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SEEKING A SPIRITUAL HOME

— A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CHEN RAN'S AND AMY TAN'S FICTION



寻找心灵的家园

——陈染和谭恩美小说比较研究

和静/著



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内 容 简 介

本书旨在从比较文学和文化研究的角度探讨中国当代女性作家陈染和华裔美国女性作家谭恩美小说中所体现出的女性自我意识的迷失和重构。陈染和谭恩美尽管身处不同的社会文化语境，但两人的创作均源自女性内心的独特感受，以个人言说的方式，关注女性在特殊的家庭背景和强大的父权话语影响下的心灵成长历程。

除绪论和结语外，本书共分六章。绪论回顾了陈染和谭恩美的个人经历和创作阶段，并对两者的可比性进行了详细的阐释。第一章为文本研究的铺垫，介绍了本书的研究问题和选材依据，并讨论了本书涉及的研究方法和核心概念，包括新批评理论、身份认同理论、女性主义各阶段特征及其后现代转向。作者还对关于两位作家的文献研究进行了细致的梳理和分析，以突出本书的切入点和研究意义。第二章至第四章分别结合后现代女性主义理论、心理分析和身份认同理论对陈染和谭恩美小说中所表现出的母女关系、两性关系和女性情谊进行了文本细读式的比较研究。在横向比较的同时，作者在每章第一部分又纵向梳理了每一主题在中美文学传统中的表现及演变，并结合当时的社会历史环境详细分析了主题演变的原因，以期对陈染和谭恩美作品的共性、差异及意义进行更深入的探讨。

在前三章主题对比的基础上，本书第五章重点分析了两位作家作品中的文体学特征。通过挖掘主人公的梦境、幻觉以及小说中关于镜子和鸟的意象隐喻，可以看出陈染和谭恩美在创作中渗透的女性主体性的觉醒和潜意识下对女性身份危机的忧虑。

本书最后一章旨在从作家写作策略的角度回顾陈染和谭恩美在主题和意象赋码中体现的异同之处。笔者从文化研究的立场出发，详细解读了陈染的“个人化写作”和“超性别意识”以及谭恩美“讲故事”的叙事策略和对母性谱系的追寻。两位作家在特定的社会文化语境下所采取的差异化的写作策略从某种程度上解释了两人在主题表现和意象隐喻上的不同侧重。在重拾女性身份意识的过程中，陈染和谭恩美分别选择了从女性情谊和母女纽带中汲取精神力量，但两者又不谋而合地采取了“个人叙事”的写作策略。无论是陈染笔下现代女性的身体体验和生存之痛，还是谭恩美作品中华裔移民几代母女的艰辛历程，都寄托了作家对精神独立、自由平等的人类理想的向往。本章还从后现代女性主义的视角考察了陈染

和谭恩美作品中共同体现的女性主义意识。陈染对女性身体的审美再现及其“超性别意识”对性别范畴的解构与西苏“身体写作”和巴特勒“性别表演”的思想异曲同工，而谭恩美为了重建断裂的母性谱系而使用的多元交叉式的叙事技巧与伊利格瑞关于“女性谱系”和克里斯蒂娃对母性理论的论述不无相似之处。

在这场跨越时空的对话中，陈染和谭恩美以各自精湛的笔触向读者展示了女性心灵的寻根之旅和对心灵家园的不懈追求。

About the Book

This book aims to address, from the perspective of comparative literature and culture studies, the loss and reconstruction of women's self-identity as reflected in the fiction of contemporary Chinese woman writer Chen Ran and Chinese American woman writer Amy Tan. The author attempts to prove that though in different socio-cultural contexts, both Chen and Tan focus on, through personal narratives and with unique female sensitivity, women's spiritual growth against special family backgrounds and the influence of overpowering patriarchal discourse.

Besides Introduction and Conclusion, the book is divided into six chapters. The Introduction reviews the two writers' life experiences and stages of their literary creation, followed with a detailed explanation of their comparability. Chapter One sets the scene for the entire book, introducing the research questions, material selection, methodologies and key concepts, including New Criticism, identity theories and the postmodern trend in feminist studies. Previous scholarships on the two writers are also reviewed to pinpoint the niche and the significance of the current project.

Chapter Two to Chapter Four center on a comparative close-reading of the three overriding themes in the fiction of Chen Ran and Amy Tan, namely, mother-daughter relationship, heterosexual relations and sisterhood. While conducting parallel comparisons from the perspective of postmodern feminist, psychoanalytic and identity theories, the author also explores the evolution of literary representations on each theme in both Chinese and American literary traditions. Socio-historical parameters are considered for a thorough understanding of such evolution and its implications for a comparative analysis of Chen Ran and Amy Tan in terms of their similarities, differences and significance in their respective cultures.

