

Supernatural Power in Chinese American Novels

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Abstract

This study intends to explore how supernatural elements in Chinese American female writers' novels reinforce their power of uttering. As double minored group, Chinese American female writers suffer the condition of being silenced. Applied the supernatural power in their writing, Chinese American female writers opened an access of telling a "true" story to fight against "official stories". Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan as the most representative Chinese American female writers exemplified how supernatural elements can work as an authorized voice. This paper will apply Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* as examples and take a closer look on how they find their voices through the supernatural power.

Key words: supernatural elements, voice, alien space

Supernatural elements have been incorporated into some fictions for highlighting suspense and increasing tension of the plot. In contrast to the real world, ghost and spirit represent "other," "marginalized" or "alien" space. As Gayle K, Fujita Sato remarks,

Ghosts define two antithetical worlds that threaten the narrator's sense of a unified self. How is she to articulate her own location, which is "Chinese American," when history, tradition, and family have formulated "China" and "America" as reciprocally alien territories? (194).

Ghosts threaten the narrator's unified self, at the same time, ghosts could also bridge two

different worlds. Both Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* contain the supernatural elements. Through showing different attitude toward ghosts, these two authors also display different strategies of authorizing Chinese American voices. Thus, this paper intends to explore Chinese American experiences through analyzing the supernatural elements in Kingston's autobiographical fiction and Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses*.

Both protagonists in *The Woman Warrior* and *The hundred Secret Senses* confront the conflict of family, ethnicity, culture, history and nationality and try to negotiate their positions in the conflict. Revealing the forbidden secrets which are

told by their Chinese ancestors, both Kingston and Tan establish the connection between the supernatural and Chinese American voice. Furthermore, they explore the authority provided by ghosts to articulate for Chinese American's identity and resist the power imposed by western culture. Yet, through analyzing the ghosts in these two different novels, readers will discover the differences between the two ghost images which are presented by these writers. For Kingston, ghosts is a threat in her life, therefore, she tries to fight against the ghosts who haunted her; yet, Tan depicts ghosts as a human-like image which spiritually sustains Chinese American in the Euro-centered culture. Ghosts become a spiritual link between America and China.

The inspection will start from the image of ghost and the symbolic meaning ghost represents. The subtitle of *The Woman Warrior; Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, reveals the main theme. Kingston's mother fought with the ghosts and tried to win voices among the Eurocentric Americans. Ghost, as Kingston depicts, represents her Chinese root which has haunted her, no matter the value of her ethnicity is good or not. As her mother tries to give her a lesson through telling the story about "No-name aunt," Kingston starts to be haunted by the Chinese ghosts:

My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not origami-ed into houses and clothes. I do not think she always means me well. I am telling on her, and she

was a spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water. The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, waits silently by the water to pull down substitute. (Woman 16)

The image of the ghost appears as a threat and something scary. Kingston's aunt reveals her independence and individuality, yet the personal value is not admired. "No-name aunt" dares to go for her love. "At the mirror my aunt combed individuality into her bob" (9). However, the personality is not appreciated in China. Thus, "the villagers punished her for acting as if she could have a private life. Secret and apart from them" (13). What comes to her aunt at the end is that she committed suicide and whole family members deliberately forget her. Without permission to be mentioned in the household, Kingston's aunt becomes a "No Name Woman." From this story, Kingston understands the charm of being independent as well as the danger of it. Being a warning of not committing adultery, "No Name aunt's" ghost becomes a successful lesson that Kingston's mother intends to teach her daughter. Contradicting with her education in American culture which puts much emphasis on individualism, Kingston falls into conflict.

In addition to be the Chinese root, ghost also represents Chinese American's marginalized space because of cultural inadaptability and problems in American mainstream. Kingston, who tries to inscribe her Chinese experience and reconstruct a

new Chinese American cannon, discovers that she has been marginalized in the Western culture, the alien culture. “No name aunt” exemplified the alien space in the family and the predicament that Chinese American live in America. Committing adultery makes “No name aunt” be expelled by the family and punished even after her death. Her name is not allowed to be mentioned in the household and after death, she will be always “hungry, always needing” (16). Individualism is not valued in Chinese society; therefore, punishment follows. Reversely, being not appreciated in American culture, the ethnic culture is punished with being alienated, being “othered.”

