Through the Looking Glass: Female Identity Rediscovery in Chen Ran's and Amy Tan's Fictions

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***Abstract*:** This paper compares the metaphorical images in the fictions written by contemporary avant-garde Chinese writer Chen Ran and Chinese American writer Amy Tan. Through a close-reading of the protagonist' dreams and the attitudes towards the mirror from the perspectives of psychoanalysis and postmodern feminist theories, the paper attempts to prove that the dream scenes and the imagery of the mirror function as an essential tool for women to reconstruct their identities of multiplicity and fluidity in defiance of male arbitration.

Keywords: Chen Ran; Amy Tan; Comparative Literature; psychoanalysis; feminism

1. Introduction

As contemporary women writers of Chinese origin, both Chen Ran and Amy Tan are influential contemporary women writers who rose to fame in 1990s and are still active in their respective cultures. Chen Ran (Born in 1962) is one of China's avant-garde feminist writers and the winner of the first "Contemporary Chinese Female Writer's Award" (1998), whose works including *私人生活* [*A Private Life*] and *破開* [*Breaking Open*] have drawn heated discussions among Chinese critics. 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. 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.

Though living in different socio-cultural backgrounds, both Chen Ran and Amy Tan attempt to reclaim women's identities through their heroines' self-empowerment and female bonding that constitute a real challenge to institutionalized phallocentrism and heteronormativity. Feeling the tremendous pressure from the pervasive discourse system of patriarchal symbolism, both Chen and Tan resort to women's dream world and the imagery of the mirror for their protagonists to reclaim the lost identity. This paper compares the metaphorical images in the fictions written by Chen Ran and Amy Tan while adopting a close-reading method from the perspectives of psychoanalysis and postmodern feminist theories. The paper attempts to prove that through their heroines' dreams and illusions and their resignification of the mirror, the two writers have reinscribed women's unique perspectives of multiplicity and fluidity as an unsettling chord in the master narrative.

2. Dreams, Illusions and Women's Identity Crisis

In his influential work *The Interpretation of Dreams* published in 1899, Sigmund Freud postulates the idea that dreams embody repressed desires and conflicts that cannot be expressed by an individual during the waking hours. Those desires and conflicts therefore are transformed in dreams into more tangible imageries for the dreamer to come to terms with. Expanding Freud's research, Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung coined the term "collective unconscious" in the early twentieth century to encompass the "primordial and universal images" that appear in narratives of disparate cultures through manifestations of "dreams, rituals, myths, religious beliefs, and literature" (p. 142). In the fictions by both Chen Ran and Amy Tan, when the heroines are struggling with a fate beyond their own control, the only psychological outlet left is through their dreams and illusions, which, on the one hand, reflect their subconscious fears of the suppressive power of patriarchy and heterosexuality, and on the other hand, their eruptive desires to be bonded with maternal and sisterly power pertaining to the construction of women's deprived identity.

For female protagonists in Chen Ran's fiction, what comprises their dreams is mainly a terrible fear of male dominance and an inexplicable anxiety about their natural affinity with and desire for other women. The theme of sisterhood, or "female same-sex love,"[1] is greatly valued in Chen's fiction by heroines who are disappointed in or tortured by their male counterparts. However, constrained by deep-rooted social norms of heterosexual hegemony and a long-standing collective culture in which one cannot totally ignore public opinion, these suffering women who find empathy from each other are rather anxious about their transgressive desire, which is manifested in their dreams. In Chen's fiction *空心人的誕生* [*The Birth of a Hollow Person*], the day after the assertive "woman in black" (Aunt Miao) urges the timid "woman in purple" (Mom) to divorce her brutal husband and take confidence for the future of their sisterly relationship, the "woman in purple" describes a dream she had the previous night when the "woman in black" is praising her figure and recommending her to try on a newfangled bra. In that dream, the "woman in purple" finds herself confronted all the time by "a big tiger-striped cat"[2] with a head so big that she couldn't forget (p. 232, my translation). As a response, the "woman in black" puts her hand on her friend's shoulder, strokes it gently and recounts her coincidental dream about a cat the same night. In contrast to the menacing cat in the first dream, the cat dreamed by the "woman in black" is "sick, dirty and as thin as a lath, its fur darkish and shaggy and its eyes full of terror, doubt and hatred" (ibid.)[3]. It jumps in through the window even though the door is locked and bumps into the woman's leg as she is rushing out of the room. It is clearly implied that the two cats of totally different nature are just like the two women with their conflicting attitudes towards the intimate feeling between them. Whereas the "woman in purple" feels uneasy pressure from social convention when steeped in her female

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[1] The paper borrows Tze-lan Sang's term of "female same-sex love" (2003), an extended form of sisterhood, while referring to a close female bonding as a euphemism for lesbianism in the Chinese context, which puts emphasis on spiritual attachment among women.

