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THE SENSE OF BELONGING AND SECURITY OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN CHINESE AMERICAN NOVELS OF DIFFERENT ERA



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ABSTRACT

This study explores the evolution of three literature works namely *Fifth Chinese Daughter* by Jade Snow Wong; *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan; *Everything I Never Told You* and *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng over time and examines the feelings of belonging and security experienced by the female characters in these works. The research objectives are to identify the influences of the authors' social and cultural backgrounds on their novels; to classify the faces of the absence of security and belonging among the female characters and to explore the manifestations of the security and belonging as represented in the selected novels. This study adopts a qualitative research approach to answer the research questions raised according to the research objectives. The findings reveal that the three authors present distinct narrative landscapes due to their individual growth paths from different cultural influence of the times and they are increasingly diluting the factor of racial identity in their works as time progresses. Furthermore, the findings also show that females, including the authors themselves and the female characters they create in their works, commonly face a lack of security and a sense of belonging. Fortunately, the findings also reveal that the female characters gain their sense of security and belonging by accepting their own ethnic identity, downplaying racial differences, and correctly acknowledging human commonalities. It can be concluded that external factors shape the literature, and the characters' psychological struggles and self-growth illustrate their quest for security and belonging. As an implication, this study offers valuable insights to students and readers on how to navigate life while seeking a sense of security and belonging. Additionally, it serves as a significant contribution to the understanding of human connections to homeland, culture, and history, emphasizing the intricate interplay between individual identity and broader societal influences.





RASA MILIK DAN KEAMANAN WATAK PEREMPUAN DALAM NOVEL CINA AMERIKA YANG BERBEZA ZAMAN

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka evolusi karya tiga penulis wanita Amerika Cina iaitu, 'Fifth Chinese Daughter' oleh Jade Snow Wong, 'The Joy Luck Club' oleh Amy Tan, 'Everything I Never Told You', dan 'Little Fires Everywhere' oleh Celeste Ng. Karya-karya ini mengkaji perasaan kekitaan sesama manusia dan keselamatan yang dialami oleh watak-watak wanita. Objektif penyelidikan ini adalah untuk mengenal pasti pengaruh latar belakang sosial dan budaya penulis terhadap novel mereka, mengklasifikasikan wajah ketiadaan keselamatan dan kekitaan di kalangan watak-watak wanita dan untuk meneroka manifestasi keselamatan dan kekitaan seperti yang digambarkan dalam novel-novel yang dipilih. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan penyelidikan kualitatif untuk menjawab soalan-soalan penyelidikan yang ditimbulkan mengikut objektif penyelidikan. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa ketiga-tiga pengarang memaparkan lanskap naratif yang berbeza kerana laluan pertumbuhan individu mereka yang dipengaruhi oleh budaya zaman mereka dan mereka semakin mencairkan faktor identiti kaum dalam karya-karya mereka seiring dengan zaman mereka. Selain itu, dapatan kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa wanita, termasuk pengarang sendiri dan watak-watak wanita yang mereka cipta dalam karya-karya mereka, secara umumnya menghadapi kekurangan rasa keselamatan dan perasaan kekitaan. Nasib baik, dapatan kajian juga mendedahkan bahawa watak-watak wanita memperoleh rasa keselamatan dan perasaan kekitaan dengan menerima identiti etnik mereka sendiri, mengurangkan perbezaan kaum, dan mengakui persamaan manusia dengan baik. Dapat disimpulkan bahawa faktor luaran membentuk kesusasteraan, dan perjuangan psikologi serta pertumbuhan diri serta watak-watak menggambarkan usaha mereka untuk mencapai keselamatan dan perasaan kekitaan sesama mereka sendiri. Implikasinya, kajian ini memberikan inspirasi kepada pelajar atau pembaca untuk meneruskan kehidupan mereka dengan perasaan keselamatan dan kekitaan sesama mereka. Secara amnya, kajian ini memberi sumbangan kepada pembacaan hubungan manusia dengan tanah air, budaya, dan sejarah.



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Chinese American literature has been around for more than 100 years since the first Chinese newspaper was published by Chinese immigrants in the United States in 1854 and the first English-language literary work was published in 1887. According to the Chinese experience in the United States, Chinese literature can be roughly divided into three main stages.

The first is the “early period”, from the rise of the “gold rush” in the mid-nineteenth century to the 1940s. The period from 1848 to 1882 was the period when the Chinese immigrated freely to the United States. At that time, not only did the “gold rush” attract Chinese immigrants, but also the United States needed a lot of labour to develop the West and recruited Chinese workers from China. In 1882, the United States passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which led to social unrest and



economic downturn, and Chinese workers were no longer needed. From 1882 to 1943, when the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed, the image of Chinese people in Chinese literature was more angry, helpless and appealing for social justice. The second is the “transition”, that is, from the 1930s to the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1930s, the United States was hit by the Great Depression, and in order to stabilize the society, Roosevelt’s New Deal proposed to improve labour conditions and advocate ethnic equity. After the outbreak of World War II, the U.S. needed to unite with China to counteract Japan, and in 1943 the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed, and Chinese immigrants joined the U.S. in large numbers.

In this period, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, published in 1945, expressed the strong desire of a new generation of Chinese to integrate into American society and become American citizens. *Fifth Chinese Daughter* has had a great influence on contemporary Chinese writers, and its author Jade Snow Wong is considered the “mother of Chinese-American literature” because she was one of the first Chinese writers who wrote about life in Chinatown. But unfortunately, during this period, the voices of Chinese writers were basically unheard in the mainstream American literary world, and few readers were willing to pay attention to Chinese literature. It was not until the release of some representative works such as *The Warrior Woman* and *The Joy Luck Club* after the 70s that Chinese literature really emerged.

