

## The Growth of Chinese – American Literature and Position of Amy Tan: An Overview

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### Abstract:

The Paper focuses on the growth and position of Chinese American Literature in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. It also reinforces the position of woman in the male dominated society in China and how does every woman suffered to come out of that hurdles in their life and start their life again with a fresh air. The paper mainly shows the domination of male on females in the practical context. It also signifies the importance of Chinese who waited in the Angel land to enter America, their suffering and as to how they overcame and evolved into new lives. The paper has given importance about the woman in everyone's life as to how they swallow the suffering in order to bring their families to the shore for the better living.

**Keywords:** *Chinese-Americans; Feet Binding; Gold Rush; transcontinental railroad; huiguan; War Brides; China Town*

The growth of Chinese–American literature is itself a product of a specific historical moment. Just as ambiguities surround the term “Chinese Americans”, so there exists no consensus on what properly falls within the preview of Chinese–American literature; indeed the boundaries of the field, as inferred from critical practice have fluctuated with changing historical conditions. The usage of “Chinese–Americans” currently accepted by a majority of the community and by the American political structure, to refer to persons of Chinese ancestry residing permanently in the United States regardless of nativity, is of recent coinage.

Before we discuss the significance of Chinese-American literature, it would be worthwhile to discuss the role of women in Chinese society. In China, feet binding was one of the ways by which Chinese men made women feel inferior to them. This was a practice till the communists had arrived to change the attitude of the people. Even the property was bequeathed only to the sons, not to the daughters. Although in early history, Chinese society may have been matrilineal, by the first century B.C, patriarchal power was firmly established. To them the way in which women were portrayed can be illustrated by poems in “The Book of Songs” such as the

following, “Black bears and Brown bears” means Men Children.” “Snakes and Serpents” means Girl Children.

There is an anonymous poem that reinforces male superiority: –

So he bears a son, / and puts him to sleep upon a bed, /clothes him in robes,/ gives him a jade sculpture to play with./ The child’s howling is very lusty;/ in red greaves shall he flare,/ be a lord and king of house and home./Then he bears a daughter,/ and puts her upon the ground,/ clothes her in swaddling clothes,/ gives her a loom-whorl to play with./ For her no decorations, no emblems;/ her only care, is the wine and the food,/ and how to give no trouble to father and mother./

This poem shows the favoured treatment of males over females which starts right at birth. In traditional Chinese culture, women were so inferior that they were sometimes thought of as less useful than farm animals that is small humans. Practices such as female slavery, concubinage, female infanticide and foot binding were very normal, though in American society today, most of the people would consider them inhuman. ‘Confucius’ (551-479 B.C) also revealed an attitude towards women which was inferior. He seldom wrote about women, and when he did write about them, he classified women as slaves and small humans. There also existed a code, which controlled the behaviour and instructions of women in the first century B.C. obviously this, did nothing to change the patriarchal position of women. This code consisted of three obedience’s and four virtues. Three obedience’s were that she Obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son after her husband’s death. The four virtues are that she be chaste, her conversation be courteous and not gossipy, her leisure should be spent in perfecting needle work and tapestry for beautifying the home.

Returning to the subject on Chinese American literature, one may say that it is closely linked to the history of America. The earliest rendered arrival of the Chinese was during the California Gold Rush. *The California Gold Rush* (1848-1855) started in January 1848, when James W. Marshall found shiny pieces of metal near the sawmill he was building. Tests showed the metal was gold. When James Marshall looked into the American River and saw gold alongside John Sutter's sawmill on 24 January 1848, he unintentionally initiated a set of events that dramatically transformed both California and the United States. Although Marshall and Sutter attempted to prevent news of their discovery from spreading, within a few months word had reached San Francisco. As news of the discovery spread, some 300,000 people came to California from the rest of the United States and abroad. The Chinese were one of the earliest to arrive. To them, San Francisco was their ‘Gum San’ or gold mountain. While few of them made money using the gold, many could only find work in the mines. Others found work in wool and cotton factories.

The massive importation of Chinese laborers to build the *transcontinental railroad* in the 1860's is a significant landmark in Chinese American history. Due to this building of the railroad, many Chinese immigrants were employed in the work. During this period women unbound their feet and worked with men proving that they were equally strong. In spite of the various struggle; Chinese worked for Americans for the survival of their families in China.