[2] The original Chinese: "老虎那種花紋的大貓"。

[3] The original Chinese: "瘦骨伶仃的骯髒的病貓，毛色陰暗雜論，眼睛佈滿驚恐、懷疑和仇恨"。

companion's gestures of intimacy, which intimidates her as the tiger-looking cat does, she is compared by the "woman in black" to a stray cat that needs protection and care in a spiritual home lighted with female affection.

In addition to subconscious fear of sisterhood with its unknown consequences, the dreams described in Chen's fiction reflect the heroines' depressed mood in a world dominated by patriarchal power women cannot escape from. In *無處告別* [*Nowhere to Bid Farewell*], when Miss Dai Er returns home from aimless wondering on the street after another bitter quarrel with her authoritative mother, she hides herself in bed and envisions a nightmarish scene in darkness. She could hear, above her head, "countless tongues groaning with a hissing sound, countless strands of black hair dancing in the air, countless pale arms pouring on her forehead like icy spouts of water, countless pairs of women's breasts dangling in the sky like fancy lanterns, countless penises growing into towering trees on black soil…" (p. 112)[4]. Here, the dream imageries of "tongues," "arms" and "penises" might be interpreted as symbolism for phallocentric narratives that attempt to deny female subjectivity. While the towering tree of male power has taken root "on black soil," the female symbols of dancing hair and dangling breasts are only of decorative nature, flowing rootless in the air. Dai Er's illusions therefore reflect women's hidden anxiety concerning their objectified fate and erased identity.

In comparison, the illusions of Ying-ying about the Moon Lady in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* also reveal the harsh fact of women's rootless status in a world with all its rules prescribed by men. The story unveils when Ying-ying is a willful four-year old girl raised in a well-off family in Wuxi, a relatively prosperous city in central-eastern China. Running about on a large boat her family rent for a cruise on the Lake Taihu in celebration of the Moon Festival, Ying-ying accidentally tumbles into the lake. She is soon rescued by a fishnet, but is mistaken by the fishermen as a beggar girl without a family. Wondering among a crowd of strangers by the riverside, Ying-ying suffers from her identity confusion: without her fine clothes and family's good fortune, she is indeed no different than a beggar girl. It is at that desperate moment that Ying-ying is attracted by an ongoing shadow show about the Moon Lady.[5] As the Moon Lady is lamenting on her lonely life on the moon, forever lost to the world and banished for her "untempered passions," Ying-ying cries in deep sorrow, feeling emphathetic for the same identity crisis she is going through. She rushes to the backstage as soon as the play ends, eager to confess her secret wish. But it turns out that the beautiful Moon Lady is performed by a man with "shrunken cheeks, a broad oily nose, large glaring teeth, and red-strained eyes" (*The Joy Luck Club*, p. 82). Though later found by her family, Ying-ying is no longer the same girl

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[4] The original Chinese: "黑暗中無數隻舌頭在悉悉漱漱歎息，無數縷長長的黑髮在空中舞蕩翻飛，無數隻蒼白的手臂像冰涼的水伸向她的額頭，無數雙女人的乳房懸掛空中燃起彩燈，無數隻陽具在黑土地上長成參天大樹"。

[5] The Moon Lady, or the goddess of the moon according to Chinese folklore, is named Chang'e, who swallowed out of curiosity the elixir of immortality her husband Houyi obtained from the Queen Mother of the Western Skies and floated into the sky until she landed on the moon. While Houyi the Archer is known for his bravery to save the scorching earth by shooting down nine suns, thus representing brightness and masculinity, Chang'e, though deified as the Moon Lady, leads a lonely life in the cold and cheerless palace of the moon and cautions people against negative traits like greediness and jealousy traditionally associated with women.

with absolute confidence. As Xu Wenying (1995) comments, the fact that the Moon Lady is acted by a man points to the reality that the "femininity" of women is "ultimately determined by patriarchal ideology," while the "ugliness" of the Moon Lady's face reveals "the ugliness of women's victimization" and the dark secret behind the patriarchal myth that "subjugated women and turned them into sexed subjects" (pp. 60-61). For Ying-ying, the night of the Moon Festival is a night of change, an epiphany in her life. Finding out the cruel truth behind the illusion of the Moon Lady, the narrator Ying-ying in her late years realizes she has long lost herself, and her secret wish "to be found" could not be fulfilled by anyone but herself.