The “contemporary” era, from the 1960s to the 1980s, is the era of reshaping the image of Chinese people, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the new immigration law in 1965, which gave Chinese people equal opportunities with





immigrants from other countries; The 1960s was also the era of the rise of multiculturalism and multiracial politics in American society, coupled with the arrival of a large number of Chinese students in the United States, which led to a significant increase in the percentage of educated Chinese in the United States and the maturation of many American-born Chinese writers, including Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, some of whom were native Chinese writers. At this time, the Chinese image changed to that of an authentic Chinese American, retaining Chinese cultural traditions such as hard work, dedication, education, honesty and pragmatism, and other Confucian cultural strengths, and speaking out against racial discrimination. And in modern times, there is another Chinese American writer Celeste Ng, who, born in 1980, has been hailed as “the next Amy Tan”, which heralds the re-emergence of Chinese-American writers into the mainstream of European and American literature. But because of her different upbringing, Celeste Ng’s works convey that Chinese American writers have more than just immigrant stories to tell. In her works, *Everything I Never Told You* and *Little Fires Everywhere* we can see not only the stories of immigrants but also the stories of other ethnic groups. Celeste Ng may represent a category of Chinese American writers who are highly self-conscious of their “heterogeneity” and are try to be proud of it, but at the same time take the initiative to speak out and try to reconcile with mainstream society. Through her works, she hopes to make everyone eliminate the concept of race and focus more on the concept of “human” as a kind of human being itself.

Hence, in this study, Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, Celeste Ng’s *Everything I Never Told You* and *Little Fires*



Everywhere are examined. The three women writers represent outstanding writers who were very popular and recognized by mainstream society in the 1940s, 1980s and 2010s. Although the three writers wrote in different eras, and they grow up in different worlds and diverse cultures, they all face the confusion of belonging and the feeling of security. In their works, they reflect their thoughts on this confusion, using their own unique narrative perspectives and language styles to position themselves, from ethnicity to identity and security with a fluid perspective. The shift in perspectives from ethnicity to the fluidity of belonging and security reflects the increasing ability of Chinese American writers to navigate beyond race, color, and cultural conflict. The acquisition of a person's inner security originates in the family of origin. In this study, New Historicism and Individual Psychology from Psychoanalytic Criticism are applied in order to figure out how the authors' growing up experience influence them and the creation of their works.

1.1 Background of the Study

The United States is known as a nation of immigrants, but throughout its history, the United States, after breaking free from British colonial rule, inherited the British "white mainstream" and opened up a new world. The United States began to exclude the country's people of color from the mainstream. It was in this context that the early Chinese came to America. Hence, the issue of cultural identity as well as belonging and security in the United States has always plagued Chinese immigrants and native-born Chinese American.

Chinese-American fiction is clearly influenced by these sociohistorical concerns. This study aims to explore the process of transmutation of Chinese American female writers' creation over time and explore the feeling of female's sense of belonging and security. Based on this aim, this study focuses on the works of three representative female writers born in different times, which are Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*; Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*; Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* and *Little Fires Everywhere*. The three authors analyzed in the study were born respectively in 1922, 1952, and 1980, so they represent different generations. The growth paths of these three Chinese American women present distinct narrative landscapes due to their individual differences, which is not only in line with the need for gender representation, but also the result of the cultural influence of the times. In this section. An overview of the selected novels is given first.

1.2.1 *Fifth Chinese Daughter*

The novel *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is the famous debut novel published in 1945 by Jade Snow Wong, who is known as the “mother of Chinese American literature”. It was translated into 19 languages and widely distributed, and was included in the literature textbooks of American high schools. It is an autobiographical novel written in the third person, which truly shows how a girl blends the traditional Chinese morality with the American spirit of individual independence, and vividly recreates influence of Chinese cultural elements on the role of Chinese Americans.



The novel was written in the aftermath of World War II. Having experienced World War I and World War II, the United States suffered from an unprecedented economic depression, and with the onset of economic crisis, white Americans with strong racial attitudes viewed the hardworking Chinese immigrants as the main culprits. Initially, the U.S. government encouraged Chinese labourers to enter the country to work, as cheap labour was necessary for the rapid development of the United States. However, it did not last long, and white Americans gradually began to have great prejudice against Chinese labourers. They were paranoid that the hardworking Chinese were taking away their jobs, resulting in massive unemployment and declining of living standard. As a result, there were many incidents of rejection and attacks on Chinese people, forming an influential force of Chinese exclusion. At that time, the Chinese were isolated in Chinatown and struggled to make a living.



Jade Snow Wong comes from a traditional business family, with parents who are both first generation Chinese immigrants. Wong's father immigrated from Zhongshan, Guangdong to San Francisco, and was nurtured by traditional Chinese culture such as Confucianism since childhood, so he believed that family relationships were the core of a stable and harmonious society. In a typical Chinese family, the idea of male superiority over female dominates, with men enjoying higher social status and honor and women being subordinate to men. The male is considered to be the best choice to inherit the family status, honor and property, while the girl is ultimately the outsider. and the girl eventually will marry out of her family, just as a Chinese old saying goes, "a married daughter is like spilled water". Therefore, parents do not





“waste” too many resources on their daughters, but rather pour all their love into their boys. The limited educational resources are tilted in favor of men but women are still expected to take on more family responsibilities. Women are expected to be filial and obedient to their parents, and cannot fight against them, but only quietly accept the duties given to them by their families. Because Jade Snow’s father is born and raised in a patriarchal society and he demanded absolute obedience from his daughter. It is under such a social and family environment that Jade Snow Wong composed *Fifth Chinese Daughter*.

Jade Snow Wong lived in a time when, in addition to the demand for racial equality, the call for gender equality was also growing. With the development of capitalism, women in Europe began to break through the cage of feudal bondage since the Middle Ages and actively fight for the same social status as men. Due to the influence of European feminism, American women’s self-awareness was gradually awakened. From the mid-19th century to the early 20th century, the American feminist movement aimed to fight for women’s right to vote in politics, economics, and society. Ultimately, in politics women were given the right to vote on an equal footing with men; And economically, women have greatly expanded their career choices; socially, women have gained more freedom and respect. Although the feminist movement in the United States is in full swing, it has not affected traditional Chinese-American immigrants in Chinatown. As a special landscape in the United States, Chinatown, where Chinese people live, often appears in Chinese literature, and it also appears in the works of Jade Snow Wong.