By 1860, the ratio of Chinese men to Chinese women was eighteen to one (compared to California's overall twelve-to-one ratio). This was caused by a variety of cultural, social, economic, sexist and political factors, which also resulted in a "widow" society in China and a "bachelor" society in America. Parallel to a belief among many Americans in the supposed cultural, moral and racial inferiority of the Chinese, was a xenophobic fear of a Chinese takeover, later called the Yellow Peril. When the economy declined, unemployed white workers accused Chinese workers of causing the nation's demise. Nativistic, anti-Chinese hysteria permeated California's politics. The state's labor unions claimed Chinese immigration would drive out "real" Americans and destroy the nation's democratic structure. This xenophobia was realized in murders, exclusion and the total destruction of the Chinese communities by the passage of anti-Chinese legislation.

California's 1879 Constitution even contained a specific section on how to eliminate the Chinese. Their presence led to the creation of Chinese communities commonly called Chinatown, sometimes Little China or Little Canton. These enclaves were segregated and considered an exotic curiosity by mainstream America. They had their own form of self-government organized under the leadership of merchants' guilds and district associations called *huiguan*. The largest China town is the San Francisco Chinatown which is now the biggest tourist spot.

In 1882, the Exclusion Act was passed to prevent Chinese from forming families in the United States. The most popular way to subvert exclusion laws was the "paper son" system. Since the courts ruled that U.S. citizens were exempt from exclusion, Chinese children born of U.S. citizens were allowed to enter the country because of their derivative citizenship. Chinese Americans going to China would report the birth of children, usually sons; rarely daughters and create slots for sale to those Chinese who did not have an American connection. Assuming the identity of a Chinese American's son, such a "paper son" was now eligible to enter the U.S. Fully aware of these fraudulent entries, the government detained Chinese for interrogation at immigration stations at ports of entry. The best known of these stations was on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay.

From 1910 to 1940 all Chinese and Chinese Americans entering the port of San Francisco were subjected to interrogations and physical examinations. Some of these people were confined for as long as two years on the island. The expressions of injustice, frustration, and anger carved on

the walls of the station barracks by these people can still be seen today. Chinese on migrating to America carved poems of frustration into the wooden walls of barracks on Angel Island (in San Francisco Bay), which was used as an immigration station.

After the U.S. entered World War II, many Chinese Americans found jobs in war-related industries and at last found the opportunity to put their education and training to use. An estimated twenty thousand Chinese men and women served in the U.S. military during the war. Further, economic and political factors related to the World War II alliance between China and the United States, as well as a need to diffuse Japan's anti-American propaganda efforts in Asia, played a crucial role in bringing an end to exclusion. With the Repeal Act, sixty-one years of exclusion came to a close on December 17, 1943.

After the Second World War, the Chinese American community was transformed by the entry of *War Brides*, which began to correct the gender imbalance in Chinatowns and made nuclear families prevalent for the first time in many years. The glow faded as communism triumphed in China, and the Korean War broke out. Further, and the cold war began to cast suspicious on Chinese Americans – now the ‘bad’ Asians again. It took some time before Chinese were finally accepted as part of the ‘American family’.

Therefore, it became a matter of necessity to explain about the Chinese to white readers. This work was taken up by a group of highly educated, often aristocratic Asians, who used their knowledge of the English Language and American culture to dispel negative images about their ethnic group. These Asians were called, “Ambassadors of goodwill.” Some of these ambassadors are Lee Yan Phou, Wu Tingfang, Lin Yutang, and Chiang Yee.

Early traces of Chinese American Literature as mentioned earlier can be found on wooden walls of Angel Island, San Francisco Bay. Some of the early traces of Chinese-American literature are *My Life in China and America* (1909) by Yung Wing, the first Chinese to graduate from an American University. Other few examples are Pardee Lowe’s *Father and Glorious Descendant* and Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter*.

As far as Asian American Anthologies are considered, three of them are considered remarkable. In 1972 Kai-yu Hsu, a distinguished scholar of Chinese literature, and Helen Palubinskas published a slim anthology, *Asian American Authors*, the first collection of its kind, which brought to light two generations of American writers from three Asian traditions. In 1974 two additional anthologies appeared: *Aiiiiieee!*, edited by Frank Chin, Jeffery Chan, Lawson Inada, and Shawn Wong; and *Asian American Heritage*, edited by David Hsin-fu Wand.

The three anthologies differ in their definition of Asian American. Hsu and Palubinskas included writers of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino origin. The Chinese Americans and Japanese

Americans were considered in the order of their length of residence in the United States. Those born and reared here had priority; then came, those who had immigrated when very young and remained here. Some Filipino writers who had established their careers in the Philippines before coming to the States were included because they had written and published in English.

At the same time, the editors rejected American-born writers Jade Snow Wong (*Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 1945) and Virginia Lee (*The House that Tai Ming Built*, 1963) for catering to “white racism” by maintaining the stereotypes of passivity, inoffensiveness, and “cultural superiority.” The classics of Asian American literature for Chin and others are Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961), John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957), and Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*.

