

**A Vastness of the Soul: Ethnic Realism and Magical Realism in Amy
Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses***

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"The Vastness of the Soul: Ethnic Realism and Magical Realism in *The Hundred Secret Senses* "

"..the world is not a place but the vastness of the soul"
(Tan 399)

Amy Tan skyrocketed to a level of prominence in the minds of American readers in 1989 with her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*. In a style that is at once humorous and moving, Tan's early novels are peopled with believable characters that instantly endear themselves to the audience. The common framework employed in her first two novels is the creation of narrators who are women born in America of immigrant Chinese parents. These women tell their stories along with the histories and mythologies of their Asian parents, ultimately achieving some sort of closure regarding what they view as their own dual identities. Published in 1995, Tan's third novel *The Hundred Secret Senses* takes a variation on this theme by focusing on the relationship between two sisters rather than a mother and daughter, and also by chronicling experiences had in other lifetimes as well as in differing cultures.

Reviewing *The Hundred Secret Senses* in a popular weekly news magazine, Laura Shapiro calls it "a novel wonderfully like a hologram"(91). Though not a literary scholar, Shapiro nonetheless offers a profoundly accurate phrase which describes the novel's constantly shifting images and narrative perspectives. The description is seconded by literary critic Benzi Zhang, who, in his 2004 essay, cites Shapiro and observes in reference to Tan's novel that "the.. .hologram produces a rebounding

circularity that indicates an endless narrative recursion in which the narrative levels are relative" (13). The high opinion of Tan's work demonstrated in Shapiro's review is not universal, however. Frank Chin, a scholar at the forefront of a movement for Asian Americans to reclaim the non-American aspects of their cultures, criticizes the circular plot elements and holographic images so highly praised by Zhang. "The works of.. Tan are not consistent with Chinese fairy tales and childhood literature," he asserts (8).

Another critic, James Lu, paradoxically both supports and refutes Chin's assertion when he calls Tan's style of composition "creative use of Asian popular metaphors and a parodic restructuring of Asian myths, legends, and fairy tales" (3). What Chin and his followers fail to consider is the possibility that Amy Tan was not attempting to compose a text based in historical fact or even in Chinese literary tradition but rather was constructing a fairy tale of her own. Because the story is grounded in a somewhat fantastic reality which demands suspension of disbelief, the question of whether or not it offers accurate details of either Chinese or American actualities is irrelevant.

The use of fantastic elements in an acceptable and believable setting is reminiscent of other texts that have been categorized as magical realism. Investigating the use of magical realism within ethnic writings of non-Latin American origin, Roland Walter notes that "magic is an integral part of reality in that the natural and supernatural categories of reality are harmoniously intertwined" (2). This mingling of the natural world with the supernatural is a key component in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, a component which makes clear the fact that Tan never intended to write what Chin calls a "Christian Chinese autobiography" (25). Despite some negative interpretation from a decidedly ethnocentric—not to mention decidedly male—perspective, *Senses* is, on the

surface as well as below, a fantastic work of fiction. Tan incorporates contemporary culture with history and magical realism to enhance and draw attention to multiple levels of existence and reality while describing the journey of a single individual learning to "explore the deeper dimensions" (Zhang 15) of both herself and of her surroundings. This individual is Olivia Bishop, thirty-something daughter of an immigrant Chinese man and a woman who enjoys considering herself "American mixed grill, a bit of everything white, fatty, and fried" (Tan 3). Narrating in the present, Olivia begins by recalling the introduction into her childhood of Kwan Li. On his deathbed, Olivia's father Jack shocks the family by announcing that he has a daughter living in China, the child of a previous marriage. He begs his current wife to find the girl and bring her to America. Olivia is four years old when she learns about Kwan and six when the two finally meet, and Olivia's perspective on their lives together presents an always rocky relationship. "I should have been grateful to Kwan," she muses. "I could always depend on her[. . .]But instead, most of the time, I resented her" (Tan 12). Olivia's early memories of life with Kwan center on Kwan's "wack[iness] [. . .]even by San Francisco standards" (Tan 20). Kwan is blessed with what she calls "Yin eyes," or the ability to see and communicate with people who have died. Not surprisingly, this is a difficult idea for young Olivia to accept, and the difficulty does not wane as the women grow older. Also needling the back of Olivia's mind are the "bedtime stories" Kwan used to tell the young Olivia. "For most of my childhood, I thought everyone remembered dreams as other lives, other selves," she says dismissively (Tan 31). In her adulthood, however, Olivia begins to realize that Kwan was not just remembering dreams but was, in fact, recalling a life she firmly believes herself to have lived in the year 1864. Readers learn of this other

life through interludes narrated by Kwan in her simplistic English, scattered through Olivia's story. Kwan's tales of the past offer the most obvious example of the "rebounding circularity" observed by Zhang as, though they are presented in primarily chronological order, these interludes occur in the novel at points when their meanings relate directly to Olivia's narration at the time.

