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THE ROLE OF TAOISM IN THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY
IN *THE JOY LUCK CLUB*

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
In
English Composition

by
Rebekah Elizabeth Shultz

September 2002

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ABSTRACT

The identities of the characters in The Joy Luck Club are socially constructed by Chinese beliefs in Taoism. This thesis will examine how Amy Tan, in four first-person, mother-daughter narrative pairs, uses the Taoist attributes of the five directions -- east, west, north, south, and center -- to illustrate the shared socially constructed identities of each of the mother-daughter pairs. In addition, Tan demonstrates how the mothers and daughters struggle to realize empowering aspects of their identities and communicate this realization to each other. This thesis will examine how cultural differences and barriers of guilt impede this communication process. In addition, this thesis will discuss how the mothers and daughters work together by listening and learning about each other to break through some of these barriers. Finally, this thesis will examine how the implied reader, who has access to the overarching mother-daughter narratives, represents the center and can choose to become empowered by putting all these stories of empowerment together as a whole. Through using a cultural studies approach, this thesis will utilize the literary theories of social constructionism, feminist-

psychology, reader-response, and ethnic studies to explicate how biographical philosophical, religious, and historical sources illustrate how Tan uses Taoist symbols to illustrate the identities of her characters.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club, a group of mothers and daughters struggle to not only utilize empowering aspects of their socially constructed identities for themselves, but also to pass on these empowering aspects to each other by using Taoist symbols despite cultural barriers and legacies of guilt. The novel opens with three Chinese mothers and Jing-mei, the daughter of the recently deceased Suyuan, playing mahjong. Each mother and Jing-mei sits at one of the four cardinal positions, and, as the novel progresses, each Chinese mother and her American-born daughter tells a narrative that corresponds to her position at the mahjong table. Each narrative is interwoven with the Taoist symbols of the five elements, which not only correspond with the dual principle of the yin and the yang, but also correspond to the cardinal directions as well.

These tales that Tan situates around the game of mahjong illustrate the socially constructed Chinese-American identity the mothers and daughters share. The mothers show a greater degree of self-awareness of their identities than their daughters because they understand the

significance of the Taoist elements in the construction of their identities. Through their life experiences, the mothers have used this self-knowledge to deal advantageously with their circumstances. Though this self-knowledge is better understood by the mothers, they still struggle to pass on this empowering understanding to their daughters because the mother's understandings and communication of their identities are distorted by cultural differences and a few parenting expectations. Confronted by this cultural and generational rift, the daughters are even more impaired in their understanding of their shared ethnic identity because they do not completely comprehend the cultural significance of the Taoist symbolism that so heavily informs their mothers' speech and experiences. They also lack the self-awareness of their identity that would enable them to change within themselves so that they can effectively alter the ways they cope with their problems. The novel shows how understanding these Taoist symbols on a deeper level can help the mothers and daughters become more self-aware of their shared ethnic identities and they can use this knowledge to successfully solve problems in their lives.

Identity construction is complicated, comprising psychological, social, and ethnic factors. To do justice to the many aspects at play, I will take a cultural studies approach to analyzing how the novel illustrates identity construction with Taoist symbols. I will use ethnic, social constructionist, feminist, psychological, and reader-response literary theories. In employing a cultural literary theory approach to illustrate the fullest meanings behind Tan's use of Taoist symbols, I will also utilize Taoist religious, philosophical and historical sources, as well as biographical sources illustrating the history of Taoist belief within Tan's own family, to analyze how Tan incorporates Taoist symbols into the identity construction of her female characters. This chapter will briefly discuss how these theories and sources will be used to examine identity construction in the novel as well as position this thesis within the current critical debate surrounding Tan's use of Taoist symbols to illustrate identity.

Though many critics discuss Tan's use of Taoist symbols in The Joy Luck Club, from an ethnocritical perspective, they do not fully explore this aspect of the novel because a thorough explication of character

development from a Taoist perspective lies beyond the scope of their work. In addition, Ben Xu does not demonstrate a fully accurate understanding of Taoism and Frank Chin does not show a thorough knowledge of the construction of Taoist folktales and myths. Therefore, it is important to draw in religious and philosophical Taoist sources to understand Tan's use of Taoist symbols. The first of these critics, Patricia Hamilton, in "Feng Shui, Astrology, and the Five Elements: Traditional Chinese Beliefs in Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club," accurately explicates how *wu-hsing*, or the Taoist theory of the five elements, fire, water, wood, metal, and earth, is used to illustrate how mothers and daughters share certain personality traits in Tan's novel. However, the focus of her article does not cover a thorough discussion of how these traits lead to a socially constructed and fully realized and empowered character. For instance, Hamilton points out how both Rose and An-mei share the same character traits of being too easily influenced by others because they do not have enough wood in their personalities, but have a lot of water.

'Without Wood' deals with the disastrous effects of Rose Hsu Jordan's not having enough Wood in her personality, at least according to her mother

An-mei's diagnosis. An-mei herself has inspired
'a lifelong stream of criticism' from Suyuán Woo,
apparently for bending too easily to other's
ideas, the flaw of those who lack Wood. (130)

However, the focus of Hamilton's article does not include an analysis of other social factors that prompt Rose's character to construct herself like water. In addition, there is no discussion of whether Rose and the other characters are static or whether they change themselves for the better. By linking Taoist elements with certain character traits, the focus of Hamilton's work makes an important first step towards an understanding of how specific cultural beliefs also inform the beliefs and personalities of the characters. However, though her work is accurate, it does not take the next step of including a substantial literary analysis of character development. It does not overtly analyze how Tan employs Taoist symbols to illustrate social construction of identity. In fact, the scope of Hamilton's article does not discuss character development at all.

Taking a psychological and ethnic studies approach in his text "Memory and the Ethnic Self," Ben Xu discusses Tan's use of Taoist symbols in her novels. However, the

scope of Xu's article also does not cover a full discussion of how these symbols illustrate social construction of identity and character development. In addition, though he possesses a fairly accurate understanding of Taoism, he is partially inaccurate in his understanding of a few key Taoist beliefs -- namely how *feng shui* utilizes a balance of yin and yang through the five elements to create empowerment. Xu dislikes Tan's use of *feng shui* in her novel because he believes that the Taoist doctrine of *wu-wei*, or non-action, fosters a passive, and often fatalistic, acceptance of fate. He says, "Chinese Taoist culture helps to maintain this kind of victim mentality because it reinforces a passive if not fatalistic attitude toward life" (10). However, a belief in *feng shui* does not necessarily encourage a passive acceptance of fate, as Xu suggests, but is instead a way of understanding how the five elements form the self so that the situations around the self can be balanced, or manipulated, to be in harmony with the self. According to The Religion of China, written by Max Weber, the renowned sociologist, if surroundings are in harmony with the self, the self will easily do what is right for the situation without having to work hard (184). In this way, Tan uses *feng shui* to illustrate how important

it is for the characters to fully understand the Taoist symbols that influence their personalities because this knowledge will show them how to best manipulate their surroundings. In other words, if their personalities, or inner selves, have the correct balance of yin and yang, their surroundings and their inner selves will come together in an empowering harmony. For example, when Lindo loses her metal rings, she rearranges the elements on her body to more clearly reflect her true personality of fire and, as a result, discovers a way to manipulate social superstitions and Confucian rituals to honorably extricate herself from an arranged marriage. Lindo says, "after the gold was removed from my body, I felt lighter, more free That day I started to think how I would escape this marriage without breaking my promise to my family" (Joy 59-60). So, instead of passively adhering to their social fate, Taoists are more able to manipulate their surroundings to their benefit if they can understand how the five elements shape their personalities and the world around them.

While many critics view Tan's work through an ethnocritical lens, by looking at Tan's work through the cultural-biographical lens of literary theory, it seems Tan

herself is the most vocal about denying any symbols in her work. Tan states, "if there are symbols in my work, they exist largely by accident or through someone else's interpretive design" ("Required" 5). However, though Tan denies it, readers can still detect Taoist symbols within her text. From a cultural-biographical perspective, readers can note that Daisy, Tan's mother, shared many of the same beliefs in Taoism, specifically *feng shui*, as Tan's characters. Daisy, had such a strong conviction in *feng shui* and geomancy -- belief systems based on the balancing of the five elements -- that when Tan was 15, Daisy and Tan moved out of their house after both Tan's father and brother died of brain tumors. Daisy was convinced that their house was imbalanced and "diseased" according to her *feng shui* beliefs (Huntley 5). In an echo of Tan's own mother, Tan's character Ying-Ying complains misfortune will befall her because, according to *feng shui* principles, her house "was built too steep on a hill, and a bad wind from the top blows all [her] strength back down the hill," and like Daisy, she whispers about "things not being balanced" (Joy 112). From these examples, *feng shui* and its corresponding Taoist symbols, can be directly shown

to have been a part of Tan's childhood and have also shown up in her writing.

Even though Tan may state that she never intended any Taoist symbolism in The Joy Luck Club, this statement is undermined by the fact that, according to the reporter John Habich, Tan originally intended to entitle her book "Wind and Water" -- a literal translation of the term "*feng shui*," but her publishers persuaded her to change it (1E). Since titles often capture poetically a book's controlling theme, Tan must have thought the symbols behind *feng shui* important if she wanted to use *feng shui* as a title. In fact, her desire to use this title shows that she wanted to imply that *feng shui* is a controlling theme in her novel. This title further suggests that the narratives could be organized around the five elements and their corresponding attributes.

Even though from a cultural-biographical perspective it is evident that Tan's mother shared the same Taoist beliefs as Tan's fictional characters, from an ethnocritical perspective, Frank Chin has accused Tan of creating false symbolism and false Chinese fairytales; however, in "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," Chin exhibits an incomplete understanding of

the fact that fairytales are a Western literary convention and that they change with time. Chin accuses Tan of forgetting Chinese culture in her attempts to create tales solely for a European audience, specifically taking great offense to a vignette that Tan uses to open a section of narratives in her novel.

Amy Tan opens her Joy Luck Club with a fake Chinese fairy tale about a duck that wants to be a swan and a mother who dreams of her daughter being born in America, where she'll grow up speaking perfect English and no one will laugh at her The fairy tale is not Chinese. (2)

Since most Western readers would not be able to distinguish an authentic Chinese "fairytales" from an inauthentic one, Chin must feel as if Tan is misrepresenting Chinese culture.

In fact, according to John C. Stott and Anita Moss in The Family of Stories, the fairytale is a specific type of folktale in which fairies, a supernatural creature of European origin, are present. They write, "The term fairytale is generally not accepted by folklorists" (318). So, ironically, because the term fairytale is of European

origin, by using the term, Chin himself is misusing the genre.

Chin, however, not only shows a misunderstanding of the correct use of "fairytale" in his article, but he does not address the fact that Tan is really not creating false Chinese folktales because there is no such thing as one "real" authentic set of folktales. Folktales were originally entirely oral, and, as a result, changed with each different person who told them. Moss and Stott write, "[S]cholars also insist that the folktale rarely exists in a pure form" because:

persons retelling tales inevitably modify details, introduce differences in tone, and vary shades of meaning according to their own cultural values and those of their audience. (316)

Furthermore, because there is more authorial control in the literary folktale, which Tan has created in her novel, there are even more differences between versions. Though the literary folktale will also cover the same themes as an oral tale, Stott and Moss assert that the literary folktale "is written by a specific author in a particular social and historical context" (316). As a result, Tan is only doing what literary folktale authors have done for centuries:

writing a folktale to address the social concerns of her time and place. For instance, when Ying-Ying recounts the story of the Moon Lady that illustrates how women are yin, the darkness within, and men are yang, the brightness of truth, Ying-Ying ends the story with a subtle feminine twist -- the Moon Lady turns out to be portrayed by a man. Ying-Ying narrates, "So I walked closer yet, until I could see the face of the Moon Lady: sunken cheeks, a broad oily nose, large glaring teeth, and red-stained eyes And as the secret wish fell from my lips, the Moon Lady looked at me and became a man" (Joy 83). In China, women were denied access to most public forums like the stage, leaving men to fill female roles. Kay Ann Johnson, a scholar of political science and Asian studies, explains why women were excluded from the stage in Women, the Family, and Peasant Revolution in China when she writes that "Ideally, women's lives were confined to the domestic realm and their contact with nonfamily members carefully limited" (14). However, though men usually performed female roles, this telling still subverts oppressive Chinese stereotypes of male honesty and female deception. Since men are believed to be yang, the brightness of truth, the fact that the Moon Lady is a man symbolizes that men themselves are not so

honest as Chinese culture teaches. This story is influenced by a feminist perspective and changed slightly to dispel oppressive and damaging gender stereotypes for a contemporary audience.

In his claims, Chin also exhibits an incomplete understanding of the fact that Tan is not creating false "fairytales," but synthesizing various cultural symbols of old Chinese folktales into her stories to create a literary talk story. The talk story is a telling of personal experience: an oral hybrid of emotional experience and personal interpretations of cultural folktales and myths. It arose out of a need for women to define themselves in empowering ways to subvert the hegemony of a society that repressed or denied their self-expression. Wendy Ho, a feminist Asian American scholar, defines the talk story in her book In Her Mother's House: The Politics of Mother-Daughter Writing as "multidimensional texts [that are] composed of overlapping sedimentary discursive fragments of history, race, ethnicity, culture, class, sexuality, and gender" (20). She defines further the personal talk stories in her own Cantonese family by saying, "In telling and retelling their women's stories, they continue to disentangle the layered meanings of their experiences"

(19). By incorporating so many rich sources of information, the talk-story gave women a vehicle with which to fully express the complicated and sometimes contradictory reality of their inner lives. For instance, the "fairytale" of the swan is more like a literary talk story with a unique personal and cultural meaning that as literary critic, Qun Wang, states in "The Dialogic Richness of The Joy Luck Club" can be deciphered if the symbols in it are understood. She writes:

By using the swan, a symbol of western culture in traditional Chinese literature, to represent a person's sense of culture and story (in the case of Suyuan Woo, her sense of Chinese culture and story), Tan uses a synergistic approach to describe the complexity of the Asian American experience. (81)

In the story, a woman is trying to bring a swan to the United States so that she can give it to her daughter, but when "she arrived in the new country, the immigration officials pulled the swan away from her," leaving the woman only a feather (Joy 3). When the cultural symbols are fully understood, the tale can be interpreted as an

illustration of how the mothers struggle against cultural barriers to instill within their daughters a more complete cultural awareness of self-identity so that their daughters can use this self-knowledge to overcome problems in their lives.

To fully understand the reason for Tan's use of synergistic symbols, it is helpful to fully decipher the meaning behind the symbols in this vignette from an ethnic studies perspective. Understanding the meaning will shed light on the novel's central theme of cultural identity, communication, and empowerment. The swan, a symbol of the West, could also symbolize the mothers' dreams for a more empowered identity and a better life for them and their daughters, which they believe the West, America, will bestow. For example, the mother says:

Over [in America, my daughter] will always be too full to swallow any sorrow. She will know my meaning, because I will give her this swan -- a creature that became more than what was hoped for. (Joy 3)

However, the swan is still a Chinese symbol for the West, implying a Chinese sensibility or understanding of the West. In other words, because the mother's hopes and

dreams of the West are constructed from Chinese sensibilities, they will inevitably be misunderstood when the mothers really come in contact with the West. The American "immigration" officials who confiscate the feather also symbolize the real cultural customs of the West, which both misunderstand and are misunderstood by the mothers' original conception of the West. Finally, because of this misunderstanding, the mothers are left with only a feather from the swan: a shred of the rich dreams they held of the West and what it held in store for them. They still have these hopes and dreams, but these dreams have been drastically altered. For instance, the mother wants to give her daughter the feather to symbolize her "good intentions": the dreams she held for her of the West. However, she waits "year after year, for the day she could tell her daughter this in perfect American English" (Joy 3). While they can still empower their daughters by sharing with them their hopes for a better life and a more empowered identity, a misunderstanding of cultures has diluted the potency behind the message of empowerment and the mothers can only communicate a fraction of who they are and who they wish to become to their daughters.

To take up where many critics have left off in explicating how Tan uses cultural symbols in her novel, I will illustrate how Taoist symbols do illustrate the social construction of identity and resulting social empowerment among the characters. It is possible to show that the characters' Taoist belief in the five elements actually defines their identities because in sharing narratives laden with socially constructed Taoist symbols with each other, they also share in constructing the identities of one another. For example, the friends of An-mei construct her personality to be like water by deliberately using the images and symbolism of water when they refer to her. In fact, Suyuan tells Jing-mei that An-mei has "too little wood" so she bends "too quickly to listen to people's ideas" (Joy 19). In other words, An-mei's identity construction flows in every direction like water.

The social construction of each character's personality according to the Taoist symbols of the five elements is possible because awareness of one's own identity and the identity of others is formed, not through an objective truth, but through the social negotiation of language -- a naming process that by its very nature identifies and defines. Consequently, the meaning of

language is also a socially negotiated construct. In fact, Tony Waticins, a social constructionist literary critic, writes in "Cultural Studies, New Historicism, and Children's Literature" that "All cultural systems, including language, literature, and the products of mass communication, play a part in the construction and reconstruction of the subject" (176). In other words, language, a social construct, inevitably forms the identity of its subject -- whether that is the identity of a tree or the identity of a woman playing mahjong with a group of friends as part of the Joy Luck Club.

In The Joy Luck Club, the social construction of identity is, at times, difficult to see because many of the characters' narratives that define self are not told when they are part of a group, but are told to the reader alone as if the reader is partaking in the characters' private thoughts. However, these narratives are also socially constructed, even though some of their social construction is not overtly obvious, because the seemingly solitary nature of thought is also a social construct. In fact, self-identity is constructed partially outside of the self, because, as Kenneth Bruffee, an English compositionist, explains further in "Social Construction, Language, and the

Authority of Knowledge: A Bibliographic Essay," "thinking is an internalized version of conversation" (777), In other words, thought is an internal conversation we hold with ourselves, but it is also a conversation that is very heavily influenced by outside discourse communities of all sorts.

