An Example of ‘Othering’ In Contemporary Culture to Explain How This Process Is Involved In the Creation or Maintenance of Cultural Identity

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Abstract. This study examines the definition of other, the process of othering, and how othering is represented in Amy Tan’s novel, The Hundred Secret Senses by analyzing two chapters of the novel, Young Girl’s Wish and Hello Good-bye. In the two chapters, Chinese negative cultural identities and positive American cultural identities are constructed through presenting the local environment, and different behavioral patterns of Chinese and American. The main contribution of the study is expanding the scope of “othering” by providing the concept of “self-othering” and illustrating how “self-othering” is embodied in Contemporary Culture.

Introduction
Amy Tan is a famous Chinese American writer and most of her novels are related to Chinese American lives and Chinese culture. Many scholars (Wong,1995; Kong, 2014; Yin, 2005) point that in Tan’s novels, China and Chinese culture are presented as “negative” and “exotic”, which matches the mainstream western ideologies and stereotypes, and meets “Middle-class American readers’ taste”. The Hundred Secret Senses is the third novel written by Amy Tan, published in 1995; it is mainly about the lives between Kwan, a Chinese girl and her American young half-sister Olivia (Tan, 1995). The novel describes Chinese culture as other, opposite from American culture, through comparison between Kwan, China, and Olivia, America. In the first part of this study, the definitions of other and othering (especially in feminist and post-colonial discourses) will be analyzed; a different type of othering, self-othering will be also demonstrated. In the second part, two chapters Young Girl’s Wish and Hello Good-bye from The Hundred Secret Sense will be analyzed in detail as an example of self-othering and othering process, and the constructions of Chinese and American cultural identities in the process will be examined.

Other and Othering
“The meaning of each linguistic unit can only be established by reference to another” (Rose, 1986:55-56), which indicates that the meaning of some concepts, cannot be explained solely and they tend to be illustrated through using some related concepts. Identity is such kind of words which is often presented with some related concepts. According to Hegel (1807 cited in Brons, 2015:69), “self-identity is exclusion of everything other outside itself”. It means when people define self-identity, they are likely to create a boundary and use those who do not belong to the self-category, other, to define those who are in the category. Therefore, it is impossible to constitute the self without mentioning the other (Chaitin, 1996; Castoriadis, 1997).
Feminists such as de Beauvoir and post-colonial scholars such as Said extend the notion of other (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996), and suggest that other is often related to negative characteristics opposite to the positive self. Many scholars claim that other is often “demonized” and “devalued” to be inferior, abnormal which is in contrast to the dominant, normal self (Inokuchi & Nozaki, 2005:62; Castoriadis, 1997:249). Brons (2015:70) points that “otherness is constructed through self-other distantiation.” Self and other are two polar positions and totally different from each other. The
process of creating and polarizing negative other against positive self is the process of other, which is othering.

The boundaries of self and other are not likely to be real and natural. The categories are imaginative and man-made (Said, 1985); the differences within one category and the similarities between different categories are often omitted and overlooked (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2003). Power relationships exist in the othering process, such as who for what purpose creates the boundaries. It has been stated by Crang (1998:65) through othering, “identities are set up in an unequal relationship”. Hall (1992) points that power makes function via othering, which self makes itself a subject position by constructing the other as object. In these viewpoints, self is usually the decider and producer of the concept related to other. Self makes control of the discourses about subordinate other-identity; simultaneously, it creates and maintains itself as a positive and dominant identity. Therefore, Othering is a “device of domination” (Nederveen, 1992:12) and a way to obtain authority over other (Said, 1979). Feminist (de Beauvoir, 2011) and post-colonial scholars (Said, 1979) claim that patriarchy and western imperialism achieve dominance through othering, by constructing the identities of woman and colonial nations as inferior other.

In these contexts, othering and other are referred to dominant groups construct the subordinate group as other to achieve political benefits such as controlling other group. However, there appears one type of othering which one group defines itself as other to obtain certain purposes such as economic benefits. For example, some tourism areas construct themselves as undeveloped, exotic other, different from modern, developed metropolises to attract tourists. Yan & Santos (2009:295) analyze China, Forever, a Chinese tourism promotion video, and claim that in the video, “self-orientalism representations” are adopted to reveal “changeless, mythical and feminized China”, through which China posits itself as other and makes otherness “marketability”. This kind of self-othering for marketing purpose is different from feminist and post-colonial scholars’ othering, and it is widely used in contemporary world. In the following part of the study, two chapters, Young Girl’s Wish and Hello Good-bye from Amy Tan’s The Hundred Secret Senses will be analyzed as an example for self-othering; and the construction of Chinese and American cultural identities in the othering process will be demonstrated.

