

## From Raw to Cooked: Amy Tan's "Fish Cheeks" through a Lévi-Straussian Lens

By Susan K. Kevra

In 1989, after the publication of her novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan admitted, "there is this myth that America is a melting pot, but what happens in assimilation is that we end up deliberately choosing the American things – hot dogs and apple pie – and ignoring the Chinese offerings." (Wang 69) Tan's choice of food as the indicator of racial difference is significant, and it encapsulates a tension that plays out in the hyphenated lives of the Asian-American characters in her fiction. Nowhere is this sentiment more apparent than in her early short story, "Fish Cheeks," published in *Seventeen Magazine* in 1987. Tan's setting of Christmas for a traditional Chinese dinner, shared with the American boy on whom the protagonist, Amy, has a crush, emphasizes the girl's dual identity as an Asian American, a reality she is confronting head on. Although the story delivers a clear message to Asian American teenage girls to see beauty in their Asian features and celebrate their cultural heritage, the story is pervaded by an overwhelming sense of discomfort. Amy fears her guests will be repelled by the strange menu and offended by her elders' eccentricities at the dinner table. But her discomfort goes deeper, revealing anxieties about growing up and the struggles involved. These fears are amplified in one passage that contains a detailed description of raw ingredients in her mother's kitchen – piles of uncooked prawns, pale blocks of tofu, a slimy whole fish. This focus on rawness can be read as symbolic of Amy's own rawness and immaturity, recalling anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's theories on the categories of the raw and the cooked. Just as cooking signals a shift from a more natural and primitive state to a more refined and cultured one, Amy experiences a shift of her own. What she undergoes is a rite of passage, prompted by a meal shared between two very different families.

Tan's short story – and it is short – a scant 500 words – uses food to show the striking differences between the Chinese hosts and their American guests. Although they gather on Christmas day to share a meal, this is no traditional Christmas dinner of "roasted turkey and sweet potatoes," (57) and the adolescent Amy fears that the American guests will find the whole steamed fish revolting. The fact that Robert is also the son of a minister, forced to celebrate this most Christian of holidays with a Chinese family over an exotic and unusual meal,

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casts a glaring light on the cultural differences between the two families. Already we see the dichotomies stacking up: whole steamed cod and roast turkey; Christian and non-Christian; Chinese and American.

The dichotomies in the story recall the work of Lévi- Strauss who recognized in humans the tendency to arrange culture and thought around binary opposites. He also believed that myths were tools through which these contradictions could be reconciled. In a piece published in the *New York Times* in 2009, just after the death of Lévi-Strauss, the author explained the dynamic at play in *The Raw and the Cooked*:

“Raw” and “cooked” are shorthand terms meant to differentiate what is found in nature from what is a product of human culture. That dichotomy, Mr. Lévi-Strauss believed, exists in all human societies. Part of what makes us human, however, is our need to reconcile those opposites, to find a balance between raw and cooked. ...In a metaphoric sense, a cook is a kind of mediator between those realms, transforming an object originally from the natural world into an item fit for human consumption. So by “cooked,” Mr. Lévi-Strauss means anything that is socialized from its natural state (Rohter).

In a story replete with descriptions of raw and cooked food, we can fruitfully apply Lévi-Strauss’s theories. Not only do we see how the narrative strikes a balance between images of raw food early in the story with the cooked, finished product, but more importantly, we see a symbolic cooking that goes on. The cook, Amy’s mother, is in fact responsible for turning raw ingredients into a meal, but additionally, she helps her daughter reconcile her duality as an Asian-American. Before examining the mediating role of the mother and analyzing the pivotal scene set in her kitchen, it is first necessary to understand the context for this scene, as well as the mindset of the protagonist.

The first person narration begins with a confession: “I fell in love with the minister’s son the winter I turned fourteen” (57). As with all genuine confessions, what follows is a laying bare of her soul, as she describes how mortified she is that her mother outdid “herself in creating a strange menu” (57), an Asian feast made up of tofu, prawns, and a whole steamed fish, as its centerpiece.

Throughout much of the story, we see a girl who has bought into the ideology of assimilation. Outside the home, at school, she can do her best to fit in, to privilege the American side of her Asian American-ness. This means rejecting her past and Chinese traditions, because as Tan confessed, they brought on feelings of “shame and self-hate” (Wang 69). Even food, often the last vestige of an immigrant’s homeland, becomes for the children of immigrants, a source of embarrassment. Instead of uniting families, in Tan’s fiction, food often divides parents and children. For example, in her 1989 novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, four immigrant Chinese women gather to play mahjong and cook while their daughters chug down Coke. In *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, Pearl Louie Brandt, a Chinese-American woman, married to a European American, realizes her children are much more likely to ask for fast food than to eat Chinese delicacies,

like jellyfish or “sweaty earthen jars of preserved meats and vegetables” (Tan, *Joy* 73). For these young Asian Americans, Chinese cuisine is neither a badge of pride nor a way to remember the past. For them and for Tan, it is undesirable, something best kept secret. But in “Fish Cheeks,” the minister and his son’s presence in the girl’s home mean the girl can’t hide her ethnicity, especially when surrounded by her “noisy Chinese relatives who lacked proper American manners” (57), speaking a heavily accented English.

Food and language are not the only things that set the girl apart from Robert, who is “not Chinese, but as white as Mary in the manger”(57). Amy’s fixation on Robert’s white skin and his blond hair says more about her dissatisfaction with her own appearance, made explicit in her Christmas prayer for “a slim new American nose”(57). Although Tan wrote the short story at the age of 35, she obviously had not forgotten the insecurities of adolescence, with her candid talk about her dissatisfaction with body image and appearance. Indeed, Tan confessed that as a girl, she “pinched her nose with a clothespin for a week in the hope that doing so would Westernize her Asian nose [and even] fantasized about plastic surgery” (Huntley 3).

