

Sisterhood across Cultures — With Reference to Chen Ran's and Amy Tan's Fiction

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Abstract: Sisterhood, which is defined in this paper as a continuum of a close bond among women that accommodates both female friendship and female same-sex love, is a major motif in the fiction of contemporary Chinese woman writer Chen Ran and Chinese American writer Amy Tan. In their story telling from female perspectives, both writers touch upon, although with different emphasis, sisterhood as a source of women's consolation and salvation. This paper conducts a thematic comparison of the two writers' portrait of sisterhood, the affirmation of which is a powerful means to revolt against compulsory heterosexuality prescribed by a male-supremacist norm. An analysis of Chinese and American socio-historical realities and literary representations on sisterhood is also carried out to account for the variations of the role sisterhood plays in the fiction by Chen Ran and Amy Tan.

Keywords: Comparative literature; sisterhood; Chen Ran; Amy Tan

1. Introduction

Against the background of globalization featured by cultural diversity and cross-cultural communication, comparative literature is playing an ever-increasingly important role in bridging the cultural gap and deepening our understanding of the uniqueness within and the commonality between different cultures. This paper focuses on a comparative study of sisterhood portrayed by Chen Ran and Amy Tan in their respective fictional world. Though living in different socio-cultural backgrounds, both writers attempt to reclaim women's identities through their heroines' self-empowerment and female bonding that constitute a real challenge to institutionalized phallocentrism and heteronormativity.

As the research subjects of this paper, both Chen Ran and Amy Tan are influential contemporary women writers who rose to fame in the 1990s and are still active in their respective cultures. Chen Ran (1962-) is one of China's avant-garde feminist writers whose works have drawn heated discussions among Chinese critics. Her major works include novellas "A Toast to the Past"¹ (*Yu wangshi ganbei*, 1991), "Nowhere to Bid Farewell" (*Wuchu gaobie*, 1992), short stories "Sunshine Between the Lips" (*Zuichun lide yangguang*, 1992), "Breaking Open" (*Pokai*, 1995) and the latest novel *A Private Life* (*Siren shenghuo*, 1996), winning her

¹ The novella was adapted into a film *Yesterday's Wine*, which premiered at the "Fourth World Conference on Women" held in Beijing in 1995, bringing Chen Ran's work to the attention of the feminist arena for the first time.

the first “Contemporary Chinese Female Writer’s Award” in 1998.² In comparison, Amy Tan is a renowned Chinese American woman writer enjoying great reputation and popularity among American readers as well as readers in other countries of the world. Although Tan is ten years older than Chen, she embarked on her literary career not until she was 33. Since the publication of her first novel *The Joy Luck Club* in 1989, which won enthusiastic reviews and stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for eight months, she had created successive selling miracles with the novels *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001) and the latest *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005). Like Chen, Tan also proceeds from female stories and femininity as the cornerstone of her writing focus. Her novels have been translated into 36 languages and her first novel *The Joy Luck Club* had been adapted into a Hollywood film that won her world acclaim.

Besides, both Chen and Tan take an active stance for cross-cultural communication, representing a higher status of women of Chinese origin and their enhanced awareness for a louder voice in the world arena. All of these factors make a comparative study of Chen Ran and Amy Tan not only valid, but also meaningful for a thorough understanding of women’s inner world, their social struggles and attempts to reconstruct the female identity.

2. Sisterhood Is Powerful

Either in a radical form of lesbianism, or a mild manifestation of female friendship, the concept of sisterhood has been an issue of common concern among feminist theorists and practitioners. It provides an alternative to women in their pursuit of spiritual independence. By turning to their female allies suffering from the same plight, women can truly enjoy freedom and equality in addition to appreciation and comfort from each other.

In *The Bonds of Womanhood*, Nancy F. Cott dedicates one chapter to “sisterhood” in her discussion on the social derivation of “womanhood” in New England from 1780-1835. While the accessible diaries and letters of young women from the late eighteenth century suggest “a pattern of reliance on female friendship for emotional expression and security” (1977, p. 173), by the early nineteenth century, female friendship became a way of life when it assumed a new significance of forming “peer relationships” (pp. 185-187). As Cott elucidates, the nineteenth century is an era when relations between equals supersede hierarchical relations “as the desired norms of human interaction” (p. 187). Since women were not regarded as peers of men, they would turn to their own sex as true peers and value female friendship in their pursuit of equality and individuality. It is also acknowledged by Cott that women’s attachment to each other symbolizes the construction of their gender identity. Discovering their gender-prescribed “talents, needs, outlooks, inclinations,” women realize that their best chance to escape male-defined inferiority is to uphold and celebrate, through a strong female bond, their distinctive gender attributes, which is no lesser than, or even better than those of men (p. 190).

² All of Chen Ran’s works are written in Chinese. The titles listed here are the author’s translation with the Chinese titles indicated through Chinese *pinyin* in brackets. So far, only three works of fiction by Chen Ran have been translated into English, namely, “Sunshine between the Lips,” “Breaking Open” and *A Private Life* (2004).