The Analysis of Young Girl’s Wish and Hello Good-bye

The Hundred Secret Senses is about the stories between Kwan, a Chinese girl and her American half-sister Olivia; Kwan is an unusual person who has Yin eyes and hundred secret senses which can help her see and talk with ghosts and dead people; most importantly, through her magical senses, Kwan rescues the relationships between Olivia and Olivia’s husband Simon in order to repay her debt of gratitude to Olivia in the last life (Tan, 1995). The novel portrays Chinese people and Chinese culture identities as other, opposite to American people and American cultural identities. Many scholars (Ma, 2001; Kong, 2014) mainly focus on the representations of Kwan and claim that Tan constructs Kwan as a Chinese mysterious and abnormal other to indicate Chinese culture identities as other. For example, Ma (2001) suggests that Tan presents Kwan’s hundred secret senses as animal-like sense, through which it presents primitive, mysterious and exotic Chinese culture images. In this study, othering process of Chinese cultural identities will be analyzed through focusing on the descriptions of China and local Chinese people in Young Girl’s Wish and Hello Good-bye, two adjacent chapters from the middle part of The Hundred Secret Senses.

In these two chapters, Kwan takes Olivia and Simon (Olivia’s husband, native American) back to Changmian (a small village in the south China where Kwan grew up) to realize Kwan’s wishes and visit Big Ma, an old lady who looks after Kwan when Kwan was young (Tan, 1995). The majority of the book is devoted to the descriptions about what the three people encounter on the way from Guilin to Changmian, such as local people, Chinese environment and culture. By using specially selected words and comparing the attitudes of American (Olivia and Simon) with Chinese (Kwan and the local people), the novel constructs Chinese cultural identity as other which is exotic, savage, and unacceptable, which is totally different from American modern, civilized cultural identity.
The Representations of Local Environment

There are mainly two types of environment descriptions. The first type is mainly about the poor and dirty environment in Guilin. “...these ancient stone formations are the blight of high-rises, their stucco exteriors grimy with industrial pollution, their signboards splashed with garish red and gilt characters...all of them (buildings) painted a proletarian toothpaste-green...there is the rubble of prewar houses and impromptu garbage dumps...gives the Guilin the look and stench of a pretty face marred by tawdry lipstick, gapped teeth, and an advanced case of periodontal disease.” (Tan, 1995:190-191). In this text, nearly all the description words are negative. From those adjectives, such as “blight” and “grimy”, Guilin is seen as a dilapidation city with heavy pollution. “Garish red”, “gilt”, and “toothpaste-green”, those color depictions show a coarse city image. The metaphor at the end, tends to lead readers feel horrible and disgusted about the environment. Through the representations, Guilin is presented as a city with poor, dirty, undeveloped and disgusting image.

Another type of description is about the primitive and fascinate environment in Changmian. The description words here are very positive and vivid. Changmian is presented as “Nirvana”, “a charmed world of distant past”, “in the documentary”, unbelievable (Tan, 1995:204-205). Tan uses treasure-like color depictions such as “Mirror like ponds”, “tall peaks, dark jade in color”, “their hillsides a velvety moss-green with folds deepening into emerald” (ibid), to present the landscape as treasure which is fascinate and intoxicating. Additionally, the text emphasizes the primitive, undeveloped image of Changmian, such as “no tin roofs or electrical power lines” and “avoided the detritus of modernization” (ibid).

Through the two types of environment descriptions, Chinese environment is seen to be unusual and unbelievable to Olivia and Simon, the westerners. The texts construct the identities of China as undeveloped and primitive which is different from American modern and civilized environment. Chinese environment culture is other to American.

The Representations of Chinese Food Culture

In the two chapters, there are two descriptions related to Chinese food, morning street food and animal in the bird market. For the morning street food, Tan represents the food as dirty and unhealthy. The text provides detail depictions of one food sellers. “The vendor pries the cooked pancakes off with his blackened bare fingers...” (Tan, 1995:188). From the description, the vendor’s hand is “black” which means dirty and “bare fingers” shows that he catches the pancakes without any tools such as plastic glove or spatula. Those indicate that the cooking process is primitive and the food vendor does not pay attention to the customers’ health. Tan also provides the different reactions and attitudes to the street food between American (Olivia) with Chinese (Kwan and the local). Olivia thinks that the street food is “food poisoning” and “carries a few parasites” (Tan, 1995:187). Kwan totally thinks the food is “cheap”, “good”, acceptable (ibid). In addition, the text also mentions that a number of local Chinese also eat the food without concerning about the food safety (Tan, 1995:187-188). From the contrasts between American and Chinese attitudes, it shows that Chinese food culture is unacceptable, dirty and primitive compared to American food culture. The American people are more civilized and modern who would concern about the quality of the food, but Chinese people are uncivilized and animal-like which just eat the food and never concern about the health and hygiene issues.