The chapter, “Shaman,” gives a clear view of how Kingston presents ghosts as an alien space, as a no-man territory. “Shaman” shows Kingston’s mother as a smart independent woman when she was young. Brave Orchid, as her name shows, lives in the ghost-haunted dormitory alone and exhibits her courage to fight the ghosts. The ghost-haunted room is a territory that no one dares to cross.

Even though they had to crowd the other rooms, none of the young women would sleep in it. Accustomed to nestling with a bedful of siblings and grannies, they fitted their privacy tighter rather than claim the haunted room as human territory. No one had lived in it for at least five year, not since a series of hauntings had made its inhabitants come down with ghost fear that shattered their

brains for studying. (64-65)

However, Brave Orchid possesses the ability of communicating with ghosts. She can cast the non-human beings out and make the no-man territory become her secret place for studying. She exorcises the spirits with shouting and preaching.

“You will not win, Boulder,...you do not belong here. And I will see to it that you leave...only one of us will control this room, Ghost, and that one will be me...I do not give in...You’re no mystery to me...You have no power over a strong woman.”(70)

Brave Orchid exhibits her tremendous courage to talk it way and gain the control. After casting the spirits, Brave Orchid is empowered and owns the power of “talking” to spirits. With the mythic power, Brave Orchid, thus, can blur the boundary between “Yin” and “Yan”.

In *The Woman Warrior*, ghost, on another level of meaning, also symbolizes “foreigner,” which is related to the Americans. Living in American culture, the unfamiliar ideology, languages and cultures make Chinese American feel isolated. As Kingston writes, “They would not tell us children because we had been born among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were ourselves ghost-like” (183). Chinese American children who were raised in America become part of ghost for the immigrant parents. As the second generation, Chinese American children get to know more about American culture which breeds them and educates them since they were

born, on the contrary, the Chinese culture is the one which is imposed by their immigrant parents. Calling the Americans as ghosts, in fact, shows the Chinese American parents' inner fear. For immigrant parents, American culture is the alien culture that they have to learn from the beginning since they will start their new life in a territory that doesn't belong to them. Consequently, they assume their children who are taught by "foreigners" are also "foreigners." The narrator, therefore, is caught between two different cultures which both nourish her.

The discussion reveals that ghosts show the Chinese roots, alien space and foreign culture in Kingston's novel. Thus, for Kingston, ghost does not link the Western and Eastern worlds; instead, it only enlarges the gap. Consequently, Kingston, as what her mother did, has to fight with the ghosts which carry the meaning of her Chinese heritage. Trying to negotiate between her Chinese past and American present, Kingston has to fight against her Chinese ancestors and find a position in American mainstream. Brave Orchid becomes Kingston's mentor in the hostile American society. She tries to fight against her position which has been marginalized. Though Kingston intends to apply her mother's experiences on dealing difficulties in America, she realizes that it does not work. As Kim denotes, the ghosts of *The Woman Warrior* "are not simply white people but 'shadowy figures from the past' or unanswered questions about the unexplained actions of Chinese, whites, and Chinese in America" (200). Kingston has to decide which ghosts to embrace and which to

exorcise. Kingston recognizes herself as a dehyphenated "Chinese American" and she makes "Chinese" as an adjective to modify "American". In this sense, it shows the fact that she identifies herself as an American but possesses Chinese heritage. In other words, she recognizes the value of her ethnicity, yet, she celebrates the hybrid identity. The concept is proofed in "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe." She is called Ho Chi Kuei. Ho Chi in Cantonese means "similar" or "like" and Kuei means ghosts. This term signifies the narrator's dilemma of choosing the dominant society or claiming her ethnic heritage. Lee points out that "Ho Chi Kuei is neither/nor as well as both/and, and at the same time, occupies the 'in-between' space" (115). This "in-betweenness" is a process of hybridization. Kingston, like her mother, survives among the "ghosts" and she claims to her mother that she has found "some places in this country that are ghost-free. And I think I belong here" (Woman 101). Kingston can find a proper position in American society and/or Chinese heritage. Therefore, Kingston is able to "translate her cross-cultural experience into words and transforms the supposedly derogatory meaning of Ho Chi Kuei into a more positive, hybrid identity" (Lee 116) through writing and representing the stories.