Women's objectified fate is also reflected in the dream of Rose, one of the daughters in *The Joy Luck Club*, in which her mother appears as an accomplice of patriarchal imprisonment of women. Being an obedient child, Rose believes in her mother's words that the door into dreams is guarded by a man named Old Mr. Chou. In a dream Rose remembers, she falls through a hole of the old man's floor into a nighttime garden filled with color-changing snapdragons and plants with veins of blood. But before she has time to appreciate the beauty of the garden, she is scared away by the angry shouts of Old Mr. Chou and eventually finds herself in a giant playground with rows of square sandboxes and a new doll in each box. Hearing her mother telling Old Mr. Chou that she has already known which doll her daughter would pick up, Rose deliberately disobeys her mother's wish by picking another doll. Just at the moment when Rose tries to escape from the chasing man, she suddenly becomes paralyzed, "too scared to move in any direction" (p. 186). In this dream scene similar to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Rose unleashes her rebellious desire by making a choice against her mother's will. But in doing so, she experiences an anticipated penalty of paralysis. What is worth noting is that her mother is collaborating with an authoritative male figure of Old Mr. Chou, who not only guards women's dreams, but also keeps under his strict control the magical garden, which probably symbolizes female vitality and creativity. The dolls in the middle of square sandboxes carry a metaphorical implication of women's expected submission to male rules. Deprived of their identities, for these angels of the house, any attempt to step beyond the boundary of the box would incur a similar punishment as Rose: unable to move and nowhere to run away from.

Based on the above analysis, we may see that the depiction of dream scenes and illusions plays an important role in Chen's and Tan's fictions in terms of disclosing the heroines' internal fears of their endangered identities. While the two writers converge in their description of dreams and illusions as an indirect revolt against patriarchal repression of women, they have their distinctive focus when it comes to women's salvation of themselves. Losing hope in heterosexual relations, heroines in Chen Ran's fiction lay special emphasis on sisterhood as power of subversion, while Tan's characters ultimately return to their mothers to regain their lost voice. Although the aforementioned dream scenes reflect, to some extent, a subconscious uncertainty about forging sisterly alliance for Chen's characters, or fear of erased identity threatened by overly maternal control in Tan's case, it is through the eruptive power of the dreams as journeys of self-discovery that the heroines are able to explore the devalued potentials of sisterhood and maternal guidance that help them construct their respective sexual and ethnic identities.

In Chen Ran's *A Private Life*, the protagonist Niuniu takes her neighbor Widow Ho as a mirror of her heart. Whatever joys or pains experienced, she could always find a soothing

response from this caring woman. But in a homophobic society, Niuniu's intense longings for Ho are confined within the spiritual realm, repressing the erotic desires only to the subconscious level of her dreams. Having realized that Ho is the one she truly loves compared to her sex-driven involvement with Ti, the obscene school teacher, Niuniu dreams of a dance party, in which her hand is taken by Ho's warm hand that has been persistently seeking her. Urged by Ho to dance with her, Niuniu is pulled onto the dance floor, held closely to Ho, afraid to be lost in a moment of inattention. The description from Niuniu's perspective is no different from that for an amorous couple:

> *Like the sound of the little drum in an opera orchestra, her heart beat wildly against my breast. Her body emitted an intangible heat as she pressed herself tightly against me. She held my young buttocks firmly in her hands, so exciting me that I began to gasp for breath. (pp. 125-26)*[6]

Coaxed by Ho's bright eyes, Niuniu follows Ho to a deserted garden away from the crowd. There, Ho starts to undo the blouse of Niuniu and herself, stepping back while facing her so that they could appreciate the body of each other. In Niuniu's eyes, each single movement and gesture of Ho overcomes her with its perfect beauty, and burns her desire:

> *She was my mirror.*
> *…I had never before seen such a suggestive look in such an intelligent and passionate female face. Her short, neat, glossy hair and the serious lines at the corners of her mouth perfectly embodied her calm profundity and her rich life experience…*
> *A giddy feeling of joy began to rise up from the soles of my feet" (p. 126)*[7].

In this sensual dream of Niuniu, the social taboo of lesbianism is finally broken. Through the fixed gaze of the mirroring female body with its dazzling beauty and hidden power, Niuniu regains her obliterated sexual identity and boldly plunges into Ho's kisses and touching that rekindle a childhood or pre-oedipal memory of familiarity: "my pulse quickened and I began to tremble, until at last I listened to her with my heart, held her within my heart of hearts" (pp. 126-27)[8].

It could be stated that such description of lesbian eroticism is unprecedented in Chinese women's literature. In a literary and cultural environment that is still quite conservative about homosexual eroticism, Chen Ran's experimental words through the heroine's dream scenes embody acclaimed female same-sex desires and sexuality in a powerful yet concealed way.