In Tan's novel, the Joy Luck Club group not only helps to define and construct the identities of each of the mothers, but the group also helps each character define her identity in a way that empowers herself. It is significant that Suyuan first finds empowerment through conversation with a group of women when she formed the first Joy Luck Club in China because in China, men formed a powerful group that hegemonically marginalized, or disempowered, Chinese women. In China, women were denied formal education and were not permitted to take part in political or social activities where writing comprised a large component of communication. Johnson writes:

Such [patri]lineage organizations, usually dominated by their richest members, were central to religious life and also often controlled the basic political, judicial, and educational functions of communities as well. (8)

To maintain power, men formed their own written narratives that justified their positions of power. Political scientist, John B. Thompson, discusses this narrative hegemony further in Ideology and Modern Culture:

For ideology, in so far as it seeks to sustain relations of domination by representing them as 'legitimate,' tends to assume a narrative form. Stories are told which justify the exercise of power by those who possess it, situating these individuals within a tissue of tales that recapitulate the past and anticipate the future.

(qtd. in Watkins 179)

It is only natural, then, that in reaction to the hegemony of exclusive discourse groups, minority discourse groups, like the social group of the Joy Luck Club, would also form with the sole purpose of subverting these hegemonic narratives with their own.

However, because women were denied access to more legitimate, male forms of discourse such as writing, they formed a very specific oral discourse, the talk story, to define themselves in empowering ways and subvert masculine hegemony. In examining the talk story again from a social constructionist perspective, it is interesting to note that

Tan's written stories mirror the tradition of the oral talk story: they empower the women in the discourse group by allowing the women to define themselves through their narratives in ways that allow them to subvert the dominant, masculine discourse group. Wendy Ho deepens her definition of the talk story when she writes:

Conversational texts [that] are the critical personal and collective stories of Chinese American women require an active attention to the theorizing practices and sites of communities that have been excluded from or marginalized within privileged sites of power in society and history. (20)

Like Ho's definition of the talk-story, the stories Tan's characters narrate not only legitimize feminine experience by allowing a forum for them to be voiced, but, by doing so, they also show ways to subvert the mores and traditions of the dominant masculine discourse, serving as a warning and an example for the younger generation of women on how to thrive despite the burden of oppressive cultural mores and traditions. The mothers' desire to empower their daughters through a talk story, a personal narrative that uses a hybrid of cultural folktales to explore personal and

emotional experience, is evidenced by Ying-Ying who wants to show her daughter that they share the same tiger spirit, or fearlessness in the face of adversity, which can help her daughter overcome adversity, just as it helped her. She says that she will use the "sharp pain" of her story "to penetrate my daughter's tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose" (Joy 286). By imagining herself as a tiger, a Chinese cultural symbol of power and fearlessness, Ying-Ying hopes to empower her daughter by helping her daughter imagine herself as something powerful enough to overcome the oppression in her life.

Though the mothers' attempt to empower themselves and their daughters by defining themselves with talk-stories, from a feminist-psychological approach, some of this empowering message is lost because the mothers' perceptions of themselves are distorted by guilt. Many of the mothers think that a part of their identity is harmful, so they try to repress it, denying this part of themselves to their daughters and to themselves. For instance, Suyuan believes that part of her identity is weak because she abandoned two babies in China while fleeing from the Japanese. She covers her perceived weakness by trying to force Jing-mei to become the perfect genius daughter, drilling her with

harder tests such as "finding a queen of hearts in a deck of cards, trying to stand on [one's] head without using [any] hands, [and] predicting the daily temperatures in Los Angeles, New York, and London" (Joy 144). This faulty perception comes, however, not from a genuine failing of character, but from a patriarchic society that oppresses women.

In Feminism and Psychoanalytic Therapy, Nancy Chodorow explains how misconceptions of identity and feelings of guilt can occur when women are taught by both Western and Eastern society to be the ultimate nurturers in the family. Because of this, mothers often are left with the sole responsibility of raising a child, putting an unfair burden on them. Consequently, if anything goes wrong in the family, the mother is the first to be blamed, even if the circumstances were beyond her control. Chodorow writes, "Belief in the all-powerful mother spawns a recurrent tendency to blame the mother on the one hand, and a fantasy of maternal perfectibility on the other" (80). As the ultimate care-giver, the mother becomes the scapegoat upon which the family can hang its problems.

In The Joy Luck Club this is evident in Suyuan's character. She struggles with the guilt of abandoning her

children while she was sick and fleeing the Japanese. For instance in describing her flight from Kweilin, she says, "I packed my things and my two babies into this wheelbarrow four days before the Japanese marched into Kweilin" (Joy 13). Though she barely escaped with her own life, she alone carries the responsibility and guilt of leaving her children, without realizing that other social factors such as war and famine prompted her to make this choice. She did not cause these circumstances, and so should not feel guilty because she could only manage the best that she could to help her and her daughters survive through them.

From a psychological, social constructionist perspective, Suyuan's guilt, then, becomes a by-product of societal views. J. Coulter, a scholar of psychology, explains the social construction of guilt in The Social Construction of Mind when he says that for emotions to occur, they have to have meaningful objects. Our feelings derive from our ability to interpret and perceive these objects and this perception, because it is defined by language, is socially constructed. Colter writes, that learning to appraise the situation that causes particular emotions is "learning to appraise matters in terms of norms, standards, principles, and ends or goals judged

desirable or undesirable appropriate or in appropriate, reasonable or unreasonable, and so on" (129). Thus, guilt is a feeling derived from a perception of societal norms; in Tan's novel, guilt is most often felt when mothers do not feel like they are able to live up to unfair or unrealistic norms or standards society has set for them.

The daughters also feel guilt from trying to differentiate from their mothers. Therefore they do not see their own identities clearly, and certainly do not realize how their mothers' have attempted to define their identities in empowering ways. Chodorow states that childhood personality development is a direct result of parental social interaction. Because women are often the sole nurturers of children, their interaction forms a child's personality almost entirely. Chodorow writes that "The nature and quality of the social relationships that the child experiences are appropriated, internalized, and organized by her or him and come to constitute his or her personality" (47). Eventually, boys differentiate from their mothers because society pressures them to identify with their fathers instead. Girls, however, continue identifying with their mothers well into adolescence. Because females are not encouraged socially to readily

identify with a father figure, females often differentiate themselves from their mothers by becoming the polar opposite of the mother. Chodorow writes that the daughter "projects what she defines as bad within her onto her mother and tries to take what is good into herself" (59). The struggle to differentiate from the maternal is illustrated in The Joy Luck Club by Jing-mei. In directly opposing her mother's wishes to become a genius, Jing-mei finds herself, but struggles to know her mother. For instance, when the aunties request that she tell her two half-sisters about her mother, she looks at them in dismay and exclaims, "What can I tell them about my mother? I don't know anything" (Joy 31). Consequently, the rest of Jing-mei's narrative is a description of her guilt and her struggle to reconnect with her mother.

Besides guilt, the mothers have an additional obstacle in using their talk-stories to empower their children. Raised in an American culture, the daughters do not always understand their mothers' stories of self-empowerment because they do not fully understand the Taoist symbols of the five elements that heavily inform these stories. For instance, because Lena has an incomplete understanding of the Taoist culture that informs her mother's stories of

imminent danger, these stories terrify her. To control her fear, Lena imagines herself as having her mother's eyes so that she too can also foresee danger and, in the process, protect herself. She sees "Monkey rings that would split in two and send a swinging child hurtling through space" (Joy 106). Actually, when Lena tries to empower herself in the face of imminent violence, she is attempting what James Gabriano, a child development expert, in Children in Danger: Coping with the Consequences of Community Violence, terms "representational competence": "the ability [children have] to understand clearly what is occurring in their environment" and "perceive resources and reassurance in the fantasy direction" (136). In other words, the world of fantasy can give children meaning and strength so that they can cope with threatening situations. In Lena's case, by imagining she can foresee danger like her mother, Lena attempts to find a sense of protection.

However, though Lena foretells doom like her mother, she does not realize that her mother's premonitions are informed by a strong belief in *feng shui* and the balance of the five elements. When Ying-Ying whispers about "things not being in balance" (Joy 112), and rearranges the furniture to try and balance the five elements, Lena does

not understand and gets very frightened. She says, "I could see that some terrible danger lay ahead" (Joy 112). However, if Lena had known that a lot of Ying-Ying's forebodings were based on *feng shui*, perhaps this would have given her a better way of controlling her own fears because she would have understood why her mother was foretelling certain disasters.

To better understand the underlying symbolism of the novel, it is also important to understand the Taoist school of thought, the theory of the five elements or *wu-hsing*, which informs much of the mother's communication with their daughters. According to Patricia Hamilton the belief in *wu-hsing* attempts to explain the workings of the universe through the interactions of the five elements: wood, fire, earth, water, and metal. In Taoist thought, each element signifies certain attributes that are influenced by the universal forces of yin and yang because, according to The Parting of the Way: Lao Tzu and the Taoist Movement, written by Holmes Welch, a South-East Asia Studies scholar, Taoists believe "that the physical processes of the universe were due to the interaction of the five elements" (96). In Tan's novel, the five-element theory is directly illustrated by Jing-mei when she explains her mother's

strong belief in the five elements. She narrates, "The elements were from my mother's own version of organic chemistry. Each person is made up of five elements, she told me." She then goes on to explain how her mother saw these elements in the personalities of her friends (Joy 19). If Suyuan was able to see evidence of the five elements in her friends, then it is very clear that she utilized this theory to also define and socially construct herself, Jing-mei, and those around her, and that the influence of this theory pervaded much of her communication.

In fact, Suyuan's belief in the five element theory pervaded so many aspects of her communication because, according to Taoists, since the interaction of the five elements attempt to explain the universe, they correspond to everything in it and the universe is seen as working together as a cosmic whole. As a result, the microcosm becomes a symbol for the macrocosm, and vice versa. However, since the universe works together in cosmic unity, the microcosm is more than a mere symbol of the macrocosm - - the microcosm *is* the macrocosm. So, in this way, the Taoists believed in a complex set of symbols that corresponded with each other. For example, the five

elements corresponded with the seasons, colors, directions, and spiritual attributes. In other words, according to "Taoist Alchemy: A Sympathetic Approach Through Symbols," written by Thomas Boehmer, an expert in Asian Studies, the element of wood corresponds to the east, fire to south, water to north, west to metal, and the center to earth. Boehmer writes, "This metaphoric symbolism is to be understood, however, not in the physical sense in which the reflected image is reversed, but rather in the sense that each presents a true image of the other" (57). In other words, to Taoists, the signifier and the signified are considered the same thing. This is why Ying-Ying knows she and her daughter Lena have the same traits as the tiger because, according to Taoist thought, they are the tiger. Lena, however, does not understand the Chinese traits of the tiger and when she looks at her mother, instead of seeing a cunning tigress, "sees a small old lady." Ying-Ying says that this is because Lena lacks *chuming*, or an "inside knowing of things" (Joy 282). In other words, what Ying-Ying terms *chuming* is really knowledge of how the metaphorical value of the Taoist elements informs the mothers' perception of personal identity.

The Taoist elements inform the mothers' perception of personal identity specifically because, according to *wu-hsing*, everyone has a certain mixture of elements within each personality. Bhoemer elaborates further that no one has a perfect balance of all five elements and most people have one element that is dominant in their personalities (58). For example, in the novel Jing-mei explains how the five elements shape a person's personality when she says, "Too much fire and you had a bad temper Too little wood and you bent too quickly to other people's ideas, unable to stand on your own" (Joy 19). This dominant element, then, is what the mothers perceive as constructing the identity of themselves and each other. Thus, each mother seated around the mahjong table is known for having a dominant element that defines who she is.

To fully understand what characteristics the elements give to personality traits, it is also necessary to understand how the characteristics of the five elements are influenced by the duality principle of yin and yang. For instance, according to "The Yin-Yang-Wu-Hsing Doctrine in the Textual Tradition of Tokugawa Japanese Agriculture," written by Wai-Ming Ng, an Asian philosophy scholar, yin and yang influence the characteristics of the five elements

because wood and fire are yang, while water and metal are yin (125). Maja Milcinski, a scholar of Asian philosophy and religion, defines in "The Notion of Feminine in Asian Philosophical Traditions" that yin is symbolized by the moon, while yang is symbolized by the sun. Yin is instinctive, intuitive, passive, still, receptive, dark, moist, soft and flexible. Yang, in contrast, is rational, creative, active, aggressive, expansive, light, and hard (200). Mary Ann Faraquar states in "The Hidden Gender in Middle Earth" that yin represents death, while yang represents life. She writes that yin is "the female principle realized in earth, water, death and stillness" (156). In addition, yin is thought to be illusion, while yang is real (Welch 131). In The Joy Luck Club, the Moon Lady story is a perfect example of the yin and yang dichotomy. Because the moon lady was deceitful, a yin characteristic, she is forced to live on the moon, which is also a yin characteristic. At the end of the tale, Ying-Ying explains the tale, stating, "For woman is yin the darkness within, where untempered passions lie. And man is yang, bright truth lighting our minds" (Joy 82). As a result, women, as yin, are seen as deceitful, intuitive,

passive, and receptive, while men, as yang, are seen as rational, honest, and aggressive.

In Taoism, though, the inaction of yin can be considered positive. According to the Tao Te Ching, or The Way of Power, real power resides in inaction and passivity. Yin attracts yang to it by doing nothing, and inactively causes yang to act. As the Tao says, "Therefore the Master acts without doing anything" (Tzu 2). Yin conquers with inactive attraction, not force. In other words, force defeats itself. Since every aggressive act fosters more aggression, the only way to end this vicious cycle is to respond with inaction or non-aggression. In another verse, the Tao says, "The Master doesn't try to be powerful; thus he is truly powerful" (Tzu 38). This is the inaction that Ying-Ying is talking about when she says that she "waited between the trees" and did not work, but waited until the time was right for her to go to Shanghai to work as a shop girl (Joy 283).

Because yin and yang are opposites, they create each other. James R. Robinson in "Iceman and Journey, Yin and Yang: Taoist Rhythm and O'Neil's Late Tragedies" writes that yang contains seeds of yin and yin contains seeds of yang. As a result, these seeds of yin or yang grow until

one becomes the other. In other words, as yin grows, yang diminishes and vice versa. However, because yin and yang contain seeds of each other, which never completely die, this principle illustrates "the hidden unity of all phenomenal oppositions" (21). In fact, a recessive yin or yang trait may dominate in extreme situations. For example, the characters in Tan's novel also have hidden dualities of yin and yang within their personalities. When in extreme crises, the characters will revert to the hidden yin or yang opposition within the core of their personalities. Suyuan, for instance, is normally a very dynamic and aggressive yang character, but at the core of her character, she has yin, which she reverts to in times of crisis. Usually she is so aggressive she tries to mold Jing-mei into a genius without regard to Jing-mei's true talents. However, while fleeing from the Japanese with her two babies, her yin core shows through when she passively abandons them in the hopes that this will attract the good will of someone more capable than herself. She does this because she is sure she will die of sickness, "or perhaps from thirst, from starvation, or from the Japanese, who she was sure were marching right behind her" (Joy 324). Therefore, by using the inactive attraction of yin, Suyuan

is hoping to passively attract help from strangers who can care for the baby when the aggressive yang part of her character is unable to care for them.

Actually, if understood from a Taoist perspective, this reversion to the yin-yang opposite in times of great stress is considered a utilization of great strength because it is through a balance or union of yin-yang opposites that great strength is effected. In Taoism, "the union of the yin and yang elements can be seen as leading to the center, the void or origin [of life]" (Boehmer 60). In fact, Taoists believe that if the yin and yang can be equally mixed, the elixir of life can be created and eternal life obtained (Boehmer 61). In Tan's novel, the elixir of eternal life, which arises from the balance of the yin-yang, is symbolized by the personal breakthroughs that the characters make in dealing with their problems in new ways -- in ways that are opposite to the yin or yang characteristics that dominate their personalities. For instance, when Suyuan abandons her children in a passive, yin-like fashion, directly contradicting her aggressive yang personality, she gives her children a chance to live. Jing-mei's father says that "[I]t was an old peasant woman

who found them" and she takes care of them even when Jingmei eventually meets them in China (Joy 326).

Unfortunately, it is never quite clear if the mothers or daughters can relate how this yin-yang balance can empower each other in times of crisis because each of the narratives that the mothers and daughters relate are told in the first person and seem to be solitary narratives told as if in strict confidence to the reader. As a result, from a reader-response perspective, the reader is never sure if the characters actually tell each other how to find the balancing center of empowerment within their identities like they do in their narratives to the reader. For instance, though Ying-Ying smashes a vase onto the floor and tells the reader that she will use this incident as an excuse to "cut her daughter's tiger spirit loose," her narrative ends just as Lena is entering the room to talk to her. Similarly, in Lena's narrative, after she enters the room after the crash, all Ying-Ying says was "fallen down," presumably talking about the vase and not Lena's tiger spirit. Then, the narrative also ends. Because there is no clear connection between the messages in the narratives and the other characters, it is the reader who has full access to these narratives. Consequently, the reader is

the only participant in the novel fully capable of receiving the empowering message of yin and yang balance -- the elixir of eternal life.

By constructing her novel this way, Tan implies that the reader, not the characters, is the real receiver of her message of empowerment -- the elixir of eternal life. In fact, Wolfgang Iser implies in The Act of Reading that Tan's organization of her novel constructs this sort of reading when he writes, "Thus the concept of the implied reader designates a network or response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text" (163). In other words, the construction of first-person narratives which only the reader is privy to, forces the reader to become the recipient of Tan's message of empowerment, compelling the reader to grasp the empowering truth behind her message of yin-yang balance. In this way, she also urges the reader to find an empowering yin-yang balance within his or her own life and use this balance to build stronger relationships and a better life.