Growing up in Chinatown, Jade Snow Wong did not have any close friends other than her family and her social life was almost empty. This is mainly because of her father, who was very strict in his discipline, “if she was not careful, she would immediately receive severe punishment” (Wong, 2019, p. 32) and due to her brightness and studiousness, Jade was arranged by her father to study general courses at school during the day time and Chinese at night school. Because of her outstanding academic performance, her father selected a white junior high school for her. She was the only Chinese-American student in the school. Her white classmates ostracized and isolated her, so she did not make any new friends. Soon after entering school, she encountered the first racial crisis of her young life when a young boy named Richard threw chalk erasers at her twice, which ended with Jade’s running away. After graduating from high school, Jade wanted to continue her college education, she decided to ask her father to pay for her to go to college. But to her disappointment, due to the influence of the Chinese patriarchal traditional Chinese beliefs, her father thought her education was beyond that of a common Chinese girl and was at the general education level of an American girl and refused to fund her education and said, “If you have talent, you can pay for your own college tuition”(Wong, 2004, p. 103) Facing the rejection of different ethnic groups by their peers and the devaluation of women by the family’s feudal ideology, for her, facing the sense of belonging and security, also once became a problem that plagued her. But she didn’t give up on herself because of these unequal treatment and discrimination and let fate take its course. She needs to earn the attention of her family and the respect of white people, so she decided to prove herself through her own efforts to break the tradition and discrimination. At home, through her mother’s teaching and constant practice, she





gradually mastered the essence of Chinese cuisine, so in her book *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, there are extensive and detailed descriptions of the selection of ingredients, cooking and serving of food. She does not reject and deny Chinese culture, instead, the “Chinese virtues” are evident in her. In society, from working for a Chinese family employer to a white family employer in San Francisco, she earned her diplomas from American and Chinese schools respectively by working and studying hard. She spoke on stage at the graduation ceremony, which was watched by millions of people, on behalf of the recent graduates, so you can imagine how good she was in school. She then went on to further her education at the Women’s College, where her personal skills were further enhanced. Finally, she started her own business and opened her own ceramics store in the United States. This series of achievements has earned her the respect of the Chinese community and the American mainstream, and even more



What factors led to her success? From her, we can see the virtue of reconciling herself to adversity and resilience, so there is no doubt that the traditional family education has a great influence on her. At the same time it was the environmental factors of American society and Chinese society that influenced her at that time, which made her willing to become a “model minority” and believe in the American dream. At the same time, she is willing to see the good side of the world and find her own sense of belonging and security through her own efforts.





1.2.2 *The Joy Luck Club*

Chinese-American literature gained real significance in the 1960s with the rise of the black civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, and the student movement.

The Chinese American literature had its real development in the 1980s, after being driven by the Black civil rights movement, women's liberation movement, and student movement. In the 1980s, Chinese American literature saw a boom in its development after the 1960s. It was against this background that Tan's masterpiece, *The Joy Luck Club*, was published, and it can be said that since then, Chinese-American literature has entered the mainstream of American literary studies. It was nominated for the "Bay Area Fiction Review Award", "the Commonwealth Club Gold Medal", and "the National Book Award" and "the National Book Critics Circle Award".

"Joy luck club" is the name given to a mahjong party by mothers who immigrated to the United States. By describing the generation gap and the conflict between four pairs of mothers and daughters, the author reflects the collision and compatibility between the Chinese mother culture and the heterogeneous American culture, as well as the difficult search for self-cultural identity, security and sense of belonging.





The novel takes mahjong as its starting point. The four mothers at the table, though with different experiences and personalities, move to the United States and set up the Joy Luck Club. Once a week, they eat, drink, talk, and confide in each other, and it becomes a haven for them to preserve their Chinese culture and escape the American mainstream. Although in the book, at the mahjong table, through the elders' gossip, the author shows Chinese culture in all its richness and diversity to Chinese and foreign readers: the theory of the five elements, feng shui, zodiac signs and marriage, the rules of the mahjong table, how to play mahjong, the symbolic meaning of foods such as dumplings, noodles, peanuts, etc, the author, Amy Tan, as the children of first-generation immigrants, her life experience and family education made her memory of her motherland—China full of fear and even disgust as a young girl, because Tan's grandmother in China committed suicide in the traditional Chinese confinement, so her mother often took a harsh way of educating her that if she did not listen to her mother, her mother would sometimes threaten to commit suicide or sometimes say that if she did not listen and study seriously, she would have to go back to China, which made the young Tan feel that China was almost equal to death and was a very scary place to go. Actually, as they had little knowledge of their home country.

And because the first two generations had experienced the racial liberation movement, and the status of the Chinese had been greatly enhanced. The status of the second generation of Chinese American in the United States has also been raised. They have been brought up with the American culture, so they feel more a sense of





their American identity, and they know little about China. The identity of the protagonist as a Chinese has begun to weaken.

In the novel *The Joy Luck Club*, the four daughters described by the author reject their own cultural traditions and identify with American values to a greater or lesser extent, and they dress, talk, act and live as much as they can to imitate white people, hoping that people will think they are exactly the same as Americans. They are under the superiority of Chinese culture and the inferiority of American culture. Unable to find the sense of belonging, they resent their identity, negatively evaluate themselves, and deny themselves. These are actually signs of low self-esteem and a sense of insecurity and lack of belonging. In the novel, except for one of the daughters, all of them marry or live with white people. But for their white partners, they always carry a sense of admiration, with a sense of contempt for themselves, they are afraid of being denied and afraid to expose their own shortcomings. This is also a sign of insecurity.