The second piece of the food culture descriptions is in the bird market. It descripts that two American cannot accept that Chinese sell owl and pangolin as food. The text specially provides detail depictions of Olivia and Simon’s strong reactions to these. “That’s disgusting”, “he (the seller) is a fucking goon”, “I do not believe this...I am going to be sick”, “that is insane” (Tan, 1995:192-193). When Kwan is going to buy the owl, Olivia almost cries and firmly deters Kwan to buy and eat it (ibid). Through these descriptions, the text presents that Olivia and Simon as American, are compassionate with animal which is opposite to Chinese other who are cruel and savage.

Through the two pieces of food culture descriptions, Chinese food culture is regarded as other, which is uncivilized, primitive and unacceptable. Chinese eating habits and Chinese people are
presented to be cruel, barbaric, and less human. Chinese food culture is totally different from more civilized, healthy and normal American food culture.

**The Representations of Chinese people, Their Attitudes and Behavior**

In the chapters, Tan also uses large blocks of text to portray the three people’s taxi taking experience in China. At the beginning, there are some descriptions about the low quality and lack of safety facilities in the taxi. “A late-model sedan curiously lacks seat belts and safety headrests” (Tan, 1995:197). The word “curiously” indicates that the two American feel unusual about the poor facilities, suggesting that this will not appear in advanced and safety concerning America. Apart from that, there are a number of depictions about the Chinese careless and violent car drivers. For example, there appear three pieces of descriptions about dangerous and scared scenes which the taxi driver almost hits the passersby or another car. The reactions are almost the same in the three scenes, which the driver does not care, while Olivia and Simon feel scared, and think it is “mass suicide” (Tan, 1995). The three also encounter a traffic accident and the reactions of Chinese and American about the accidents are distinct. Local Chinese people merely stand aside and watch, they “stare and point... as if it were a science exhibit” (Tan, 1995:202-203). The taxi driver merely drives ahead without caring and stopping, and he says that “this type of disaster is commonplace” (ibid). On the contrary, Olivia and Simon are shock and worried about the injured people and want to stop to help. Simon is even complained and angry with the lack of public facilities, which there is no ambulance and doctor (ibid). From those representations, Chinese people are described to be other who are violent, mad, less caring about other people’s lives, and they are selfish and not willing to help others. They almost have no safety and life-caring consciousness and the society lacks of public facilities, all of which is opposite to American, who are humane and cherishing everyone’s life, and have sophisticated social infrastructures.

**Amy Tan’s “Self-othering”**

From the analysis above, it is clear that Tan creates exotic, savage, and undeveloped Chinese cultural identities through portraying Chinese environment, Chinese food, and Chinese people’s behavior, which is totally opposite from modern, civilized and humane American cultural identities. The representations are similar to the western orientalist discourses examined by Said (1979) which construct orient as the exotic, barbaric and undeveloped other. The Chinese cultural identities which are constructed by Tan in the novel are biased and stereotypical. Wong (1995) analyzes one of Tan’s famous fictions *Joy Luck Club*, and suggests the same issue, which she defines as “repackage[ed] Orientalism” (ibid: 197). She claims that “Tan’s (mis) representation of Chinese myth and Chinese language...to sustains itself through a complex relationship with dominant western ideologies...” (ibid). Other scholars (Kong, 2014; Yin, 2005; Fickle, 2014) state that Tan portrays exotic Chinese cultural identities which meet the western orientalism ideas and invoke western American readers’ interests. Amy Tan is Chinese American, as an other in American white society. She posits Chinese cultural identities which she belongs to, as other, and she uses “self-othering” to obtain economic benefits. It is different from Feminist and Said’s othering which dominant groups construct the other position for subordinate group to achieve and maintain control and imperialism.

**Conclusion**

This study briefly analyzes the definition of other, the process of othering and their functions. It also provides a different type of othering, self-othering, and analyzes how this othering is achieved in *Young Girl’s Wish* and *Hello Good-bye*, two chapters of Amy Tan’s novel, *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Through presenting the different behavior of Chinese and American, and using certain detail descriptions, the othering of Chinese negative cultural identities and creation of positive American identities are constructed. As a result, the orientalism ideas and American stereotypical Chinese cultural identities are maintained.
References