Ghost also appears in *The Hundred Secret Senses* as an alien space. The protagonist, Kwan, possesses "yin" eyes which endow her an ability of seeing ghosts. Nevertheless, in western culture who believes only in science, Kwan is a threat and a challenge to the scientific ideology. Consequently, Kwan is labeled as an

outsider. Her “otherness” is categorized as abnormal. The punishment comes along when the secret is revealed. When Kwan tells Olivia the secret that she can see the “yin” world, she is sent into asylum immediately and receives the shock treatment. In the scientific term, Kwan suffers “mental disorder.” Yet, Kwan’s “yin” eyes could not be explained with scientific sense. It is her secret senses that function as a power to give her inner strength. Kwan fights the imposing power by scientific world through her Chinese silent treatment. When Kwan was confined in the mental hospital, she “ ‘treat them like American ghosts—I don’t see them, don’t hear them, don’t speak to them. Soon they’ll know they can’t change me, why they must let me go’”(Hundred 17). The shock treatments did not cure her and make her become an “ordinary” person; rather, she feels the shock treatment “loosened my tongue so I could no longer stay silent as a fish. I became a country duck ...bragging about the World of Yin” (17). The shock treatments did not silence Kwan, on the contrary, it led Kwan to outspoke the secret. Although Yin world is still alien in scientific sense, it brings new sight to Olivia.

Yet, compared to Kingston’s ghost image, the image of ghosts in Amy Tan’s novel is friendly and human-like. As Olivia describes, “Her ghosts looked alive. They chatted about the good old days. They worried and complained” (56). Instead of a threat, ghosts for Amy Tan symbolize a space or a media to pass down the heritage and tradition. Ghosts connect the two worlds—“Yin” and “Yan,” furthermore, it is

the link between past and present. Kwan unveils the secret that Miss Banner who appears in the Yin world is Olivia and Nunumu is her last lifetime. “Kwan’s eyes are wet. ‘...I knew someday you would remember with me. I always wanted to show you I really was your loyal friend” (363). Kwan’s association between her “last lifetime” with “this lifetime” shows that reincarnation is possible. Reincarnation, in this sense, becomes possible because one receives the wisdom or experiences which are passed down from lots of people who are connected with he/she no matter in which lifetime. And Kwan’s ideology of reincarnation reinforces the significance of past which could be related to one’s ethnic heritage. Therefore, a person does not live alone; instead, one inherits spirit from his/her past and is obliged to recognize every lifetime of self. Consequently, death is not the end. It is the beginning of next lifetime, because each one has to pass down the wisdom. As Kwan explains, “Ending? You die, that’s not end story. That only mean story not finish” (377).

Also, at the end of the story, after Kwan vanishes in the cave, Olivia gives birth to a baby girl who likes to play the music box that Kwan left. It implies that the baby is Kwan’s next lifetime. Thus, love and wisdom will never disappear and carry on forever. Olivia testifies her awareness at the end:

I think Kwan intended to show me the world is not a place but the vastness of the soul. And the soul is nothing more than love, limitless, endless, all that moves

us toward knowing what is true. I once thought love was supposed to be nothing but bliss. I now know it is also worry and grief, hope and trust. And believing in ghosts—that's believing that love never dies. If people we love die, then they are lost only to our ordinary senses. If we remember, we can find them anytime with our hundred secret senses. (399)

With the wisdom and love that Kwan leaves, Olivia, now, has enough strength to live on and deal with all the difficulties.