In psychology, it is believed that the feeling of inferiority can destroy people as well as shape them. Therefore, in order to eliminate inferiority, each person must constantly acquire superiority. In order to balance the mind, we need to gain a sense of superiority and control. We need to feel a feeling of control of our lives. But how do you get that sense of superiority and control? In the novel, the suffering of mothers in the past is now transformed into wise inspiration for life choices, helping the daughters to complete the reprogramming of their own and accept who they are. They





help their daughters to re-code themselves to establish a new subjectivity and complete the beautiful transformation into dependent “swans”(Tan, 2006, p. 123)

1.2.3 *Everything I Never Told You*

Celeste Ng is a Chinese-American writer born in 1980. Celeste Ng grew up in Pennsylvania and Ohio, and graduated from Harvard University. Her parents are both scientists, and she is a second generation immigrant from China, Hong Kong. She had been writing for many years before the publication of *Everything I Never Told You*, and her fiction and prose works appeared in various literary journals and magazines. Nearly thirty years have passed since the publication of Amy Tan’s famous work *The Joy Luck Club*, and the emergence of Celeste Ng has filled a gap in the mainstream literature of Chinese writers in Europe and America.

The James family in *Everything I Never Told You* is a “white-Chinese” interracial marriage. Marilyn, the wife, is a white intellectual woman. James, the husband, is Chinese-American and a tenured university professor; both husband and wife attended Harvard University, and their oldest son, Nath, has just been accepted to Harvard; their second daughter, Lydia, attends a local high school and does well in school, and their youngest daughter, Hannah, is obedient. On the surface, the James family seems to have achieved success in terms of socio-economic status, children’s education or integration with mainstream American culture, and is considered a model of Asian success. Like many Chinese-American writers who would gravitate toward





writing about Chinese-Americans' story, the author of this novel Celeste Ng also tells the story of a Chinese-American, fictional father character, but again she is not only telling the story of the Chinese-American, but also the story of the fictional character's white wife because of her own experience.

James was born and raised in the United States as a second-generation American immigrant, but has been plagued by an identity crisis and no sense of belonging as an American: "He never felt like he belonged here." (Ng, 2015, p. 111) This lack of belonging and insecurity has deep social causes. James's father came to the United States as a "paper son" in place of his neighbor's son, and for more than half a century, Chinese labourers were not allowed to enter the country due to the Chinese Exclusion Act, so many Chinese Americans could only come to the United States through the status of "paper sons". In Chinatown, these impostors were easily identified, using false names, hoping not to be discovered or deported, so they tried desperately to blend in and to avoid being different." James was afraid to say much at school for fear of revealing his identity, and even pretended to forget the homework assignment assigned by the teacher to draw a family tree, preferring to get a zero rather than reveal himself as the descendant of a paper son immigrant.

For James, the police are a symbol of the judicial authority of the United States. As a descendant of the Paper Sons, James is distant from the police, not to mention challenging their authority. The fear of losing his identity is deeply engraved in the subjective consciousness of the Chinese community, creating the stereotype of being peaceful and submissive to authority.





Marilyn, the mother character in the novel, has dreamed of being a doctor all her life. She got into Harvard University, but in her junior year she became pregnant, so she was forced to give up her studies and became a housewife. But in reality, the apparently happy married life does not have her a sense of security, so she has been trying to find a career that she can control. Eight years later, after her mother's death which wakes her up and she decided to leave her family and go back to find her dream of being a doctor. From then on, the children's world came crashing down. 5-year-old Lydia thought she and her siblings were the ones who had failed to meet her mother's expectations; if her mother could come home, she would finish her milk obediently, she would brush her teeth on her own, she would go to bed when her mother turned off the lights at night, she would never get sick again, she would do whatever her mother said, and she would fulfill her mother's every wish (Ng, 2015), so when Lydia's father told the children that their mother was coming back, Lydia thought it was nothing short of a miracle, thinking that she had made a wish so her mother heard it and came home, so she must keep her promise. She became understanding and obedient.

After that, Marilyn pinned her unfulfilled dreams on her daughter Lydia. She poured all her heart and soul into Lydia, strictly controlling her daily life and studies. She bought a bunch of medical books so that Lydia could learn medical-related knowledge in advance. She arranged summer tutoring classes for Lydia, took her to science fairs, and packed all her time into a full schedule. She also pinned Lydia's test papers with failing scores to the wall and made her study them over and over until she got them all right. Under her impermeable urging, Lydia was busy studying and





taking tests from the second grade onward. She became increasingly withdrawn, had no friends and no hobbies. Marilyn was oblivious to all this, hoping that she would become a famous doctor known to all. She was always pretend to be happy and pleasant to accept, “yes mom”, “good mom” (Ng, 2015, p. 98). But it was not science that Lydia loved from the beginning to the end. The road of growing up is like a shackle on Lydia, she has no beautiful dresses and jewelry, no friends, her world is all books and the only one who understands her is her brother Nath, but when one day Nath leaves, the insecure Lydia is overwhelmed and chooses to commit suicide by jumping into the river. She was anxious, scared, and unable to find the sense of security, and suicide was the only safe outlet she can find. In this novel, the background of the times and family education have made the characters insecure and lack a sense of belonging.



1.2.4 *Little Fires Everywhere.*

Little Fires Everywhere is the second full-length novel by Chinese-American author Celeste Ng. The novel tells the story of Mia, a female artist who lives alone with her daughter. Mia was born from an ordinary family, but has had an extraordinary soul since birth. She loves art, loves to create, and loves to break the rules. After a disagreement with her parents, Mia left home and started her wandering journey from then on. Even after giving birth to her daughter, she never stopped moving from city to city. When she arrives in the modern “utopia” of the Shaker Heights, she decides to stay. However, the landlady Mrs. Richardson, who was born into the American elite





and grew up with a life that was well planned. She chose a school close to home, married the right person at the right age, returned to the neighborhood where she grew up, held a decent and stable job, married for a few years, and then had children. For her, a stable and good life must be carefully planned. In order to maintain the rules and private feelings of the “utopia”, she goes to great lengths to unearth Mia’s former “dirt” so as to drive her away. The youngest daughter leaves home after setting fire to the house and follows Mia and her daughter. She couldn’t find a sense of belonging in her orderly home, and she was tired of the uniformity. Then, Mia’s daughter, however, wants a stable home like hers one day.

