaceable role she plays in nurturing Violet; in excerpt b, the parallel structure of "more than" repeats three times, indicating Violet's escalating affections for Magic Gourd that culminate when she officially affirms her mothering role in the end.

To be sure, Magic Gourd exceptionally fulfills the three demands of maternal work: preservation, growth and social acceptance, as is posited by Sara Ruddick: "To be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance, and training" (1989, p. 17). By training Violet to be a popular courtesan of social acceptance in the male-centered society and passing on to her wise survival strategies as a critical part of matrilineal heritage, Magic Gourd makes herself an outstanding othermother in Chinese American fiction.

2.3 Mia's Spiritual Othermothering for Izzy

In *Little Fires Everywhere*, Mia is characterized as an outstanding othermother, who not only cares for and invigorates her own daughter Pearl, but also Izzy and Lexie, Mrs. Richardson's two daughters. The emerging Chinese American female writer Celeste Ng sets her story in "Shaker Heights", a middle-class suburb governed by numerous rules. Mrs. Richardson as a typical personification of Shaker Heights devoutly follows these rules, lives a regimented life and also pressures her children into the same kind of "perfect" life, regardless of their personality and mentality. While the other three of her children obediently follows her path, Izzy, her youngest child is born to be an "outcast" as she rebels against any forms of authority and injustice. Understandably, she is the most unpopular and unhappy one in the family: her mother constantly criticizes her and her brother and sister always mock her. As Wang keenly observes, Mrs. Richardson treats her children as the necessity of achieving the ideal middle-class lifestyle and the "assets" she can flaunt; therefore, she only cares about whether they can fulfill her expectations instead of attending to their real needs (2023, p. 110). Contrary to Mrs. Richardson, Mia is a free-spirited photographer and leads an unconventional nomadic life. It is Mia's spiritual othermothering that significantly transforms Izzy, reshaping her character and facilitating her self-growth.

Firstly, Mia inspires and guides Izzy to exploit her full potentiality and search for her selfhood. A prime example is that Mia ignites the little fires in Izzy's heart when Izzy is suspended from school for breaking Mrs. Peter's bow. Izzy actually seeks to fight for Deja, the black kid in her class who is discriminated by Mrs. Peter. Unlike Mrs. Richardson who sharply punishes her misbehavior, Mia asks: "What are you going to do about it?" It is a question Izzy has never been asked before and the idea that "she *could* do something stunned her" (Ng, 2017, pp. 89–90, emphasis in original). When Mia gives an account of someone gluing the lock on his history teacher's door as revenge for unfair treatment, Izzy sees it as a signal that Mia covertly encourages her to take vengeance in her own way. Mia's "delight in mischief, in breaking the rules" intrigues Izzy: she feels "a kindred spirit, a similar subversive spark to the one she often felt flaring inside her" (Ng, 2017, p. 100). Since then, Mia wins Izzy's trust and draws her closer by her understanding and unique character.

Moreover, Mia's spiritual othermothering for Izzy is best exemplified by her artistic creation that profoundly empowers Izzy to aspire for her own artistic pursuit. Every day after school, Izzy directly goes to Mia's home and watches her at work, learning to frame a shot, develop film and make a print. Furthermore, Izzy also learns from Mia's aesthetic taste. She is so exceptionally fascinated by Mia that she "hung on Mia's every word, sought and trusted her opinion on everything" (Ng, 2017, p. 103). Unlike Mrs. Richardson who perpetually finds fault with her daughter, Mia tends to discover Izzy's strength and guide her with patience and encouragement: "There's so much wonderful about you" (Ng, 2017, p. 104). Izzy is so emotionally attached to Mia that she visualizes being Mia's daughter who finally reunites with her true mother after years of separation. More importantly, Izzy has been enlightened:

All her life she'd felt hard and angry; her mother always criticizing her, Lexie and Trip always mocking her. Mia hadn't been like that. With Mia she'd been different, in a way she hadn't known she could be: in Mia's accepting presence she'd become curious and kind and open, as if under a magic spell. She had felt, finally, as if she could speak without immediately bumping into the hard shell of her sheltered life, as if she suddenly saw that the solid walls penning her in were actually bars, with spaces between them wide enough to slip through (Ng, 2017, p. 372).