Drawing on this complex foregrounding, I will examine how the mothers and daughters in Tan's novel struggle through barriers of cultural differences and guilt to understand and communicate how Taoist symbols have socially

constructed both their identities in similar and empowering ways, and how the reader, in understanding how each narrative of empowered self-identity works together as a dynamic whole, also becomes empowered. The Taoist symbols that construct the identities of both mother and daughter and, finally, the reader, are illustrated and situated by the directions of the mahjong table at which each mother, as well as the reader, are positioned. Chapter two will show how both Suyuan and Jing-mei empower themselves with a more accurate understanding of how the Taoist attribute of the eastern position, benevolence, constructs their identities. Chapter three will examine how both Ying-Ying and Lena redefine themselves in more empowering ways by using the Taoist attribute of the western position, sense. Chapter four will look at how Rose and An-mei use wisdom, the Taoist attribute of the northern position, to solve crises in their lives. Chapter five will focus on how a better understanding of social propriety, the Taoist attribute of the southern position, enables both Lindo and Waverly to deal with problems in their lives. Finally, chapter six will examine how the reader, who embodies the Taoist attribute of the center, faith, is ultimately meant

to be empowered by having access to how all the narratives work together in a dynamic whole.

As a result, each position of the mahjong table, at which each mother-daughter pair are situated, holds different Taoists attributes that both define and empower the characters at that position. Finally, the reader, who is situated at the center, is empowered the most because in this center position, the reader can mentally bring together all the positions as a whole and can view how all the attributes of the different positions work together to achieve an empowering balance and harmony.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EAST

By using a cultural studies lens, I will show how both Suyuan and Jing-mei, who sit at the eastern side of the mahjong table, empower themselves through a better understanding of how the eastern Taoist characteristic of benevolence shapes their personalities. Suyuan is aware of her benevolent nature because she has grown up in the Chinese culture that informed it and can use this knowledge of who she is to deal advantageously with circumstances in her life. Specifically, in times of turmoil, Suyuan gains a modicum of personal power through helping others: facilitating group activities that give her and the other women social support. By selflessly sacrificing her own desires to serve the needs of others, she is aware of the social roles she is to play in Chinese society; as a facilitator of the group, she can also effectively subvert these roles to gain some social power, social mobility, and personal fulfillment. While helping the members of the group achieve these things, she is helping the others learn about their own ethnic identities.

Jing-mei, however, is at first not aware of how these Taoist symbols inform her personality trait of benevolence;

she cannot see how benevolence enables her to perform the role of group facilitator because she has grown up in America, and does not know how to use Taoism to circumvent potential problems in her life. As a result, she lacks self-esteem and a sense of purpose. Suyuan seems incapable of giving Jing-mei this knowledge not only because of a cultural barrier, but Suyuan's own self-knowledge, though more accurate than Jing-mei's, is clouded by overly high parental expectations for herself. She does not know how her self-sacrifices, which she perceives as weaknesses, have given her personal power. Consequently, it is not until Suyuan dies that Jing-mei uncovers her mother's true identity of self-sacrificing benevolence, and in the process, find her own identity by taking her mother's place in The Joy Luck Club. By having a more complete picture of who both she and her mother are, Jing-mei learns to more effectively handle challenges in her life by aiding others and by effectively taking on her mother's role as group facilitator. She inspires the group members to aid their own daughters in discovering their ethnic identities of empowerment.

It is overtly obvious, unlike the other characters in the novel, that Suyuan and Jing-mei symbolize the eastern position. When the three surviving mothers ask Jing-mei to take her mother's place at the mahjong table, Jing-mei knows

without anyone telling her that she must take the eastern position at the table. She knows her mother's position was at the east end of the table because her mother always told her, "The East is where things begin the direction from which the sun rises, where the wind comes from" (Joy 22). Jing-mei can probably sense that her mother's position is the east, the position where things begin, because Suyuan began the Joy Luck Club out of kindness, underscoring her benevolent nature. She started the first club to help herself and her friends face the Japanese invasion of China during World War II with a sense of hope. For instance, while playing mahjong, Suyuan states, "Each week we could hope to be lucky. That hope was our only joy. And that was how we came to call our little parties Joy Luck" (Joy 12). With the hope and comfort that this gathering gave her, she was able to deal with the horrible living conditions of Kweilin until it was invaded and she was forced to flee (Joy 11-13).

To escape the Japanese, Suyuan fled to America and started the club up again with three women from the local San Francisco Methodist Church so that she could help others and, in the process, help herself face the disorienting alienation and loneliness of a new land. Suyuan knows from the three women's faces that they had all escaped unspeakable tragedy in China. Jing-mei narrates, "my mother saw the numbness in

these women's faces. And she saw how quickly their eyes moved when she told them her idea for the Joy Luck Club." And so just as the sun's rising in the east symbolizes the ending of night, the yang energy of day, Suyuan's creating "The Joy Luck Club" shows her own compassion and kindness for others by bringing them hope and comfort in times of chaos and distress (Joy 6-7).

Since Jing-mei is replacing her mother's eastern position after her death, it seems that the east symbolizes death, not birth or the hope of a new day. However, since the east is the direction from which the sun rises and where things begin, Suyuan's death really symbolizes a rebirth. Jing-mei plunges into a quest to uncover her mother's true ethnic identity, as well as her own, promising her mother's friends that she will "remember everything about her" (Joy 32). Jing-mei's promise prompts a chain of attempts from the other mothers to pass on empowering truths about their own identities to their daughters while they are still alive, especially because their identities are partially obscured from their daughters because they are so influenced by their Chinese culture and ethnicity. Jing-mei says about her aunties: "They are frightened. In me they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America" (Joy 31). In other words, Suyuan's death prompts the

mothers, who are following in the tradition of the talk-story, to narrate fully to the reader, and partially to their daughters, stories about how they have overcome difficulties.

By imparting to their daughters that they also share these traits of perseverance, creativity, and personal courage, the mothers will teach the daughters how to overcome their own problems. Therefore, as a symbol of where things begin, Suyuan, and her untimely death, not only begin the novel, but also give it meaning and an urgent sense of purpose. The lessons of the talk-story may be why the aunts tell Jing-mei to "Tell them stories she told you, lessons she taught, what you know about her mind that has become your mind" (Joy 31). As a result of the talk-story, the "joy luck" that Suyuan creates by forming the club also symbolizes matrilineal survival because the club serves as a vehicle for both the mothers and daughters to come together and share in the talk-story.

Because Suyuan represents the eastern direction, she also has a very benevolent nature. According to Lu I-ming in the introduction to the Taoist Classic Understanding Reality, which was written by Chang Po-tuan, benevolence is defined as "humanity, kindness and compassion" (13). Suyuan always unselfishly helps others, sometimes even at her own expense. For instance, she starts The Joy Luck Club by holding weekly

parties to help herself and others purposefully forget the grief of war. For these parties, she unselfishly sacrifices some of her own hoarded rations so that her friends can "feast" and better forget their own pain. Suyuan narrates:

We didn't notice that the dumplings were stuffed mostly with stringy squash and that the oranges were spotted with wormy holes. We ate sparingly, not as if we didn't have enough, but to protest how we could not eat another bite, we had already bloated ourselves from earlier in the day. (Joy 10)

Thus, because of her unselfish and kind nature, Suyuan compassionately brings hope and happiness to her friends, despite the ensuing Japanese invasion and the suffering of those around them.

To heighten her kind and giving nature, though, she also has some strong yang characteristics, which is why the eastern position is also characterized by wood. Tan illustrates the strong-willed and dynamic nature of wood in a negative contrast to water when she writes that Rose and An-mei are "without wood" and because they lack wood, they have "too much water and [flow] in too many directions" (Joy 19). For instance, Suyuan's aggressive and tenacious yang characteristics also enable her and her babies to flee from the Japanese. Throughout most of this trip, she tenaciously

clings to her babies, showing a deep level of caring devotion even though "[s]he knew she would die of her sickness, or perhaps from thirst, from starvation, or from the Japanese, who she was sure were marching right behind her" (Joy 324). Suyuan is so strong-willed that even in the face of starvation and extreme illness, she is always concerned with the care of her children.

It is also during this escape that Suyuan reveals the yin at the core of her yang character and seemingly betrays her caring, benevolent nature. Because the road to escape is long and arduous and Suyuan is sick and out of food, she eventually abandons her two daughters. She places them on the side of the road with all the rest of her jewelry and attaches a note to their blanket telling anyone who finds them to take care of them. Sure that she will inevitably starve, she abandons her daughter so that someone more capable than herself at this time will be able to take care of them. Jing-mei's father says, "She knew she would die of her sickness, or perhaps from thirst, from starvation, or from the Japanese, who she was sure were marching right behind her" (Joy 324-325). She holds on to them until, in her mind, she is absolutely sure she will fail them. However, abandoning them goes against Suyuan's stubborn and aggressive yang nature that would have aggressively fought to keep them until the bitter end and

exposes her passive yin core. For instance, even though Suyuan abandons her daughters because she is sure she will perish, Suyuan herself does not die because her stubborn and aggressive yang character helps her survive.

However, reverting to her yin side in her great time of need is actually Suyuan's hidden strength because it is a way of better utilizing her caring, unselfish nature and illustrates why Taoists think that the mixture of the yin and the yang, the passive and the dynamic, produces the elixir of life and true spiritual fulfillment. Thomas Boehmer writes that through the alchemical production of the elixir, "the union of yin and yang elements can be seen as leading to the center, the void or origin" and "it is through the union of opposites that the return to the undifferentiated source is effected" (60). For example, Suyuan is so near death, she could not have cared for her babies by herself; instead, she passively attracts assistance from benevolent strangers who are capable of caring for them for her and unselfishly gives them up. In the Tao this passivity is defined as non-action, or the doctrine of *wu wei*, where one uses the force of attraction, or love, to get others to do things for you. According to Holmes Welch, "[Inaction] succeeds by being rather than doing, by attitude rather than act, by attraction rather than compulsion" (21). In this way, by utilizing a

mixture of yin and yang and giving way to yin passivity when it is appropriate by leaving her babies at the side of the road with a note, Suyuan passively attracts the love of strangers so that they do the active work of caring for her babies when she is no longer able. In this way Suyuan is still able to indirectly maintain her beneficial nature even when she is not directly capable of it (Joy 325).

Suyuan, however, cannot see that utilizing her yin core in times of stress is actually a strength and feels a great deal of guilt about abandoning her daughters because she fears that they have died, telling Jing-mei "Our whole family is gone" (Joy 313). She cannot forgive herself for failing to rely on her yang aggression and care for them herself. For instance, when Jing-mei tells her mother she wishes she was not her daughter because her mother keeps making her practice, her mother becomes pale and deathly silent. Jing-mei instantly remembers "the babies she had lost in China, the ones we never talked about" (Joy 153).

The guilt that Suyuan feels is a product of patriarchal society where the mother is exalted as the ultimate nurturer and, consequently, has sole responsibility for nurturing her child. This attitude places an unfair responsibility on women -- especially in times of crisis and hardship, as, in Suyuan's case, World War II. Nancy Chodowrow concurs with the

impossibility of fulfilling this unfair responsibility by stating, "Feminists take issue with the notion that a mother can be perfect in the here and now, given male dominance, lack of equality in marriage, and inadequate resources and support, but the fantasy of the perfect mother persists" (90). For example, because of her social circumstances, Suyuan flees with her two babies with only a little food, water, or money and no transportation. She tells Jing-mei, "I packed my things and my babies into this wheelbarrow and began pushing for Chungking" (Joy 13). Under these circumstances, it is ludicrous to assume Suyuan should maintain her role as the ultimate nurturer when she barely had the resources to survive herself, yet Suyuan still feels guilt for not living up to the model of motherhood.

Guilt prevents Suyuan from clearly seeing her true self-identity so she cannot tell how her aggressive yang side compliments and aids the yin side in better serving her benevolent nature. As a result, she tries to overcompensate for her self-perceived failing by trying to aggressively help Jing-mei to become a genius, forcing Jing-mei to practice the piano without giving any regard to Jing-mei's wishes. Jing-mei narrates, "So now on nights when my mother presented her tests, I performed listlessly, my head propped on one arm" (Joy 144). As always Suyuan is benevolently trying to help

others make the most of themselves and their circumstances. But in this case, she is not really helping Jing-mei because she does not care about what Jing-mei wants.

Chodorow explains further why guilt would drive Suyuan to overcompensate for her "failing" by trying to help her daughter to become perfect with little regard to what her child actually wants.

This happens, in the most familiar instance, in a sense of diffuse responsibility for everything connected to the welfare of [a mother's] family and the happiness and success of her children.

This loss of self in overwhelming responsibility for and connection to others is described particularly acutely by women writers. (58)

In other words, mothers often live out their lives attempting to correct their past failures vicariously through their daughters, thereby assuaging guilt. Jing-mei explains her mothers' vicarious wishes when she says, "In all my imaginings, I was filled with the sense that I would soon become *perfect*" (Joy 143). Suyuan is so determined to correct her past mistakes, she cannot see Jing-mei for who she actually is and believes that Jing-mei can become a child prodigy if she is just given the right vehicle with which to perform. Suyuan tells Jing-mei, "Of course you can be child

prodigy too You can be anything" (Joy 141). Suyuan, then, seeks to correct her past mistakes by constructing the "super" daughter who is so perfect that she would not fail where Suyuan has.

Suyuan's obliviousness to Jing-mei's true feelings could be changed to a more accurate understanding by more of a balance between her outer yang characteristics and her inner yin core. In other words, Suyuan's spiritual trait of essence, the attribute of wood, can either be fostered into benevolence when it is spiritually nurtured, or when essence is tempered with earthly concerns, it can be changed into a negative form of action or temperament and can lead to a willful oblivion of others' needs and wants (I-ming 9). In Suyuan's case, her spiritual character is probably tempered by memories of her two lost twin daughters and her haunting memories of the weakness of her inner yin core, which are her earthly concerns and cause her great pain and guilt.

Like Suyuan, Jing-mei also possesses the characteristic of the east -- benevolence. A simple but telling example from their everyday life illustrates both Jing-mei's benevolence and her mother's awareness of it. Knowing that her mother loves crab, Jing-mei purposefully chooses the crab that has not been freshly killed at a family dinner so that her mother can have the fresh one. Recognizing how her daughter shares

her own trait of kind benevolence, Suyuan says, "Only you pick that crab. Nobody take this. I already know this. Everybody else want best quality. You thinking different" (Joy 234). Unlike Waverly, who is always trying to be the best at the expense of others, Jing-mei does not take the freshest crab because she thought it would be the polite and gracious thing to do. Suyuan knows this about Jing-mei because Suyuan had also insisted that Jing-mei take the better quality crab, even though Suyuan loves fresh crab. As a result, their shared desire not to succeed at the others' expense superficially may appear to be a fault, but their selfless desire to put others first is really their greatest strength.

Unfortunately, Jing-mei does not know that she shares benevolence and other traits with her mother partially because Suyuan has aggressively tried to deny the yin at the core of her own personality, causing Jing-mei to grow up with a distorted view of her mother. Jing-mei has not really gotten to know her and often does not understand her. Jing-mei says about her relationship with her mother: "My mother and I never really understood each other I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more" (Joy 27). Because of this lack of understanding, Jing-mei has spent most of her life feeling that her mother never listened to her and really did not care about who Jing-mei actually was.

Because Suyuan's true identity of benevolence is obscured from Jing-mei, she cannot see how to use benevolence to gain social power and support through helping others like her mother has. For instance, unlike her mother who, because of personal tragedy, seems to have so much wood in her personality that she is inflexible and unwilling to listen, Jing-mei mistakenly believes that her personality would be better symbolized by the water element. Jing-mei says of herself: "Too much water and you flowed in too many directions, like myself for finishing neither [biology nor art degrees]" (Joy 20). She does not see the strength of will that exists in her personality, but, instead, sees herself as more of a weak-willed failure.

Nevertheless, the fact that Jing-mei is unable to decide upon a career and thinks of herself like water is probably a sign of the yin at her core. For instance, according to Taoist alchemists:

Conscious knowledge is essence; essence is in the province of wood: the essence of wood is soft and it easily floats up Instability is due to the unsettledness of the consciousness of the human mind, which in turn is due to lack of the mind of Tao. (I-ming 33, 35)

In other words, though she may be strong-willed and obstinate at times, like her mother, she also has yin at her core, which can make her indecisive and causes her to mistake her wood character for the yin element water.

Because Jing-mei and Suyuan share the yin-yang combination of the wood character, it may seem that Jing-mei superficially shares little in common with her mother, but beneath the surface there are many more similarities than differences. In fact, Jing-mei is just as dynamic and aggressively yang as her mother. For instance, even though Jing-Mei has had a hard time deciding what she finally wants to do for a living, once she makes up her mind about something, she is just as obstinate and "wooden" as her mother. This is particularly evident when she refuses to practice piano because she wants to remain herself. Jing-mei explains her practice sessions by saying, "I dawdled over [the music], playing a few bars and then cheating, looking up to see what notes followed. I never really listened to what I was playing" (Joy 149). In fact, she is so set in her desire not to practice piano, that she refuses to practice properly even when she knows she will have to play for a recital.

By always doing the exact opposite of what her mother wants, in a rebellious attempt to individuate herself from her mother, Jing-mei inevitably lets her mother shape her.

Chodorow notes that personality traits are inevitably internalized from the mother, regardless of the intent of the child, by stating that personality traits are "a result of a boy's or a girl's social-relational experiences from earliest infancy" (47). Jing-mei internalized her mother's personality traits very early on because her early interaction with her mother consisted of a kind of tug-of-war of wills and to oppose someone with such a stubbornly wooden character, one has to be just as stubborn.

