Ghosts

Chinese scholar, sociologist, and anthropologist Xiaotong Fei referred to America as the "land without ghosts." For immigrants, the American landscape lacked the layers of past ancestors, households, and journeys woven throughout the Chinese homeland. A sense of the difference between a Chinese ghost and an American ghost can inform how we read *The Joy Luck Club.*

Viewed from a Chinese perspective, American ghosts were shallow, lacked depth, and served primarily as the matter for children's tales. Chinese ghosts and the spirits in Tan's novel are far more than the supernatural presence of the undead.

One of the greatest novels of Chinese literature, *Dream of the Red Chamber,* depicts the story of two Chinese families living in Beijing during the 18th century. The hero has been reincarnated from a living stone left behind by a goddess. Other characters are reincarnations from the hero's former life as the stone. The story is framed by the hero's "dream of a red chamber." The dream sheds more light on the tribulations of human life than the hero might surmise on his own. In keeping with Buddhist beliefs, the daily, tangible life of the body is a dream life. As we come closer to enlightenment, we "awaken" from this dream life to see the true world.

Ghosts can bring information from true reality into this world. Further, ghosts can provide us with hints as to our former lives and our future fates. In the present, we are often reflecting back on our former lives and contemplating our future reincarnations. As a result, past, present, and future weave tightly together, only artificially separated to make our analysis easier. Fei explains, "Life in its creativity changes the absolute nature of time: it makes past into present—no, it melds past, present, and future into one inextinguishable, multilayered scene, a three-dimensional body. This is what ghosts are." One writer on migration, Adam MacKeown, notes that ghosts represent "an intangible specter of the past that inhabited and affected the present."

While Tan explicitly refers to ghosts numerous times, we might also hear the echo of ghosts in repeated symbols. For example, the novel begins as a swan is torn from a woman during immigration processing. She is left with one feather. Birds appear and re-appear throughout the novel. Are they the reincarnation of this former, the true bird? Are they ghosts of a true-bird? An-Mei's mother tells of a turtle that hatches seven magpie birds of joy. Ying-ying St. Clair tells of a bird domesticated to catch fish. When Chinese peasants refuse to suffer, the birds die, falling from the sky. Somehow, Tan's birds are the ghostly indicator of suffering or joy throughout generations.

Ying-ying St. Clair remains most connected with the world of ghosts. Her second self enters this realm to meet the Moon Lady. Her musings demonstrate that she has "lost herself" to the other world. She worries that she has no spirit to pass on to her daughter and that Lena has also become a ghost. It is Tan's stories, however, that let loose the spirit, a "hard, shiny and clear" link to past, memorialized for the next generation.