The novel is about order and chaos, about art and secrecy, about the sacrifice and cruel pull of motherhood, about whether life should be lived at one’s own pace or strictly planned, about the hardships of wandering and the dangers of assuming that “living by the rules will prevent disaster”. In this novel, the author does not devalue one way of life and elevate the other, but allows us to see the comparison, questioning, envy and mutual influence between two families and two ways of living. The readers are prompted to think about what exactly is a person’s sense of security and belonging. She did not confine herself into writing stories only about migrants, but because of the different backgrounds of her upbringing. Ng’s works convey that Chinese American writers have more than just immigrant stories to tell. In her works, we can see not only the stories of immigrants but also the stories of white women. Ng may represent a category of Chinese writers who are highly conscious of their own “heterogeneity” and proud of it, and at the same time take the initiative to speak out and try to reconcile with mainstream society. Through her works, she hopes to make everyone





eliminate the concept of race and focus more on the concept of “human” as a kind of human being.

1.2.5 Summary

The above-mentioned works demonstrate how these three Chinese women authors, who were born in various generations, are all disturbed by the issue of security and belonging. For the authors born in various generations, the emphasis on security and belonging is different. The novel *Fifth Chinese Daughter* reflects the fact that the author’s perception of belonging and security was greatly influenced by her father, who had a traditional Chinese patriarchal ideology because the initial Chinese immigrants’ sense of attachment to their homeland was very strong. This, coupled with a social context that discriminates against the Chinese migrants, makes the author’s sense of security and belonging come from the recognition of people of higher status than her. She admits and accepts her inferiority, but she also struggles to seek her own security and belonging by working hard in every aspects. Amy Tan, who was born in the 1950s, had a different upbringing than Jade Snow Wong in terms of history. The Chinese community’s standing slightly rose during her formative years, their parents picked up some rudimentary English, and living conditions improved. *The Joy Luck Club* reflects the collision and compatibility between the Chinese mother culture and the heterogeneous culture, as well as the difficult search for self-cultural identity, security and sense of belonging between the two cultures in the collision. The generation represented by Amy Tan is supposed to be the most



confused generation of Chinese Americans in regard to their identity. They have a deep inferiority complex. They are seeking a sense of security and belonging. Her work reflects this very well. The third author studied in this study was born in the 1980s. We can see from her two famous works that she is no longer only concerned with the issue of Chinese identity. Her upbringing has slowly blurred the boundaries of ethnic identity, focusing instead on the security and sense of belonging that women need as human beings. These three novels well reflect the process of Chinese Americans from the initial acceptance of their inferior status, to the second and third generations who try to get rid of their Chinese background and try to become a “real American” but encounter various setbacks and obstacles, to the contemporary generation (the fifth and sixth generations) who face up to their differences and begin to ignore the issue of cultural belonging as Chinese Americans and explore the sense of belonging and security as equal people.

1.2 Problem Statement

In real life, many individuals live with fear and trepidation, struggling with insecure selves. These individuals, particularly in environments characterized by distrust, instability, and persecution, often feel deeply insecure. Their primary motivation for survival becomes the pursuit of a sense of security and belonging. To achieve this, they seek to connect with others and understand the social order to avoid the dangers of uncertainty. This issue is especially pronounced among Chinese Americans, who face heightened challenges due to their ethnic identity. The lack of belonging and



security is more acute for Chinese Americans compared to the general population, making their experiences particularly significant. Addressing the problems of belonging and security for Chinese Americans, beyond the scope of their ethnic identity, could offer solutions applicable to a broader range of individuals facing similar issues. Thus, this study's importance lies in its potential to uncover insights that not only enhance the understanding of Chinese American literature but also contribute to solving fundamental issues of belonging and security experienced by many people. By exploring these themes through the lens of new historicism and psychoanalytic criticism, this research aims to provide a unique and valuable perspective on the Chinese American experience.



1.3 Objective of the Study



According to the problem statement of the study, the objectives of this study are threefold:

1. To identify the influences of the authors' social and cultural backgrounds on their writing production as manifested in the selected novels of the study.
2. To classify the faces of the absence of security and belonging of the female characters as represented in the selected novels of the study.
3. To explore the various manifestations of female characters' sense of belonging and security in the selected novels.





1.5 Research Question

According to the problem statement and the objectives of the study, the research questions are as follow:

1. What are the influences of the authors' social and cultural backgrounds on their writing production as manifested in the selected novels of the study?
2. What are the faces of the absence of security and belonging of the female characters as manifested in the selected novels of the study?
3. What are the various manifestations of female characters' sense of belonging and security as represented in the selected novels?



1.6 Theoretical Framework of the Research

In order to conduct the research based on the research questions, New Historicism theory and Individual Psychology from Psychoanalysis Criticism are employed to conduct a close reading of the context in the four novels.

1.6.1 New Historicism

Since the 20th century, the field of Western literary criticism has seen the emergence of such academic schools as Formalism, Structuralism, New Criticism, Deconstructionism, and so on. However, the changes of these schools of literary





criticism are merely variations of formalism in the pursuit of detailed reading within the text. These formalists reject history and turn their backs on history, and view literary works as self-regulating domains that are isolated from the text. A growing ahistorical tendency has emerged in literary criticism, the traditional historicism was questioned, and the connection between literature and history, text and context was neglected. In this context, when literary criticism again focused on history around 1980, the nature of literary criticism gradually changed and a new historicism became active.

New Historicism, which originated in the late 1970s and early 1980s, had its moment in the field of English and American literature. The school is led by the American literary critic Stephen Greenblatt, and also includes Alan Sinfield, Brooke Thomas etc. These critics focused mostly on the study of Renaissance literature and developed a keen interest in Shakespeare's plays. In 1983, Greenblatt worked with colleagues at the University of California, Berkeley to produce the journal *Representations*, which he served as editor-in-chief of in 1986. This journal is a bastion of new historicism and is an interdisciplinary publication in the humanities that deals with literature, history, and cultural studies. In 1982, Greenblatt formally introduced the theory of New Historicism. After that, New Historicism's influence continued to grow and the theory eventually permeated all genres of English and American literature. The 1960s marked a pivotal decade in American history and marked the start of certain New Historicists' academic careers. The American student movement and the Vietnam War baptized the majority of the students during this time.