The stark contrast between her two ways of existence has been distinctly revealed in this excerpt. She lives a hard life with her family, being criticized, mocked and treated like a lunatic; with Mia, she feels carefree and delighted. Mia's spiritual othermothering illuminates her marvelously, enabling her to break down "the hard shell of her sheltered life" to embrace freedom. It is noteworthy that Mia's charm resides in that she fully respects

Izzy's "peculiarity" and guides her to search for her selfhood by inspiration instead of constraining her behavior by coercion. By engaging Izzy in artistic creation with her motherly love, Mia succeeds in leading Izzy onto the right track to her subjectivity and individuality.

It is also Mia's spiritual othermothering that prompts Izzy to burn down her mother's house and leave home for the journey of self-discovery. Mrs. Richardson pressures Mia, the "outlier" in Shaker Heights to leave her rental house in the name of safeguarding the rules and order of the community. Before Mia is evicted from Shaker Heights, she leaves a set of photos to the Richardson's family, in which she records everyone's life by using their deserted objects. Izzy is immensely stunned by the photo for her: it features a black rose dropped on a cracked square of pavement, with the rose made of different parts of her beloved boots discarded by her mother. Apparently, the rose imagery carries profound connotations. On the one hand, it symbolizes Izzy's depression in such a frustrating environment given its "black" color; on the other hand, it epitomizes Izzy's resilience in countering the hostility and searching for her true self. Izzy views it as a sign: Mia perceives her misery and incites her to take action. It dawns on her that it is precisely the value of Shaker Heights featuring "instrumental rationality" that shackles her spiritual freedom; she determines to start all over again and follow Mia on the road of artistic pursuit (Wang, 2023, p. 111).

Ultimately, Izzy derives courage from Mia's remarks about the prairie fires:

Remember, Mia had said: sometimes you need to scorch everything to the ground and start over. After the burning the soil is richer, and new things can grow. People are like that, too. They start over. They find a way (Ng, 2017, p. 374, emphasis in original).

Overwhelmed by indignation, Izzy feels that it is the time to bid farewell to the past. She lights up a match, sets fire to her mother's house when everyone is out, and runs away to search for Mia as well as for her selfhood. Judith Arcana notes: "If we want girls to grow into free women, brave and strong, we must be those women ourselves" (1979, p. 33). As one of these free, brave and strong women, Mia manages to empower not only her own daughter, but also Izzy as an outstanding othermother, a spiritual role model, inspiring her to become an equally free, brave and strong woman in the future.

2.4 Mia's Contingent Othermothering for Lexie

In addition to spiritual othermothering for Izzy, Mia also provides othermothering for Lexie, Izzy's elder sister. She acts as Lexie's "contingent mother" who nurtures Lexie's body and soul, bails her out of predicaments and gets her life back on track.

Ng gives detailed account of how Mia, with love and tenderness, nurses Lexie to recover smoothly after abortion. Instead of going home to seek solace in her own mother, Lexie directly goes to Mia's home because she knows for sure that her mother will definitely be disappointed and accuse her of disgracing the family (Wang, 2023, p. 110). The minute Lexie enters Mia's home, she bursts out crying; and Mia pulls Lexie into her arms and tucks her into her bed to rest. When Lexie discovers that Mia specially puts a towel on the lamp to dim the light during her sleep, "the thoughtfulness of this pierced her" (Ng, 2017, p. 278). Mia also helps her keep the secret, pretends to be her mother and asks for a leave from her school. Instead of judging her behavior, Mia deeply sympathizes with her physical and emotional sufferings. When asked by Lexie if she has made a huge mistake, Mia guides her to find out the answer by asking thought-provoking questions: "Would you have been ready to be a good mother? ...The kind of mother a child deserves?" (Ng, 2017, p. 282) Overwhelmed by Mia's goodness and tolerance, like Izzy, Lexie also envisages having Mia as her mother and living Pearl's life as her life. Furthermore, she requests Mia to accompany her to the follow-up appointment at the clinic, a marked indication of her trust and reliance in her "contingent" mother: "I'd just feel better if you were there"; and she even enjoys the time when Mia drives her to the clinic on "this most intimate errand" (Ng, 2017, p. 311).