Jing-mei's rebellion and resulting individuation has caused her to lose the strong bond with her mother that would help show her how closely Jing-mei's character deep-down resembles that of her mother. Suyuan tries to not only show her these similarities symbolically, but also how she can use these similarities to empower herself when she gives her a green jade pendant. She says in Chinese, "For a long time, I wanted to give you this necklace. See, I wore this on my skin, so when you put it on your skin, then you know my meaning. That is your life's importance" (Joy 235). This transaction holds particular importance because jade symbolizes benevolence. Green, the color of the jade, is the color of the east and also symbolizes the characteristic of benevolence. In fact, according to "Man, Land, and Mind in Early Historic Hong Kong," written by George Lovelace, a

Southeast Asia Cultural Studies expert, the east is often characterized by green and, more specifically, a green dragon in *feng shui*. He writes, "Flanking ridges [of hills] on the east are referred to as the 'azure dragon' or 'green dragon'" (360). By giving Jing-mei the jade pendant, Suyuan is also symbolically passing on the trait of benevolence by showing Jing-mei how benevolence was a characteristic of her identity that she previously did not know that she possessed.

Suyuan, though, seems to imply that Jing-mei may not fully discover how the characteristic of benevolence can bring social empowerment right away when she says, "Not so good, this jade. This is young jade. It is a very light color now, but if you wear it every day it will become more green" (Joy 235). Since the jade will get greener as it ages, by saying that the jade is young, Suyuan could be implying that Jing-mei too is young. As a result, the eastern quality of benevolence which Jing-mei shares with her mother may not be fully developed yet and as a result, like the jade, she is not as "green" yet, but will become more so with age.

When Jing-mei's jade does age, she learns how benevolence, or unselfishly thinking of others, gives her social power. For example, because she selflessly comes to the joy luck mahjong game at the behest of the other mothers, the only daughter to willfully join their meeting, they give

her money to go to China to see her two sisters and, in a way, give her a chance to reconnect with her mother. Jing-mei exclaims, "I am embarrassed by the end-of-the-year banquet lie my aunties have told to mask their generosity" (Joy 30). However, even though Jing-mei is the only daughter to come to the mahjong game, she comes to it not out of a desire for personal gain, but out of respect for her mother and her friends and because she is interested in maintaining her mother's community by taking her place. Her interest in maintaining her mother's community is evidenced when she realizes that the aunties see their own daughters when they see her. Jing-mei explains, "And then it occurs to me [in me] they see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation" (Joy 31). In this flash of insight, Jing-mei realizes why her mother's community of mah jong players was so important -- it gave a sense of hope and purpose to her and her friends.

Jing-mei also realizes that if she is to reclaim this sense of empowering hope, she must understand the stories her mother has told her. Consequently, she can define how her mother's character has given her mother a sense of hope and empowerment so that Jing-mei can possess this hope and pass it on to her sisters. She realizes this when the aunties press

her to tell her sisters about her mothers by telling them stories that her mother told her. They say, "Tell them stories she has told you, lessons she has taught, what you know about her mind that has become your mind" (Joy 31). In other words, with this invitation, the aunties are implying that Jing-mei should find out how Suyuan has helped construct Jing-mei's identity in empowering ways so that Jing-mei can pass on the empowerment of benevolence and hope to her sisters.

Jing-mei also discovers how the unselfish kindness of benevolence gives social power when the mother's gift of a trip to China gives her a renewed sense of purpose. Jing-mei has been drifting from one thing to the next so much that she thinks she is like the water element; when the aunties give her the mission of telling her sisters about her mother, Jing-mei, for possibly the first time in her life, does not shrink away from the challenge, but eagerly embraces it. For example, when the other mothers ask her to go, she says, "I will tell them everything." But when the aunties look at her doubtfully, she narrates, "'I will remember everything about her and tell them,' I say more firmly. And gradually one by one they smile and pat my hand" (Joy 32). Thus, because her benevolent nature requires that she honor the aunties' request, it also prompts her to make a resolute pledge to them -- even though

this pledge, to know how her mother really was, will be a challenge she never felt she could meet even while Suyuan was alive.

By going on the trip at the other mothers' request, Jing-mei also learns how her own unselfishness helps her discover more about her mother and herself. In discovering her twin sisters on this trip, Jing-mei makes contact, in a way, with a part of her mother she never fully knew. She understands her mother and her own identity from a Chinese perspective. In this way, she probably more fully understands the Taoist beliefs that have informed Suyuan's conversations with her about her identity. This is illustrated when Jing-mei recognizes the similarities of the eastern position when she takes a picture of herself standing with her two sisters and watches it develop. She narrates, "The gray-green surface changes to the bright colors of our three images, sharpening and deepening all at once Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long cherished wish" (Joy 332). When she realizes that her sisters, who have the spring names Chwun Yu, Spring Rain, and Chwun Hwa, Spring Flower because spring is also represented by the east, look a lot like her mother, she also realizes that she too is a lot like her mother. According to Tun Chung-shou, a Chinese scholar in the second

century A.D., spring is a characteristic of the east because "wood is located in the East and characterizes the *ch'i* or ether of spring" (qtd. in Boehmer 59). Since this picture, which represents all the total traits and elements of her mother, arises from a green surface, the color, which represents the east, seems to imply that all of the characteristics of Suyuan also arise. As the picture develops, it takes a darker, greener hue, just like the jade pendant does as it ages, so that as the characteristics of Suyuan become more distinct, Jing-mei can find more of her identity in herself and her sisters as she is better able to relate to and know her mother.

By benevolently honoring the request of the other mothers to go to China, Jing-mei is also able to resolve some of the conflicts that Suyuan dealt with through her life that inhibited both Suyuan and Jing-mei from honestly knowing each other. For example, by meeting her two twin sisters and understanding her mother's self-perceived failure of abandonment, Jing-mei can forgive her mother in ways that her mother never could. For instance, when Jing-mei asks her mother if they had any relatives left alive in China, she denies it and says, "'Cannot be' And then her frown was washed away by a puzzled blank look, and she began to talk as if she were trying to remember where she had misplaced

something" (Joy 313). Suyuan had probably given up hope of ever finding her daughters again, and by telling Jing-mei that all her relatives were dead, she implies that she thinks her daughters are dead as well. The thought of her daughters' deaths probably weighed heavily on Suyuan's conscience and so she redoubled her efforts to make Jing-mei perfect, frustrating her relationship with her even more. If Suyuan had lived to know the truth -- the fact that her daughters were still alive and well in China -- she may have been able to forgive her moment of yin passivity and may have been more relaxed about letting Jing-mei be whom she really wanted to be -- not just her genius daughter. However, Suyuan has not lived to know the truth, so Jing-mei has to understand her mother so that she can find forgiveness for her. For instance, the Polaroid picture of all the girls reunited and smiling together illustrates Suyuan's long cherished wish of forgiveness and reunion with her daughters. Jing-mei says about the picture, "Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long cherished wish" (Joy 332). By showing all Suyuan's children together, the picture reaffirms that Suyuan had been a good mother and had done the right thing in a time of crisis. Her daughter can at last forge understanding and forgiveness for these actions.

Thus, through a more accurate self-awareness of how the eastern characteristic of benevolence shapes their personalities, both Suyuan and Jing-mei can empower themselves. Because of the unselfish roles they both play as group facilitators, both find hope and purpose. In addition, by using her trait of benevolence, Jing-mei is able to gain a more accurate picture of her mother by understanding the similarities she shares with her, and, in doing this, is finally able to find the forgiveness and peace her mother never knew. Both Jing-mei and Suyuan, then, show how benevolence brings empowerment to the eastern position of the mahjong table. In a similar fashion, in chapter three, I will show how Ying-Ying and Lena, seated at the western side of the mahjong table, use the Taoist trait of sense to construct empowered identities.

CHAPTER THREE

THE WEST

In grappling with the social construction of their identity, Ying-Ying and Lena, who are seated at the western side of the mahjong table, use the Taoist western trait of sense to envision themselves in empowering ways. However, both Ying-Ying and Lena do not know how to fully utilize the trait of sense, which can be viewed as perception, because negative emotions distort their perceptions. Ying-Ying cannot fully utilize this trait because her awareness of how it shapes her identity is clouded by guilt from aborting her first child. Consequently, she is not able to fully impart all of her knowledge of how this trait brings an empowered identity to her daughter. Lena does not realize the full potential of this trait because, lacking the cultural knowledge with which to understand it, she believes her mother's distorted perceptions and lives under a cloud of fear. By struggling to understand each other, both of them work together to more positively use sense to empower their lives and their identities.

Ying-Ying can use her perceptions to empower herself and others by being able to perceive things that are about

to happen. In Taoism, sense can refer to any faculties used to discern reality. According to Lu I-ming, sense is the function of consciousness, sensing reality, or perception (6). From a Taoist perspective, Ying-Ying can perceive future events when she can keep "consciousness open and fluid while clearing sense of subjective feelings; this means transcendence of restrictive mental fixations through the greater perspective afforded by the mind of Tao" (I-ming 6). In other words, when she can clear her mind of mundane thoughts, or emotional problems that may cloud her perception, she can perceive things so accurately that she can tell what will happen in the immediate future because her mind is one with the mind of Tao. For instance, when she conceives her first child, she knows he is male. She says, "The night [my husband] planted the baby, I again knew a thing before it happened. I knew it was a boy. I could see this little boy in my womb" (Joy 280). With consciousness open to the mind of Tao, unrestricted by petty earthly concerns, Ying-Ying is able to empower herself by perceiving future events.

Even though Ying-Ying can become empowered through the power of her perception, for most of the novel she is not because she does not keep her mind clear of subjective

feelings or mental fixations. Instead, her perceptions are distorted by the emotion of guilt. In fact, in Taoist alchemy, feeling is seen as a weakness coming from spiritual impurity that clouds perception. A spiritually pure person, unconnected to the corporal pleasures of the world, will be able to isolate perception from feeling and will be righteous, the virtue of the west, by being able to accurately perceive reality. However, someone who is consumed with passionate feeling will err from what is righteous. According to Taoist alchemists, "The five thieves are emotions and cravings, called thieves or bandits because their indulgence robs the individual of energy, reason, and inner autonomy" (I-ming 13). For instance, Ying-Ying's guilt over a previous abortion clouds the way she interprets *feng shui*. She is so negative in her interpretation that she perceives terrible things befalling her and, thus, becomes a victim of her own negative self-fulfilling prophecies. For instance, Ying-Ying predicts that she will have a miscarriage because, as Lena narrates, "she looked at the way our new apartment sat too steeply on a hill. She said the new baby in her womb would fall out dead and it did" (Joy 161). By negatively interpreting *feng shui*, Ying-Ying thought that the house

would bring bad luck because negative *ch'i*, or Chinese spiritual energy which is also called *sha*, travels in straight lines, so the apartment, which sat at a sharp angle on a hill, was then a prime target for it. Jeffrey Meyer, an expert of Religious Studies, says in "Feng Shui of the Chinese City" that "any straight lines of flow . . . are dangerous because they are carriers of noxious influences" (142). However, while no house can be perfectly arranged to garner nothing but good *ch'i*, no house can be arranged to completely garner *sha* either. Instead of focusing on some of the other aspects of her house that may have brought her fortunate *ch'i*, Ying-Ying only focuses on the negative aspects -- creating a negative self-fulfilling prophecy for herself.

Because, while growing up, Lena identifies so strongly with her mother, her mother's distorted perceptions shape how Lena forms her identity as well. Like her mother, Lena's perceptions of reality are distorted by her emotions -- namely fear created by her mother's secret guilt. For example, Lena calls Ying-Ying's influence on her perception of reality the "magic of the unspeakable," which illustrates the terror Ying-Ying has engendered within Lena for most of her childhood. Lena expands on the negative

influence of her mother's secret guilt by saying, "even as a young child, I could sense the unspoken terrors that surrounded our house, the ones that chased my mother until she hid in a secret dark corner of her mind" (Joy 105). So, for most of her childhood, Lena lived in terror of her mothers' dark secrets, which inform Lena's perception of reality. She struggles to perceive reality in a more accurate way because her mother's perception, which so heavily influences her own perception, is obscured in a cloud of guilt.

The excessive emotion that clouds Ying-Ying's perceptions begins when she is still in China. At first, Ying-Ying is overcome with the impure feeling of joy when she falls in love with her first husband. She says, "I cried with honest joy That is how much I came to love this man" (Joy 280). However, soon after marriage, he begins having affairs with other women and the full force behind the joy of her love turns to hate and revenge. She says, "It is because I had so much joy then that I came to have so much hate" (Joy 280). When her husband leaves her while she is pregnant, she aborts his only son in revenge. She says, "I took this baby from my womb before it could be born" (Joy 281). After the abortion, her guilt immediately

distorts her perception of herself. She envisions herself as a ghost and says that she "floated like a dead leaf on the water until I drifted out of my mother-in-law's house back to my family home" (Joy 282). In other words, overcome with guilt, Ying-Ying's perceptions of herself are so distorted that they echo the imagery of the "ladies of the lake" -- ladies who have done such shameful deeds that they commit suicide through drowning.

Ying-Ying's ensuing guilt over her abortion causes her to not only negatively distort her perceptions, but also plunges her into constructing an identity of yin passivity, which in its extreme without the balance of yang is debilitating. For instance, Lena says about her mother's extreme yin passivity after her miscarriage, "Sometimes she would start to make dinner, but would stop halfway, the water running full steam in the sink, her knife posed in the air over half-chopped vegetables, silent, tears flowing" (Joy 117). Consequently, Ying-Ying becomes so passive that she cannot really live. Nevertheless, Ying-Ying has formed this extremely passive yin identity because she is trying to repress the aggressive yang at her core out of guilt because she believes it caused her to abort her son. She becomes extremely yin in her passivity to

compensate for her aggressive yang failure (Welch 20). She becomes so weak, she says, "I could not even lift pins in my hair" and she represses her passion for her second husband, saying that her love is the "love of a ghost" (Joy 286). Because of her guilt, Ying-Ying imagines herself as a leaf that passively floats through life, and, like a yin ghost, she loses all her strength to live.

Because Ying-Ying has constructed such a passive identity, she can only protect herself from foreseeable crises in her life with yin passivity by using the principles of *feng shui*. For instance, when a drunken man lunges after Ying-Ying and Lena on the streets of San Francisco, Ying-Ying becomes so frightened that for the rest of the day she trembles and "clutche[s Lena's] hand so tightly it hurt" (Joy 111). Lena narrates that her mother saw this incident as something that "threw her off balance," implying that because Ying-Ying saw this incident that caused an imbalance in her life, it would cause future calamities or imbalances to happen to her in the future (Joy 111). However, though Ying-Ying is badly frightened and sees this incident as an omen of imbalance, she never does anything proactively yang to protect herself and her family to end her fear. For instance, Lindo, an aggressive

character with a lot of yang, would have done something more proactive. She says, "If the roof crashes on your head, no need to cry over this bad luck. You can sue anybody, make the landlord fix it" (Joy 289). Unlike the proactive Lindo, when a crisis occurs to Ying-Ying, she merely passively uses the principles of *feng shui* to correct the imbalance. She tells Lena, "When something goes against your nature, you are not in balance" (Joy 112), so as soon as she got home, "she removed the cans from one shelf and switched them with the cans on another. Next, she walked briskly into the living room and moved a large round mirror from the wall facing the front door to a wall by the sofa" (Joy 111-112). She rearranges the furniture to achieve harmonious *ch'i* and prevent negative *ch'i*, or *sha*, from forming. George Lovelace, defines *feng shui* as the art of generating positive *ch'i* through balancing the five elements through placement. In other words, the practitioner tries to find the perfect site where all the five elements are balanced and in harmony with each other. According to *feng shui* beliefs, elements can be placed in a destructive pattern or a creative pattern. So, in *feng shui*, things in a house should be placed in a site where the elements correspond to each

other harmoniously, or in the order or pattern that will give the most positive *ch'i* (359).

Another reason why Ying-Ying is so passive and ineffectual in her efforts to shield Lena and herself from negative events through using *feng shui* is because Ying-Ying is only trying to find the harmonious balance of yin and yang through her external environment, while failing to find an empowering balance spiritually in her internal self. Thomas Bhoemer writes that for the external environment to be in harmony, the individual also must be in internal harmony because "each presents a true image of the other" (57). In other words, in Taoism, the macrocosm of the external world and the microcosm of the individual must be in harmony because they are not merely reflections, but actually become the thing they reflect. Boehmer writes that the external and internal are "to be conceived of only in relation to the other. Thus, if man is a reflection of the cosmos, the principles of yin and yang must be at work in man just as they are in the cosmos" (58). Thus, Ying-Ying will never find true harmony if she merely balances her external world. It is evident that she cannot find harmony in her external world even though she uses *feng shui* because no matter how many times she rearranges the

furniture, she is still unhappy. Lena narrates that even after she rearranges the furniture, Ying-Ying speaks "about a heaviness around her, about things being out of balance, not in harmony with one another" (Joy 113). Ying-Ying cannot find harmony in her external world if she only tries to balance her external environment and fails to balance the yin and yang in her inner self.

Nevertheless, Ying-Ying's extremely passive yin response to her guilt of using *feng shui* is, in part, socially constructed as part of her identity because women in Chinese society were expected to be passive and submissive to men. For instance, the only way that a woman could gain power within the patriarchic family structure was if they passively waited to bear their husbands' sons. Kay Ann Johnson states, "Within the male defined family, women gained some status and respect through bearing children, particularly male children" (10). To prepare Ying-Ying for a woman's passive life, her mother teaches her to repress her inner yang nature. When Ying-Ying runs like a boy to catch a dragonfly, her mother chastises her and tells her that it might be all right for boys, who are supposed to act in an aggressively yang manner, to run free as she does, but that a girl should stand and be quiet.

Then, by being passive, the girl will attract the dragonfly and the dragonfly will come hide in the shadow of the girl's shadow. Ying-Ying says, "I loved my shadow, this dark side of me that had the same restless nature" (Joy 70-71). According to Welch Holmes, the power of attraction is the action in inaction or the doing in non-doing of yin. It is after Ying-Ying's mother tells her to stand still in her shadow that Ying-Ying discovers her shadow or the yin of her nature (20).