Although women's affinity and bonding with each other has been in existence for centuries, it is kept silent by the male-enforced norm of heterosexuality, which is denaturalized by lesbian feminism that gained its popularity in the 1970s and early 1980s. In 1980, Adrienne Rich published "Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence," generally considered as a manifesto for sisterhood. In this paper, Rich explores the reasons why women's choice of sisterly relations among themselves is "crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise" and why a discussion on lesbian existence is left out of most writings including feminist scholarship (p. 131). In response to the debate over lesbianism that surfaced to public attention since the sexual revolution and the advent of second wave feminism in the 1970s, Rich proposes a continuum of lesbian existence to replace the clear-cut distinction between lesbian and heterosexual women. For Rich, all relationships between women comprise a lesbian element, whether a woman claims a lesbian identity or not:

I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support, [...] we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology. (italicized in the original, pp. 135-136)

According to Rich, the introduction of the lesbian continuum could enable women to unite and seek power from each other and "discover the erotic in female terms", which is by no means confined to bodily experience, but is interpreted as an omnipotent energy in the sharing of physical, emotional and psychic joy that empowers women to shake off "resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial" imposed by men (Lorde, 1984, as cited in Rich, 1996, p. 136). Rich also cautions that the denial of reality and visibility to "women's passion for women, women's choice of women as allies, life companions, and community" under the lie of compulsory female heterosexuality has incurred an immeasurable loss "to the power of all women *to change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other*" (italicized in the original, p. 139). Rich's elaboration on a lesbian continuum provides a theoretical basis for the generalized interpretation of sisterhood in this dissertation. When we extend our understanding of sisterhood from a narrow sense of female friendship to a broader concept of any forms of female bonding including what has been defined as lesbianism by a compulsory heterosexual mentality, then more women would be united so as to realize their shared fate and seek a more equal relationship with their male counterparts.

In *Unpacking Queer Politics*, another lesbian feminist Sheila Jeffreys places a paramount emphasis on woman-loving to be fundamental to feminism (2003, p. 19). Citing Charlotte Bunch's ideas on woman-identified lesbian existence³ and Janice Raymond's elaboration on

³ According to Bunch and Hinojosa (2000), a lesbian is woman-identified, since her sense of self and energies center around woman and she dedicates herself to other women for political, economical, emotional and physical support (p. 332, as cited in Jeffreys, 2003, p. 20).

the coined notion of “Gyn/affection”,⁴ Jeffreys concludes that for the survival of a feminist movement, solidarity of the oppressed through women’s love for one another is a necessary basis for women to identify and reject atrocities against them (p. 20). Another key element for lesbian feminism, as Jeffreys summarizes, is that lesbianism is based on choice and resistance instead of sexual relationships; it is more like the “romantic friends” of the nineteenth century who prioritize affection and companionship (p. 22).

Be it “lesbian continuum” in Rich’s analysis, “Gyn/affection” proposed by Raymond or lesbianism according to Jeffreys’ understanding, the major concern of lesbian feminists is to subvert the compulsory mechanism of heterosexuality by discovering and utilizing the hidden power of women in sisterly bond, or what the current author categorizes as sisterhood. For postmodern feminists, the power of sisterhood is also one of the central themes in their deconstructive challenge to established norms and binary oppositions. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1999) has an extensive discussion on Monique Wittig, who envisions lesbianism as a political strategy to launch “a full-scale refusal of” normative heterosexuality (p. 158). Although Butler cautions against Wittig’s radicalism that might mislead feminism into another form of binary oppositions by overemphasizing the power of homosexuality that assumes instead of overthrows the role of heterosexuality, she seems to tally with Wittig on the point that non-heterosexual women and men encompass a promise to “transcend the binary restriction on sex imposed by the system of compulsory heterosexuality” (p. 26).

Luce Irigaray, another postmodern feminist, also confirms the power of sisterhood for women’s self-salvation in a phallogocentric world. In her famous work *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985b), Irigaray deems lesbian and lesbian relationships as the only alternative to “the hegemonic phallogocentric model” that should be harshly condemned (Holmlund, 1991, p. 287). In *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985a), Irigaray contests the inability of Freudian psychoanalysis “to conceptualize women except as the ‘same’ as men” (ibid.). For Irigaray, by masquerading and playing with masculinity and femininity of psychoanalytic discourse, a lesbian demonstrates both notions as constructions and performances. The shift to sisterhood, according to Irigaray, not only challenges the male-defined gender identity, but also grants women “exhilarating pleasure” when they partner with someone like themselves (1985b, p. 103). As Rosi Braidotti notes, the realization of a sisterly bond among women “is the starting point for feminist consciousness in that it seals a pact among women,” the moment of which serves as a cornerstone to articulate “feminist position or standpoint” (1996, p. 415).

Proceeding from a theoretical argument on sisterhood as a means of female empowerment along western feminist school of thought, the author attempts to explore literary representations on sisterhood in Chen Ran’s and Amy Tan’s works about women of Chinese origin, a field rarely touched by Western researchers but nevertheless worth studying in this globalized era of communication. Similar to their Western counterparts, for heroines in the fiction of Chen Ran and Amy Tan, when what they experience in a male-world is tyranny and disappointment, they

⁴ Raymond (1986) invents the concept of “Gyn/affection” to refer to women’s passion for each other, or “the experience of profound attraction for the original vital Self and the movement toward other vital women” for full power (p. 7, as cited in Jeffreys, 2003, p. 20).

naturally turn to their female friends, from whom they realize not only their shared fate of male suppression, but also the power of sisterhood to rediscover their shining points and reconstruct an emerging self. Reaching for each other, women in the fiction of the two writers are no longer afraid, hopeless, numb or insignificant, because sisterhood is powerful.