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[6] The original Chinese: "我的舞伴狂亂的心跳如同樂隊裡的小鼓，敲擊在我的乳房上。從她的身上散發出一股含含糊糊的熱力，將我不由分說地包裹起來。她緊緊貼在我的身體上，雙手摟緊我年輕的臀部，我激動得抑制不住地大聲呼吸"。

[7] The original Chinese: "她是我的鏡子。[…] 我從來沒有在這樣一張滿溢著聰慧與深情的女性的臉孔上，捕捉到如此內涵的表情。她的整潔而富有光澤的短髮，以及她的唇角處那一道沉思的皺紋，都恰到好處地體現著她內在的沉著、深邃與滄桑。[…] 一種暈暈乎乎的感覺從腳底升上來"。

[8] The original Chinese: "令我心動，顫抖，我終於用自己的心臟聽到了她，用我的內心抓住了她"。

However, when Niuniu is symbolically having sex with Ho during the dream dance, she still needs the assistance of a familiar *第三隻手* [*The Third Hand*] coming out of nowhere for a shuddering consummation, and as she recovers from "tense, numbing excitement" (p. 127)[9], she finds out that her dance partner has changed into a male, who proudly declares himself to be Niuniu's real inner need. Backing further away from the conquering man, Niuniu shouts a firm breakup with the male world: "I don't need you, I don't need you at all" (p. 127)[10]. The contradictory implications of the dream reflect Niuniu's dilemma in her love relationship with Ho. Expressing her physical desire for another woman in her dreams, Niuniu still cannot do without the help of the "third hand," a symbol for the male genital, nor can she escape from the omnipresent shadow of the man. According to Sang Tze-lan, the dream scene with male presence in the end can be interpreted as Chen's strategy for "describing lesbian sex in a language that is acceptable to the heterosexist society and state" (p. 214).

The dreams described in Chen's fiction not only fulfil the heroines' libido drives otherwise restricted in sisterhood, but also empower women to realize their uniqueness and the immeasurable power of female bonding. In *Breaking Open*, the narrator Dai Er dreams of a plane crash when she and her female friend Yunnan are flying to the city of N to establish a female society. Assuming herself dead in the accident, Dai Er feels her spirit entering a fairyland with unspoiled beauty. There, she couldn't help marveling at the sharp contrast between the conventional portrait of death as dark, scary, and horrifying and the real sight before her eyes in this enchanting, luxuriant, and holy place. As she approaches a heavenly hall standing tall and upright in front of her, Dai Er discovers that the walls of the dark red building are "covered with cavities that look like eyes, big and wide open" (p. 67)[11], allowing its owner to "look outside from every angle and point of view" (ibid.)[12]. Walking into this maze-like mansion with hidden doors, the protagonist is greeted by an old woman, a familiar stranger symbolizing the female god, who urges Dai to return to her physical body to take care of her mother and keep company with Yunnan: "You must work together, close as sisters, like mouth and teeth, like hair and brush, like socks and feet, barrel and bullet, because only women can really understand women – only they can really empathize with each other" (pp. 67-68).[13] Although the voice of the old woman seems to come from far away "like an echo resounding in an empty valley" (p. 68)[14], it penetrates the narrator's soul in an unusual way: "I feel that I am not listening with my ears, but with my whole face, I am inhaling her voice. That voice is not muddled at all, I can hear it distinctly" (p. 68)[15]. After Dai Er pours out her hidden desire to live together with Yunnan and all the talented women of the world as close sisters, the old woman puts "a string of shiny, white

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[9] The original Chinese: "過度激動的麻木"。

[10] The original Chinese: "我不需要你，我一點也不需要你"。

[11] The original Chinese: "佈滿眼睛似的豁口，大大地洞張著"。

[12] The original Chinese: "房間的主人仿佛可以從各個角度和側面窺視外邊"。

[13] The original Chinese: "你們要齊心協力，像姐妹一樣親密，像嘴唇與牙齒，頭髮與梳子，像鞋子與腳，槍膛與子彈，因為只有女人最懂得女人，最憐惜女人"。

[14] The original Chinese: "像空穀回音盤旋而來"。

[15] The original Chinese: "我感覺自己不是在用耳朵傾聽，而是用整張臉孔在諦聽，在呼吸她的聲音。那聲音卻一點也不模糊，我聽得真真切切"。

stones"[16] in Dai's hand, saying that the pebbles, which are ordinary taken separately, could "send forth a peculiar brilliance"[17] when stringed together (p. 69).