Moreover, ghosts could be the reflection for the Eurocentric culture. In the assumption of western tradition, Yan /human territory and Yin/ghost territory are the binary oppositions. Yin could refer to China and Yan refers to America. In contrast to Yan world which is defined as a human territory, Yin is an unknown world that human beings dare not to cross. Consequently, when Yin world is marginalized, the Chinese ideology also becomes "otherness" that should be detested. Yet, Amy Tan, in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, contests the binary opposition between human and ghosts. Likewise, she protests the Orientalist binary opposition between "secret" China and "ordinary" America. Kwan exemplifies the traditional Chinese heritage, and on the opposite, Olivia represents the dominant Eurocentric culture. Olivia refuses not only Kwan's "Yin" world, but also her Chinese heritage. Her arrogant attitude parallels the arrogance of western culture which neglects the value and richness that different ethnicities may carry. "...Because I am not Chinese like Kwan. To

me, yin isn't Yan, and Yan isn't Yin" (277). Olivia's superiority makes her reject the ideology that Kwan tries to enlighten her; instead, Olivia insists on the binary opposition between "Yin" and "Yan", "East" and "West."

Yet, through Kwan's experiences of confrontation with ghosts, Tan presents Kwan as a spiritual guide of Olivia who suffers from dilemma of identifying herself. Kwan inspires Olivia to perceive a brand new perspective through the journey to China. The journey to China could be seen as a journey to rescue Olivia in her crisis. Kwan, as her name suggests in Chinese, can "see" the truth that lies under the mundane world. Kwan is a magical character herself. Her magic power comes from her childhood experience. She exchanges body with her friend when her body was crashed into pieces in Childhood. After that experience, like Brave Orchid, Kwan also can see ghosts with her "yin" eyes, and this enables her to communicate with ghosts. She does this by using her hundred secret senses, a potent mixture of remembering feeling, seeing and hearing. She knows "secret senses" that everyone possesses, yet only she knows how to uncover the ability. She teaches Olivia how to retrieve her "secret senses":

Secret sense not really secret. We just call secret because everyone has, only forgotten. Same kind of sense like ant feet, elephant trunk, dog nose, cat whisker, whale ear, bat wing, clam shell, snake tongue, little hair on flower. Many things, but mix up together. (113)

Furthermore, Kwan also indicates the

essence of the secret sense:

Memory, seeing, hearing, feeling, all come together, then you know something true in your heart. Like one sense, I don't know how say, maybe sense of tingle. You know this: Tingly bones mean rain coming, refreshen mind. Tingly skin on arms, something scaring you, close you up, still pop out lots a goose bump. Tingly skin top a you brain, oh-oh, now you know something true, leak into your heart, still you don't want believe it. (114)

Secret senses, thus, arises out of memory, feeling and seeing, and remembrance revived by the stories told. One has to retrieve his/her past in order to know the wisdom and experiences that were passed down by his/her ancestors. Through remembrance, the past and the heritage can endow Chinese Americans strength in a being marginalized world.

Therefore, Ghost functions as deconstructing the binary opposite between Yin and Yan, East and West. As Lee suggests, "The alien space opens up new possibilities to eschew oppositional thinking and offers a different strategy to defend against the appropriation and interpellation of dominant cultural hegemony" (106). Kwan tries to negotiate dominant ideologies promoted by her family members in language, culture and reality. However, born and reared in China possesses Chinese cultural tradition, Kwan suffers difficulties to assimilate into American mainstream culture. Through Yin world, she can find the inner strength to survive in America where all the kids

exclude her because her "abnormal" behaviors. Instead of assimilating into mainstream culture, Kwan exhibits her uniqueness in diverse ways—her faltering English, Chinese logic and her yin eyes. Her "differences" did not silence her; rather, she is more outspoken and more sensitive than others. Her "differences" reinforces "the infinity and irreducibility of the Other" (Liu). As Zhang indicates, "The dominant culture can neither assimilate the other ethnic minorities nor efface the differences among the ethnic groups" (46). Kwan's experiences not only blur the boundary between "Yin" and "Yan" world, but also between the Western and Oriental world. Ghost, thus, symbolizes the link between reality and imagination, the past and present; furthermore, ghosts provide the function of deconstructing the binary opposition. Kwan's perception of Yin and Yan world blur the boundary between the two. This fact may make Kwan as an outsider, yet it also reinforces her power of deconstructing Eurocentric ideologies. At the same time, it also elevates her as a foreseer who helps Olivia resolve the problems she suffers.