3. Sisterhood in Chen Ran's and Amy Tan's Fiction

As an important source of female power and origin of self-discovery, sisterhood, in its various forms from female alliance to same-sex love, is an indispensable component in fiction by Chen Ran and Amy Tan. Based on the above literature review on sisterhood, this paper aims to address the following two research questions through close-reading methodology and from the perspectives of postmodern feminism and cultural studies: First, How are the thematic similarities and differences of sisterhood demonstrated in the fiction of Chen Ran and Amy Tan? Second, How to account for such similarities and differences from Chinese and Western literary traditions on similar themes?

3.1. Substitution of Maternal Love

For heroines in the two writers' fiction, a trusted female friend is where they can find true peace of mind and an extended form of maternal love during crisis in life. While sisterhood in Chen Ran's works could heal the mental wounds inflicted by male hegemony, a bond with women suffering from the turmoil of war in Tan's novels promises a brighter future of a dream coming true.

In Chen Ran's representative novel *A Private Life* (2004), after the heroine, a teenage girl Ni Niuniu commits the appalling "crime" of cutting her father's trousers as a way of venting her resentment to patriarchal dominance, she runs away from home and wanders aimlessly in the street. Feeling deserted in a hostile world inhabited by people like "wolves in human form," a world where she "could neither exist as an independent individual nor change [herself] into a female wolf" (p. 37), Niuniu suddenly thinks of Widow Ho, the neighbor with "wonderful, enchanting voice," always sitting in the courtyard, waiting for her to return home from school. The moment Niuniu entered Ho's home and moved toward her extended arms, her "agitation amazingly began to subside" and a feeling of complicity arose from the soles of her feet (p. 38). This young widow ten years older than Niuniu could always generate a fantastic sense of conspiracy and rekindle a faint hope in her, no matter what she did (pp. 38-39). As Niuniu describes the role of Ho in her life:

She was a kind of light in my otherwise bland inner life. In her I had found a warm and close friend, a special kind of woman who could take the place of my mother. When she was near me, even if we were silent, a fragrant warm feeling of security and gentleness enclosed me. This feeling was a kind of intangible glow that bathed or illumined my skin. (p. 78)

From Widow Ho, Niuniu finds the kind of love and understanding she wishes to receive

from her mother, who is victimized and silenced by male tyranny. In this female bond without any interference of men, Niuniu could enjoy temporary relief both psychologically and physically. After receiving an injection when she has fever, Niuniu is taken care of by Widow Ho when her mother goes for work. Like a loving mother, Ho comforts Niuniu to forget the pain and lightly rubs the swelling with her fingers. Intoxicated by Ho's soothing touch, Niuniu describes her special feeling for Ho: "[T]he skin of her entire body bespoke a tender readiness to rush to me at a moment's notice, to watch over me, to protect me, and to drive away any pain or misfortune that threatened me" (p. 83). When Niuniu has fears over her mother's health, who suffers from breathing difficulties due to unknown reason, her feet carry her directly to Widow Ho's. Relaxing against Ho's shoulder, Niuniu remembers a familiar scene: "I knew this shoulder very well. I had been enchanted by its fragrance ever since I was a tiny girl. It seemed as if these soft but strong shoulders had always been the keepers of my body, giving me support as I grew toward maturity" (p. 142). Afraid of being separated from the maternal embrace of Ho, Niuniu clasps her arms "tightly around her neck" and utters her strong desire for Ho: "I can't [...] live without you" (ibid.).

In her discussion about the psychodynamics of the family, Chodorow explains the need of women to be loved and to "reexperience the sense of dual unity they had with their mother" (1999, pp. 199-200). For women, especially those raised in families that are "organized around women's mothering and male dominance," they tend to look elsewhere for love and emotional gratification because of men's difficulties with love and their own relational history with their mothers (p. 200). According to Chodorow, one way to resolve and recreate the mother-daughter bond and define women's relational capacities and selfhood is through "the creation and maintenance of important personal relations with other women" (ibid.). Living under the constant threat of her father's domineering existence and submitting to the humiliation of being isolated and harassed by her teacher Mr. Ti, Niuniu longs for a maternal love as her spiritual sanctuary. While her rebellious nature finds no hope of salvation in her mother's compliance with male ruling, as evident in the latter's panic-stricken reaction to the destroyed trousers and her respectful obedience to Ti's reprimand of her daughter, Niuniu directs her love to Widow Ho, who represents both a maternal affection embracing Niuniu with warmth and security and an independent identity free from male definition.

In the novels of Amy Tan, sisterhood also plays the role as a substitute for the lost maternal love. In the end of *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Jing-mei – one of the four American daughters of Chinese immigrant mothers – describes the miraculous feelings after being reunited with her two half-sisters in China, fulfilling her mother's lifelong dream. When she sees somebody waving to her, Jing-mei has a strange feeling of familiarity: "I know it's not my mother, yet it is the same look. [...] As soon as I get beyond the gate, we run toward each other, all three of us embracing, all hesitations and expectations forgotten. [...] 'Mama, Mama,' we all murmur, as if she is among us" (p. 287). In Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), when Winnie realizes that she is separated with her friend Helen in the crowd as they flee for shelter from Japanese bombing, she can't help crying in desperation "Ma! Ma!" Those words come out of Winnie's throat so naturally even though Winnie has been abandoned by her mother long time ago. Yet as Winnie recounts, "I was walking through the crowd, calling for my mother, looking for Helen" (p. 216). When Winnie almost loses hope, assuming the death of Helen, her female ally comes

to her rescue. Riding up to Winnie on a pedicab she takes by force from a man, Helen hands Winnie a stick, the leg of a stool, to beat away any man who tries to steal the cab from their sisterly oasis. Later in the novel, when Helen promises to help Winnie escape her torturous marriage, Winnie throws her arms around Helen “like a child against her mother” (p. 310). A similar scene occurs in Tan’s *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001). Reading the letter from her half-sister Gao Ling, who arrives at the U.S. earlier and takes great trouble to arrange for Lu Ling’s immigration, Lu Ling feels like “a child now being guided by a worried mother” (p. 296). When Lu Ling suffers from Alzheimer’s disease, it is Gao Ling again who takes care of Lu Ling attentively. Miss Grutoff, the nurse and head mistress of the American orphanage, also embodies maternal and sisterly love in the eyes of the other female members: “We love Miss Grutoff. She is mother and sister to us all” (p. 274).