The dream, in which the protagonist fantasizes about "a utopian woman's nation" and is reminded through a holy voice the vital importance of female alliance, constitutes "a feminist-lesbian manifesto" (Sang, 2003, p. 212). The red mansion covered with wide-open cavities is just like the multiple perspectives and limitless potential of women who have long been neglected and downtrodden by a male-supremacist society. And Dai Er's self-imposed death in her dream for fear of emotional and physical intimacies with her female friend Yunnan proves to be a comforting journey with rediscovered source of power instead of a terrifying experience in a dark abyss as the way lesbianism has been demonized by heterosexual discourse. Though the pebbles scatter around in reality at the end of the novel, implying the enormous difficulty for women to struggle against compulsory heterosexuality, it is through the dream that the writer Chen Ran embeds her message on the value of sisterhood, and the narrator finally plucks her courage to confirm her lesbian identity with a loud proclamation "I want you to go home with me" (p. 71)[18] !

If Chen's characters reconstruct their sexual identity through dreams of erotic desires and united power in sisterhood, heroines in Tan's fiction are awakened in dreams to their lost selfhood and ethnic identities. Living in the shadow of her husband Ted for fifteen years, Rose is all adrift when Ted wants a divorce from her. Instead of confronting Ted to discuss the matter between them, Rose puts all her trust in her psychiatrist and vents her desire for revenge only in dreams. Once, Rose dreams of inviting Ted to dinner at a trendy place. After Ted starts the first course in joy and relaxation, Rose takes out a voodoo doll and aims her fork "at a strategic spot" of the doll, shouting loud enough for everyone to hear: "Ted, you're just such an impotent bastard and I'm going to make sure you stay that way" (*The Joy Luck Club*, p. 189). The dream reflects the crux of the problem in Rose's marriage. Behind the seeming harmony in their daily life, what is actually at work is Rose's willing submission of her own voice to that of Ted, who, however, becomes spiritually impotent after losing a malpractice lawsuit and refrains from making any further decisions ever since. Rose's imagined revenge not only provides an outlet for her anger at Ted's cowardice, but also helps her awaken to the fact that it is her own subjugation to male authority that dooms her marriage as a failure. The dream gives Rose a feeling of racing "to the top of a big turning point" with a reborn self-identity (ibid.), but when Rose describes the symbolic dream to her psychiatrist, the latter looks bored and sleepy-eyed, and soon calls an end to the consultation. As a matter of fact, it is at the urge of her mother to speak up for herself instead of blindly following the psychiatrist's advice that Rose finally fights back for her lawful rights, gaining her lost voice by shouting to Ted's face, "You can't just pull me out of your life and throw me away" (p. 196). That night, Rose dreams of a garden totally different from that in her first dream. There, she sees her mother hovering over something like tending a baby, and beneath her all along the ground are "weeds already spilling

[16] The original Chinese: "一串光亮闪闪的乳白色石珠"。
[17] The original Chinese: "闪爍出迥然相異的光彩"。
[18] The original Chinese: "我要你同我一起回家"。

out over the edges, running wild in every direction" (ibid.). The dream symbolizes the ultimate reconciliation between the mother and daughter. Over the years, Rose has misunderstood her mother to be over-protective, treating her like a doll in the middle of a sandbox with clear demarcation designated by male dictatorship. The dream at the end of the story brings the daughter back to her mother as a gardener of female spirituality. The weeds the mother plants both for Rose and for herself signify women's self-identification, which is no longer confined by the "edges" of male definition and has exuberant vitality full of possibilities beyond male control.

While Rose's dreams imply women's spiritual growth from being paralyzed by patriarchal domination to becoming masters of their own lives, through the dream of Ruth, Luling's daughter in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Tan seems to express a deep concern over the identity crisis of Chinese immigrants as ethnic minorities in American society. In this dream, Ruth recalls that the curtains of her bedroom turn out to be transparent, and she is naked, "her most private moments, her most private *parts*" being watched by her grinning neighbors. Before she has time to cover herself, the radio starts to glare, followed by an explanation that the American Broadcasting System is testing early-warning signal for disaster preparedness. But at the same time another voice comes on, the voice of Ruth's mother, "No, no, this is not test! This real[sic.]" (*Bonesetter's Daughter*, p. 20). And quick as a wink, everything is swept over by the "the dark shape in the bay" that rises into "a tidal wave" (ibid.). Even for the second-generation of Chinese Americans like Amy Tan, or Ruth as Tan's fictional representative, who are immersed in American culture since birth and have a successful career, they still experience "a sense of alienation and strangeness" in the American society (Ling, 1990, p. 105). As Amy Ling points out, the "double consciousness," or the sense of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" in the words of W. E. B. Du Bois when characterizing African Americans, also apply to Chinese Americans (Du Bois, 1982, p. 45, qtd. in Ling, 1990, p. 105). Such an anxiety of feeling under constant surveillance with one's value measured not by oneself but by those privileged in the mainstream society, therefore, creeps into the subconscious dream scenes of Chinese Americans like Ruth. The "transparent curtains" exposing the private bedroom of the protagonist and her nakedness mocked by the contemptuous neighbors are pertaining to a sense of insecurity and loss of ethnic identity. The surging wave about to engulf the entire house is emblematic of the assimilative power of the American culture. The imperceptible obliteration of one's racial origins without any trace at all is just like the sham announcement of the national radio, claiming it is only a test warning. Like the phone call from Rose's mother who finally talks Rose into facing Ted in her own voice, the shout of Ruth's mother cautioning her daughter to run away from the incoming tide constitutes the mother's desperate attempt to protect their Chinese ethnic identity from being totally erased by the overpowering American culture.