Although Ying-Ying's passive, yin identity is constructed, it is so extremely passive that it disempowers and even harms her. In fact, according to Mary Ann Farquar, because yin is death, in its extreme, without the countering balance of yang, it can cause a person to become self-destructive. In this case, Ying-Ying reacts with so much passivity to her guilt that she is more dead than alive, prompting Lena to say, "My mother was now always 'resting' and it was as if she had died and become a living ghost" (Joy 118). According to Farquar, the ghost-like aspect of Ying-Ying's character is also an aspect of the death-like qualities of yin (155). In fact, according to the Taoists, "the spirit of ghosts is the yin soul" (I-ming 29).

The severe guilt that causes this extreme immobilizing passivity is also socially constructed by both western and eastern cultures. In the east, even though infanticide for female children was not seen as a terrible thing in Confucian Chinese society, killing a male child was still culturally a terrible thing because a woman's only role in Chinese Confucian society was to bear healthy sons for her husband. In fact, Johnson criticizes some of the policies of current Communist China.

The clash between unreformed structures and attitudes and coercively implemented government demands for one, or at most two, child families could all too easily lead to a revival of female infanticide in some areas, repeating the fate of unknown numbers of unwanted females during the worst circumstances of poverty and disruption in the past. (230).

The guilt caused by killing a son that was so culturally prized causes Ying-Ying to become so severely passive that she becomes virtually indigent. She says, "I did not work. My cousin's family treated me well because I was the daughter of the family who supported them" (Joy 283). Crushed by guilt, Ying-Ying ceases to take an active part

in her own life.

In the West, Ying-Ying is so severely consumed by guilt because in contemporary western society, women are still considered the ultimate, and usually sole, caregivers and are the first to be blamed for any family dysfunction. For instance, Nancy Chodorow states that in the contemporary, common lore of western motherhood, women are so idealized as mothers that "the good mother knows naturally how to mother if she only follows her instincts" (90). In following her instincts, however, Ying-Ying succumbed to intense passion and committed infanticide. Therefore, to a western mind, Ying-Ying must not be a fit mother. This conclusion is unfair, though, because it is impossible for anyone to "naturally" be the perfect mother. Because mothering is socially constructed, mothers must learn from others how to mother. Chodorow states, however, that often in western societies mothers lack adequate role-models from their own mothers and that, while mothering, mothers are often cloistered at home, isolated from other positive role-models who could help. Chodorow states that a "mother's daily life is not centrally involved in relations with other women. She is isolated with her children for most of the workday" (63).

An illustration of Ying-Ying's attempt to grapple with her guilt caused by the disapproving western culture is seen by how she interprets this world using the Taoist *feng shui* beliefs. She says she sees the hallway of her western house as so narrow that "it is like a neck that has been strangled" (Joy 112). She probably sees her doorway as a strangled neck because it reminds her of her aborted baby in China. In other words, by using *feng shui*, she is interpreting the external world in ways that are influenced by the guilt caused by both western and eastern societies.

Ying-Ying's distorted, guilt-laden perceptions of reality have also profoundly influenced Lena's own perceptions of reality by distorting them with fear. Because Ying-Ying has so much guilt, she is very secretive about her abortion, but still expresses her guilt about the abortion in vivid and grotesque stories about past and future calamities to Lena. For instance, as a small child, Lena thinks of her mother's dark secret as springing from the basement -- a place where Ying-Ying says an evil man lived "who would have planted five babies in [Lena] and then eaten us all in a six-course meal" (Joy 106). Obviously this terrible story with its imagery of unwanted pregnancy coupled with infanticide is a metaphor for Ying-

Ying's secret abortion. However, Lena does not know this. Consequently, for much of her childhood, she takes her mother's metaphoric stories literally, living in a perpetual state of terror as a result. For instance, soon after this story, Lena imagines that she can see fearful things occurring before they actually do. Lena, who is only half Chinese, begins to equate her Chinese identity with using her imagination, specifically using her "Chinese eyes" or her mother's eyes. She states, "I saw these things with my Chinese eyes, the part of me I got from my mother" (Joy 106). Because her mother perceives the world in such a negative and distorted fashion, so does Lena. She imagines that she can see "monkey-rings that split in two" or a tetherball that smashes a girl's head across a playground (Joy 106). In addition, Lena associates her Chinese self with these terrifying visions. She says, "I could see things that Caucasian girls at school could not" (Joy 106). Lena is not trying to be malicious with these dark visions, but, out of fear, she is strongly identifying with her mother's distorted perception of reality, which has shaped Lena's own perceptions of reality and herself, specifically the Chinese portion of herself.

Lena's tendency to see the world through her mother's

eyes really indicates a lack of ego boundaries with her mother. For example, Chodorow states that often mothers and daughters have "not completely conscious reactions to the [other's] body as their own" (57). In other words, because of demands from society to be responsible for the family's well-being and happiness, mothers are often so responsible that they equate their daughters' feelings and even their bodies as their own. In the process, they teach their daughters to over-identify with them as well. So when Lena says that she can "see devils dancing feverishly beneath a hole [she] had dug in the sandbox," this is because, by overidentifying with Lena, Ying-Ying also teaches Lena to perceive the world and herself in a distorted fashion.

Though Lena's belief that she is seeing the world through her mother's eyes indicates a lack of ego boundaries, it also an attempt to protect herself against her mother's violent stories. Though Lena never feels the physical threat of violence from her mother, Lena constantly feel the very real threat of violence from the world around her through these stories. She narrates that her mother told these stories "to warn me, to help me avoid some unknown danger. My mother saw danger in everything"

(Joy 108). James Gabriano writes that children can cope with violence effectively if they can form an empowering ideology with which to understand and make sense of the violence. Gabriano writes that for children, this ideology is specifically referred to as "representational competence": "the ability to understand clearly what is occurring in their environment" to help "children master the stress" of the violence in their environment (qtd. in Dresang 136). To achieve representational competence, children often mix reality with fantasy so that they can "perceive resources and reassurance in this same fantasy dimension" (qtd in Dresang 136). In Lena's case, she tries to lessen the trauma associated with the foreboding of her mother's stories by imagining "the worst possible thing" through her mother's eyes (Joy 120). By imagining lightening that had eyes and "searched to strike down little children," Lena attempts to take a measure of personal control over the fantasy life her mother has created by appropriating and controlling it herself (Joy 106). In this way, Lena attempts to gain some understanding of the perpetual danger her mother saw.

Lena is not entirely successful at her attempts at representational competence. Even though she imagines she

can see the world through her mother's eyes, she still cannot effectively make sense of her mother's omens. Consequently, her personal resources are still too limited to deal effectively with her fear. For instance, later when her family moves to a new neighborhood, she can tell "that some terrible danger lay ahead" because her mother has rearranged the furniture. However, she does not understand the danger at all and asks her mother, "But what does it mean? What's going to happen ?" (Joy 112). Though Lena attempts to empower herself against her environment through representational competence, her attempts are not entirely successful because she still lacks an effective way of understanding her environment.

Ying-Ying's secrets not only cause Lena to distort her perceptions of reality, they also make it so that both Lena and Ying-Ying do not really know each other. Part of their relationship is lost in misunderstandings. For example, Ying-Ying says, "Because I moved so secretly now my daughter does not see me And because I remained quiet for so long, my daughter does not hear me" (Joy 64). In a similar fashion, Lena says that because she does not understand the cultural context behind many of her mother's Chinese stories that are meant to impart a sense of

identity, she "could understand the words perfectly, but not the meanings. One thought led to another without connection" (Joy 109). As a result, Lena largely cannot decipher her mother's empowering messages about identity that would make it easier for Lena to overcome obstacles in her life. She does not know her mother or herself.

Because Ying-Ying passively uses Taoist beliefs to deal with crisis, she constructs a passive identity for Lena. Like Ying-Ying, Lena believes that she can deal with crises by using certain socially constructed Taoist beliefs about passivity. Lena believes she can foretell future events by not doing certain things, or by using the Taoist principle of inaction. When Lena is an eight-year-old girl, Ying-Ying, tries to get her to finish her rice by saying, "[Y]our future husband [will] have one pock mark for every [grain of] rice you do not finish" (Joy 164). Her mother's words start Lena's internal conflict to maintain autonomy despite her mother's wishes and construction of her future identity as a wife. Lena knows only one person with pock-marks -- a boy named Arnold whom she dreads and avoids because he flicks rubber-bands at her ankles (Joy 164-165). By itself, Lena may have been able to shrug off this incident and forget about it, but the

next week she sees pictures in Sunday school of starving lepers in India and Africa. The pustules and boils of leprosy look even bigger than the pock-marks her mother warned her about, and she imagines that they are a result of many bowls of uneaten rice. Lena narrates, "If my mother had been in the room, she would have told me these poor people were victims of husbands and wives who had failed to eat *platefuls* of rice" (Joy 166). She decides then that she can make Arnold die of a pock-ridden disease if she simply stops eating her rice and then he will not have to be her husband. So, in fact, Lena decides that she can make something happen simply by *not* doing something else. This is an interpretation of the Taoist actionless activity of yin. Welch writes, "[Inaction] succeeds by being rather than doing, by attitude rather than act" (21). Even though she has virtually no connection with Arnold, avoiding him because she dislikes his torturous rubber bands, she imagines she can will events to happen to him because of the influence of her mother's Taoist beliefs. And, eventually, Arnold does die an untimely death from a rare strain of measles. When Lena hears about this she is terrified because she thinks her mother will know that she caused Arnold's death. She narrates, "And I thought that

she could see through me and that she knew I was the one who caused Arnold to die. I was terrified" (Joy 167). As a result, this incident illustrates how Lena uses interpretations of her mother's Taoist beliefs to deal with the problems in her life.

Because Ying-Ying has constructed such a passive identity for Lena, Lena is almost as debilitated by extreme yin passivity as her mother. She is married to a man so obsessed with economic equity in his marriage that he splits all expenses in half with Lena, even though Lena only makes a fraction of what he makes. Furthermore, even though he has used many of Lena's ideas in his architectural firm, he refuses to make Lena an equal partner, hiring her as an associate instead. Lena says, "So, really we are equals except that Harold makes about seven times more than what I make" (Joy 173). But though Lena may see the glaring problems in her marriage and professional life, she seems too passive to be able to solve them. For example, when she finally tells him "I just think we have to change things [in our marriage]," as soon as he starts to question her, she loses her resolve and doubts herself, saying "And now I don't know what to think. What am I saying?" (Joy 180) Lena, then, is so

passive that she cannot effectively solve the problems in her life.

When Ying-Ying sees how unfairly Lena is being treated in her marriage, she tries to empower Lena by revisioning an identity for herself and Lena that incorporates more of a balance of yin and yang. By doing this, she finally becomes empowered because she balances not only her external world, but also her internal world. Ying-Ying realizes her extreme yin passivity has influenced Lena to be passive as well. Ying-Ying says, "She has no *ch'i*. That is my greatest shame" (Joy 64). She decides to finally access her own yang core by envisioning herself as a tiger because she wants to empower Lena by showing her that they share the same fierce yang core so that Lena can find the strength within herself to fight more aggressively for her rights.

Ying-Ying envisions herself as a tiger because according to Ying-Ying, the tiger also has two natures, like yang within yin. It is symbolic that both Ying-Ying and Lena were born in the year of the tiger because the tiger symbolizes the west, as Arne Kallard, an ecologist, states in "Geomancy and Town Planning in a Japanese Community" (Joy 282). Furthermore, the tiger is symbolic

because "The gold side [of the tiger] leaps with its fierce heart. The black side stands still with cunning, hiding its gold between trees, seeing and not being seen, waiting patiently for things to come" (Joy 281). The tiger is symbolic because its bright yellow fur is like the brightness of yang, or like Ying-Ying who runs free and happy like a boy when she is a child. However, the tiger also has black stripes, like yin, so that it can hide in the shadows passively waiting to attract action, but not actively doing. This black side is like Ying-Ying when she learns to stand still in her shadow like a lady, or when she becomes indigently depressed after she commits infanticide.

When Ying-Ying realizes that she must empower Lena, she realizes that she has to impart to her a more accurate perception of herself and reality. However, to do this, Ying-Ying also knows that she must first accurately perceive reality herself by not allowing her guilt to taint her perceptions. Instead, she must face the pain of her abortion and, at least, take the first step towards dealing with her guilt. She says, "I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter's tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose" (Joy 286). In other words, she knows that to access

the fierce, yang side of her tiger spirit, she must quit repressing the pain of her infanticide.

Thus, in empowering Lena through the use of sense, or accurate perception, Ying-Ying empowers herself by assuaging the guilt of killing her first child by being the "perfect" nurturing mother to Lena. And in helping Lena access her aggressive yang nature, Ying-Ying achieves a more healthy balance between the yin and the yang in her own personality and perceptions by becoming more open and aggressive herself. For example, a more healthy way of dealing with her guilt and her relationship with Lena is by being more open about her past. She says, "And now I must tell her everything about my past" (Joy 274). By being more open, she becomes more yang-like in her approaches to life. In balancing her nature like this, she can possibly gain forgiveness for her past from Lena and find ways to forgive herself. In this way, she will be able to perceive the world in a more positive, balanced, and accurate light. Thus, she can then move on from the past and become active in her life and Lena's instead of lapsing into extreme bouts of passive yin depression.

As a young girl, when Lena realizes that her mother is being overcome with yin passivity after her miscarriage,

she also tries to impart to her mother a more balanced construction of her identity and reality by utilizing sense -- a more accurate perception of reality. Throughout Lena's childhood, her perception of reality has been distorted by the fear of her mother's superstitious forebodings and darkly vivid imaginings of the "worst possible thing" (Joy 105). For instance, her mother tells her of her Chinese grandfather who sentenced a beggar to die the most horrible death, "the death of a thousand cuts," but then the beggar comes back to haunt her grandfather and causes him to die a much more tortured death (Joy 104). Because of this story and others, Lena, who shares her mother's vivid imagination, sees the worst possible things happening before they occur and believes so strongly in her own dark imagination that she thinks she can sense Teresa, a next-door neighbor, getting murdered in the next room. However, she then runs into the Teresa a few days later and discovers that she is very much alive and, in fact, has no discernible cuts or bruises (Joy 113-115). From this experience, Lena realizes that though she thinks she can sense "the worst possible thing," it may not actually happen. So, when her mother predicts misfortune, Lena learns to use her "Chinese eyes" to perceive her world more

accurately, seeing the good that could happen as well as the bad. Lena writes, "I still saw bad things in my mind, but now I found ways to change them. I still heard Mrs. Soci and Teresa having terrible fights, . . . [but] I heard them . . . shouting with love" (Joy 120). In other words, though Lena would normally imagine Theresa and her mother were killing each other when they fought, she now has more information and realizes that things are rarely as terrible as they seem. Though Theresa and her mother seem to hate each other, Lena now knows that in reality they love each other. Shouting is just one of their ways of expressing their love.

Because yin is illusion, by realizing that her mother's darkly distorted perceptions are just illusion, Lena, just like her mother wanting to unleash Lena's tiger spirit, wants to unleash her mother's yang core by showing that she is really living in a world of yin illusion (Welch 131). She lets the light of true knowledge of the mind of Tao, or, in other words, the light of her yang core, shine through when she realizes the truth about her mother and learns to more accurately perceive her. According to Taoist alchemists, "The innate knowledge of the natural mind and real knowledge of the mind of Tao are white within black,

coming from within empty nothingness, movement born from stillness," or, in other words, the light of yang within the blackness of yin (I-ming 40).

To empower both herself and her mother with sense, or accurate perception, Lena imagines that she is using her grandfather's sword to kill her mother with the "death of a thousand cuts," but her mother does not die. She then imagines she asks her mother if she can see the truth and the mother says, "Now I have perfect understanding. I have already experienced the worst. After this, there is no worst possible thing" (Joy 121). This imagined exchange shows that Lena has finally achieved representational competence. By realizing that her mother's forebodings of danger are not real, she has finally clearly perceived the trauma in her life. By imagining that she is cutting her mother with a sword that does not hurt her, Lena can now use her imagination to effectively deal with her fear. This imagined exchange also shows Lena's realization that she can achieve a more balanced and empowered identity -- one that is more yang-like in its optimistic view of life and less yin in its negative and illusionary outlook. In other words, by attempting to have a more balanced outlook on reality, especially her mother and herself, this

exchange shows Lena's possession of an outlook that more effectively utilizes sense or accurate perception. This exchange also shows Lena's desire to help her mother realize a more balanced identity construction in which she is more positive and active, and less passively negative. Finally, this exchange shows her desire to impart to her mother a more accurate perception of reality, thereby empowering her with the attribute of sense. Though it is not clear from the text if Lena is even fully aware of the burden of guilt that Ying-Ying endures, by wanting her mother to take on a more positive outlook, Lena seems to imply that she wants her mother to move past her guilt so that she can perceive reality more clearly.

By utilizing sense, or more accurately perceiving themselves and reality, both Lena and Ying-Ying can become empowered. By sharing a revision of identity that balances their original identity constructions of extreme yin with yang, both characters can find inner strength. By envisioning herself with more yang, Ying-Ying can be more open about her past, and through seeking understanding and forgiveness from Lena through sharing her new vision, Ying-Ying can forgive herself and move on from her guilt which has distorted her perceptions of life. Lena, too, can

benefit from trying to share a more balanced view of herself because, through this new vision of herself, shares this more positive perspective of life with her mother and can stop living in the fear which has also distorted her perceptions of life. In this way, both characters become empowered by using the Taoist trait of sense, or accurate perception. Similarly, in chapter four, I will show how An-mei and Rose, seated at the northern end of the mahjong table, use the Taoist traits of real knowledge and wisdom to construct empowered identities.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NORTH

In the construction of their identities, An-mei and Rose, seated on the north side of the mahjong table, use the northern characteristic of real knowledge because it gives them insight into empowering aspects of self that enable them to make wise decisions in times of great crisis or need. Though An-mei's public self is constructed as indecisive by her friends, her private self has been constructed as confident and wise by her mother because her mother has shown her the power of real knowledge and how to magnify this power by keeping it hidden until needed. However, not all of the traits that An-mei's mother constructed within her are empowering. An-mei also was taught to desire nothing. Consequently, when An-mei tries to show Rose the power of real knowledge within her identity, this is problematized by the fact that An-mei also passes on the disempowering lessons of desiring nothing she learned from her mother. This negative construction of identity causes Rose to become lost in a morass of guilt and indecision in which she passively accepts her fate. However, by working together to

understand one another, though, An-mei can convey the empowering wisdom of real knowledge to Rose and help Rose attain a more complete understanding of her identity so that she can learn how to make wiser decisions in her life and overcome the negative aspects of her previous identity construction.