In both writers’ fiction, sisterhood in the form of female trust and friendship injects the heroines with maternal love and a strong will to struggle in an oppressive world no longer alone. As Irigaray clarifies, “the ethical order of love cannot take place among women” without the “verticality” of the mother-daughter bond (Irigaray, 1984, p. 106, as cited in Hirsch, 1989, p. 43).

3.2. Shared Dreams, Shared Secrets

A striking similarity between Chen Ran and Amy Tan in their portrayal of sisterhood is woman identification realized through the heroines’ shared dreams and secrets with their female friends as mirroring models or the ideal ego of themselves. As Adrienne Rich argues, “[w]oman identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, curtailed and contained under the institution of heterosexuality” (1996, p. 139). Sisterhood is like a mirror for the female characters in the two writers’ fiction, reflecting each other’s inner desires, life experiences and reformative power. It is in sisterhood that women are starting to recover their lost self identity.

In Chen Ran’s *A Private Life* (2004), the intergenerational friendship between Niuniu and Widow Ho is characterized by shared interest and commonality. From Niuniu’s childhood, she has been aware of Ho’s love of reading. But it is not until Niuniu gradually grows her interest in reading and talks more with Ho that she realizes how much they have in common. They would “spend hours discussing literature and life,” both fascinated by foreign writers like “Borges, Joyce, Kafka, Poe, and Faulkner”, especially female writers like Yi Lei⁵ out of a shared “feminine view of life” (pp. 119-120). Ho’s husband dies abruptly of a mysterious fever, leaving Ho as a young widow “before she has time to get pregnant” or lay bare the truth about his affair with another woman (p. 41). Worn down by diabetes and living on a disability allowance, Ho deems Niuniu as “her salvation and her future” (p. 35). Niuniu symbolizes Ho’s dream

⁵ Yi Lei (1951-) is a contemporary Chinese poet who rose to fame in the 1980s with a series of poems reflecting her feminist stance and a bold search for one’s individuality in modernity. Her representative work “A Single Woman’s Bedroom” is composed of fourteen poems that explore the unique experience of women who are determined to blaze a trail of their spiritual selves.

to be vigorous in power and rebellious in spirit. It is through Niuniu that Ho sees hope in her life, and her lonely soul finds harmonious resonance in a symphony of sisterhood. For Niuniu, Widow Ho is the shadow behind her on the horizon of time and seems to be her accomplice in every step she takes. As Kay Schaffer and Xianlin Song state, Niuniu's relationship with Ho is suggestive of "Irigaray's fluid feminine world of alterity beyond masculine boundaries, a world of playful jouissance" (2006, p. 167). Widow Ho is like what Irigaray describes as the speculum that would bring to light female experience omitted from the symbolic patriarchal order. To Niuniu, Ho is "a labyrinth, the outer form of a cave" she has fallen into (*A Private Life*, 2004, p. 35), "a house made of mirrors" that belongs to the innermost being of Niuniu and in which she could always see herself, no matter where she is (p. 122).

Like heroines in Chen's fiction, the Joy Luck mothers in Tan's novel are linked by unspeakable tragedies of war and a shared dream to start their life anew. The four Joy Luck sisters are all trapped in dire threats of Japanese invasion. But instead of waiting passively for deaths "with proper somber faces," they decide to "hold parties and pretend each week had become the new year" for them to "forget past wrongs" and hope for joy and luck (*JLC*⁶, 1989, p. 25). Each week, one of the women would host the feast for good fortune: "dumplings shaped like silver money ingots, long rice needles for long life, boiled peanuts for conceiving sons, and [...] many good-luck oranges for a plentiful, sweet life" (p. 23). Although these women have either lost homes and fortunes or are separated from their families, in the Joy Luck Club that binds them together, they put on a defiant gesture against adversity by playing mah jong together, telling the best stories to cheer each other up, enjoying delicacies and chatting late into night in loud laughter. Their weekly ritual that is sustained even after their immigration to the U.S., keeps alive their shared dreams of leading an empowered life.

Like the Joy Luck mothers, the same dream for a better life and a shared fate of suffering and misfortune seal Winnie and Helen together in lifelong friendship that is sustained even after their immigration to America. Although not related by blood and having disagreements at times, Winnie and Helen are "related by fate" and "joined by debts" to an extent even closer than sisters. As Winnie says, "I have kept her secrets. She has kept mine. And we have a kind of loyalty that has no word in this country" (*KGW*, 1991, p. 73). The flower shop the two women cofounded twenty-five years ago right after the death of Winnie's husband and Helen's loss of her job, symbolizes their "dream that would replace the disasters" (p. 14). From the pavilion where Winnie and Helen reveal secrets about the shared fate of women to the flower shop that carries their dream for a better life, it is in sisterhood that women find out the truth about their objectified status in a male-dominant world and set out to seek spiritual independence in defiance of the patriarchal norm.