Based on the previous three chapters on theme comparison, Chapter Five prioritizes the stylistic features in the examined fiction by Chen Ran and Amy Tan. Excavating metaphorical implications in the protagonists' dreams and illusions, as well

as the imageries of the mirror and birds, we can find an awakening female subjectivity and a subconscious identity crisis in the fictional worlds of the two writers.

The last chapter attempts to recapture, through their respective writing strategies, the similarities and differences between Chen Ran and Amy Tan in their thematic explorations and imagery encodings. Taking an approach of cultural studies, the author gives a detailed elaboration on Chen Ran's personalized writing with a "gender-transcendent consciousness" and Amy Tan's talk-story narrative of matrilineal tracing. The divergent writing strategies within specific socio-cultural contexts help explain in some extent the two writers' different emphasis in their motifs and imagery implications. In their reconstruction of women's identity consciousness, Chen Ran and Amy Tan accentuate sisterhood and mother-daughter bond respectively for spiritual empowerment. But both converge on the writing strategy of personal narratives. Through personal narrations of a woman's bodily experiences and existentialist modern predicament in Chen's fiction and survival stories of Chinese American immigrants extending generations of mothers and daughters in Tan's works, the two writers have expressed their shared humanistic ideals for women's spiritual independence free from inequality and discrimination. Viewed from postmodern feminist theories, the fiction of both writers embody a strong female consciousness. Chen Ran's aesthetic recovery of a female body and her deconstruction of gender categories as implied in her "gender-transcendent consciousness" are similar to Hélène Cixous's advocacy for "body writing" and Judith Butler's proposal of gender performativity. In comparison, the multi-voiced and intercrossed narrative structure of Amy Tan that aims to repair a broken tie of matrilineage has much in common with Luce Irigaray's pursuit of "genealogy of woman" and Julia Kristeva's maternity theory.

Through this cross-cultural dialogue that strides over time and space, Chen Ran and Amy Tan reveal to us in their touching works women's root-seeking journey of their undefined identities and a relentless pursuit for a spiritual home.

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INTRODUCTION

*A*gainst the background of globalization featured by cultural diversity and cross-cultural communication, comparative literature is playing an ever-increasingly important role in bridging the cultural gap and deepening our understanding of the uniqueness within and the commonality among different cultures. It is “a methodological art of tightening the ties between literature and other fields of knowledge by establishing relations of analogy, influence, and kinship, or by bringing together facts and literary texts whatever their distance is in time or space” with the aim of “better description, understanding, and enjoyment” (Pichois and Rousseau 174, qtd. in Chevrel 2). Comparative literature promises researchers a gold mine to excavate by transcending the confinement of national borders and reaching out for the merging points of different cultures: the ideas, feelings and values pertaining to their humanistic pursuit. As noted by Elizabeth Dahab, the contemporary trend of comparative literature studies witnessed a move-away from “the canonical great book tradition to include literary texts and spaces previously marginalized,” especially “the writings of women, the writings of ethnic minorities at the periphery of larger literary systems” (xiii). Acknowledging the importance of raising the voice of those marginalized in the literary scene, this book takes two contemporary women writers Chen Ran and Amy Tan as subjects for comparison in order to explore their attempt, through literary practice, to search for, identify and reconstruct women’s identities in their own names.

A. Chen Ran and Amy Tan^① —A Biographical Sketch



Chen Ran: Four Stages of Literary Creation

Chen Ran is one of China's avant-garde^② women writers of the 1990s, an important figure in Chinese literary scene and the winner of the first "Contemporary Chinese Female Writer's Award." She was born in Beijing in 1962 into a traditional intellectual family. After a failed attempt in China's national College Entrance Examination in 1980 when she was eighteen years old, Chen spent two years at home, immersing herself in literary works, ranging from ancient Chinese writings to classical foreign novels. It was also during this period that she shifted her interest from music to literature. Her dream of becoming a writer was reinforced and substantiated after she was enrolled by Beijing Normal [Teachers] University as a major of Chinese Literature in 1982.

During her four-year college life, Chen Ran devoted herself wholeheartedly to the world of literature and philosophy, "developing affinities for modernist writers such as Franz Kafka and Virginia Woolf" (ibid.). In order to balance the restless passion surging

① Although Chen is the writer's surname, it is placed before her first name Ran without a comma in between in this dissertation to conform to common reference to Chinese writers by western scholarship. It is the same with other Chinese writers, critics and fictional characters mentioned in this dissertation. For critics sharing the same surname, first names would be followed after the surname to avoid confusion.