To summarize, dreams depicted in the fictions of Chen Ran and Amy Tan are the embodiment of both women's deep worries about male oppression and their growing awareness of their endangered identity in a hostile world. Imprinted with divergent cultural particularities as introduced in previous chapters, Chen's heroines utter a spiritual declaration, through their dreams, on women's sexual identity and solidarity in sisterhood, while Tan's characters find in dreams their true selves and realize the value of their ethnic identities with the help of their mothers.

3. The Mirror and Women's Self Recognition

The mirror has always been associated with the subject's construction of his or her self-identity. The most influential theory on the mirror is probably Lacan's psychoanalytical formulation of the mirror stage. Inspired by the research of psychologist Henri Wallon on disparate behaviors of human infants and chimpanzees in response to their reflections in the mirror, Lacan proposes in the 1930s his concept on the mirror stage as a milestone in the development of human subjectivity. For Lacan, the mirror stage that starts when the infant is six months old and continues up to the eighteenth month is characterized by the infant's recognition of and jubilant interest in his image in the mirror, which lays the foundation for the formation of the child's ego (Lacan, 2002, pp. 3-4). By the 1950s, Lacan broadens his concept on mirror stage not only to interpret child psychology, but also to represent a general structure of subjectivity in which the subject is captivated by his or her own image in the mirror. In *Some Reflections on the Ego*, Lacan further clarifies the implications of the mirror stage, to which he assigns "a twofold value":

> *In the first place, it has historical value as it marks a decisive turning-point in the mental development of the child. In the second place, it typifies an essential libidinal relationship with the body image. (Lacan, 2002, p. 14)*

A key point in Lacan's description of the mirror stage is the formation of one's Ego through the process of objectification. The child's vision of the whole body image through the mirror is in sharp contrast with his fragmented understanding of himself due to a lack of muscular and sensory coordination. Once the child develops a narcissistic identification with his mirror image, he begins to have a sense of self-identity. Therefore, the Ego is formed as a result of the discrepancy between one's perceived mirror reflection and one's emotional experience. According to Lacan, it is through identification with an internalized ideal image in the mirror, a process of alienation and misrecognition, that one achieves subjective consciousness. The mirror in Lacan's mind is not confined to its literal meaning, but is symbolic of all kinds of specular images projected by individual imitative gestures and socio-cultural configurations (Evans, 2006, p. 193).

Lacan's theory on the role of the mirror in the formation of one's self-identity has exerted great influence among feminist theorists. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir explains the magic of the mirror for woman to project herself and to attain self-identification. While man considers himself as an active subject and therefore has no interest in his specular image, for woman, who is deemed as an object of desire, the image in the mirror "is identified with the ego," since the reflection is an objectified other just like herself, and she "gives life through her admiration and desire to the imaged qualities she sees" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 631).

Like Beauvoir, Irigaray also attaches importance to the power of the mirror for woman. Though originally a follower of Lacan as a member of the Freudian School in Paris, a Lacanian psychoanalytic institute founded in 1964, Irigaray deviates from the theoretical models of both Freud and Lacan that put phallus in the central position as the "signifier of all signifiers," leaving no place for the female subject (Burke, 1981, p. 293). In *The Looking Glass, from the*

Other Side, the preface to *This Sex Which is Not One*, Irigaray (1985) experiments with her notion of female writing while reviewing a Swiss film with a heroine who is reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. According to Irigaray, women are exiled from their true selves while trying to conform to masculine projections in a "masquerade of femininity" (Irigaray, 1995, pp. 135-36). Objectified as the mirror to reflect male desires, women are perceived as the lack or the Other without their own identities. In the preface, Irigaray expresses through the words of Alice, the heroine of the film, woman's loss of identity to objectified images in the social mirror:

> *I keep on pushing through to the other side, […] because on this side of the screen of their projections, on this plane of their representations, I can't live. I'm stuck, paralyzed by all those images, words, fantasies. Frozen. […] So either I don't have any "self," or else I have a multitude of "selves" appropriated by them, for them, according to their needs or desires. […] I'm completely lost.* (Irigaray, 1985, "The Looking Glass", p. 17)

Just like the adventurous Alice who enters into the Looking-Glass Land where everything is out of logical order, it is implied by Irigaray that a woman should rediscover herself "in a new psychic space" behind the mirror of patriarchal discourse, an emotional and intellectual realm where she "is no longer defined in relation to man as his negative, other, or as lack" (Burke, 1981, p. 296).