3.3. Reconstructing Female Identity in Sisterhood

In the fiction by both Chen Ran and Amy Tan, the heroines resort to sisterhood to take refuge from the harsh reality, provide mutual help in time of difficulty and share dreams and

⁶ *JLC* stands for Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* and *KGW* is the abbreviation for Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*.

secrets with affinitive understanding and a growing sense of self-identity. Although such a sisterly bond is sometimes disrupted by misunderstandings or betrayed because of social pressures from heterosexual normativity in the works of the two writers, both Chen and Tan tend to associate, with different emphasis, sisterhood with the heroines' reconstruction of their female identities. While Chen Ran assumes a more radical stance by emphasizing sisterhood as a means for sexual initiation and deconstructing gender dichotomy, in Amy Tan's novels, sisterhood serves as a catalyst for women's awakening awareness for independence and self-determination.

In Chen Ran's novel *A Private Life*, Niuniu's transition from an ignorant girl, who mistakes her budding breast for a sign of breast cancer, to becoming a woman with clear gender consciousness is facilitated by her friend Yi Qiu, the only one in the class who enjoys talking to Niuniu. Three years older than Niuniu, Yi Qiu is sexually mature and attractive. Although crippled as a result of polio sequelae, she "[takes] pleasure in her own sensuality," having no desire of concealing her full breasts that tremble with each step she takes and swaying her hips in a suggestive and erotic way (p. 57). It is firmly believed by Niuniu that it is Yi Qiu who has "initiated [her] passage into womanhood" (p. 68). In the chapter entitled "The Inner Room⁷," Chen Ran gives a detailed description of Niuniu's emotional turbulence when she catches sight of "a blood-soaked wad" amid the waste toilet paper in Yi Qiu's bathroom. Although Niuniu has witnessed similar scenes before, she used to think it irrelevant to her as it concerns only adults. When her companion Yi Qiu has the same problem, Niuniu couldn't help relating herself to the bleeding symptom that represents something unique to women. It is in Yi Qiu that Niuniu realizes the potentiality of her own maturing womanhood.

As stated by Julia Kristeva, the menstrual blood is a typical example of the pre-lingual notion of the "object," which is beyond the symbolic law of the Father:

[It] stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. (1982, p. 71)

The abjection of women's menstrual blood by the dominant patriarchal ideology is out of male necessity to expel the feminine threat the blood represents. According to Kristeva, women's menstrual blood reminds men of the violent and chaotic distortion they have been through at birth. For the males, the idea that once in their lives they were embedded in their mothers' body and controlled by the maternal power frightens them and must be dispelled in order to assert male subjectivity. In other words, men's dread of the female body and their

⁷ In the epigraph of this chapter, Chen Ran provides an explanation for the choice of the title. In Chinese, the "inner room" is also an addressing term for women. Metaphorically comparing the "inner room" with the female vagina, a wound "that comes along with birth, that others are not allowed to touch," Chen goes on to write in the novel, pointing out a fact commonly ignored: "Our maturation process involves our gradual acquiescence to and our seeking for and ultimate acceptance of 'entry.' During the process of seeking, our girlhood ends and we enter womanhood" (p. 66).

refusal to acknowledge their maternal origin is determined by a fear of the splitting subject and the confusion of identities. Chen Ran's focus on the abject, namely Yi Qiu's menstrual blood, as a sign of Niuniu's sexual awakening could be interpreted as the writer's attempt to deconstruct the dominant discourse of patriarchy that denies female sexuality. Contrary to traditional understanding of the menstrual blood as something filthy and abhorrent, in Niuniu's eyes, it is mysterious and beautiful at the same time: her heart "pounded wildly," the red color "was like a budding flower that had burst into blossom hidden among a heap of white paper" (p. 67). Appreciating and embracing the subversive power of the female sexuality, passed through a magical link of sisterhood, Niuniu sets out to reclaim her repressed feminine subjectivity just like Yi Qiu.

If Niuniu's sisterly relationship with Yi Qiu helps her develop a sense of female sexuality, Miss Dai Er, the heroine in Chen's "Breaking Open," is enlightened by her female friend Yunnan, homophonically meaning "Fallen Male," to deconstruct the concept of gender difference. When describing the timidity of Dai Er, Yunnan first compares Dai to "a doe in a forest riddled with traps, a she-goat doomed to be slaughtered for a feast, a domesticated she-wolf who is howling her song of distress everywhere" ("Breaking Open", 2001, pp. 49-50). But at second thought, Yunnan drops all the female qualifiers in front of these words, uttering her rejection of the negative connotations related to the word "female": "stupidity, weakness, passivity, and powerlessness" (p. 50). Correcting her previous diction, Yunnan rephrases her comment on Dai Er's "natural and unrestrained charm" as carrying an air of "little-brother-like kid sister" or "kid-sister-like little brother" (ibid.).

Yunnan's insightful remarks that challenge the naturalized gender norms fit in with the ideas of Judith Butler. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler deconstructs the notion of gender as cultural and ideological constructs. According to Butler, "[t]he heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine,' where these are understood as expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female'" (1999, p. 23). Therefore, certain types of "identities" in which "gender does follow from sex" cannot exist in a cultural matrix that only allows intelligible gender identity (pp. 23-24). Taking a subversive approach, Butler argues that one's gender is constituted through performative acts instead of remaining solid and stable. The gender "woman," likewise, should be considered "an ongoing discursive practice" open to "intervention and resignification" (p. 43). From this perspective, Yunnan's final choice of words of "little-brother-like kid sister" or "kid-sister-like little brother" embodies a similar subversive act called for by Butler to trouble the gender and constitutes a fluidity of identities.