② Chen is regarded as an avant-garde writer of the 1990s for her personalized writing style that explores "the complex emotional territory of the female body, sexuality, homoeroticism, and fantasy" (Wang Lingzhen, qtd. in Shaffer and Song 163). As Shaffer and Song comment, such kind of writing is unprecedented in the Chinese literary scene and is "highly regarded amongst the *avant-garde*, none more so than that of Chen Ran" (ibid.). In an interview with Xiao Gang, Chen Ran also confirms the avant-garde nature of her writings, including innovative contents and a writing style that subverts textual order and destroys the established reading habits of readers. (Chen Ran and Xiao Gang 250).

within her sensitive self “at a schizophrenia state”^①, Chen wrote and published dozens of poems from the age 20 to 22. The next year witnessed a transition in Chen’s writing interest from poetry to fiction. Her maiden work “Hey, stop feeling so low” (hei, bie name sangqi)^② was published in *Youth Literature* (qingnian wenxue), a leading literary journal in 1985. Subsequent stories like “Century Sickness” (shiji bing),” received vigorously as “pure” or “avant-garde” fiction, distinguished Chen Ran as a budding young talent and “the newest representative of serious female writers” on China’s literary stage (Howard-Gibbon xii).

Upon graduation in 1986, Chen Ran remained in her Alma Mater as a lecturer at the Chinese department. During this period, she published a series of short stories in various influential journals, which contributed to her first anthology *Paper Scrap* (zhi pian’er, 1989). Compared with the first period of Chen Ran’s literary practice when she wrote poems and stories during college years, depicting the solitude, anguish and rebellion of youngsters of her time who are eager to break through social conventions for an emotional outlet of their wild spirit, *Paper Scrap* symbolizes the second period of Chen’s writing, which is characterized by mysterious plots, surrealist imagery and freakish characters. When reflecting upon the motivation behind her creation during this period, Chen explained that she intended to explore the origin of the universe, life, consciousness and humanity through mythological symbolism and philosophical parables (Zhou 313).

After a short trip abroad in 1988, Chen Ran returned to China and became an editor at the Writers Publishing House. Although Chen didn’t claim to be a feminist writer, she was nevertheless influenced by Western feminist ideas with a growing awareness of the assertion of female identity. The 1990s witnessed the publication of many of her representative fiction on women’s unremitting pursuit of love and quest

① In “Without an Ending” (mei jieju), Chen writes, “At that time (at college), my life is at a state of schizophrenia. I’m shy and silent in public places, and only when I retreat to my own world can I pour out my swelling feelings into poems” (8-9).

② All of Chen Ran’s works are written in Chinese with their original title indicated in brackets through phonetic transcriptions in the form of *pinyin*. The English titles of Chen’s works are translated by the current author, except for those already translated into English, in which case, the English translation of the published work would be adopted. For the sake of Western readers, the author cites the English titles before the Chinese *pinyin* when referring to Chen’s works in this dissertation.

for the meaning of life, such as “Redundant Roles” (juese leizhui, 1990), “An Empty Window” (kongde chuang, 1991), “The Birth of a Hollow Man” (kongxinren de dansheng, 1991), “A Toast to the Past”^① (yu wangshi ganbei, 1991), “Nowhere to Bid Farewell” (wuchu gaobie, 1992), “Sunshine between the Lips” (zuichun lide yangguang, 1992), “Standing Alone at a Path of Draft” (zhanzai wuren de fengkou, 1992), “Time and Cage” (shiguang yu laolong, 1992)^②, “A Hidden Matter” (qianxing yishi, 1992), “The Wheat Woman and the Widow” (maisui nü yu shougua ren, 1993), “A Hungry Pocket” (ji’e de koudai, 1993), “The Sound of Another Ear Knocking” (ling yizhi erduo de qiaoji sheng, 1994).^③ According to the present author, these stories mark the third period of Chen Ran’s writing, combining psychological struggle of the female characters trying to define the significance of life with existentialist concerns of human beings suffering from isolation, alienation and the indifference of modernity.