Olivia is unable to comprehend the power of her secret senses until the journey to China. Olivia's journey to China is identified as hero/heroine's quest for self. Joseph Campbell finds the deep structure of the heroic myth unvarying in its three components—birth, alienation, and reintegration. The components themselves clearly indicate "Myth as process" (Hero 30). Campbell in *Primitive Mythology* also indicates the function of myth as "process" or "way" mythic ritual can lead to the

transformation of the individual which dissociates him from his historical situation and takes him into some sort of “ineffable experience” (121-122). The process of the hero released the hero from the social system into the psyche, where he is put in touch with both the soul and its world. In this sense, the hero amplifies his perceptions of experience and deepens his realizations of that experience. Moreover, heroes are always special people who are marked or defined in such a way as to set them apart from their society. Thus, making a hero as an orphan is the most poignant way to define the hero who solves the mystery of who he really is and regains family ties that have been broken.

Olivia, like the prototype of a hero, embarks on a quest for self-discovery. Olivia is not an outright orphan. Yet, she loses her father and her mother is always absent. Kwan is the substitute mother for her. She is orphaned metaphysically. She finally achieves identity through a testing of her individual strengths and through a discovery of her cultural heritage. When she arrives China, the confrontation of Chinese and American culture makes Olivia feel panic. “...in China, where I have no control, where everything is unpredictable, totally insane” (292). She is incapable of controlling everything with her Eurocentric and self-centered ideology. Her western ideology cannot dominate the Chinese matters. This is the first time that she does not feel confident and superior to Kwan. Instead, Kwan can be adept in every environment. Thus, Kwan, as a spiritual mentor, leads her to the way of discovery her ethnic heritage. When Kwan

reveals the fact that they were friends in the last lifetime, she comes to realize Kwan’s Yin world and it seems for her that she can see the Yin world. Dissociating with her Eurocentric-ideology, the secret senses come into her: “And I listen, no longer afraid of Kwan’s secrets. She’s offered me her hand. I’m taking it freely. Together we’re flying to the World of Yin” (363).

Olivia’s awareness and epiphany further comes from the secret caves in the mountain. In the passage to the caves, Olivia knows the importance of love when her husband, Simon, gets lost and she realizes what Kwan always want to instruct her after Kwan disappears. Coming out from the cave (literally can be seen as a womb), Olivia gains her rebirth. “...I’m glad that she[Kwan] suggested we come to China,”(318) said Olivia. Now, Olivia acquires her own secret senses to face her crisis. “I now believe truth lies not in logic but in hope, both past and future. I believe hope can surprise you. It can survive the odds against it, all sorts of contradictions, and certainly any skeptic’s rationale of relying on proof through fact” (398). The remembrance or recognition of the past is of value only if there is concern for the present and thus for the future. Indeed, one respects the past to inform the present so as to will into being a future.

Ghosts play an important part in both Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan’s *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Through Ghosts, both writers endow Chinese American authority of voicing. Although ghosts symbolize the marginalize position, both writers positively recreate a unique identity separate from the ghost position.

With the reconciliation of the conflict between two cultures, Kingston deconstructs Chinese tradition and legends and establishes a new tradition for Chinese Americans. Amy Tan, in her different way, elevates the value of ethnic heritage and devalues the Eurocentric culture. Despite the difficulties they suffer, both writers achieve their hybrid identity.

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華美女性小說中的超自然力量

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摘要

本論文旨在探討華美文學中，女性作家如何在寫作技巧中置入超自然力量，以期找到華美女性發聲的媒介及力量。在譚恩美的「百種神祕的感覺」和湯婷婷的「女戰士」小說中超自然力量的巧妙運用，讀者清楚的看到，「鬼」並非可怕的形象，取而代之，成為華美女性擺脫傳統束縛及種族壓迫的一個「他者空間」，藉由這個空間，華美女性得以找到發聲的管道，顛覆傳統的枷鎖，對抗官方故事，訴說真實的故事。

關鍵字：超自然力量，發聲，他者空間