An-mei's private self, empowered by real knowledge, or wisdom, aggressively makes important decisions in her life with a yang-like certainty. From a Taoist perspective, real knowledge is much different from the Western conception of wisdom. It is innate, personal knowledge that is objective because it is not influenced by surroundings. Lu I-ming further defines real knowledge as ultimately "immediate knowing, originally inherent in the human being, and not the product of learning" (6). In other words, unlike conscious knowledge, which is knowledge learned through social customs and norms and so changes through time, real knowledge is innate and so does not change with time. Real knowledge remains stable through time because it refers to an innate knowledge of right and wrong and so using real knowledge leads to wisdom -- the "investigation of things and understanding of principles" (I-ming 13). So, by using real knowledge, An-mei can

investigate and understand herself and her surroundings on a deeper level, which allows her to have the courage to pursue her dreams with yang aggressiveness. An-mei illustrates this aggressive certainty when, despite possessing little money, she and her husband immigrate from China, purchase a home in the sunset district of San Francisco, and end up having seven children (Joy 129). Her real knowledge gives her so much confidence in her self that in crisis she is even more aggressive in pursuing what she wants. When Rose's little brother is missing, even though no one has taught An-mei how to drive, she drives to the beach with determined and aggressive certainty. Rose says she wondered how An-mei had "learned to drive overnight" while "she used no map" and "drove smoothly ahead" (Joy 136). When in a crisis, An-mei is empowered by real knowledge, which gives her the courage and determination to make wise decisions with calm assurance.

Unlike her private self, An-mei's public self lacks the ability to make assertive decisions, prompting her friends to construct her identity as someone who has a lot of yin because, as Maja Milcinski writes, she is too "flexible" and "passive" (200). According to them she has "too little wood" and bends "too quickly to other people's

ideas, unable to stand on [her] own" (Joy 19). This construction of An-mei's identity implies that she is like water, agreeing with and flowing with the direction of everyone else's decisions. And, in fact, according to Thomas Bhoemer, the element of the north is water (59). When An-mei is small, she even has a dream in which she envisions herself "falling from the sky down to the ground, into a pond," like rain (Joy 270). When An-mei falls asleep, she is most likely dreaming about herself as rain, or her element of water.

An-mei is able to realize contrasting public and private selves because of the yang within the yin of her personality. As the north, An-mei is mostly yin; Milcinski states that "the symbols of Yin are water" and "its heavenly side is North" (200). However, An-mei has a yang core that allows her to know the truth in major crises -- to have real knowledge. For instance, unlike conscious knowledge, which is false yin at its core, real knowledge has the truth of yang at its core. Taoist alchemists explain why the strength of real knowledge may not first be apparent when they write, "Conscious knowledge floating up and acting in affairs is the "host"; there is artificiality within the real. Real knowledge sinking and not being

manifest is the 'guest'; the artificial overcomes its reality" (I-ming 33). So, while An-mei's conscious knowledge, or her public self, may be indecisive, this is not real. At her core, An-mei's private self, is very assertive -- even though this private self is hidden and not manifest to her friends. When faced with major decisions, An-mei knows the right thing to do because she possesses true wisdom.

An-mei's mother constructs An-mei's dual identity because she also has a contrasting public and private self, which utilizes her outer yin and her inner yang. The public self of An-mei's mother is yin because it is very passive. Though she detests being the lowly concubine of Wu Tsing in her public life, her public self does nothing to actively escape or change it. Instead, she relies on the passive force of her beauty to attract Wu Tsing's aid and buys beautiful silks to become even more attractive. "Wearing a new silk fur-lined gown the bright turquoise color of kingfisher feathers," she tells An-mei that "[they] are going to live in a house of [their] own" because "Wu Tsing has promised this already" (Joy 263). This is a clear example of yin, which instead of actively doing, attracts action to itself to become doing in non-

doing. For instance, Welch Homes writes that Taoist yin inaction succeeds "by attraction rather than by compulsion" (21).

However, the private self of An-mei's mother is the reverse, illustrating the yang within her core. In times of crisis, she is capable of taking courageous action. For example, when An-mei's grandmother is dying, she slices her own bone marrow so that she can place it into a healing broth. When her mother did this, An-mei implies that it took a lot of courage because it was incredibly painful. She says, "Tears poured from her face and blood spilled to the floor" (Joy 41). In fact, it is from this action that An-mei begins to fathom the dual nature -- the outer yin and the inner yang -- of her mother and learns that she shares this dual identity as well. She says that from this action she sees "in [my mother] my own true nature. What was beneath my skin. Inside my bones" (Joy 40). Because An-mei's mother appears to be outwardly passive, but inside exhibits a remarkable capacity for strength and action, she constructs An-mei's identity to also exhibit these dual features of yin and yang as well.

An-mei's mother also shapes her identity by showing her the power in the wisdom of real knowledge. When An-

mei's mother becomes a concubine, the second wife tries to bribe An-mei's favor by buying her a string of pearls, but An-mei's mother smashes the pearls on the ground, showing An-mei the falsity of the second wife by exposing the glass of one of the broken "pearls." After she smashes the pearls, she asks An-mei, " Now can you recognize what is true?" (Joy 261). From this incident, An-mei's mother shows An-mei how to discern the real from the false and trust her instincts to discern the truth.

An-mei, though, does not know the power that comes from making wise decisions based on knowing real knowledge until her mother teaches her with her death. By listening to the sorrow in her heart, An-mei's mother knows that life as the fourth concubine has nothing to offer her or An-mei. As fourth concubine, she holds little power over the other wives, and though her second husband desires her sexually, he only offers her empty promises. She cries to An-mei, "Do you see how I have no position?" (Joy 258). To bring power to herself and An-mei, she commits suicide. She even plots her death so that it would give the most power to An-mei. She plans her death for three days before the Chinese New Year. During this time, the Chinese believe, her ghost will come back to settle all scores and it is unlucky to

have a vengeful ghost haunting on New Year's. Because this was considered a particularly unlucky time for a suicide, the suicide of An-mei's mother gives An-mei supreme power over her mother's second husband. An-mei says, "He promised her visiting ghost that he would raise [my brother] and me as his honored children. He promised to revere her as if she had been First Wife, his only wife" (Joy 271). Afraid of incurring the wrath of his fourth wife's ghost, he will now do anything in his power to ensure An-mei's happiness and An-mei has ultimate power over him -- even though she is just a young girl and would normally have, according to Kay Ann Johnson, "low status . . . in a family and kinship system organized around men and male authority" (8).

An-mei, however, is at first unable to teach Rose about the power of real knowledge or her inner yang strength, leaving Rose unaware of a dual yin-yang identity construction that utilizes real knowledge. In fact, Rose is confused and indecisive with decisions that affect both her public and private self, preferring instead to passively attract the assistance of males so that they make all decisions for her. In fact, she does not have any awareness of her yang core at all. For instance, just like

her grandmother's passive yin public self, she gains the protection of Ted by using the passive force of attraction. They start dating when she refuses money for class lecture notes, but "accept[s] a cup of coffee instead" (Joy 123). When she marries him, she lets him make all the decisions for her -- decisions that would affect both her public and private self. Not only does he make all public financial decisions, but he also makes private decisions like where they should go on vacation and what furniture they should purchase. Rose states, "We used to discuss some of these matters, but we both knew the question would boil down to me saying, 'Ted, you decide'" (Joy 126). Rose is living in extreme yin-like passivity, without any yang assertiveness in private matters, because she attracts Ted so that he can make all of these decisions for her.

Rose's extreme yin indecisiveness even prompts An-mei to say that her daughter's identity is like water, applying her friends' appellation of her public self to all aspects of her daughter. An-mei, frustrated with Rose's indecisiveness, tells Rose she cannot make decisions because she is without wood, indirectly implying that this is because she has too much water in her personality. She tells Rose:

A girl is like a young tree You must stand tall and listen to your mother standing next to you. That is the only way to grow strong and straight. But if you bend to listen to other people, you will grow crooked and weak. You will fall to the ground with the first strong wind. And then you will be like a weed, growing wild in any direction, running along the ground until someone pulls you out and throws you away. (Joy 213)

By saying that Rose is "like a weed, growing wild in any direction," An-mei is implying that Rose is like water because she seems to have no personal strength of will. Like Rose's ability to conform to her friend's ideas without being able to make up her own mind, water also runs in any direction and conforms to the shape of a container. She will only stop changing her mind, or running in any direction, unless she has someone who is strong-willed to make decisions for her -- someone who can make her conform to the shape of his or her will.

Rose's passive indecisiveness is caused from guilt over her brother's death, which she believes she caused through neglect; she loses faith in herself and becomes

afraid of making even small decisions for fear they will lead to tragic results like before. She blames herself for his death since An-mei had told her to watch him at the beach. She says, "I knew it was my fault. I hadn't watched him closely enough, and yet I saw him" (Joy 135). However, her brother's, Bing's death was not necessarily her fault because her two other brothers had gotten in a fight, and, in trying to break up the fight, Rose temporarily lost sight of Bing. This second was a second too long, though, since just when she starts to watch him again, she realizes that he is falling into the water. She narrates, "And just as I think [he's going to fall in], his feet are already in the air, in a moment of balance, before he splashes into the sea and disappears without leaving so much as a ripple" (Joy 133). Because she had temporarily become distracted, she feels guilty about his death because she thinks she was unable to save him even though she knew he was going to fall in the water.

While it may not be Rose's fault that her brother died, her guilt is constructed, rather unwittingly, by An-mei and stems from the unfair "perfect" mother complex that both Chinese and American society place on females -- even if these females are only young girls and not mothers in

their own right. Rose says that An-mei entrusts her with the responsibility of caring for her brothers because "How else could I learn responsibility? How else could I appreciate what my parents had done for me?" (Joy 131). In entrusting Rose with the care of her brothers, however, An-mei has given Rose adult responsibilities beyond her years. These responsibilities included care and awareness of her brother at all times, because as Meredith Tax states in an early feminist tract, a woman's "awareness of others is considered [her] duty, [and] the price [she] pay[s] when things go wrong is guilt and self-hatred" (qtd. in Chodorow 58). These responsibilities are supposed to prepare her for womanhood and include preparing her for the role of the "perfect" all-nurturing mother who feels responsibility and inevitable guilt for everyone else.

However, An-mei gives Rose the responsibility of an all-seeing and caring mother because of the influence of both Western and Eastern societies. Nancy Chodorow states that in both societies, girls are raised to be "little women" (54), oriented "toward nurturance and responsibility" (55) and are not supposed to act like children. Boys, on the other hand, are permitted to act like children during childhood because learning their real

roles of adulthood will not begin until later in life (55). These gender role responsibilities are demonstrated by the fact that only Rose is entrusted with Bing's care and there is no mention of whether Rose's brothers share in this responsibility. Rose is so used to filling the mothering role that she says, "I thought how much I sounded like my mother, always worried beyond reason inside" (Joy 131). Her brothers, in contrast, are childishly engaged in a fight, completely oblivious to Bing's presence, and cause Rose, when her mother orders her to break them up, to lose sight of Bing. Also, though her brothers are partially to blame, there is no mention of them feeling any guilt for Bing's accident (Joy 133-134).

By giving Rose these unfair and unrealistic responsibilities at such a young age, An-mei has also unintentionally shaped Rose's identity to be indecisive and passively yin, reflecting the same values An-mei was raised to have -- to reject her own desires and accept the decisions of others for herself. An-mei says, "I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat my own bitterness. And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she came out the same way" (Joy 241). To teach An-mei to desire nothing, and,

instead, swallow her own bitterness, An-mei's mother tells her a story about a turtle that cries so much that his salty tears gradually form a pool of water. The turtle can read people's thoughts, and, as they cry into the pool, the turtle eats their tears. An-mei's mother narrates, "Then I saw this turtle swimming to the top and his beak was eating my tears as soon as they touched the water. He ate them quickly, five, six, seven tears" (Joy 243). The tears then turn into eggs, which hatch magpies of joy. An-mei's mother told this tale to An-mei to show her that it was useless to desire because desire will inevitably cause pain and sorrow, which just turns into another person's happiness -- the magpies of joy. She says it is useless to cry because "Your tears do not wash away your sorrows. They feed someone else's joy" (Joy 244). Instead, she says that An-mei should swallow her tears and become just like the turtle at the bottom of the pond. In fact, after the suicide of her mother, An-mei, envisions herself as the turtle and says "I became a little turtle lying at the bottom of this watery place" that swallows her tears and desires nothing (Joy 270). So she recognizes she needs to take power from her mother's sorrow.

An-mei's mother causes her to construct her identity as a turtle that desires nothing because the turtle, a symbol of the north, neatly encapsulates the spiritual Taoist beliefs of the north. According to Taoist alchemists, desire is the thief that steals the virtue of real knowledge or wisdom, so the attempt to desire nothing is an attempt to maintain the empowering aspect of the north -- real knowledge (I-ming 9, 13). But by stifling desire in an attempt to maintain real knowledge, bitterness and tears result. This is why the turtle swallows tears and why the north, according to Arne Kallard, is represented by the flavor of salt (20). It is also significant that it is Rose's brother's drowning, or accidental immersion into salt water almost like a turtle, that causes Rose to become so passive and afraid to desire anything, swallowing her own tears, for fear she will cause more of them by accidentally causing more accidents like her brother's salt water one.

Though An-mei's mother has taught An-mei to desire nothing, causing An-mei to inadvertently pass this trait on to Rose by entrusting her with unrealistic mothering responsibilities at a young age, An-mei's mother does not completely desire nothing herself. Her greatest desires

are to love An-mei and to end her life as a concubine. Because desire is an inevitable part of human nature, swallowing desire and thwarting it only bring misery and grief. An-mei says, "I was taught . . . to eat my own bitterness" (Joy 241). In fact, Taoist alchemy teaches that people should give in to their inevitable desires, but should discipline them into going in the right direction. Thus, through disciplining desire, real knowledge and wisdom will be attained (I-ming 81). An-mei's mother illustrates how disciplining desire can bring real knowledge when she gives in to her desire to love and bring happiness to An-mei and her desire to end her own life by committing suicide. While suicide may not seem like a strength, the suicide of An-mei's mother shows her strength of character because she plots her suicide in such a way that it brings An-mei the power and position she would have never had otherwise. An-mei says about her mother, "I know my mother listened to her own heart. I know this because . . . why else did she plan her death so carefully that it became a weapon?" (Joy 270). In this way, by channeling her desires, An-mei's mother's desires cease to be a thief but become an aid to finding real knowledge so that she can act wisely.

An-mei also does not completely desire nothing, and, like her mother, she knows how to channel her desires into the wisest and most empowering course of action. For example, she channeled her desire to have a prosperous and happy life for herself and her family in America into having seven children and purchasing "a house in the Sunset district for very little money" (Joy 129). Consequently, An-mei's ability to channel her desires into taking the wisest choice, has made her large family comfortably well-off.

Rose finally realizes how her mother has tried to empower her when she sees weeds overtaking her yard and equates them with her mother's definition of her own water-like identity. Consequently, she is able to use her spiritual gift of real knowledge and wisdom to finally act when it is most beneficial to keep her house -- finding the balance between yin and yang in her identity. She has been suppressing her true desires, just like her mother and grandmother before her, by passively letting Ted make all her decisions for her. But when Ted tries to divorce her, she finally channels her desire into making an active decision to keep her house. In so doing, she shows her true strength -- the yang within her yin. For instance, in

the beginning of her divorce, she is so confused, it is like she is lost in a sea of choices and each decision looks as good as the next one. She is so confused, she does not know what she wants. She asks, "What did I want from divorce -- when I never knew what I wanted from marriage?" (Joy 215). However, she finally discovers her true desire when she makes a decision to fight for her house, even though Ted is trying to take it from her. She sees the weeds in her garden "growing wild in every direction," taking over the yard and the house, just like her mother always warned her she would be like if she bent to the wishes of everyone else -- especially Ted (Joy 213). She also remembers her mother saying, "Like a young tree[,] . . . [y]ou must stand tall and listen to your mother standing next to you" (Joy 213). Because she equates herself with the over-spilling weeds, for the first time Rose overcomes the cultural communication barrier between herself and her mother enough to become aware of how she can apply her mother's words to herself by keeping the house. She courageously stands up to Ted and says, "I said I am staying here" (Joy 219). An-mei's vision of Rose's empowered identity, yang-like in its firm strength, acts as a catalyst for Rose to fight for her desires. By making a

firm decision to stay, she becomes empowered because she is balancing yang characteristics with her predominately yin personality.

Furthermore, by making a connection between her own water-like identity and the weeds taking over her house, she is able to realize both the yin and yang parts of herself with real knowledge. She says, "No way to pull [the weeds] out once they've buried themselves in the masonry; you'd end up pulling the whole building down" (Joy 218). Because taking the weeds out would tear down the house, Rose realizes that, like the weeds, if she is torn from the house, the house would no longer stand. She realizes that because the weeds and the house are inseparable, they are both a part of her identity. The house, firm, strong, and protective, is like her inner core of yang, which enables her to act wisely in times of crisis. The weeds growing outside are like her outer yin. Consequently, like Rose's own identity, if one is wrenched from the other, they both are destroyed.