The novella centers on the two women's preparation for a women's association truly free of gender dichotomy and discrimination. Aiming at bringing together all the talented women as sisters, the association is named "Breaking Open" instead of the other alternative "The Second Sex," since the later version still implies a confirmation of men as the first sex. Experiencing a rebirth after an imagined air crash in her dream, Dai Er finally gets hold of her own desiring identity and utters a loud proclamation of sisterhood to Yunnan, "I want you to go home with me! I need to feel at home, I need to have somebody to face the world with" (p. 71).

In contrast to Chen Ran's prioritization of sisterhood as a crucial element in the heroines' construction of their self identities that counteract the heterosexual constraints on women,

in Amy Tan's novels, sisterhood functions as a driving force for the female characters to change from a submissive and feeble-minded woman to a strong-willed individual resolute in pursuing the self-defined happiness. Take *The Kitchen God's Wife* as an example; it is under the influence of her female friends, especially Helen, that Winnie gradually develops her own identity consciousness. Despite being Winnie's best friend and fellow sufferer, Helen is totally different from Winnie in terms of personality. Unlike Winnie who resigns to everything without questioning, Helen "twists things around to her way of thinking" and contradicts everything Winnie says (*KGW*, p. 192). Growing stronger under the influence of Helen in her attitude towards life and marriage, Winnie gradually learns to rebel against her husband Wen Fu's spiritual enslavement. She insists on saying that Wen Fu's favorite dish of sweet cabbage tastes bitter, even at the cost of being forced to eat the same and only dish for two weeks. The strike ends with the ultimate success of Winnie, whose stomach "prove[s] stronger than his temper" (p. 282). Though the incident seems meaningless, it has special meaning for Winnie: "If I didn't fight, wouldn't that be like admitting my life was finished?" (*ibid.*). Gradually, Winnie starts to change her attitude from a pessimistic outlook scolded by Helen to one with confidence and hope.

From the above analysis, we can infer that although both Chen Ran and Amy Tan portray sisterhood as an extension of maternal love, a source of complementarity and a mirror of commonality, the two have different priorities when it comes to the role of sisterhood in the heroines' identity construction. Compared with Tan's association of sisterhood with the heroines' matrilineal heritage and a realization of their true values as an independent individual, sisterhood in Chen's fiction functions as a catalyst for the protagonists' sexual awakening and a vague implication of lesbian eroticism. To account for such difference, it might be helpful if we take a closer look at the cultural particularities and literary representations on sisterhood in China and the United States respectively.

3.4. Acceptance of Sisterhood: A Cross-cultural Comparison

Tracing China's modern and contemporary socio-historical realities and literary traditions, we may better understand the evolution of Chinese academic contentions on sisterhood, which constitute an important motif in Chen Ran's writing. As a matter of fact, Chinese culture has been relatively tolerant of sisterhood in history. Because of the common practice of polygamy in ancient Chinese culture until late Qing Dynasty, women's affectionate relationship with each other, either among concubines or servant girls, was not only publicly allowed, but rather encouraged for the sake of maintaining familial and social stability. In *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China*, Tze-lan Sang (2003) cites two studied cases of sisterhood societies in China, one formed by peasant silk workers in Shunde, a rural area in Guangdong province during the early nineteenth century and the other formed by young widows in Chuansha area near Shanghai in the early twentieth century. The sisterhood at Shunde was formed by "self-wedded women" (*zishunü*) who vowed to remain single and lived in Buddhist vegetarian halls self-sufficiently. For young widows in Chuansha, they formed sisterhood while making a living in cotton spinning and weaving. Both forms of sisterhood are characterized by "[t]heir affiliation with lay Buddhist sects, their independent income, and their desire to

live outside the traditional family system” (Honig, 1986, p. 214). These sworn sisters pooled financial resources for emergencies. Some would forge emotional or sexual bonds with each other, while some female couples or single women would adopt daughters to carry on the tradition.

Unlike male homosexuality that was demonized and socially denounced, “emotional and physical intimacies” between women were not considered “an object of moral admonition,” since the Confucian doctrine of female chastity neither criminalizes female same-sex eroticism nor mentions such desires at all (Sang, 2003, p. 21). Sisterhood among women, either in the form of spiritual longings or physical contacts did not constitute “a significant source of anxiety for men;” instead, it was appropriated by the “male polygamous imagination [...] either to enhance or to collaborate with male desire for female bodies” (ibid.). The subject of female same-sex desires could be found in the Kunqu opera of “Cherishing a Fragrant Companion” (Lianxiang Ban) written by Li Yu⁸ and Pu Songling’s *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*,⁹ to name just a few.

However, it should be noted that the indulgence in sisterhood as granted by the traditional Chinese culture is not a cause of celebration, but rather a testimony of women’s objectified status in feudal times. All the heroines in the above literary examples are still strapped in heterosexual marriages or an overpowering patriarchal society. It was not until the 1920s when women were gaining some recognition as individuated persons with increasing economic independence and access to education that female same-sex desire came into public notice, becoming a source of anxiety and fear for males. Along with the May Fourth Movement that aimed to awaken the Chinese nation with the introduction of science and democracy, many Western works on sexology were translated into Chinese. The sexual enlightenment enabled people to make sense of the prevalent phenomenon of female same-sex attachment in the 1920s. Though generally considered as “a psychological or sexual perversion” according to “modern science” of sexual psychology, which served as the main rationale for a legitimate discrimination against female as well as male homoeroticism in modern Chinese culture (Sang, 2003, p. 24), women writers of the May Fourth generation like Lu Yin (1898-1934) and Ling Shuhua (1904-1990) persistently depicted in their fiction the romantic desires for alternative lifestyles in sisterhood among many New Women as students and teachers in boarding schools¹⁰.