Mia's contingent othermothering is also exemplified by her understanding and comfort to sustain Lexie when she breaks up with her boyfriend. Similarly, the disheartened Lexie wants to be in Mia's rental house instead of her mother's house, as "Mia would know just the right thing to say, would give her space to think this through, to process what had just happened" (Ng, 2017, pp. 320-321). To be sure, what Lexie needs is Mia's sympathy and trust to relieve her pain and soothe her soul, which is precisely what women as daughters really need from their mothers. Adrienne Rich argues: "Deeply and primally we need trust and tenderness; surely this will always be true of every human being, but women growing into a world so hostile to us need a very profound kind of loving in order to learn to love ourselves" (1995, p. 246). Likewise, Fromm also asserts that mature motherly love characterized by care, support, tolerance, and understanding enables children to develop their personality and self-awareness (1995, pp. 39-40). For Lexie, such "profound kind of loving" stems from Mia's contingent othermothering brimming with mature motherly love, empowering her to weather through her plight, to retake

the helm of life, and to embrace rebirth.

3. Sweet Sisterhood in Chinese American Fiction

According to Wang, the concept of “sisterhood” is originally proposed by the white feminists, who hold that women of different race, class, and religion should unify each other on the basis of their common oppression from patriarchy; feminism should endeavor to solidify such sisterhood to overthrow male dominance (2007, p. 137). Such opinion is challenged by feminists of color, such as bell hooks, who notes that “common oppression” is “a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women’s varied and complex social reality” (1984, p. 44). She continues to argue that women should unite with one another based upon “shared strengths and resources”, the true meaning and essence of sisterhood (1984, p. 44). Meanwhile, Zhang contends that sisterhood encompasses not only sisterly relationship, but also the community or partnership formed by women on the ground of common aspiration and vision (2024, p. 34). Such concept is employed in this article to refer to the mutual empowerment among women of similar age who share resources and strengths to support each other in myriad oppressing social contexts. The portrayal of sisterhood abounds in Chinese American fiction by women writers, and typical examples are selected from *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Valley of Amazement*, and *Little Fires Everywhere* to be analyzed in this part.

3.1 Cross-cultural Sisterhood Between Jade Snow and Her Multicultural Sisters

In *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Jade Snow has established cross-cultural sisterly relationship with several friends from diverse background, who not only render her practical support to continue with her study, but also bestow on her the joy of cross-cultural communication. Specifically, the dean at Mills College and her friends at Mills Hall have colored her college life and ignited her interest in introducing Chinese culture to foreigners; and Jade Harp, the white friend she gets acquainted with right after graduation brings delightful friendship and brand new experience to her and her family.

In the first place, the dean at Mills College guarantees Jade Snow’s successful entry into the college and swift adaptation to the new life. Although Jade Snow longs to be admitted to Mills College, her inability to pay the tuition fee thwarts her ambition. It is the dean, with the president Dr. Reinhardt’s consent, who offers to grant her not only a full tuition scholarship, but also a position in her household that will give her room and board in return and a clerical job at her office to cover the extra cost. In addition to assisting Jade Snow to further her study, the dean also inspires her by her gentle demeanor as well as inner spiritual strength. “With humor, honesty, and affection”, the dean guides her to think through tricky problems, enlightens her outlook on life with mature perceptions, as well as gives her comfort without judgement (Wong, 2019, p. 156). Blessed with the dean’s help and friendship, Jade Snow embraces a new life brimming with hope.

Moreover, the dean also encourages her to make new friends and invites them to her home. Jade Snow luckily makes a couple of friends from the Mills Hall, including Teruko from Tokyo, Harriet from Washington and several others, forming a truly multicultural sisterhood. Jade Snow warmly invites them to the dean’s home and treats them with Chinese food. Wong goes to great length in detailing the procedure of how Jade Snow shops for the groceries, cooks Chinese dishes as well as how much her friends marvel at Chinese cuisine. In return, her friends also invite Jade Snow to dine at their hall, in the process of which they have pleasant exchange with each other. More importantly, since they are pretty curious about Chinese culture, Jade Snow for the first time comes up with the idea of presenting the “constructive and delightful aspects of the Chinese culture” to foreigners (Wong, 2019, p. 161). Her cross-cultural sisterhood enables her to see Chinese culture through a new lens and facilitates her identity mapping as a Chinese American woman.