Olivia meets Simon during college and falls in love with him despite the fact that he is living his own ghost story. Simon is haunted by the recent death of his girlfriend Elza, and Olivia begs Kwan to help her win Simon's whole heart. Kwan, through Yin world connections, arranges a meeting with Elza, Simon, and Olivia and communicates to Simon Elza's desire that he move forward with his life. "Only afterward did I consider the irony of the whole matter," remembers Olivia, "that I was helping Kwan with her illusions so that she could help Simon let go of his" (Tan 115). It is largely Olivia's feelings of guilt over what she feels was a deception of Simon which lead to her sense that Elza is a constant spiritual presence in her eventual marriage with Simon and also lead to their later separation.

In the wake of this separation, Kwan engineers a plan to reconcile the couple through a trip to China during which the three will visit Kwan's native village of Changmian. Once there, Olivia has increasing difficulty in dismissing Kwan's yin eyes and past lives as entire flights of fancy: "I feel as if the membrane separating the two halves of my life has finally been shed" (Tan 230). While matters between Olivia and Simon shift and change, the more important alterations take place within Olivia. Examining the possibilities (as well as improbabilities) suggested by evidence that Kwan may not be as crazy as her family supposed, Olivia begins to question her relationships

with everyone around her and looks more carefully at her relationship with her self. True to the form represented in Tan's first two novels, Olivia does achieve some measure of closure at the novel's end, though it is not necessarily the closure that the audience would have expected.

At one end of the spectrum of criticism regarding Amy Tan's writings are those who, like Frank Chin and Sheng-Mei Ma, berate Tan's novels for their lack of realism. On the other end are readers such as Terry Dehay, Elaine Kim, and Sau-ling Wong. These latter few suggest that Tan's ethnicity comes through in her works regardless of the reality involved in her presentation of Chinese people and their* cultures. Tan's critics seem to imply that, by virtue of being an Asian American writer, she is therefore obligated to compose in a style that is much more harshly regulated than that of a non-ethnic author. An expectation is set forth that Asian writers will not use creative license or even, it appears, engage in the writing of fiction. These constraints are not placed on American or English authors, nor are Caucasian writers given this responsibility to accurately portray every element of their cultures in a manner more suited to scientific or historical study than to the art of fiction.

To Chin and his fellow readers, Kwan does not come across as an amusing and loveable annoyance in Olivia's life, "an orphan cat, kneading at my [Olivia's] heart" (Tan 25). Instead, Kwan is seen as an ignorant caricature of a Chinese woman: "Everything about her is loud and clashing.. .she thinks her English is great.. .she's the naive, trusting type who believes everything said" (Tan 22-26). Rather than acknowledge the possibility that a character of any other ethnic background could possess these traits, anti-Tan scholars suggest that Kwan is designed to embody a racist American's concept of

Chinese people. Similarly, Chin and his colleagues look down on Tan's descriptions of the fictional Chinese village of Changmian, the setting for Kwan's life before joining Olivia and her family in San Francisco as well as for the past-life narrative that Kwan weaves through Olivia's story. Referring to what Olivia compares to "carefully cropped photos found in travel brochures.. .convey[ing] all the sentimental quaintness that tourists crave" (Tan 230), these scholars claim that Tan has deliberately painted a portrait of a primitive China that does not exist. "The idyllic preindustrial countryside exists for the express purpose of touristic impressions and narcissistic wish-fulfillment," comments Ma. It is Frank Chin's contention that the author has cowed to the influence of Western society and has made both Kwan and Changmian appear inferior for the purpose of "perpetuating and advancing the stereotype of a Chinese culture so foul... [and] perverse..." (11).