The fourth period of Chen’s literary creation might be symbolized by the publication of the story “Breaking Open” (pokai, 1995) and the novel *A Private Life* (siren shenghuo, 1996). Unlike Chen’s previous stories that are “intensely melancholy,” portraying female protagonists’ fruitless pursuit of refuge “in sexual relationships with men, in emotional relations with women, or in service to the state or to some other cause” (Sieber 184), “Breaking Open,” with many sparkling remarks on female fate and identity by the two heroines as cofounders of a female society, carries a more optimistic tenor of celebrating “female intimacy grounded in close mother-daughter bonds” and is “heralded as a manifesto for women” (ibid.). *A Private Life*, the only novel by Chen Ran, has also attracted great attention from scholars both at home and abroad for its display of the protagonist’s troubling growing experience, both psychologically and physiologically, accompanied by her ambivalent love with a widow, her loveless sexual entanglement with her obscene school teacher and her poet lover who flees the country amid the political turmoil, and the death of her mother, all of which finally draw the heroine toward a narcissistic infatuation with herself in the

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

② All the stories mentioned above are collected in *Sunshine between the Lips* (zuichun li de yangguang).

③ Except for “The Wheat Woman and the Widow,” which is included in the anthology of Chen’s novella *The Divorced* (liyi de ren), all the other stories could be found in the anthology *Nowhere to Bid Farewell* [wuchu gaobie].

bath tub. In these experimental writings, Chen exhibits a stronger desire for the pursuit of female identity through her exploration of mutual affection and support among women as well as her shifting focus on women's inner world for strength and inspiration. Bringing into her writing the unique experience of being a woman, Chen invites the readers to feel, in her female characters' sensitive mind and body, the world around them. The protagonists' experience of growth and family, love and sex all point to a reconstruction of female identity lost in male dominance. It was also during this period that Chen Ran put forward the notion of "gender-transcendent consciousness" (chao xingbie yishi)^① which symbolizes a new height of women's awareness of their unique identity and reflects a philosophical quest for the common fate of human existence.

From the above analysis, we can sense a growing focus on women's psychological world in constant struggle and their sensual experience with all its multiplicities along the four stages of Chen's writing, which draws increasing attention from researchers at home and abroad.



Amy Tan: Legendary Stories

Amy Tan is a renowned contemporary Chinese American woman writer enjoying high reputation and popularity among American readers as well as readers in other countries of the world. Born in Oakland, California in 1952, Tan grew up in a Chinese immigrants' family with legendary life experiences that supplied Tan with inexhaustible materials for her literary creation. Her father John Tan met her mother Daisy Du, wife of an abusive Chinese husband, on a boat trip in southwestern China while serving as a translator for the U.S. Information Service during World War II.

① The English translation of the term is borrowed from Sang Tze-lan when she discusses Chen Ran's novel *A Private Life* in *The Emerging Lesbian, Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China*. The notion of "gender-transcendent consciousness" was first proposed by Chen Ran in her lectures at British universities in 1994. Challenging the hegemony of heterosexuality, Chen believes that the conventional love driven by reproductive and economic concerns will be replaced by an emerging consciousness that transcends the concept of gender. From the perspective of a writer, Chen shares Virginia Woolf's vision of androgyny and deems the harmonious combination of male and female powers in one's mind as the prerequisite for a writer to attain absolute clarity and purity in expression of thoughts and feelings. For an elaborated interpretation of Chen's "gender-transcendent consciousness," please refer to Section A of Chapter Six.

Their love affairs resulted in a two-year imprisonment of Daisy for adultery accused by her former husband before her eventually marrying John and emigrating to the U.S., leaving three daughters in China. John, on the other hand, abandoned the chance of studying electrical engineering at M.I.T. and followed the family tradition as a Baptist evangelist upon graduation from Berkeley Baptist Divinity School.

Amy's parents "held high behavioral and intellectual standards for their three bilingual children" (Snodgrass 9). Ever since a little child, Amy was caught between the Chinese heritage she was trying to reject, and the American milieu she embraced as her home culture. Reared in various coastal Californian cities before moving to Santa Clara, Tan "was the perpetual loner," struggling to "harmonize American roots with her parents' Asian customs" (ibid.). Quarrels with and rebellion against her dominant and feisty mother with different viewpoints and values seemed to be an inseparable part of Amy's adolescent years. In 1967 when Amy was only 15 years old, her elder brother died of malignant brain tumor. The same fate happened to Amy's father seven months later. The death of two immediate family members within a year was a heavy blow to both Amy and her mother. While Amy retreated further into her insular self, her mother Daisy, attributing her tragic life to ancestral curse, became more superstitious and eccentric. Gaining a "divine directive" from a can of Old Dutch cleanser, Daisy decamped with Amy and her younger brother, travelled to Holland, Germany, and finally settled down in Switzerland, where Amy finished high school. In 1969, Amy moved back to California and enrolled in medical studies, which she abandoned three years later for a double concentration in English and linguistics and eventually earned a master's degree in linguistics from San Jose State University. Suffering from long-term depression and psychosomatic laryngitis resulting from the aftershock of a break-in murder on the twenty-fourth birthday of a friend and former roommate Pete, Tan quit her doctoral studies at UC Berkeley. In the following years, Tan fulfilled Pete's wish, working as a language development consultant for retarded citizens and a language specialist for children with developmental disabilities.