Jade Harp is Jade Snow’s white sister that has a lot in common with her and brings much happiness to her and her family. After graduation, Jade Harp, a charming Caucasian girl of similar age becomes her companion: they attend the same pottery class, take up similar position of secretary, and explore dinner places for Chinese food that Jade Harp is particularly fond of. Jade Snow’s parents also invite her to their home for Chinese home cooking and extend great hospitality to her as they would do to a Chinese guest. When requested to give a Chinese name to his daughter’s friend, Jade Snow’s father, full of surprise and pleasure, gives Jade Snow’s middle name “Jade” to Jade Harp as a way to welcome her into his family, making them almost like real sisters. They have a great time in the kitchen, where Jade Harp shows huge interest in Chinese food while Jade Snow’s parents show unprecedented easiness and contentment with Jade Harp around. In a word, Jade Snow’s sisterhood with Jade Harp brings joyful vibe to Wong’s family and increases their sense of pride in Chinese culture.

3.2 Powerful Sisterhood among “Joy Luck Mothers”

Amy Tan in *The Joy Luck Club* not only describes the estrangements and conflicts between four pairs of mothers

and daughters, but also depicts the powerful sisterhood among these four mothers, who form the “Joy Luck Club”, a powerful social networking. Dating back to the war-torn China, it is organized by Suyuan Woo as a counter strategy to cope with the horrendous wars, innumerable deaths and hostile social environment. On a hot summer night, amid the disgusting smell from the sewers and screaming sounds from pigs, Suyuan, by serendipity, gathers another three women to fill each corner of her mahjong table. Coming from different backgrounds, these four women of similar age with no blood ties are linked by their parallel circumstances and common aspiration for survival in the bombarded Kweilin in the 1940s. They take turns to hold parties each week, serving dyansyin food to bring good luck, playing mahjong, and telling stories about the good old days. Tan also portrays a similar scenario in *The Kitchen God's Wife* in which Winnie, Helen and their families long to “squeeze out one more moment of fun” by listening to the music and playing mahjong to relieve their pain in the Chaotic Kunming during the anti-Japanese war (2006, p. 239). In spite of their adversity and trauma of losing their families and friends in the war, these women derive strength and inspiration from one another, searching for opportunities to mitigate their misery, to lift up their spirits and to keep hopes alive. To be sure, the Joy Luck Club enables these “Joy Luck women” to “redirect energies and emotions in more creative, life sustaining ways amid great terror, tragedy and dispersion” (Ho, 1999, p. 183).

The “Joy Luck Club” is carried on by Suyuan in America with three different members to confront with their common crisis in the foreign land. As Chinese immigrant women of similar age, these “Joy Luck mothers” have untold traumatic stories and crave for consolation: “My mother could sense that the women of these families also had unspeakable tragedies they had left behind in China and hopes they couldn't begin to express in their fragile English” (Tan, 1989, p. 20). Such strong empathy propels Suyuan to bring them together around her mahjong table, to “talk stories” and to laugh, just like what she used to do in China. They speak Chinese, they keep their Chinese culture in every possible way, and they seek solace in each other's companionship. They understand and sympathize with each other's sufferings by sharing their stories.

Indeed, the Joy Luck Club showcases the survival strategies of resilience, optimism and flexibility of Chinese American women with tenacious vitality (Zhang, 2024, p. 39). Moreover, the emotional affinity and interconnectedness among these “Joy Luck mothers” significantly facilitates the establishment of “more permeable and meaningful social and gendered spaces and practices for themselves within their families and communities” (Ho, 1999, p. 194), a testimony to the slogan of “Sisterhood is Powerful”. Admittedly, the Joy Luck Club offers an invigorating means to build emotional and social networking that helps to heal these women's trauma and recuperate their loss of families. Furthermore, as a women community characterized by Chinese and American cultural integration, it bestows on its members the sense of belongingness, revives the Chinese cultural memory and carries on the Chinese traditional wisdom of “harmony” in America (Zhang, 2024, p. 41).