As a main metaphor for "imaginary/ideological force" in psychoanalytic and feminist theories, the mirror plays significant roles "in the process of recognition/identification and the formation of gendered self-consciousness" (Wang, 2004, p. 180). In the fictions of both Chen Ran and Amy Tan, the mirror serves as an enlightening tool for the heroines to cast away the feminine image under the male gaze, penetrate their own souls, realize their real desires and exploit their untapped potentials.

A familiar scene in Chen's fiction is the protagonist's narcissistic observation of her body through the mirror. In *A Toast to the Past [yu wangshi ganbei]*, the protagonist Xiao Meng, a pubescent girl living a solitary life in a deserted nunnery, is driven by an undercurrent to study her budding body. Lying naked on her bed soggy with sweat, like a slippery fish basking on the sunny beach, and holding a mirror at hand that moves up and down, the girl compares the images of her body with those on a textbook of gynecology. Yet such soft hand, this blushing face, tearful eyes and blossoming, firm breasts seem so strange that she could hardly recognize them (pp. 25-26). Throughout the human history, women have been alienated from their own bodies, which are simply perceived as sexual objects for male consumption. To unleash the hidden power of the female body against patriarchal appropriation, the first step is to demystify woman's body by her self-gazing and self-identification through the mirror. Xiao Meng's shocking discovery of her maturing body in the mirror not only alludes to women's institutionalized alienation from their bodily potential, but also is accompanied with the protagonist's awakening sexual awareness and a growing sense of self-identity.

The discrepancy between women's disguised images projected by men and their real selves emerging from the other side of the mirror under female self-gazing is also hinted at in Chen's *A Private Life*. Before going out on a date with Yin Nan, Niuniu carefully assesses her appearance

in the mirror:

> *As I looked closely at this young but very beautiful girl in the mirror, I saw her suddenly turn away, and when she turned back again she had taken off all her clothes, or, I should say, they had simply disappeared. Her naked figure was flagrantly bare in the mirror, her deep red nipples glowing as if bathed in sunlight, her smooth white breasts following my eyes like a pair of plump sunflowers following the sun (p. 145)*[19].

If the innocent, well-dressed girl in front of the mirror conforms to the male-desired image of a woman as the angel of purity, the naked figure in the mirror represents Niuniu's hidden desire to master her own body full of radiating vitality. But the unexpected eruption of Niuniu's subconscious self is soon deformed into a self-denying image kneeling to male ruling. In this dreamlike vision through the mirror, Niuniu sees herself "whimpering helplessly with tears streaming down, frail as a feather, floating lightly into the arms of someone who looks exactly like Yin Nan" (p. 145). The gentle caress of this man ignites in her "an overwhelming desire to be his prisoner" (ibid.) and to lose herself to his embrace. The hallucination prompted by Niuniu's self-reading in the mirror reveals her hidden anxiety to be captured by man as a soulless accessory. In the imagined conversation with Yin Nan that follows, Niuniu firmly contradicts Yin Nan's idealist impression of her as a girl of innocence in an attempt to define her own identity:

> *The voice said, "You captivate me. You're pure and noble."*
> *I said, "I'm not the least bit pure. You have no idea what kind of person I am."*
> *The voice said, "I understand you."*
> *I said, "You don't understand me. You have no idea how shameless I have been in the face of desire."*
> *The voice said, "I like your shameless innocence."*
> *I said, "You can't understand me. You're too young. And I am already old beyond my years" (p. 146).*[20]

In Chen Ran's writing, the mirror is an entry into a woman's subconscious realm, offering "a conscious and imaginary confirmation of an alienated self in and through the other [in which] the self is projected in the distance for imaginary re-creation, erotic desire and pleasure" (Wang, 2004, pp. 183-84). Having experienced a loveless sexual entanglement with her teacher Mr. Ti, an unfulfilling love relationship with Yin Nan, the death of her beloved Widow Ho and

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[19] The original Chinese: "我審視著鏡中那年輕而姣美的女子，我看到她忽然轉過身去，待她再從鏡中轉回過來的時候、她的貼身的衫衣已經脫掉了，或者說不翼而飛。她的赤裸的上半身毫無顧忌地在鏡子裡袒露著，暗紅的乳頭如同浸浴在陽光裡閃閃發亮，那一雙光滑白皙的乳房追隨著我的目光，像兩朵圓圓的向日葵追隨著太陽的光芒"。