More than they demand factual plots, settings, and characterization, however, these critics insist upon accurate representation of Chinese history and folklore. In his 1991 essay, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," Chin asserts that Amy Tan is among "the first writers.. .of Asian ancestry to so boldly fake the best-known works from.. .Asian literature..." (3). Rather than pointing to the ways in which Tan's fiction reflects a desire or need on the part of the Chinese American to bring together the influences of two conflicting cultures into a more holistic self, Chin dwells on the idea that this attempted integration symbolizes a wish to become so assimilated into Western society that one's Asian histories may be negated. According to Chin's paradigm of Asian literature, even authors who—like Tan—were born in the United States themselves, should avoid allowing any Americanism to be reflected in their

writings. Ignoring the fact that the terms "fiction" and "novel" denote made-up or unrealistic stories by their very definitions, he believes that every work by a Chinese American author is, to some extent, intended to be a "work of autobiographical fiction" (11). This assumption leads him to also believe that whatever absurd or fantastic elements appear in these novels are added not merely as literary techniques but as conscious acts of denial against the author's Chinese heritage.

Sheng-Mei Ma, also points to portions of *Senses* that he interprets as decidedly non-Chinese, and attributes Amy Tan's success as a writer to her ability to paint the image of Chinese people that the American people want to see. "The celebration of Chinese-ness in Tan," he states, "must be traced back to the American-ness of the author and her readers" (33). Olivia is the California-born daughter of a Chinese immigrant and a woman who "thinks that her marrying out of the Anglo race makes her a liberal" (Tan 4). Simon, Olivia's semi-estranged husband, "didn't look like any particular race.. .half Hawaiian-Chinese, half Anglo, a fusion of different racial genes and not a dilution" (Tan 74). Beginning with these two characters, Ma notes how "the mixed-blood Bishops embody the cultural hybridization of a minority like Asian Americans" (30-31). Such hybridization is not, to his mind, a positive thing. "This obsessive whitening," as Ma calls Tan's characterization, seeks "not to efface the self, but to embellish it" (31). The primary line of thinking implied by Ma's analysis is that Amy Tan views Asian-ism, Chinese-ism, and minority-ism in general not as actual personality traits or cultural contexts but as exotic outfits for her characters to wear even though they exist in a society that bears no resemblance to anything Asian or otherwise ethnic: "Tan's vision of multicultural America comes with trappings of Orientalism, upgraded by New Age chic,

presented by hip San Francisco yuppies" (Ma 34). In fact, according to Ma, it is because of their easily identifiable positions within the "white, middle-class... climate of the New Age" that the players in Tan's novel are so well accepted by her readers (30).

This denunciation of Amy Tan's ethnicity (or lack thereof) does not stop with the "whiteness" of her characters. Ma holds to the fact that though Tan does not overtly discriminate or make negative statements regarding Asians, she "celebrates the exotic Chinese other," an act which he takes to be a metaphor for Tan's severing of her own Chinese roots by illuminating that which separates "them" from "her" (34). One of the ways in which these differences are accentuated is by Tan's intensifying of "the ethnic other's faculties of sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch" (29). Ma's contention is that that Tan's choice to exaggerate these "faculties" denotes a belief that the "ethnic other's" senses and abilities are somehow less tuned or less functional than those of the author and the supposed readers. Additionally, he puts forth the idea that Tan deliberately equates her Chinese characters with non-human creatures, particularly "animals with supernatural instincts" (34). This assertion is based on Kwan's explanation to Olivia of the secret senses from which the novel takes its title:

Secret sense not really secret. We just call secret because everyone has, only forgotten. Same kind of sense like ant feet, elephant trunk, dog nose, cat whisker, whale ear, bat wing, clam shell, snake tongue, little hair on flower. Many things, but mix up together. (113)

Ma believes that Tan chose these similes or analogies not from a desire to draw parallels between humans and nature but to include Kwan as one of a variety of species in the animal kingdom. "The refrain of animal senses [...] in pidgin English, entirely without

the proper possessive unit[...] [achieves] a nonsensical quality" (Ma 35). This observation coupled with the fact that comparisons of secret senses to animal senses such as "'little hair on flower,' 'clam shell,' and 'whale ear' are pieces of information most likely accrued by students of modern science" (Ma 35) serves to make Kwan appear more ridiculous even than Olivia's description of a "tiny dynamo [...] [wearing] a purple jacket over turquoise pants" (22).