3.3 Transnational Sisterhood between Lucia and Golden Dove

In addition to *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan is also dedicated to the depiction of sisterhood in her other novels. For instance, in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie and her friend Helen accompany each other for most of their life, narrowly escaping bomb attacks in China, desperately fleeing to America, and growing old together: “And yet we are closer perhaps than sisters, related by fate, joined by debts. I have kept her secrets. She has kept mine” (Tan, 2006, p. 73). Moreover, *The Hundred Secret Senses* (2010) centers upon the sisterhood between Olivia and Kwan as the central story plot. In *The Valley of Amazement*, Tan delineates the transnational sisterhood between Lucia a white woman and Golden Dove a Chinese woman featuring business partnership and companionship.

At the beginning, they get acquainted with each other in Danner's hotel and soon become close friends due to their similar age and parallel sufferings from love. Their sisterhood develops as they become each other's language teacher and help out each other on a daily basis. Golden Dove serves as Lucia's sweet sister as she tenderly nurses Lucia when she is pregnant and intimately shares the responsibility of mothering Violet. When Lucia invites her to live together in Danner's hotel (her legitimate inheritance) for free, Golden Dove recognizes her sisterhood with gratitude and affections: “I (Lucia) was better than a sister” (Tan, 2017, pp. 514–515).

Their sisterhood is best exemplified by their close partnership in making a living in Shanghai at the turn of the 20th century. They cleverly transform Danner's Hotel and open the famed “Hidden Jade Path”, a unique combination of social club and courtesan house for Chinese and westerners. Golden Dove plays an instrumental role in their business by her industriousness, business talents and craving for success, the strong driving force for Lucia to work harder. On top of business partners, Golden Dove remains Lucia's bosom sister: she understands her strengths and misery, she takes care of Violet and she accompanies her to confront numerable life crisis. Lucia fully acknowledges Golden Dove's wholehearted devotion to her and her daughter as a mentor: “Without her...I likely would have remained a helpless American girl railing against my stupidity and his (Violet's father Lu Shing)

spinelessness” (Tan, 2013, p. 543).

In a word, Lucia and Golden Dove share resources and strategies for mutual empowerment, supporting one another in work, life and love. What typically characterizes their sisterhood is that it transcends the boundary of race and culture, constituting what Schultermanndl terms as “transnational matrilineage”: the construction and revival of transnational solidarity in the women community across race, class and culture (2009, p. 10). Tan also envisions such a kind of “transnational matrilineage” in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* where women/girls of different races, including two American missionary ladies, one Chinese Sister and some abandoned girls live in an orphanage as a transnational women community. They are well sheltered and educated to be independent “Girls of New Destiny”, which is evidenced by the song they sing:

We can study, we can learn,

We can marry whom we choose.

We can work, we can earn,

And bad fate is all we lose (Tan, 2001, p. 263, italics in original).

The sweet sisterhood in the orphanage transgresses the boundary of race and religion, a token of universal love for all mankind (Zou, 2008, p. 110). The transnational sisterhood depicted in these two novels empowers these women to jointly confront their “bad fate” and fight for their “new destiny” by pooling their collective resources and strengths as a united family. Pretty much like her protagonists, Tan treasures the sisterhood with her editor Faith Sale and elaborates her supportive roles in *The Opposite of Fate*: “In Faith, I had not only an editor and a cohort in bargain shopping but a mentor and a friend, someone who knew my best intentions and intuitions as a writer and how these fit in with the rest of my life” (Tan, 2003, pp. 62–63). In her memoir *Where the Past Begins* (2017), Tan recounts how she rented an apartment in New York City near Faith’s home to accompany her after Faith was diagnosed with cancer, which somehow turned out to be a prolific time. Tan accredits her early completion of her work to Faith: “She was like a sister to me. I had no excuse to delay the book and keep it from her” (2017, p. 43). To be sure, Tan is blessed with her sweet sisterhood with Faith, which is beneficial to her literary creation and personal life, an authentic testimony to the slogan that “Sisterhood is Powerful”.