Students in the United States were significantly impacted by these movements. As Gallagher & Greenblatt (2000) puts it:

The United States in the 1960s and early 1970s, especially through the historical event of opposition to the Vietnam War, greatly informed my own critical practice and that of many other critics affiliated with the New Historicism. (p.123)

New Historicism advocates bringing historical investigation into literary studies, and points out that there is no so-called “foreground” and “background” relationship between literature and history, but rather that they interact and influence each other. It emphasizes the connection between literature and culture, and believes that literature is part of a larger cultural network. It focuses on the complex relationship between literature and power politics, and believes that literature is the result of ideology and also participates in the shaping of ideology. In terms of critical practice, New Historicism has a distinctly interdisciplinary character.

1.6.2 Individual Psychology From Psychoanalytic Criticism

Psychoanalytic criticism is a mode of criticism that applies Freud’s psychoanalysis and later modern psychological theories such as those of psychologists to the study of literature. As Celine Surprenant (2006) writes:





Psychoanalytic literary criticism does not constitute a unified field. However, all variants endorse, at least to a certain degree, the idea that literature is fundamentally entwined with the psyche. (pp.199-211)

The first to apply psychoanalytic doctrine to the practice of literary criticism were Freud himself and his disciples such as Jung and Adler. Later, Freud's disciples and other psychologists continued to develop and establish a neo-Freudian system of thought because they did not agree with Freud's focus too heavily on psychopathology, sex, and childhood experiences. They emphasized the role of social and cultural factors in personality formation and development. One of the most important representatives of this group was Alfred Adler. Alfred Adler was one of the early members of Freud's psychoanalytic discussion group that met each week in Freud's home. He played an essential role in establishing psychoanalysis but eventually broke away from Freud's ideas. Ferenczi, & Rank (1986) once said that Adler believed that Freud's theories focused too heavily on sex as the primary motivator for human behavior.(p. 99) In 1911, Adler chose to leave Freud and founded the "Association for Free Psychoanalytic Studies" with his followers, and in 1912, he became the first to oppose Freud within the psychoanalytic school by calling his theories "individual psychology". He is regarded as the father of contemporary self-psychology as well as a pioneer of humanistic psychology. Together with Freud and Jung, he is known as one of the three founders of psychology.

The word "individual" in "individual psychology" is interpreted as "Indivisible" in Latin. (Watts, 2015, pp.123-131) Therefore, "individual psychology"





is not an individual psychology, as it is literally understood, which is the study of individual or psychology of individual differences. “The individual he refers to is an organic whole that is inseparable from society and from others, a harmonious whole that has its own unique purpose, seeks meaning in life, and pursues ideals for the future.”(Marske, 1987) Unlike Freud’s classical psychoanalysis, which emphasized the “unconscious” and “sexual instincts”. Alfred Adler’s “individual psychology” focuses on the subjective and sociocultural factors of human beings. Absorbing Freud’s psychoanalytic doctrines, Adler’s Individual Psychology introduced the basic concepts and theories of modern psychology such as the desire to belong and fit in, the creative self, the inferiority complex and compensation, the influence of early experience, birth order and family composition on the psyche, and the feeling of self-guilt, which led psychology into its modern phase.



Adler’s key concepts in individual psychology include: inferiority complex and transcendence, life style, creative self, and social sentiments. According to the individual psychology, Inferiority complex is a manifestation of insecurity, the more you like to compete and love to perform, the more it shows that your inner self is not strong enough, and you need to make yourself feel secure and belong through external affirmation. Because it is human nature to live in groups, one of the guidelines of individual psychology lies in social interest. This one gives us a sense of belonging, of being able to perceive our own strengths, resources and abilities, of being able to experience the feeling of being needed.



Individual psychology suggests that we are all goal-oriented social beings. Purposefully acting toward the goals in life that attract us. So instead of being driven by the past, people are attracted by the future. (Adler, 2014) This means that all of our words and actions have a root cause behind them in order for us to achieve some kind of purpose. And if we read this purpose, we can understand ourselves and see what the consequences and impacts are, and therefore change what we say and do.

Individual psychology is, in the end, a system for interpreting human beings and the self. A system that can be traced back to the roots of our childhood ‘archetypes’ based on what we do and say and do in the moment.

The psychological influences behind the behavioral characteristics of individuals in the selected novels against the larger social background are analyzed. Therefore, the individual psychology of Alfred Adler, a representative of Neo-Freudian in psychoanalytic criticism is also very applicable to this study because the manifestation of the lack of security and sense of belonging of the female characters in the selected novels are be analyzed.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This study employs a new historicism perspective to examine and appreciate Chinese-American literary works, comparing how the historical and cultural contexts of different eras have uniquely influenced authors and characters. By doing so, it aims to



draw aesthetically and culturally meaningful conclusions that enrich and promote the development of Chinese-American literature. As an emerging non-mainstream literature, Chinese-American literature has been gaining significant attention within both Chinese and American literary communities.

Since its inception, Chinese-American literature has consistently explored the theme of ethnic identity. Contemporary critiques frequently address the environmental and historical backgrounds of Chinese-Americans' upbringing in the United States. However, there is a notable gap in longitudinal comparisons of works from different eras, particularly those that consider the backdrop of China's development over the past century.



and compare Chinese-American literary works across different time periods. This approach provides a unique and valuable perspective for the study of Chinese-American literature. It not only complements existing research but also enhances our understanding of how historical and cultural contexts shape literary expression. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the academic discourse on Chinese-American literature and support its ongoing evolution and appreciation. The study can bring some inspiration to students or readers when dealing with life, which is the second significance. Also, it can be regarded as a contribution to the reading of human's connection to homeland, culture and history.