[20] The original Chinese: "那聲音說，'你很迷人，純潔而高貴'。我說，'我並不純潔。你並不瞭解我是一個什麼樣的人'。那聲音說，'我瞭解你。'我說，'你不瞭解。你不知道我曾在欲望面前多麼的無恥'。那聲音說，'我喜歡你那種天真的無恥'。我說，'你太年輕，你不可能瞭解我。而我已經很老了'"。

her mother in rapid succession, Niuniu finally retreats to her bathtub, across which hangs a big mirror. In this secluded female world of Niuniu and "a young woman lying on her side in a tiny, swaying white boat" (p. 207)[21], women have reclaimed their true selves, which, defying male definition, are finally reunited into a powerful force. Realizing for the first time how intriguingly beautiful the passive languor of a reclining body could be, Niuniu sets free her libidinous drive in front of the mirror, bringing perfectly together the experience of beauty and the fulfillment of desire.

While Chen Ran prioritizes the role of the mirror in women's rediscovery of their bodily power by the heroines' identification with their reflections "in" the mirror, Amy Tan plots her characters to realize, through their specular images, women's victimized fate of the Other as well as disparaging social projections on Chinese Americans so as to walk "out" of the mirror with an enlightened affirmation of their spiritual power. In *The Joy Luck Club*, when little June keeps on failing the expectation of her mother to become a prodigy in order to stand a better chance while climbing the social ladder as a Chinese immigrant, she looks in the mirror above the bathroom sink. There, she sees an "ordinary face" of a "sad, ugly girl" staring back (p. 134). In an attempt to reject this pathetic image that might be comparable to a stereotypical social image for Chinese Americans, June makes "high-pitched noises like a crazed animal, trying to scratch out the face in the mirror" (ibid.). Just at that moment, June discovers the prodigy side of her in the mirror reflection, a face she has never seen before:

> *The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. This girl and I were the same. I had new thoughts, willful thoughts, or rather thoughts filled with lots of won'ts. I won't let her change me, I promised myself. I won't be what I'm not. (ibid.)*

The mirror provides a woman with a spiritual home of her own, leading her into a pre-linguistic world not yet polluted by the phallocentric order. Keeping a distance from her mirror reflection as if observing another person, the woman could rebuild her deprived sense of subjectivity and find out her shining points that have been filtered out by the spectacles of patriarchy.

If June confirms her self value by driving away the stereotypical image of Chinese immigrants in the American society, in Tan's novel *Kitchen's God's Wife*, Winnie's mother walks out of her mirror image of humble male foils to pursue her independent identity. Just like her husband who assumes absolute authority over his objectified wives, Winnie's mother takes the mirror as a means for her to affirm her self-naming subjectivity. Every night, she would look in the mirror, observing her reflections in a detached manner. Refusing to accept her fate as the "Double Second," a replacement for the dead second wife, she would "spend many hours in front of her mirror, accusing the double second that stared back at her" (p. 93). When she sees no hope in her degraded marriage life, she resolutely smashes her mirror image and leaves home for a life chosen by herself. Like the various versions of her elopement, the fate of Winnie's mother is no longer within the control of a single male definition. Whether her

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[21] The original Chinese: "一個年輕的女子正側臥在一隻搖盪的小白船上"。

mother runs away for love, or becomes a revolutionary or nun with her hair cut off as a sign never to turn back, or suddenly becomes sick and dies, women have liberated themselves from the mirror to carry multiple possibilities.

Like Winnie's mother who projects her undesired image into the mirror for self-confirmation, Peanut, Winnie's cousin who escapes her homosexual husband and becomes a revolutionary, discards her mirror image with strong self-consciousness. When Winnie presents to Peanut an exquisite silver mirror, a gift from Old Aunt, during their long-awaited reunion, Peanut recalls her last encounter with Old Aunt. When the old woman laments the disappearance of the pretty girl she once knew, Peanut replies in unequivocal terms: "I did not have a mirror to see myself, but pretty or not, I did know I existed" (p. 349). Holding the mirror in hand, Peanut understands immediately the intention of Old Aunt: the mirror is a reminder of the lavish life Peanut could enjoy by playing her feminine roles. But rebellious and free-spirited, Peanut puts down the mirror (ibid.), determined to define her fate beyond specular reflections.

For both Chen Ran and Amy Tan, heroines' dreams and illusions and the imagery of the mirror function as an essential tool for women to reconstruct their identities in defiance of male arbitration. In a world where phallocentric narrative is the only frame of reference, it is through such "looking glass" that heroines in the fictions of the two writers embark on a psychological journey of self-searching and self-fulfillment with rediscovered identities.

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