3.4 Strategic Alliance between Mia and Bebe Chow

Celeste Ng not only portrays the outstanding othermothering but also sweet sisterhood in *Little Fires Everywhere*. Mia, the white woman and Bebe Chow, the Chinese American woman ally with each other in the form of “strategic alliance” to counter the ruthless oppression of their middle-class “white sisters”. Specifically, Mia plays a predominant role in assisting Bebe by scheming strategies and pooling resources to fight for her daughter May Ling’s custody. And their sisterhood also transcends the boundary of race and forms transnational solidarity.

The strategic alliance between Mia and Bebe Chow is noticeably exemplified by Mia’s sisterly love and encouraging support. When Mia works at Lucky Palace, a Chinese restaurant, she gets acquainted with Bebe, a full-time waitress from Canton. Bebe enjoys talking with Mia, as Mia is a good listener who never laughs at her broken English and understands her sufferings, so she tells Mia everything about her life, especially how pathetically she is abandoned by her boyfriend, how hard she has to give up her daughter due to low income, and how eagerly she wants to reclaim her who has been already adopted by Mrs. McCullough. Mia is deeply empathetic to Bebe’s circumstances: as a mother, losing her child is “as if someone had slid a blade into her and with one quick twist hollowed her out, leaving nothing inside but a cold rush of air” (Ng, 2017, p. 139). It is their common mothering experience that reinforces their bonds and intimacy.

Moreover, Mia’s care and responsibility for Bebe propels her to render unwavering support. At first, Mia advises Bebe to get a lawyer but soon realizes that she could by no means afford one. Later, Mia suggests that Bebe should contact the media to arouse public attention and win their support. Under Mia’s guidance, Bebe contacts a journalist from the local press, who reports the case and exerts huge pressure on Mrs. McCullough and her white sister Mrs. Richardson. More importantly, Ed Lim, the Chinese American lawyer offers to represent Bebe free of charge and sue the state for her daughter’s custody.

In the end, Mia gently consoles Bebe’s soul after she loses May Ling’s custody: “She will always be your child... You will always be her mother. Nothing will ever change that” (Ng, 2017, pp. 341–342). Although Bebe loses the battle, she has been transformed: for the first time, she enacts her subjectivity both as a woman and a mother. As Wang maintains, the novel demonstrates the growth process of (Bebe as) an mother and affirms the awakening and invincibility of maternity spirit (2023, p. 108). In this vein, their strategic alliance as a model of sweet sisterhood creates an empowering female-gendered space for individual growth and matrilineal continuity.

Additionally, their powerful sisterhood resists the opposing side of Mrs. McCullough and Mrs. Richardson. Although Mia is white, given her marginalized position and lower social status, she tends to be placed in the camp of racial-ethnic minority, with reference to the fact that her role in the adapted TV series is cast by Kerry Washington, an African American actress (Du & Su, 2020, p. 41). Celeste Ng herself finds it interesting that “so many people also read her as a woman of color” (Frederick, 2021). To be sure, the strategic alliance between Mia and Bebe Chow from the margin effectively counterbalances the white women ally at the center; and Ng might agree that she is engaged in the agenda of what Sau-ling Cynthia Wong terms as “racial politics within feminism”.

3.5 “Lesbian Continuum” Among Pauline, Mal and Mia

In addition to the strategic alliance between Mia and Bebe, also worthy of attention in the same novel is the sisterhood among Pauline, Mal and Mia, which presumably falls into the category of “lesbian continuum”. This term is referred to by Adrienne Rich as a kaleidoscope of “woman-identified experience”, which is not necessarily based upon sexuality preference, but also includes the myriad forms of “primary intensity” in the women community, such as “the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (1980, pp. 648–649). Prime examples of supportive woman-to-woman ties in reality and in literary representation encompass the “two women like Virginia Woolf’s Chloe and Olivia, who share a laboratory” and “the woman dying at ninety touched and handled by women”; and women can be viewed as “moving in and out of this continuum”, whether they identify themselves as lesbian or not (Rich, 1980, p. 651).