1.8 Methodology

This research attempts to analyze the authors as well as the characters created in the works of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* by Jade Snow Wong, *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan, *Everything I Never Told You* and *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng. There are several questions raised and addressed in this study. How the authors' growing up experience influence them and the creation of their works is figured out. What effects did the various historical contexts have on the formation of these Chinese American authors? To put it another way, what are the influences of the authors' social and cultural backgrounds on their writing production as manifested in the selected novels of the study? This serves as this first research question. Next, an exhaustive textual analysis of security and belonging is unfold. The faces of the absence of security and belonging of the female characters and the various manifestations of female characters' sense of belonging and security as represented in the selected novels are presented. This analysis is based on the second and third research questions. After the three research questions are solved, a discussion about if there any shifts of the feelings as Chinese American of these three authors when they create their novels as time moves and the society is becoming more compatible is performed in the last chapter of this research. The ways in which Chinese American women writers construct the female subject over time by using literary growth narratives to write about the experiences of women growing up in various eras and to produce a vivid sequence of women's pictures are also examined. Based on the above research questions, an introduction by describing the background of the study, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the theoretical





underpinnings of the study, the significance of the study, the framework of the study, and the study's limitations are provided. Then the definition of the concept of Chinese American Literature is discussed. A study of the available materials introduces the historical context for the emergence and growth of Chinese-American literature as well as the current status of research on related conceptual theories are introduced through a review of materials. The history of Chinese Americans in the United States and the development of Chinese-American literature is introduced in Chapter 2 of this study, which gives the reader a more comprehensive historical framework for the subsequent attentive reading of the text. In Chapter 3, the research theories adopted, which are New Historicism and Psychoanalytic Criticism, are discussed. In addition, the methodology of this research is discussed too. This part identifies the research methods using qualitative research based on the objectives of the study and the research questions, and conducts the research through specific methods such as documental analysis method, inductive method, textual reading method, and comparative study method. In the ensuing chapters, the texts and backgrounds of three Chinese-American women writers and their novels are analyzed. In Chapter 4, the upbringing of three Chinese-American female writers from various generations—including their family upbringing, educational experiences, and the social and cultural milieu—is examined to understand how these factors affected their artistic output. Through a textual analysis of their works, this study explores the similarities and differences in the ethnic, cultural, and gender identity dilemmas, as well as the sense of security and belonging faced by Chinese-American women writers in different historical contexts. Additionally, it investigates the positions and strategies they choose to adopt in response to these challenges. Guided by the principles of New





Historicism, this chapter delves into how the growth narratives of Chinese-American women writers are intertwined with the advancements and development of Chinese-American women's literature. This literature has endured a challenging journey from being disregarded and marginalized to being acknowledged and eventually approaching the "mainstream." By employing textual analysis, the chapter provides a detailed examination of how historical and cultural contexts are reflected in the literary works, offering a nuanced understanding of the evolution of Chinese-American women's literary contributions. After analyzing whether and what influence the upbringing of the three Chinese-American women writers has on the creation of their works, a textual study of each of their four works is further conducted to examine whether the female characters in each of these literary works suffer from insecurity and lack of belonging, and what are the specific manifestations of each of these problems according to the second research question is analyzed in Chapter 5. To support the validity of the hypothesis, logos and ethos, as well as induction and deduction, are used to examine the behavioral traits of the characters in the four works and the psychological demands that drove the authors' creations. A textual study of each of the four novels is conducted. The faces of the female characters' lack of security and belonging in each of the four books are identified in chapter 5 by utilizing the Individual Psychology theory according to the second research question. What's more, the three Chinese-American female authors' reasons for their own lack of security and sense of belonging in the context of their respective historical periods are also examined by the researcher. In chapter 6, the selected novels which are *Fifth Chinese Daughter*; *The Joy Luck Club*; *Everything I Never Told You*; *Little Fires Everywhere* are investigated into according to the third research question of this study.





The third research question is to figure out the various manifestations of the female characters' sense of belonging and security in the selected novels. In the selected novels, even though these female characters have all suffered from losing the sense of security and belonging, the authors have coincidentally and skillfully arranged for happy endings, that is, through all the trials and tribulations of life, these female characters ultimately find their own security and a sense of belonging, find their inner peace, and become powerful human beings capable of taking control of their own lives. Hence, in this section, the various manifestations of the female characters' sense of belonging and security in the selected novels are presented by the guidance of individual psychology from psychoanalytic criticism. Chapter 7 is the discussion, recommendation and conclusion of this research. In this chapter, the progression of the four novels' plots are traced and the parallels and discrepancies among these four novels from the writers born in different times are discussed. Then the solutions to the problem of lack of belonging and security from the final ending experienced by the characters in the novel are summarized. The conclusion and recommendation of this research are also made. This chapter serves as the study's epilogue.

1.9 Limitations of the Study

This study has potential limitations but some of them can be addressed in the future. The first limitation is the lack of research breadth. For the research breadth, many Chinese American English works specifically describe various historical and psychological characteristics which could be quoted as a comparative study in this



study, which enhances the security theme as well as stresses the innovation of the authors' ideas of pursuing security and well-being. So for this limitation, the researcher tries to reduce it by broadening the reading width. The second limitation is the insufficiency of supporting materials, both the quantity and quality of existing research results relating to this theme of this study are of a low level. The insufficient achievements cannot provide strong reference to the foundation of case analysis. The third limitation is that the researcher does not have a professional foundation in psychological knowledge, but she is only very interested in psychological knowledge, and in later research, the researcher makes up for this deficiency by studying psychology-related knowledge.

1.10 Definition of Key Terms

The following part is the definition of some key terms mentioned in this study.

1.10.1 Sense of Belonging

Belonging means that an individual has an affiliation with another person or a group, and a sense of belonging is a feeling of being noticed, accepted, and recognized by another person or group.

Neo-psychoanalyst Erich Fromm(1959) uses the term sense of belonging in his book *Psychoanalysis and Zen buddhism* to define a feeling of certainty, security, and grounding. (pp. 79-99.) This feeling makes the individual believe that he or she is not alone in the world and is therefore a great comfort. Humanistic psychologist Maslow's personality research claim that belonging is the third level of needs, called "love and belonging". (Maslow, 1939, p. 36) This level reflects friendship and belonging to a group, which is a social need. To be loved or to have love gives a person a sense of belonging.