By realizing her own trait of real knowledge, Rose is also able to empower herself. By standing up for herself and making a strong decision not to relinquish the house, Rose is overcoming the effects of the guilt that she had as

a result of her brother's accident. When her brother died, she blamed her decisions for his death, and so she decides to make no decisions at all; in this way, she knows she will be incapable of making a bad one. For instance, Ted says about her, "You can never make up your mind about anything" (Joy 127). By making a firm decision, Rose is able to overcome the effects of this guilt -- her debilitating indecision. And, when she overcomes the negative effects of the guilt, she is able to make a connection with her mother's construction of her identity and her own construction of her identity. She can also define her identity and her place in life and make a stable, unwavering decision, showing that she can be responsible for her life.

Though An-mei understands how to utilize real knowledge by trusting instincts so that she can make wise decisions, she struggles to pass on this same understanding to Rose because she is caught up in mothering patterns that foster guilt and extreme self-denial in Rose. Lost in guilt, Rose does not realize the empowering aspects of her mother's advice. However, by listening closely to her mother's advice and her own instincts, Rose can utilize the empowering aspects of the identity her mother has

constructed within her and build an empowered identity which utilizes real knowledge so that she can make wise and appropriate decisions in her life. In a comparable way, in chapter five, I will show how Lindo and Waverly, seated at the south end of the mahjong table, use the Taoist trait of social propriety to construct empowered selves.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SOUTH

Seated at the southern side of the mahjong table, Lindo and Waverly both use the characteristic of the south, social propriety, to empower themselves by manipulating others to give them what they need. By more fully understanding the Chinese cultural significance that informs this trait, Lindo can empower herself more effectively than Waverly can because she knows more about how it has shaped her identity. Though she tries to empower Waverly by showing how this Taoist trait informs Waverly's identity, this transference is problematized not only by cultural misunderstandings, but by the fact that Waverly does not trust her mother because of this very trait. By working together to really listen and understand each other, Waverly and Lindo overcome these difficulties and more effectively use the trait of social propriety to empower themselves.

Lindo and Waverly's trait of social propriety is defined by the Taoist Classic Understanding Reality as "decorum and social grace" (13). For Lindo and Waverly, an acute understanding of social decorum allows them to

negotiate social mores and codes in such a way that they manipulate others into giving them what they want. For Lindo in particular, this identity construction around the southern characteristic of social propriety is illustrated when she is in China. She cleverly manipulates her way out of an unhappy arranged marriage without losing face with her husband's family. Instead of outwardly opposing her marriage and bringing herself social disgrace, Lindo uses the local social customs and the superstitious beliefs of her mother-in-law to manipulate her mother-in-law into freeing her from her marriage. For example, she says she had had a dream from the ancestors that "the marriage was doomed" (Joy 61). To prove this, she said the ancestors had also given her three signs in her dream. The first was a black mole on the back of her husband, Tyan-yu. Lindo says, "this spot will grow and eat away Tyan-yu's flesh just like it ate way our ancestor's face before he died" (Joy 61). The second sign was a rotted tooth that showed that Lindo's "teeth would start to fall out one by one" (Joy 61). However, when Lindo's mother-in-law sees Tyan-yu's supposedly cancerous mole and Lindo's cavity, she is still unconvinced, so Lindo offers her another sign: the pregnancy of a household maid. The maid would have been

forced to leave penniless and in disgrace if the pregnancy was discovered, but Lindo cleverly concocts a story to save the maid and end her own marriage. Since Lindo's husband has "no desire for any woman," she has been unable to have sexual intercourse with him and is also in danger of being disgraced because she cannot produce an heir for her mother-in-law (Joy 58). To save herself, she tells her mother-in-law that the ancestors have implanted the maid with the true seed of their line, thereby choosing the maid as the mother of the family's heir and effectively discharging Lindo from marital duties without disgrace. Lindo states, "the servant girl is Tyan-yu's true spiritual wife. And the seed he has planted will grow into Tyan-yu's child" (Joy 62). The superstitious mother-in-law sees the third sign as a particularly foreboding omen, so she gives Lindo "clothes, a real ticket to Peking, and enough money to go to America" (Joy 62). She allows Lindo to leave the marriage with both her money and her honor.

Because in Confucian China the only avenue of power available to women was through the manipulation of men, particularly sons, Lindo is forced to construct an identity based on manipulation. Kay Ann Johnson asserts:

Cross cultural studies suggest that when women are denied access to legitimate roles of authority within family and society, they rely heavily on developing and manipulating informal interpersonal relationships and emotional ties to gain influence over their lives and to partially overcome the imposed handicaps of male-dominated authority structures. (10)

Lindo, who at a young age was forced into an arranged marriage, learns how to manipulate the emotions and fears of her mother-in-law to survive a marriage in which it was impossible for her to have any sons and garner the slightest bit of legitimate power.

Lindo's identity as master of social propriety is also constructed by her beliefs about the Taoist five elements. Lindo and her friends considered it difficult for a person to naturally have a perfect balance of elements in their personalities, and, instead, most have one major element that dominates their personality. For instance, Suyuan shared this belief, causing Jing-mei to say, "My mother was always displeased with all her friends Something was [perpetually] not in balance. This one or that had too much of one element, not enough of another" (Joy 19).

Lindo, as the southern position, has more fire in her personality than any other element.

In the early stages of Lindo's marriage, however, she does not fully realize the power behind her fire element -- the power of conscious knowledge. Taoist alchemists define conscious knowledge as "the everyday awareness of ordinary life, formed by training and experience" (I-ming 6). In other words, conscious knowledge is learned through training, dictated by society, and consists of knowledge such as social propriety. Unlike real knowledge, which is usually unconscious and not dictated by society, conscious knowledge can be thought of as cognizant thought. Fire represents conscious knowledge because, according to Taoist alchemists, conscious knowledge is also like the flying of flames. Lu I-ming writes in a commentary of Chang Po-tuan's classic, "When the human mind stirs, conscious knowledge flies, like the rising of flames of fire" (33). At first, Lindo does not realize the power of her conscious knowledge because the match-maker has loaded her down with metal, specifically gold rings, to make her balanced, thereby, neutralizing Lindo's natural imbalance of fire. When Lindo does not get pregnant, the match-maker decides that this is because Lindo is too balanced and takes off

the gold rings. Not surprisingly, when the mother-in-law takes away the gold rings, Lindo says she feels lighter and freer. She says, "They say this is what happens if you lack metal. You begin to think as an independent person" (Joy 59). So, in other words, when the metal was removed, Lindo feels her natural imbalance of fire by realizing the power of her thoughts or conscious knowledge. When her mind stirs, she becomes more like the element that represents her character: fire.

From a more informed Taoist perspective, Lindo does not discover her own thoughts until the gold rings are removed because metal is in the realm of true knowledge and is heavy and weighs down her conscious knowledge, or her thoughts. According to Taoist alchemists, "Real knowledge is sense; sense is in the province of metal: the sense of metal is hard, and it easily sinks down" (I-ming 33). Since metal, which is in the realm of real knowledge, is heavy, it weighs down conscious knowledge, which is light and flexible like the wind or like fire. I-ming writes, "When real knowledge advances to correct balance, there is firmness in flexibility; conscious knowledge is governed by real knowledge and cannot become flighty" (77). In this way, Taoist believers like Lindo believe that rings, which

are metal, will load down the flightiness of conscious knowledge and impede the presence of conscious knowledge or thought.

Because Lindo has garnered a measure of social power through her manipulation of social customs and propriety, she tries to teach these aspects of her identity to Waverly. She says that she taught Waverly "[h]ow not to show [her] own thoughts, to put [her] feelings behind [her] face so [she] can take advantage of hidden opportunities" (Joy 289). By teaching Waverly how to be cunning, she helps mold Waverly into being a master of manipulation. For instance, Waverly wants her mother to meet her fiancée, but is afraid that Lindo will not want to meet him because he is American, not Chinese. By using her knowledge of social manipulation, she arranges a way for her mother to want to meet her future husband, Rich. She knows that her mother and Suyuan are extremely competitive, so one evening, she and Rich stop by Suyuan's while she is preparing dinner. She then sends a thank-you card to Suyuan and writes in it: "Rich says it was the best Chinese food he has ever tasted" (Joy 195). Waverly does this knowing that by sending this extravagant compliment to her mother's best friend, Suyuan will not be able to resist

boasting about the meal with her mother -- and about her meeting Rich as well. Never to be outdone, Lindo will then have to prepare her best Chinese meal for Rich. Lindo, hungry for any and all reaffirmations of her superior cooking, will then be happy to meet Rich -- all he has to do is praise her abilities in the kitchen. She tells Rich, "Tell [Lindo] later that her cooking was the best you have ever tasted, that it was far better than Auntie Su's" (Joy 195). And, sure enough, Waverly narrates, "And the next day, my mother called me, to invite me to a belated birthday party for my father" (Joy 195). Lindo also includes in her invitation the offer to "bring a friend" (Joy 195). Because Lindo has taught Waverly the art of subtly using social codes to manipulate others very well, Waverly, in this instance, is able to manipulate her mother into inviting over her fiancée, and, in a way, gets the best of her mother.

While Lindo's construction of herself and Waverly as master manipulators empowers them by making them able to obtain things they might not have otherwise, this construction also disempowers them in other ways by damaging their relationships with each other. For instance, though Lindo's cunning seldom hurts Waverly, it

does cause Waverly to feel unable to fully trust her so that Waverly creates an unnecessary distance between them. When friends ask Waverly why she cannot stand up to her mother and be completely honest with her, she says, "I always intend to and then she says these little sneaky smoke bombs and little barbs" (Joy 191). Later, she talks about her mother's "side attacks secret weapons [and] uncanny ability to find my weakest spots" (Joy 203-204). To Waverly, even a perfectly innocent gesture of love from her mother may appear menacing because of her mother's manipulative nature. Waverly constantly thinks that her mother has an ulterior motive, a master agenda. For example, Waverly is sure that Lindo disapproves of her fiancée and will sabotage their marriage. However, when Lindo asks Waverly, "Hate? Why do you think I hate your future husband?" she completely shocks her (Joy 201). In fact, when her mother says this she is actually implying that she has probably approved of him all along, but Waverly has been too blinded by mistrust to see this.

Waverly's lost bond with her mother is a symptom of the falsity caused by Lindo's manipulation of social propriety. Because yin is deceit, Lindo's deceit and Waverly's resulting lack of trust are a symptom of the yin

within the yang of the southern position. In other words, from a Taoist perspective, Lindo's identity of cunning social manipulation is also her weakness. Yin is deception and yang is truth. Because conscious knowledge is outwardly yang, but has an inner core of yin, conscious knowledge is false at its inner core, but appears to be the truth. According to Taoist alchemists, "Conscious knowledge floating up and acting in affairs is the "host"; there is artificiality within the real" (I-ming 33). This is why in her public, outer life Lindo appears to be completely honest, even while manipulating the truth to her own ends. Those who do not know her well trust her. However, her own daughter, who is privy to her private, inner life, is the most alienated and distrustful of her. Although Lindo may know exactly what she wants and how she can obtain it, she usually has to lie to get it. For instance, while her cunning and crafty lies get her out of her marriage and are harmless, they are still lies that do not illuminate the real world, but instead create a false one.

Waverly's distrust of Lindo makes it even harder for her to understand the Taoist symbols that Lindo uses to illustrate not only their shared identity, but also the

various ways this identity construction empowers them. For example, Lindo talks about the power of conscious knowledge, the power of her thoughts, which is ultimately her identity, by using the symbol of the wind. On her wedding day, when she first begins to hatch a plan to escape her marriage, she uses the wind as a metaphor for this plan and says, "I was pure. I had genuine thoughts inside of me that no one could see, that no one could ever take away from me. I was like the wind" (Joy 59). From this statement it is evident that Lindo has faith in her ability to think her way through hard situations.

Waverly, however, sees the wind as something that, coming from her mother, steals her power. She does not realize that she shares the power of conscious knowledge with her mother and that her mother's metaphor of the wind is also meant to empower her. For instance, Waverly imagines that she loses a game of chess to her mother as the wind carries her away, implying that the wind, far from causing her to come up with a winning game plan for chess, has caused her to lose. She states:

My white pieces screamed as they scurried and
fell off the board one by one. As her men drew
closer to my edge, I felt myself growing light.

I rose up into the air and flew out the window.
Higher and higher, above the alley, over the tops
of the tiled roofs, where I was gathered up by
the wind and pushed up toward the night sky until
everything below me disappeared and I was alone.

(Joy 103)

If real communication between mother and daughter is to occur, balance between the truthfulness of yang and the deceit of yin must be achieved. In Taoism, this is referred to as "making real knowledge conscious and conscious knowledge real" (I-ming 6). By joining yin and yang, or conscious knowledge and real knowledge, flexible conscious knowledge, "instead of conforming to the arbitrary intentions of history and environment, is stabilized by the firmness of real knowledge" (I-ming 6). In other words, conscious knowledge, Lindo's ability to manipulate her surroundings by using social propriety, needs to be combined with real knowledge: Lindo's great love for Waverly. Lindo's love for Waverly is a mother-daughter bond that has nothing to do with the capricious whims of social propriety, but, instead, is something that will withstand the changes of cultures and time. Obscured

by the capricious nature of conscious knowledge, Waverly is not entirely conscious of her mother's deep love.

Waverly reaches a more mature relationship with her mother when she realizes that she needs to question her mother to obtain conscious knowledge of her mother's love - the one thing about her mother that she can trust. Because Waverly is afraid that Lindo is trying to sabotage her marriage, she decides to confront her and narrates, "I had to tell my mother -- that I knew what she was doing, her scheming ways of making me miserable" (Joy 199). By questioning her mother's motives, Waverly concludes, contrary to her long-held opinion, that Lindo is not necessarily always out to cleverly sabotage her affairs and that she honestly does want Waverly to be happy. Lindo tells Waverly, "So you think your mother is this bad. You think your mother has secret meaning. But it is you who has this meaning" (Joy 201). By finally confronting her mother's motives so that she can see the truth, Waverly sees her mother in a truer light. She says, "I could finally see what was really there: an old woman, a wok for her armor, a knitting needle for her sword, getting a little crabby as she patiently waited for her daughter to let her in" (Joy 204). By seeing her mother as someone who

is vulnerable, tired, and eagerly wanting some sort of communication and understanding, not just deceitful manipulation, with her daughter, Waverly can trust her mother enough to fully communicate with her. She is able to take the real knowledge her mother is trying to communicate with her, her love for her, at face value, making it fully conscious, and, thus, will be able to begin the process towards understanding her mother on a deeper level.

In confronting Lindo, Waverly also shows that she not only understands that they both have a public face with private intentions, but that she has also learned to look deeper into her mother's true intentions so that she can see her love for her. In the process, she makes her conscious knowledge real. When Lindo exclaims that they both share a crooked nose, Waverly exclaims, "It makes us look devious" (Joy 304). However, when Lindo looks confused and asks what "deceit" means, Waverly says, "it means we're looking one way, while following another. We mean what we say, but our intentions are different" (Joy 304). By making this definition, Waverly is beginning to realize that she shares some of the deceptive traits that she so fears in her mother -- the public face with private

intentions. However, she also realizes that while her mother's private intentions may differ from what they appear to be publicly, these private intentions still include Lindo's love for her. For instance, when Lindo asks if it is bad if people fail to trust their devious natures, Waverly replies, "This is good if you get what you want" (Joy 304). This statement implies that Waverly recognizes the positive and empowering aspects of this trait in herself and her mother: the fact that their deception is still motivated out of a very real love for each other. Consequently, Waverly can turn her conscious knowledge into real knowledge by realizing that even though their true intentions may be hidden, they will always be motivated by a real love and caring for each other.

Because the trait of social propriety that makes Lindo and Waverly both masters of manipulating social traditions also creates a false world of lies and mistrust, by attempting to be honest with themselves and each other, both mother and daughter can foster their bonds of love, their real knowledge, and still get what they want by maintaining the empowering aspects of their conscious knowledge. They can make conscious knowledge real by realizing that they both share the trait of social

manipulation with a public face and private intentions. In addition, they can make real knowledge conscious by being honest about the things that matter most to them: their love for each other. In a similar way, the mahjong table and the reader, which both embody the center, can bring empowerment through the Taoist trait of faith.

CHAPTER SIX

THE CENTER

Now that I have explored how the cardinal directions empower the four pairs of mothers and daughters, I will illustrate how the last direction at the mahjong table, the center, places all the other directions together in a balance of yin and yang that empowers them further with the Taoist spiritual attribute of faith. Furthermore, the center is symbolized by the mahjong table, which brings strength on a symbolic level, and the reader, which brings strength on a rhetorical level. The mahjong table empowers on a symbolic level by placing all of the mothers and Jingmei, a daughter replacing her deceased mother at the table, together to instill in each other a sense of faith in the future, whether they consciously realize this or not. Because the mothers want their daughters to carry on the tradition of the mahjong-playing Joy Luck Club after they die, the mahjong table symbolizes the inheritance of a Chinese cultural legacy and brings mothers and daughters faith that they can overcome cultural miscommunications and barriers of guilt.

From a reader response perspective, the reader brings strength on a rhetorical level because it is implied that

the reader is also an empowering center. As the only participant in the novel with full access to all of the narratives, the reader becomes a mental focal point that brings all of the narratives of empowerment and all the hopes and dreams that the characters possess for each other together as a meaningful whole. And, as a result of being at the center of these narratives, the reader also becomes capable of fully realizing the mothers' dreams of strength for themselves and their daughters. Both the mahjong table and this implied reader symbolize the center because they bring together as a whole the empowering narratives that show a group of women struggling to bring understanding and empowerment to each other with their hope and faith in a better life.

The mahjong table serves as a center for the characters in the novel because it brings faith in a better, more beneficial future. According to Taoist alchemists, the center brings "faith or trust" (I-ming 13). Because hope is not possible without some degree of trust and faith, Tan first illustrates how the mahjong table brings trust and faith in the future when Suyuan is in Kweilin, starving and struggling to maintain trust and faith in the future despite an imminent Japanese invasion.