The turning point in Tan's career and her relationship with her mother was after Daisy had a stress-related angina and was hospitalized while Tan was on a vacation in Hawaii in 1985. It was the first time in Tan's life that she realized how fragile her

mother was and how careless she had been toward her mother. While waiting to receive Daisy's news from intensive care, Tan made a solemn vow to God that if her mother lived, she would "get to know her," "ask her about her past," "actually listen to what she has to say," "even take her to China" and "write stories about her" (Tan, *The Opposite of Fate* 358). Although it was later diagnosed that Daisy suffered from no cardiac damage, Tan honored her promise. She began to listen to her mother's story and took Daisy on a three-week trip to China. The incident of her mother and their China trip prompted Tan to embark on her literary path and became a full-time professional fiction writer in 1988.

Tan's first novel *The Joy Luck Club* issued in 1989 ingeniously interlaced women's love-hate stories of three generations in four Chinese-American immigrant families, "a cross-cultural feminist novel" that won enthusiastic reviews and stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for eight consecutive months (Snodgrass 16). The novel "hit a nerve because women had begun to think about themselves and their mothers" (Fry 4, qtd. in Snodgrass 17), and Tan "emerged as a major American novelist and spokeswoman for women's liberation" (Snodgrass 18). As requested by her mother, Tan started to write her second novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* based on Daisy's true life of enduring a twelve-year torture by her former husband^①. Within a month of its publication in 1991, the novel topped the bestseller list on the *New York Times*, remained for thirty-eight weeks and won great honors, including "the *Booklist* 1991 Editor's Choice award, selection by Doubleday Book Club, and a nomination for a Bay Area Book Reviewers citation" (19).

After three years' venture into children's literature with two story books *The Moon Lady* (1992) and *The Chinese Siamese Cat* (1994), Tan launched her third novel *The Hundred Secret Senses* in 1995, incorporating her half-sister and her filming trip to China for *The Joy Luck Club* into the plot of "a woman-centered tale about a ghost-seer" (Snodgrass 22). Tan's mother died of Alzheimer's on November 22, 1999, and on the one-year anniversary of her mother's death, Tan released her fourth novel *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, crafting out of the legendary tales between her mother and

① Amy Tan has said on several occasions that *The Kitchen God's Wife* develops out of her mother's true story. And both the outlines and specific details of the novel are congruent with the life of Daisy Tan (Huntley 83).

her grandmother. Tan's memoir *The Opposite of Fate* (2001) was equally successful. The collection of her previous works, speeches and essays provided an autobiographical account of Tan's growing experience, her family stories and her philosophical quest for fate and hope of life. Tan's latest novel *Saving Fish from Drowning* was released in 2005, signaling a shift in her writing from focusing on mother-daughter relations and women's experience in different historical and cultural contexts to a suspenseful journey of a group of American tourists in Burma with religious and moral implications.

Tan's novels are "filled with engaging images of strong girls and women" determined to assert their own voice in the patriarchal world (Snodgrass 3), and the enthusiastic academic and public response to her writings "attests to her success at feminist and universal themes" (6).

B. Rationale for a Comparison between Chen Ran and Amy Tan

In the current book, the author chooses Chen Ran and Amy Tan as subjects for comparative studies mainly for the following six reasons.

Firstly, both Chen Ran and Amy Tan rose to fame in late 1980s and are influential contemporary women writers in their respective cultures^①. Chen Ran is "the central and most-discussed figure in the recent critical debate in China over 'female writing'

① Although Chen Ran's latest novel *A Private Life* was released in 1996 compared to Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning* published in 2005, as a member of Chinese Writers Association, Chen keeps on writing prose, essays and poems. The recent decade witnessed the publication of Chen's several books including anthology of stories *The Divorced* (liyi de ren, 2004), collection of prose: *Can We Reconcile with Life* (women nengfou yu shenghuo hejie, 2001), *Flashback in Time* (shiguang daoliu, 2003), *Who Robbed Our Face* (shui lueduo le women de lian, 2007), Chen's dairy jotting *Intermittent Words* (shengsheng duanduan, 2002), and a book on Chen's interview transcript *Beyond Words* (buke yanshuo, 2002). As the current dissertation is proceeding, the author is gratified to know that Chen's novel *A Private life*, which ran out of print shortly after its first release, was republished with a new edition in January 2010.