It is not merely the "linguistic exoticism" of Chinese immigrants or their lack of scientific knowledge that Ma believes are ridiculed by Tan (37). His opinion is that she also demonstrates a clear disrespect for her Chinese heritage by "knead[ing] together cultural elements as mutually exclusive as Christian linearity and Buddhist cyclic reincarnation, or the 1990s yuppies and the 1860s Hakkas, to advance her plot" (32). Though Tan's text offers no clear example of condescension toward Christians, Buddhists, or the Hakka people of 19th century China, Ma suggests numerous occasions on which Tan takes authorial license with historical facts and cultural traditions. The Hakka, for example, were a group largely influenced by Christian beliefs, claiming as their leader a man who believed himself to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ. The players in Kwan's past life narratives are either English missionaries or native Hakka Chinese, yet, as Ma points out, "Hakka's Christian belief.. .is incompatible with the cyclic framework of Buddhism" (32-33). What he means is that the Hakka of Changmian or anywhere else in 1864 would not have subscribed to beliefs in the Yin world or the next life; such ideas would have been contradictory to the Christian theology that these people embraced. Ma also mentions some events that occur during the visit

made to modern Changmian and denounces them as cultural misappropriations. One of these events involves the killing of a chicken for the evening meal:

She holds [the chicken] over a white enamel bowl that sits on a bench. Her left hand firmly clutches the chicken's neck. In her other hand is a small knife.. .pressing the blade against the bird's neck. She slowly saws. A thin ribbon of blood springs up [...] When the bowl is half filled with blood, Du Lili lets the chicken fall to the ground. For several agonizing minutes, we watch as it stumbles and gurgles. (295)

Olivia is taking photographs of the entire occurrence, while Simon stands by feeling repulsed by the barbaric display. Attempting to prove that the process was, in fact, a traditional ritual of some sort, Olivia asks Du Lili what the significance is of the torturous death of the chicken. "I usually cut the head off right away," the Chinese woman explains, "But this time I let the chicken dance a bit.. .For your photos! More exciting that way" (296).

Instead of amusement at the gullibility of the American Bishops, Ma expresses frustration at Tan's joke (40). As the action of the novel moves from killing the chicken to sharing "pickle-mouse wine" around the fire and then to Kwan's translation of the village's name, Ma's cultural sensibilities are increasingly offended. Explaining what he considers to be "real" definitions and influences of both the drink and the town, he accuses Tan of "consistent mis-management of the Chinese language and culture [which is] calculated to bring forth a fictional universe at once aesthetic and abominable, at once uplifting and degrading" (41). Frank Chin also refers to this "fictional universe" in Tan's

writing, complaining that her characters exist in a "pure white fantasy where nothing is Chinese, nothing is real, everything is born of pure imagination" (49).

Why, though, is a world created through imagination unacceptable to these critics? Why is the contention that *Senses* takes place in a setting that deliberately "intertwine[s] the real and the unreal" (Zhang 14) cause for complete rejection by other Asian authors? It is as though they have forgotten or are denying the fact that fiction is a process of creation and art rather than a representation of historical accuracy. Roland Walter identifies magical realism as "an oxymoron combining natural and supernatural categories of reality," and observes that "in the Americas, magical realism has been linked to...the myths and legends of cultures with a ritualistic-religious foundation" (1). It is important to note that Walter says nothing about the necessity for writings influenced by or constructed as magical realism to *remain true* to the myths and legends of those cultures. Frank Chin, Sheng-Mei Ma, and other critics of Tan's ethnic loyalties refuse to look at *The Hundred Secret Senses* as a magical realist text and therefore miss several of the subtleties that make the book a work of art rather than a book of life.