Coming to Jade Snow Wong is one of the earliest woman writers, it was “Maxine Hong Kingston’s ‘The Woman Warrior’ (1976) that formed a landmark in Chinese- American woman writing. Closely associated in fame is Amy Tan who is considered one of the foremost Chinese-American woman novelists.

Amy Tan, the middle child of Daisy and John Tan, whose Chinese name, Anmei, means “blessing from America”, was born in 1952 in Oakland, California, only three years after her mother immigrated to the United States to China. Amy’s brother’s, Peter and John, were born in 1950 and 1954, respectively. Her father, trained as an Engineer in Beijing, worked for the United States during the World War II and, after immigrating to the United States, became a Baptist minister. In 1967, Peter died of a brain tumour. Within a year, Amy’s father died, too, also of a brain malignancy. Their death’s opened a door for Amy into her mother’s past, for it was only then that Daisy Tan revealed that she had three more daughters living in China, who had remained in the custody of an abusive first husband after her divorce. Following the deaths of her husband and son, Daisy moved what was left of her family across the United States and Europe, finally settling in Switzerland, where Amy finished high school.

In 1972, Tan graduated with honours, receiving a B.A., with a double major in English and Linguistics. She was awarded a scholarship to attend the Summer Linguistics Institute at the University of California, Santa Cruz. In 1973, she earned her M.A in Linguistics, also from San Jose state University; and then was awarded a Graduate Minority Fellowship under the affirmative action program at the University of California, Berkeley, where she enrolled as a doctoral student in Linguistics. Following the murder of one of her closest friends, Tan left her doctoral program before completing her degree, and for the next five years she worked as a language development consultant and as a project director for programs serving disabled children from birth to age five. She then became a freelance business writer specializing in corporate communications for such companies as AT&T, IBM, and Pacific Bell. In 1985, when her psychiatrist treating Tan for her self described workaholicism fell asleep for the third time during one of their sessions, Tan quit therapy and decided to write fiction instead. She attended her first

writer's workshop, the Squaw Valley Community of Writer's, where she met the writer Molly Giles, who later led a small workshop that often made him to Visit Tan's house.

In 1986, Tan's first short story, '*End Game*' appeared in the defunct magazine, FM Five. The story was later reprinted in Seventeen, which attracted the attention of literary agent, Sandra Dijkstra, who encouraged Tan to continue writing fiction. When Tan had completed three stories, her agent submitted them, along with the proposal for a collection, which was bought by editor FAITH SALE at G.P.Putnam's Sons. In 1989, *The Joy Luck Club* was published and, through word – of – mouth endorsements by independent book sellers, became a surprise best seller, logging more than 40 weeks on the NEW YORK TIMES list. Though Tan wrote the book as a collection of linked short stories, reviewers enthusiastically and erroneously referred to the book as an intricately woven "novel". *The Joy Luck Club* was nominated for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Award. It received the Commonwealth Gold award and the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award. It was adapted into a feature film in 1994, for which Tan was a co-screen writer with Ron Bass and a co-producer with Bass and Wayne Wang.

Tan's second book, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, was published in 1991, followed by *The Hundred Secret Senses* in 1995. Both books appeared on *The New York Times* best seller list. Her latest novel, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, was published in February 2001. Tan's short stories and essays have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Grand Street*, *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, *Threepenny Review*, *Ski*, and others. Her essay, 'Mother Tongue' was chosen for Best American Essays in 1991 and has been widely anthologized. Tan's books are often included as part of the multicultural curriculum of high schools and colleges, an honour which caused, her much ambivalence and led her to writing a speech, "Required Reading and Other Dangerous Subjects," which she has since delivered in universities across the country. She is editor for the 1999 edition of *Best American Short Stories*. Her work has been translated into Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, German, French, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Catalan, Finnish, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Icelandic, Russian, Estonian, Serbo-Croatian, Czech, polish, Hebrew, Greek, Tagalog, and Indonesian. In addition, Tan has written two children's books, *The Moon lady* in 1992 and *The Chinese Siamese Cat* in 1994. The later is now being developed into a children's television series, and is part of a symphony program of words and music produced and conducted by George Daughtery. Along with novelist Steven King and columnist Dave Barry, Tan is a member of the literary garage band, the Rock Bottom Reminders, for which she sings the Nancy Sinatra classic, "These boots are made for walking," to raise money for literary and first amendment rights groups. Tan's rendition of the pop culture classic can be heard on the CD album, "Stranger than Fiction," which benefits the PEN Writer's Fund.

Tan lives in San Francisco and New York with her husband, Lou DeMattei, their cat, Sagwa, and their two Yorkshire terriers, Bubba and Lilli.

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