It should be admitted that both Lu Yin and Ling Shuhua take a ground-breaking step forward in their depiction of sisterhood, a theme rarely touched in Chinese literature, as a

⁸ Li Yu (1610-1680) is a Chinese playwright and novelist during late Ming and early Qing Dynasties. In the opera of “Cherishing a Fragrant Companion,” the author focuses on the story between Cui Jianyun and Cao Yuhua. Falling in love with Cao while visiting a temple, Cui tried all means for her husband to marry Cao, even giving up her status as the first wife, so as to be living with Cao for a lifetime.

⁹ Pu Songling (1640-1715) is a Chinese writer during the early Qing Dynasty best known for his mythical work *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. In the story “Lady Feng,” Lady Fan (Fan Shiyi Niang) falls in love with Lady Feng (Fengsan Niang), a fox fairy.

¹⁰ Please refer to “Old Acquaintances by the Seaside” (*Haibin guren*, 1923) and “Lishi’s Diary” (*Lishi de riji*, 1923) by Lu Yin and “Rumor Has it Something Like This Happened” (*Shou you zhe mo yihui shi*, 1926) by Ling Shuhua.

starting point for women to probe their inner desires as a way out of patriarchal oppression. However, the sisterly bond forged among female students during the Republic period is too fragile to stand the test of the overpowering social and ideological pressure, as reflected both in the tragic endings of Lu's semi-autobiographical fiction and the detached tone implied in the title of Ling's story narrated in third person narrative. A more pessimistic or even critical view about sisterhood could be found in Ding Ling's "Summer Break" (*Shujia zhong*, 1928), which describes the conflicting attitudes of five female school teachers who live together during the summer vacation. Determined to remain single so as to lead a productive life of female emancipation, the women find themselves trapped in pathetic spinsterhood and secretly regret their decision when boredom and jealous bickering among them aggravate as time goes by. Contrary to the aesthetic description of sisterhood by Lu Yin and Ling Shuhua, Ding Ling bluntly discloses the erotic nature of the relationship between some women teachers, but the plot "degrades lesbian eroticism to the level of second-rate sexual outlet and a form of self-deception" (Sang, 2003, p. 151). For May Fourth women writers trapped in a world dominated by male supremacy and heterosexuality, sisterhood, or a fulfilling female union, only remains as a utopian dream. Even with relative economic independence, few women could resist "the material and symbolic benefits that marriage provides," nor are they able to truly value their female friends as liberated individuals "deserving of trust, devotion, commitment" (p. 152). Therefore, among the sporadic literary representations of sisterhood or reserved description of female homoerotic relationships in the 1920s, what dominate the scene as the curtain descends are rather disillusionment and betrayal.

The onset of the Anti-Japanese War throughout the 1930s and 1940s extinguished the flickering spark of fictional references to female same-sex love, which was considered self-indulgent to national survival and was therefore submerged in the revolutionary themes of social engagement. The founding of the PRC in 1949 witnessed an even more tightened grip on either the acknowledgement of or the literary representation of homosexuality. Making the procreative nuclear family as "the bedrock of socialist renewal," all other forms of "sexual inactivity or activity" including extramarital sex and same-sex liaisons were constructed as a refusal to perform one's due role as a responsible citizen or even amounted to "a form of dissidence punishable by social, economic, medical, or criminal sanctions" (Sieber, 2001, p. 6).

With the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy in 1978, China was reintegrated into the global system, opening its door to the outside world both economically and ideologically. Against such backgrounds, especially when the literary search for an ideal man was proved a failure, some women writers began to re-explore the theme of sisterhood as a possible way out for women. But the fragile and platonic nature of sisterly alliance depicted by women writers of the 1980s seems to be a rehashed version of the fiction by Lu Yin and Ling Shuhua. Be it Zhang Jie's novella "The Ark" (*Fangzhou*, 1982) that portrays the "Widows' Club" formed by three divorced intellectual women who have lost all hope in men and resolutely march into the battlefield for female independence, or Wang Anyi's fiction "Brothers" (*Dixiongmen*, 1989) that tells the story of three married women as college roommates who wish to sustain their spiritual bond with each other as closest soul mates, the castle of sisterhood quickly collapses in face of social pressure or women's submission to their fatalistic roles as wife and mother. What deserves our attention is that for both Zhang Jie and Wang Anyi, although they

have realized the power of sisterhood as a means of pursuing women's self identity, it seems that they still follow the phallogocentric discourse in their definition of womanhood. The three divorced women in Zhang's fiction "The Ark" are all masculinized, determined to put away all the feminine ornamentation. Paying no attention to their physical appearance, they are good at drinking, smoking, hurling abuse at will and neglect all the housework, leaving the room unattended, the kettle empty and the dishes piled up. As for the story of "Brothers" by Wang Anyi, the title itself is apparent enough to demonstrate the author's ambivalent attitude towards sisterhood: even if women wish to tie up with each other spiritually, they still have to adopt the patriarchal discourse of "brothers" while continuing their marriage materially.