"To prevent an overwhelming sense of disbelief," explains Scott Simpkins in his essay on strategies employed by writers of magic realism, "magic realists present familiar things in unusual ways" and utilize "elements that are often present but have become virtually invisible because of their familiarity" (145). One cannot help noting the similarity between Simpkins' definition of magic realism and Kwan's definition of secret senses: "everyone has, only forgotten" (Tan 113). Early in the novel, Olivia remembers Kwan's explanation of her own mother's death following the exodus of their shared father to the United States:

[. .]our father caught a disease of too many good dreams. He could not stop thinking about riches and an easier life, so he became lost, floated out of [our] lives, and washed away his memories of the wife and baby he left behind[. .]He left us when my mother was about to have another baby.. .I can never forget lying against my mother rubbing her swollen belly[. .]Then all the water in her belly poured out as tears from her eyes, she was so sad[. .]That poor starving baby hi her belly ate a hole in my mother's heart and they both died. (14-15)

Olivia acknowledges that Kwan may have been speaking metaphorically, that in all likelihood Kwan's mother hemorrhaged during the birth of her second child and that their father probably "floated" out of their lives on nothing more magical than a boat to California. Yet the introduction into this relatively common scenario of supernatural images adds to the emotional effects the passage has both on Olivia and on the audience. In Simpkins' theory of magical strategies, the fact that we as readers are also able to make this connection actually enables us to suspend our disbelief and accept Kwan's story as fact. Having subdued our rational minds to acceptance of Tan's magical universe, we are thus better prepared to journey into the realms of ghosts and reincarnation through which the novel leads its audience.

Another scholar of Asian literature, Ken-fan Lee, discusses the use of ghosts to represent cultural differences in works of literature. In his essay "Cultural Translation and the Exorcist," Lee explains that "ghosts here symbolize the unknown and unfamiliar to the over-rationalized mind" and puts forth these valid questions: "Do the ghosts really exist? Or are they just Kwan's imagination?" (117, 119). Because, as Benzi Zhang

states, "the distinction between dream and reality[...]is not clear cut," these questions can both be answered affirmatively (13). Olivia's memories validate the existence of ghosts outside of Kwan's imagination. Remembering her own encounters with these spirits during her childhood alongside Kwan, Olivia recalls that "her ghosts looked alive. They worried and complained [...]. What I saw seemed so real, not at all like dreaming. It was as though someone *else's* feelings had escaped, and my eyes had become the movie projector beaming them into life" (Tan 56). She also describes a specific incident in which the ghost of a young girl joined Olivia in her room and stole the pink feather boa off of Olivia's Barbie doll. "I politely asked this little girl in Chinese who she was," Olivia relates. "And she said, '*Lili-lili lili-lili*' in a high squeal" (56). Much later in the novel this squealing girl-ghost makes another appearance, though in a quiet and subtle circularity. Olivia does not seem to recognize the Du Lili described to her in Changmian as her boa thief, yet Tan provides enough hints to make the connection apparent to the rest of us.

In a work of magical realism, according to Walter, "the subject's consciousness develops through active participation in human, natural, and cosmic realms" (1). Zhang confirms *Senses'* place under this heading by pointing out that "the novel, as a whole, represents Olivia's journey, as guided by Kwan's yin-sight, to the other side of existence to explore the deeper dimensions of her life" (15). While not necessarily a willing participant, Olivia nonetheless becomes an active participant in these multiple realms as she is dragged first through Kwan's fairy tale memories and then later through the physical manifestation of Kwan's fairy tale world. "From Kwan, Olivia learns how to view herself and the world in a new way" (Zhang 16). It is important, in order to

complete the transformation that leads Olivia to this different view; she not only crosses but in fact eliminates the boundary between what she sees as real and what she believes to be impossible. Kwan enables this leap by "play [ing] the role of bridging the imaginary world and reality," according to Lee (120).

"For most of my childhood," recalls Olivia, "I had to struggle *not* to see the world the way Kwan described it [...]. When I was a kid, I didn't have strong enough boundaries between imagination and reality. Kwan saw what she believed. I saw what I *didn't* want to believe" (Tan 55, 57). As an adult, however, Olivia falls prey to what Walter calls "the dominant Western paradigm that equates truth with fact and imagination with falsehood" (4). Strangely, this "Western paradigm" reflects exactly the opinions voiced by Frank Chin when he criticizes Tan and other authors. Because her rational, grown up mind tells her that Kwan must either be crazy or lying, Olivia is simply incapable of looking at Kwan's stories in any other way. "I no longer think my sister is crazy," she admits, "but Kwan is odd, no getting around that" (Tan 20-21). This oddity, however, cannot contradict the part of Olivia's mind that hasn't become entirely grown up. "[I]n spite of all my logic and doubt," she confesses as she sits in the Changmian cave beside Kwan, "I can't dismiss something larger I know about Kwan: that it isn't in her nature to lie" (358).