Suyuan gathers three other women to play mahjong so that as they feast, laugh, and play the game, they can "hope to be lucky" (Joy 12). She says, "hope was our only joy" (Joy 12). In this case, the mahjong table gives the four women trust and faith in the future regardless of the ravages of war and the ensuing Japanese invasion.

When Suyuan immigrates to the U.S., it once again becomes a struggle for her to maintain faith in the future while trying to forget the tragedies of the past within an alienating and misunderstanding American culture. So, Suyuan gathers three more women, the mothers in the novel, because she could "sense that the women of these families also had unspeakable tragedies and hopes that they could not express in their fragile English" (Joy 7). The mahjong table serves as a centering haven where the women can forget the pain of the past and find trust in the future despite the alienation of a foreign culture.

The mahjong table also empowers the women with a sense of trust in the future through its centering force by indirectly bringing gold. By representing a different position of the mahjong table, each woman brings together a prosperous and harmonious balance of *ch'i* that indirectly results in a lucky prosperity that enables them to obtain

some of the dreams of material gain that they have had for themselves and their daughters when they immigrated to America. Because mahjong is a game of skill, "the same people [were] always losing" (Joy 18). An-mei explains further, saying, "So long time ago, we decided to invest in the stock market. There's no skill in that" (Joy 18). In other words, from a Taoist perspective, the whole point of bringing four different women together is to benefit from the prosperous luck caused by the good *ch'i* arising from the harmonious balance of the group. If there is skill and not luck involved though, the effort involved to bring four very different women together in order to bring luck becomes pointless. For instance, this good *ch'i* arises because, to Taoists, when "yin and yang join[,] . . . the five elements are complete; this is the primordial noumenon of heaven. It is wholly good with no evil" (I-ming 31). Because the women need some outlet for their lucky *ch'i*, they decide to invest in the stock market because it operates more on chance.

By making this realization about mahjong so that they use their lucky *ch'i* to invest in stocks as a group, the women are showing an awareness of their group's centering and balancing power to take social control of their lives.

For example, as a group, "everybody votes unanimously for the Canada gold stock" (Joy 18). Because the whole group, not just one winner of mahjong, can become prosperous with stocks, the social power of the group is enhanced. In addition, armed with this awareness, the women can hope to be prosperous on a much larger scale, becoming even more powerful and prosperous as a group, than they would have by just betting individually on mahjong.

The mahjong table is also symbolic of monetary prosperity because according to Taoist alchemists, the combining of all the elements from all four directions, in this case the four women, was supposed to produce gold, also known as the elixir of life. The center produces gold because it was believed that if the elements of the four directions were combined in the right balance in the crucible, a symbol of the center, gold would be created. Thomas Boehmer states, "The five substances cited in this [alchemy] formula are those which are commonly employed in the compounding of the alchemical elixir. These minerals can be identified with the five elements through their associated colors, planetary essences, and associated hexagrams" (61). The gold-making substances were: mercury, symbolized by the east, lead, symbolized by the west,

silver, symbolized by the north, and cinnabar, symbolized by the south (I-ming 193). This explains why each woman, possessing unique personalities characterized by the attributes of the four cardinal directions, comes together in a harmonious balance that brings monetary prosperity to the group.

Because the center represents gold, it is even more significant that the group uses their harmonious balance, which they had originally gathered together to play mahjong, to invest their winnings in gold stocks. For example, Suyuan narrates, "Uncle Jack, who is Auntie Ying's youngest brother, is very keen on a company that mines gold in Canada" (Joy 17). Stocks have always been an intrinsic part of the American capitalistic dream. By purchasing shares of gold stock, the mothers are using the American capitalistic leverage to obtain some of the material dreams that they had when they came to America, hoping that this financial leverage will produce happiness and fulfill this dream in a uniquely American fashion.

Culturally and historically, the Chinese have come to America in search of gold, influenced by Taoist alchemical dreams of finding the golden elixir of life, but they have been denied access to this golden dream. In fact, during

the California gold rush, the Chinese referred to America as "Gold Mountain." Cynthia Wong, an Asian-American literature scholar, writes in "Anonymity and Self-Laceration in Early Twentieth Century" that many immigrants left China "in search of wealth and opportunity in America, which they also called *gaam san*, or Gold Mountain" (8). However, even though these dreams of striking gold in California were also uniquely American, these dreams were dashed for the Chinese in the face of American prejudice. Women were prevented from immigrating and Chinese were prevented from having claims with large amounts of gold. Consequently, the Chinese men were reduced to hard labor for small wages and, more often than not, died impoverished and alone -- denied access to their golden American dream. George Anthony Pepper, an ethnic studies scholar, writes in "From Under the Sojourner's Shadow" that many Chinese men were forced into menial labor "after being expelled from the mainstream of other, more desirable industries, like mining" and that they "did not have the capital required to assume middleman roles" (51). By investing in stocks, however, it is significant that women and their daughters, not just men who are prohibited from having children, have access to this dream. The women's dream is illustrated in

a vignette in the beginning of the novel when an immigrant Chinese mother says that her daughter "swallows more coke than sorrow" (Joy 3). In this way, the mothers in the group hope that financial security, power that has been historically denied to not only Asian American women, but also Asian American men, will be possible in America and will bring happiness for them and their daughters.

The mahjong table also offers the women social control and power as a group because it is from this group that the game has helped form that the mothers, by using the Taoist symbolism of the five elements, construct and reinforce balanced and empowered identities of each other and their daughters. In other words, because each woman brings to the mahjong table a unique personality that corresponds with the Taoist characteristics of the direction at which she sits, each woman brings a unique perspective of identity that empowers the others' definitions of themselves as well. In this way, when the women come together, they inspire a harmonious and empowering balance in the identity constructions of each other. In fact, it is by contrasting the extremes of each other's identity constructions that the women are able to know themselves and each other better. In other words, the passivity of

yin cannot be known unless it is contrasted with the aggressiveness of yang. Through knowing their differences though, they can construct the identities of each other to have a little more balance of yin and yang. For example, Suyuan implies that An-mei's identity is like water because she "runs this way and that" and has "too little wood" in her personality (Joy 19). On the surface, Suyuan's criticism may not seem to be empowering because it could cause An-mei to have a debilitatingly low self-esteem as well as reinforcing the passive, yin side of An-mei's water nature even more. However, by telling An-mei that she has "too little wood" and by implying that she should have more aggressive yang like herself, Suyuan is showing An-mei how passive she is, helping her define her yin nature, and telling An-mei that she needs more balance in her yin personality. As a result, Suyuan's suggestion could inspire An-mei to utilize more of her inner yang core, empowering her to be decisive and active in times of crisis in her life. For instance, when An-mei was afraid that her son had drowned, she instantly became so yang-like in her aggressiveness, that she doggedly searches for him even when all signs indicate that she should give up hope. After fruitlessly searching, she pulls out an inner-tube

and tells Rose, "This will go where Bing is. This will bring him back". With this comment, Rose says, "I had never heard so much *nengkan* [inner determination] in my mother's voice (Joy 138). Though An-mei's yang core has been constructed by her mother, it is also been enhanced by the influence of her social group of friends, which keeps her identity more balanced.

The mahjong table also represents the center's function of creating the spiritual elixir of life, or spiritual gold, because the empowered self-identities, which the women construct for each other at the mahjong table and pass on to their daughters, is the key to a happy and prosperous life that will be immortalized throughout the generations. The elixir of immortal life has both a spiritual and material component to it. Boehmer writes that the material elixir "involves the preparation of various elixirs and pharmaceuticals" and that the spiritual elixir involves "the calling forth and ordering of the attendants of the interior body" (55-56). Although for centuries Taoist alchemists had thought that if they could create gold, they would have also created the elixir of immortal life, all the Taoists' attempts resulted in a poisoned death. Bhoemer writes, "It was an accepted fact

among Pre-T'ang and T'ang Taoists that the consumption of alchemical concoctions led to a quick death" (61). As a result, a branch of Taoist alchemy became purely spiritual, divorced from the mad pursuit of gold that had long sustained it and the elixir became synonymous with life itself. According to Taoist alchemists the elixir is known as "A general word for the energy, capacity and function of life and consciousness" (I-ming 194). Therefore, in Taoism, the elixir is seen as a balanced mixture of all the spiritual elements, personified by all the directions, which the Taoists call "integration with the celestial design" (I-ming 142). So, like the crucible at the center that creates gold, when the mothers play mahjong, they also bring together attributes from all the different directions, inspiring balanced and empowered identity constructions for each other, and, in this way, partaking of the elixir of life. For instance, to make An-mei feel better after her son got arrested for selling stolen car stereos, Lindo tells a story about a neighbor, Mrs. Emerson, whose son also got arrested for selling stolen television sets. Lindo says, "Aii-ya, Mrs. Emerson good lady," implying that An-mei too is a good person and that she should not feel that her own character is somehow to

blame for her son's mistakes (Joy 24). Lindo, who in her own narratives has too much yang-like self assurance to bother with guilt, is also implying that she feels that An-mei should not waste time with yin-like guilt. In typical Lindo fashion though, Lindo does not come out and directly state what she means. She manipulates her knowledge of the social propriety of the group by allowing the other members to derive the meaning through the group's social norms and customs. Because the fact that An-mei's son had been arrested is common knowledge, Lindo does not need to state that her story is for An-mei's benefit because the whole group will conclude this by virtue of implicature. In this way, each member of the mahjong table balances the other members by teaching them specific lessons derived according to the identity she has constructed for herself.

However, these characters don't have the benefit of omniscient knowledge of each other, so only the reader sees the whole picture, becoming another representation of the center. Because Tan's novel is told in the first person, each character's viewpoint is limited. Therefore, only the reader can mentally bring together the narratives to create an overarching, central narrative of empowerment. Consequently, at the center of the narratives, the reader

can partake in his or her own brand of the spiritual elixir of immortal life. For instance, in her narrative, Ying-Ying tells the reader about her intentions of waking up Lena's tiger spirit. She tells the reader how she will present this new identity construction to Lena when she says, "She will hear the vase and table crashing to the floor. She will come up stairs and into my room" (Joy 287). However, Ying-Ying's narrative ends at this point. And though the table and vase do crash onto the floor in Lena's narrative, when Lena enters the room, all Ying-Ying says is "Fallen down" (Joy 181). Consequently, neither of the two narratives makes it clear if Ying-Ying actually has the conversation about their shared tiger spirit. The reader, then, is the only participant with a clear picture of Ying-Ying's intentions of empowerment because the reader is placed at the center of both of the narratives and can see how they interrelate.

From a reader-response perspective, the novel's first-person narrative construction not only implies that the reader is the center, but it also implies that the reader must be present for meaning to be derived from the text. As Wolfgang Iser states:

It is generally recognized that literary texts take on their reality by being read, and this in turn means that texts must already contain certain conditions of actualization that will allow their meaning to be assembled in the responsive mind of a recipient. The concept of the implied reader is therefore a textual structure. (163)

Therefore, by constructing fifteen first-person narratives that only the reader has full access to, Tan develops structures in her novel that imply a reader must be present to derive meaning. The reader becomes the center because, in order to derive the fullest meaning from the text, the reader must unite all the other narratives together as a whole.

As the implied center, the reader is shown the power in the faith that both the mothers and daughters possess because the reader gets the full message that they are trying to relay in their narratives, but that they do not fully communicate with each other. The fact that the reader, as the center, gets the characters' full message is important because according to Taoist alchemists, faith can also be defined as "sincerity and truth, and regarded as

the central quality which gives all the other virtues authenticity" (I-ming 13-14). In other words, by fully hearing the narratives of empowerment that the other characters intend to tell each other but never seem to fully communicate, the reader holds the truth of their messages for them and, in this way, authenticates their messages of empowerment. For instance, in Ying-Ying and Lena's narrative, the reader holds the faith that mother and daughter will both re-envision their identities in more empowering ways for the characters because, though it is clear from their narratives that they fully intend to empower each other, it is never clear if they actually communicate these intentions. By envisioning herself slicing her mother with a sword, Lena wants to communicate a message that Ying-Ying need not live in a fantasy world of fear because, in reality, what she is imagining is probably not that bad. She imagines that her mother realizes this and says, "I have already experienced the worst. After this, there is no worst possible thing" (Joy 121). However, it is unclear if she is really able to communicate this to Ying-Ying. Instead, the reader receives Lena's message and, as a result, holds in Ying-Ying's place Lena's hopes for empowering her.

In Jing-mei's narrative, the reader gets to know things about how both Jing-mei and Suyuan can be empowered. Suyuan, however, will never receive this empowering message because of her recent death. The reader is privy to the fact that Suyuan's babies are alive and well in China and that Jing-mei will not only reunite with them, but will also try to meet them in Suyuan's place so that they can get to know who their mother really was. She says, "I will remember everything about them and tell them [about their mother]" (Joy 32). Jing-mei's statement leaves room for the reader to realize that Suyuan does not need to suffer from the guilt of leaving them because she did, in her own way, protect and nurture them. The reader can also see that Jing-mei does realize Suyuan's attempts to empower her. Jing-mei discovers what her mother meant when she said that she would always be Chinese when she says, "My mother was right. I am becoming Chinese" (Joy 306). And so the reader can actualize in Suyuan's place all the hopes she held -- not only that her all daughters were alive and well, but also that Jing-mei would realize who she was: what it means to be Chinese and how her mother's beliefs in Taoism have helped construct her identity. Jing-mei can then bring this knowledge to her sisters.

The most successful communication occurs between Lindo and Waverly; however, it is unclear if they ever receive the same rich narrative text of hopeful empowerment that the reader receives. Instead of a cunning and vindictive manipulator deliberately trying to sabotage her plans, Waverly sees Lindo as "an old woman . . . getting a little crabby as she waited patiently for her daughter to invite her in" (Joy 204). This new vision of her mother empowers Waverly because it enables more honest communication with Lindo by showing Waverly that her mother really loves her and is also interested in communicating with her honestly. However, it is unclear from her narrative if she really communicates with her mother this new view. Lindo also tells a complex narrative in which she illustrates how the power of the wind is a symbol for the power of her thoughts. To explain how the wind symbolizes the power of her thoughts, she says, "I had genuine thoughts inside that no one could see I was like the wind" (Joy 53). It is never clear, however, if Waverly understands that the wind also symbolizes the power of her thoughts as well. In fact, it seems that she never understands this because she sees the wind as an ominous force that comes from her mother, not herself. She

imagines losing chess to her mother while her mother says, "Strongest wind cannot be seen" and she is lifted out the window by the force of the wind (Joy 103). As a result, only the reader knows that the wind is supposed to symbolize the power of Waverly's thoughts, a trait she shares with her mother, and only the reader knows how Waverly both perceives her mother yearns for honest communication with her.

Finally, Rose and An-mei also fail to clearly communicate to each other, leaving only the reader to derive their messages of hopeful empowerment. For example, An-mei tells a story of how she learned the power of true knowledge from her mother by learning that some gifts and some friends appear real, but that they are false, and that if she listens to her heart she can "recognize what is true" (Joy 261). It is never clear if Rose ever gets this message, though Rose does realize what her mother means when she says that she is like water, or "like a weed, growing in any direction" (Joy 213). Rose realizes the power behind this trait and that she also shares this with her mother when she sees the weeds in her garden and has a dream in which she sees her mother planting weeds in it so that they were "running wild in every direction" (Joy 220).

From this dream, she knows that these weeds are a gift from her mother because the weeds symbolize her mother's personality trait of water, which her mother has passed on to her. She also knows from this dream that she should keep her house, but it is not clear from the text if she shares this epiphany with her mother because her narrative ends right there. Only the reader fully knows the truth behind their intentions and can fully interpret Rose's insight, as well as An-mei's insight about true knowledge.

Because the reader is the only participant in the text completely privy to all the narratives and is the only one who can garner the empowering truths behind the narratives, the reader's full knowledge of this message of empowerment symbolizes the elixir of life. The center, the position where the elixir of life is created, also signifies the reader's position in the book in which he or she gets a balance of empowering perspectives from each character sitting on each side of the mahjong table. The Taoists say that the point of the elixir is to become empowered by reaching the mind of Tao. In other words, "The rule of alchemy is just to take the uniform great medicine of the mind of Tao" (I-ming 142). However, Taoist alchemists also say:

Though the mind of Tao is uniform, it governs the energies of the five elements and contains the qualities of the five elements. This is because the mind of Tao is the manifestation of true unity. (I-ming 142)

In other words, because the elixir of life is of the mind of Tao -- a united balance of the five elements that correspond with each direction of the mahjong table -- the reader, by reading all the narratives in the complete novel, can also come away with an understanding of the mind of Tao.

By reading this thesis, the reader of Tan's novel will be able to see a yin-yang balance of differing perspectives that are represented by each direction and may also become empowered. Like each of the characters, no readers have a perfect balance of all the five elements or yin and yang their identity constructions, and, as a result, most readers probably live their lives in unhealthy extremes. Through reading this thesis, readers may become empowered by reading about the characters with too much yin in their identities who are too passive and negative to actively pursue their dreams in life. Readers also may become empowered by reading about others characters with too much

yang who may be too stubborn and aggressive, and, in the process of attaining their dreams, may hurt others.

Through seeing how both of these seemingly paradoxical extremes work together to achieve the greatest efficacy in life in this thesis, the reader may also be empowered.

By reading about the characters' struggle to communicate across barriers of guilt and cultural differences in this thesis, the reader may also realize the different psychological and cultural barriers impeding his or her own communication with relatives. In being able to see how the characters are able to overcome to a limited degree these barriers to communication by achieving more of a yin-yang balance and, by using their opposite characteristics, actually listen to each other, the reader can also become empowered.

Through the use of Taoist symbols, Tan illustrates how mothers and daughters influence each other, overcoming cultural and psychological barriers to communication, to construct empowered identity constructions that can help them overcome obstacles in their lives. Furthermore, Tan illustrates that to overcome obstacles, a balance between yin and yang opposites, aggressiveness and passivity, must be achieved.

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