1.10.2 Sense of Security

It is a little difficult to define the sense of security, just as in a thousand people's eyes, there are a thousand Hamlets. Psychologist Maslow (1942) believed that security is a feeling of confidence, safety, and freedom from fear and anxiety. "Sense of security" is different from "safety". While feeling secure is a person's identification with and subjective perception of the outside world, safety is a term used to describe the objective situation in which an individual is in.

Different psychologists have different definitions and there is no uniformity. Erich Fromm (1959), a psychoanalyst who incorporated "security" into his theoretical framework, thought that people had a basic need to rely on others and interact with the outside world in order to overcome loneliness. Abraham H. Maslow (1939) , a humanistic psychologist, similarly held the belief that acquiring security was a



fundamental direction and intrinsic need in life. Maslow (1939) classified human needs into five categories: physiology, safety, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization. Security, stability, dependency, protection, freedom from intimidation, agitation, and disorder, the need for institutions, the need for order, the need for rules, the need for boundaries, and the need for the strength of a protector are described as the second level of “security needs” by Maslow (1942). This is the main reason why security is necessary. A person’s dependence on others and society in general contributes to their need for security.

1.10.3 Inferiority Complex



An inferiority complex is an unflattering assessment of one's own talents and traits that is brought on by certain physical, psychological, or social causes. According to the famous psychologist Alfred Adler (2002), the theory of inferiority complex mainly refers to the inferiority complex of people, that is, people always feel inferior to others. Unlike people's normal sense of inferiority, people with an inferiority complex are in a state of repressed environment for a long time, so they will be more inclined to deny themselves in all aspects of daily life, and even develop serious mental problems. Alfred Adler (2014), a renowned psychologist, claims that “ the inferiority complex hypothesis primarily refers to people’s inferiority complexes, or the constant feeling of inferiority toward others.” (pp. 83-105) Persons with inferiority complexes have a prolonged state of repression, which makes them more likely to deny their own worth in many facets of daily life and potentially develop major



mental illnesses. This is in contrast to people who experience typical feelings of inferiority.

1.10.4 Self Identity

Self-identity concept emphasizes the continuity and unity of the “I”. E. Erikson (1995) was the creator of self-identification idea and a crucial player in the introduction of identity concept to psychological research. He felt that:

Forming self-identity is a primary work of adolescence, a psychological process of convincing oneself that who one is and nothing else, and that self-identity, as the essence of personality, entails a commitment to ideologies, roles, and values. (Erikson, 2017, pp. 323-348)

1.10.5 Social Identity

Social identity is made up of three processes: social categorization, social comparison, and positive difference. Developing and sustaining a positive social identity helps people boost their self-esteem. In-group and related out-group comparisons account for a large part of this positive identification. Identity is divided into two categories in social identity theory: personal identity and social identity. Personal identity is defined as identity formed based on an individual's unique characteristics, whereas social identity is defined as identity formed based on community membership. People



intuitively put objects into categories and discriminate between in-groups and out-groups when classifying others in social situations. Individuals seeking positive social identity and self-esteem, favoring the group they belong to, increase the boundaries between internal and external groups, and individuals are enthusiastic about their own group, consider it better than other groups, and appreciate the differences between groups by seeking positive social identity and self-esteem. “Identity is neither a priori nor fait accomplishment,” says Homi K.Bhaba, “it can only be an illusive process of constant approach to the vision of totality 4.” (Homi, 1990)

1.10.6 Ethnic Identity



Ethnic identity, in a broad sense, is identification with a sovereign nation-state, i.e. national identity; ethnic identity, in a narrower meaning, is ethnic identity. In this research, the researcher discusses about ethnic identity in a very restricted sense. Ethnic identity, like national identity, is a collective identity at the group level from the standpoint of social identification, but the objects and levels of identity are distinct. What is “ethnic identity”? Academics have not yet reached a unified understanding. Some scholars argue that “ethnic identity is a multidimensional construct involving ethnic feelings, attitudes, knowledge, and behavior”. Recognizing the multidimensionality of ethnic identity is only the beginning of understanding its meaning. Ethnic identity is an individual’s recognition of membership in his or her ethnic group, a positive attitude toward the ethnic group to which he or she belongs, and positive feelings of pride in one’s ethnic identity. It is also noted that ethnic





identity is also a group identity. Cognition, attitude, behavior, and belonging are the four basic elements of group identity. Some researchers, on the other hand, argue that ethnic identity is more of a cultural identity, where individuals accept, commit to, and participate in the cultural practices of a group's cultural identity. Some Chinese scholars argue that ethnic identity is the cognitive and emotional attachment of members of a society to their ethnic affiliation, as well as a psychological and cultural identity. In general, ethnic identity has both native "root" factors and is also an acquired construct that develops and changes.

1.10.7 Psychological Perspective



The psychological perspective primarily refers to using the findings of contemporary psychology to examine the psychology of the author's creation and the psychology of the work's characters in order to uncover the work's genuine goals and determine its true worth. A psychological analysis of the work's characters serves as the foundation for psychological criticism, which then seeks to understand the author's conscious or unconscious motivations when creating the work's characters. Finally, psychological criticism makes inferences about why the work makes use of particular formal devices and linguistic cues. It is a method of analyzing the psychological phenomena of the author's creative process, the psychological phenomena expressed and contained in the literary works, and the readers' appreciation. Psychological criticism explores into the hidden meaning behind literary phenomena from a psychological perspective.



1.11 Summary

This chapter provides a brief overview of the growth of Chinese-American literature. It also briefly introduces the research background of this study, including the subject of this research, which is four novels written by Chinese-American women writers in different eras. Also, this chapter briefly explores the common topic of the female characters' search for security and sense of belonging in the four novels to be studied. Additionally, this chapter gives the conceptual and theoretical framework, briefly demonstrating how the theories used support the numerous argumentation frameworks of the study. Along with it, it outlines the research objective, problem statement, and the research questions, and establishes a distinct research significance.

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Further, this chapter presents the basic research idea in a clear framework by the part of methodology, so as to prepare a sufficient foundation for the research contents in the following chapters. At last, this chapter points out the limitations of the research and defines some key terms.