Another similarity between Zhang Jie and Wang Anyi is that they too, like the May Fourth writers, cautiously evade from erotic desires in their depiction of sisterhood. Even with a large influx of materials on Western sexology, including the knowledge about homosexuality, the depiction of women's erotic desires in sisterhood was still rare in the Chinese literary scene during the 1980s. The subsequent 1990s is an era of much openness about homosexuality. At the first Meeting on AIDS Education and Special Sex Problems held in 1994, the depathologization of homosexuality was confirmed in a joint statement made by over fifty experts from various fields. The interviews and questionnaire surveys on the Chinese gay community conducted by Li Yinhe and Wang Xiaobo in 1992 and the publication of Fang Gang's work *Homosexuals in China (Tongxinglian zai zhongguo)* in 1995 brought for the first time the situation of Chinese homosexuals to public attention (Sang, 2003, p. 168-69). Beijing's hosting of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 is accompanied with an amplification of "[o]fficial feminism, academic women's studies, and commercial distribution of women's work" (Sieber, 2001, p. 7). Since then, more progress has been made for the right of female homosexuals, including the convening of the first mainland Chinese Lesbians Conference in October 1998 and the launch of the first lesbian community newsletter Sky in March 1999. Against this socio-historical background, the sexual and erotic implications in sisterhood would not seem strange to literary experiments by feminist writers like Chen Ran in the 1990s. As Chinese critic Xu Kun incisively puts it, women writers in the 1980s stand side by side with their male counterparts in a joint effort to reignite and continue the May Fourth search for individual emancipation that has been severely repressed during the Cultural Revolution, but the individual identity quested during the 1980s is a masculinized one. In the 1990s, an era of pluralistic and opening environment, women writers emerge from their silent and marginalized trudge to the forefront, unearthing the oblivious dream of female self-discovery beneath the banner of a liberated "human" (1998, p. 149). According to Dai Jinhua, one of the leading feminist scholars in China, "the most noteworthy works" of the 1990s are the autobiographical and semi-autobiographical writings "that articulate the fear of and longing for sisterhood and lesbian relationships" (1999, p. 203). Sisterhood probed in the fiction of Chen Ran is representative of such works that go beyond pure spiritual love based on women's shared fate of subjugation to incorporate female sexual awakening and same-sex erotic desires as an essential component of women's identity construction. Acknowledging her influence from Western feminist ideas, Chen Ran decisively takes up the weapon of sisterhood against heterosexual hegemony as the root cause leading to the deprivation of female subjectivity.

Compared with the delayed arrival of public recognition for the phenomenon of

homosexuality in China not until early 1990s, American society has achieved great success since the late 1940s concerning gay and lesbian rights. The publication of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), known as the “Kinsey Reports”, by the American biologist Alfred Kinsey, provided scientific evidence to fight for equal rights of gays and lesbians. In 1955, Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), the first lesbian rights organization was founded in San Francisco, educating women who dared not come out about their rights and history. Through DOB’s primary publication *The Ladder*, the first nationally distributed lesbian journal that came out in 1956, more and more lesbians had a channel of communication, gaining consciousness and confidence in their fight against unjust discrimination. The social environment of the 1950s also gave rise to the popularity of lesbian-themed books written by female authors like Ann Bannon, Valerie Taylor and Marijane Meaker, who “present an honest, even positive view of lesbian life” (Bronski, 2003, p. 3).

The 1960s witnessed increasingly relaxed censorship standards that gave more freedom to an expression of explicit erotic content in lesbian novels. However, American homosexual community was still marginalized by the mainstream society until the Stonewall riots in 1969, which marked the beginning of a nationwide gay rights movement in America. In a few years, organizations for homosexual rights were founded across the nation, ushering in a resurgence of the female “coming-out” narratives in American literary scene amid the second-wave feminist movement during the 1970s. The publication of lesbian-themed fiction by female authors like Alice Walker and Lee Lynch during the 1980s reinforces the lesbian narrative tradition in American literature. As Cheri Register (1996) points out, an essential component of American feminist movement is to “create a feeling of sisterhood, a new sense of community among women” out of shared experience of male oppression so as to get over “group self-hatred,” the hostility against each other due to “isolation, competition for male attention, and belief in female inferiority” (p. 238).

From the above review of Chinese and American socio-historical backgrounds and the corresponding literary manifestations, we may retrieve a clue about the two writers’ varying focus in their exploration of sisterhood. While Chen Ran makes an attempt to prioritize sisterhood as a means for her heroines to discover their long-neglected sexual desires and deconstruct the collectively-masculinized gender roles assigned to Chinese women since the 1950s, Amy Tan, writing in a culture much more open with lesbianism, both socially and literarily, seems to be more concerned about the role of sisterhood in uniting women, especially for her female characters from the Old China before immigrating to the U.S., to struggle against feudal patriarchal patriarchy. As a Chinese American woman writer caught between two cultures, Tan is, at the same time, keen on relating herself to her inseparable cultural roots in China. Therefore, sisterhood in her writing plays another role of facilitating a matrilineal bond between the American-born daughters with their Chinese mothers, thus stressing the cross cultural connection as well as the bonding of her characters across time and space.

Taking the two writers as the starting point, it is hoped that more textual-based studies of inter-cultural communication could be carried out to trace and delineate common humanistic pursuits in literature and social reality, so as to gain a deeper understanding of the interactions among different cultures in this hybridized global society.

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