In *Little Fires Everywhere*, Ng envisions such a peculiar type of sisterhood among three women. Pauline and Mal are characterized as a lesbian couple who knit together by their commonality in artistic pursuit. Pauline is a renowned photographer and university lecturer while Mal is a poet and has published several collections of poems. They live together and attend to each other, rendering practical support and sharing rich inner life. Mal affectionately accompanies and nurses the gravely sick Pauline near the end of her life. It is interesting to note that Ng frames their lesbian relationship very covertly and implicitly by depicting their subtle bodily interaction, such as Mal kissing Pauline’s cheek and putting a shawl on her shoulders, an indication of their discreetness in the 1970s’ America.

Since 1960s, homosexuality has been more acceptable owing to waves of liberation movements and social reforms in America, bringing about more diversified experience and sexual freedom for Americans. Nevertheless, most “closeted” lesbians were still “imprisoned in the prescriptive ideas of “compulsory heterosexuality” and subject to the pain of “blocked options and broken connections” (Rich, 1980, p. 657). Against such backdrop, the mutual identification between Pauline and Mal offers them a potential wellspring of female power, which mitigates the pain inflicted on them by the mainstream ideology. Furthermore, on the ground of their achievements in their respective spheres, they as contemporary career women powerfully challenge the “compulsory heterosexuality” prescribed by the patriarchal system.

Furthermore, they also extend such “lesbian continuum” to Mia by sharing with her their rich inner life and rendering her substantial support. Initially, Mia is fascinated by Pauline’s extraordinary accomplishment in photography and aesthetic taste: her adoration for Pauline is like that “of a schoolgirl for a crush” and “of a devotee for a saint” (Ng, 2017, p. 231). She takes much delight in her lecture since Pauline is keen on discovering merits in each of her student’s photo. Meanwhile, Mia successfully attracts Pauline’s attention by her photos, so she is kindly invited to her home for further exchange. Pauline sincerely mentors Mia by sharing her ideas and inviting her to work together in her studio. She rectifies Mia’s perception and manner of taking photos by sheer instinct and guides her to design her work by intentional planning, as Pauline’s “favorite mantra” is: “Nothing is an accident” (Ng, 2017, p. 237). As their sweet sisterhood develops, Pauline and Mal, knowing Mia’s difficult circumstances, decide to provide concrete support to her, such as by lending her money to pay tuition fee, pressing her to stay for dinner and asking her to settle into their guest room. Before her death, Pauline takes a picture of Mia holding Pearl in her arms and gives her the contact information of Anita, an art trader in New York City, in case that they need money in the future. Most importantly, it is Pauline’s farewell wish that sustains Mia’s determination to continue with her artistic pursuit: “Do what it takes...I am expecting great things from you” (Ng, 2017, p. 268).

To sum up, the “lesbian continuum” among Pauline, Mal and Mia not only enriches their day-to-day life but also consoles their soul. As Lorde contends, such type of nurturing sisterhood is conducive to generating the “empowering joy” that makes women “less willing to accept powerlessness” and other dispiriting conditions such as “resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial” (1984, p. 58). Indeed, their

mutually-identified experience strengthens their female subjectivity and facilitates the continuity of matrilineal heritage in the women community. Such co-construction of women experience renders itself to be an optimal model for healthy female development.

4. Conclusion

This article reveals how othermothering and sisterhood represented in Chinese American fiction empower women to survive and thrive and facilitate their identity negotiation “out of her mother’s house”. The outstanding othermothers in the chosen novels share the mothering responsibilities of protecting and mentoring their “daughters” in difficult conditions. Like those othermothers in the black women community, they teach and nurture young women to resist oppression and achieve autonomy, making vital contribution to the continuity of matrilineal heritage.

Like outstanding othermothering, the sweet sisterhood among women of similar age constitutes a source of mutual empowerment that enables them to grapple with their respective life crisis and construct supporting network. Nancy Friday argues: “Whatever matrix has been developed from your good and bad experiences can be greatly changed through identification figures even after childhood is over” (1977, p. 201). These “othermothers” and “sisters” are precisely the identification figures who help their “daughters” and “sisters” to recover from “bad experiences” and bestow “good experiences” on them by their kindness, understanding and wisdom. Ultimately, the women-identified experience from othermothering and sisterhood creates a lively female-gendered space for individual growth and matrilineal heritage continuity.

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