Kenneth Reeds, a scholar of magical realism from its conception in Germany in the 1920s through its reincarnation as an ethnic literary technique, argues that belief in a magical text "requires faith in the possibility of magical events," and points to the fact that "for magical realism to function the reader had to see magical events as supernatural and this presupposed his or her vision coming from Western empiricism" (188-190).

This idea reinforces Ma's claim that it is the "whiteness" of Amy Tan's novels that make them popular with American readers who appreciate the "identity crisis [...] resolved by revisiting some magical fountain" (41). In essence, a visit to a mystical fountain is exactly what occurs in Tan's novel to hasten a resolution to Olivia's confusion regarding what is important and what is real, though she actually visits a mystical mountain cave instead. Undergoing a multi-layered crisis of identity, she struggles with her roles as Kwan's sister and as a rational person, her roles as Simon's wife and Simon's business partner, and her roles as a woman afraid to experience life and as a woman tired of living without experiencing it. "Our life seemed predictable yet meaningless," Olivia laments, "like fitting all the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle only to find the completed result was a reproduction of corny art" (Tan 139). This disenchantment with her everyday existence contributes a great deal to Olivia's decision to take the trip to China, to change her perspective, and to admit to herself that "the idea of searching for make-believe eggs in China sounds charming" (Tan 188).

Kwan's tiny hamlet, Changmian, quickly presents itself as the metaphorical fountain at which Olivia's slate of beliefs will be wiped clean. "[N]ow that we're in China.. .a lot of weird stuff has already happened," Simon points out to Olivia, "and it's only the second day" (259). The "weird stuff continues to happen, each incident stripping away more and more of Olivia's firm grasp on what she considers reality. First is Kwan's vision of Big Ma's ghost several hours before an official arrives in Changmian to break the sad news that Big Ma was killed in a bus accident that morning. The next day, Kwan explains that she has been living since the age of four in the body of a childhood friend of hers. According to Kwan's account, both girls drowned in a flood,

and though Kwan's spirit wanted to return to life her body was too badly damaged. It is finally, in a mountain cave near which Simon has disappeared, that Kwan produces evidence of the veracity of the tales she's been telling all of Olivia's life. For just a moment, Olivia tries to cling to logical thought: "It's just coincidence, the story, the box, the dates on the book" (358). Yet what she sees and knows pushes aside what she feels she is supposed to believe. Faced with such irrefutable proof, Olivia has a revelation of sorts:

I've known since I was a child, really I have. Long ago I buried that reason in a safe place, just as she had done with her music box. Out of guilt, I listened to her stories, all the while holding on to my doubts, my sanity. Time after time, I refused to give her what she wanted most. She'd say, "Libby-ah, you remember?" And I'd always shake my head, knowing she hoped I would say, "Yes, Kwan, of course I remember." (358)

This is Olivia's turning point, the moment at which she allows herself to slide over the side of reason and immerse herself in what she has always convinced herself to be fantasy. "What am I afraid of?" she wonders. "That I might believe the story is true—that I made a promise and kept it, that life repeats itself, that our hopes endure, that we get another chance? What's so terrible about that?" (361) Finding no satisfactory answer from the mountains or the wind, she turns back to Kwan. "And I listen," she says, "no longer afraid of Kwan's secrets. She's offered me her hand. I'm taking it freely. Together we're flying off to the world of Yin" (363).

"Perhaps," Scott Simpkins poses, offering one more defining concept, "magical realism's goal is to return our focus to the backdrop of [...] reality" (147). *The Hundred Secret Senses* certainly accomplishes this. Not only to Olivia as she finds herself believing that "truth lies not in logic, but in hope" (Tan 398), but also to the audience as we redefine reality in relation to the text. With this novel, Amy Tan refutes the opinions of her critics that she is unfaithful to the myths and legends of her ancestral culture. Her characters and settings are exactly as true to life as they need to be to maintain their places in the magical reality of the novel. Chin and his colleagues should reevaluate their narrow ideas of truth and of where truth should be located within a work of fiction. "Tan's novel," praises Zhang, "encourages readers [...] to search for meaning in the negotiations.. .between the ordinary and the extraordinary" (17). Readers willing to take the leap not only search for meaning but will certainly find it.

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