The protagonist’s insecurities about her ethnicity are most apparent in the scene where the two families gather around the dinner table. She watches as relatives “lick... the end of their chopsticks and reach... across the table, dipping them into the dozen or so plates of food”(58). But her greatest horror comes when her father “poke[s] his chopsticks just below the fish eye and pluck[s] out the soft meat,” (58) announcing, “Amy, your favorite”(58). A gesture she would normally appreciate now feels like a cruel blow; her father’s words brand her, marking her a part of this family with peculiar customs and bizarre food preferences. The cultural divide between she and Robert becomes an unbridgeable chasm, causing her to retreat into silence. In fact, the only sound at the end of the meal is the sound of burping, which Amy’s father explains is “a polite Chinese custom to show you are satisfied”(58). Stunned, Robert “look[s] down at his plate with a reddened face” (58).

To be certain, these foods and customs would appear strange to an outsider, and therefore, it is no small wonder that Robert grimaces when presented with a whole steamed fish, eyes and all. Rather than believing that her ethnicity might be perceived of as exotic and alluring, the girl is deeply embarrassed by it. This sentiment can be traced to the author’s own life and her admission that she felt “ashamed when people came over and saw [her] mother preparing food. [S]he didn’t make TV dinners and use canned foods. She used fresh vegetables and served fish with the head still on. I worried people would think that we ate that because it was less expensive” (Schleier). Today, when fresh food and ethnic cuisine are prized, it may be hard to understand Tan’s embarrassment, but in the 1950’s and 60’s, when she was a child, the average American’s knowledge of Chinese food was limited to chow mein and fortune cookies. Authentic Chinese cooking would have doubtless been startlingly bizarre to most Americans, particularly when processed food was the norm,

indeed even a status symbol.

We can therefore forgive Robert for his reaction and inability to appreciate the dishes set before him, but what are we to make of Amy's reaction to the meal? Despite her familiarity with these foods, she seems put off by them, regarding them in a new and altogether negative light, suddenly able to see the meal through the eyes of a boy she wants to impress. As a result, the familiar – her mother's home cooking – takes on a strange, even unsettling appearance. Before we see the food as a finished product, cooked and plated, the narrator takes us behind the scenes, focusing instead on the constituent parts of the meal, separate and unadorned ingredients, laid out in the kitchen and described in a most unappetizing way:

The kitchen was littered with appalling mounds of raw food: A slimy rock cod with bulging eyes that pleaded not to be thrown into a pan of hot oil. Tofu, which looked like stacked wedges of rubbery white sponges. A bowl soaking dried fungus back to life. A plate of squid, their backs crisscrossed with knife markings so they resembled bicycle tires (57-8).

Not only is the kitchen "littered" with ingredients that are "slimy," and "rubbery," – words that suggest spoilage rather than freshness, but the emphasis here is on the unfinished product, the brute ingredients in their uncooked state. The tofu and squid, whose raw state is highlighted, seem altogether revolting, more inedible objects than food, these "rubbery white sponges" and "bicycle tires"(57).

The dichotomy between the raw ingredients we glimpse in the kitchen and their eventual cooked state recalls Levi-Strauss's book, *The Raw and the Cooked*. The Structuralist applied binary structures (hot/cold, raw/cooked) to the study of tribal myths and practices and concluded that one sign of cultural advancement was the development of cooking. Instead of contenting themselves with raw foods, primitive peoples began to cook their food, and in so doing, took the first step towards culinary sophistication. The process of applying heat altered food and improved the taste and texture.

Are we then to read this scene in the kitchen with its emphasis on rawness as equating the family's cuisine and by extension, their culture, with a lack of sophistication, even primitiveness? How is this kitchen any different from an American kitchen on Christmas morning, with a pale, pimpled raw turkey, its pink gizzards and neck on the counter? Both sites are a liminal space, situated between nature -- where food is harvested or hunted -- and the dining room, where culture takes over, transforming animal flesh into cuts of meat, blanketed in velvety sauces, where the fork or a pair of chopsticks replaces fingers. But here is the difference. The liminality of the kitchen in "Fish Cheeks" symbolizes the girl's state: as an Asian American, she is culturally betwixt and between, with one foot in her parents' China, the other in America. Moreover, her liminality is compounded by her age: as an adolescent, she finds herself at that awkward age, straddling childhood and adulthood. As such, she is perfectly situated at this

developmental crossroads, and the kitchen becomes an initiatory site where she undergoes a rite of passage to usher her into adulthood.

In *The Raw and the Cooked*, Lévi-Strauss documents initiation rituals involving symbolic cooking. For instance, he relates how a Californian Native American tribe placed pubescent girls or women who had just given birth in underground ovens. He also cites a Pueblo practice of women giving birth over a heap of hot sand (Lévi-Strauss 335). The application of heat was believed to have “the effect of making sure that a natural creature [was] at one and the same time cooked and socialized” (336). Symbolic rituals connected to rawness and cooking are not limited to tribal groups. Lévi-Strauss recounts a similar custom in 19<sup>th</sup> century France and Belgium. When a younger daughter married first, her older sister would be “seized upon, lifted up and laid on top of the oven, so that she might be warmed up... since her situation seemed to indicate that she had remained insensitive to love”(334). In addition, it had once been the custom in France to make “unmarried elder brothers and sisters eat a salad consisting of onions, nettles and roots, or of clover and oats” (Lévi-Strauss 334-5). This practice was less an attempt to change the status of the individual than to serve as a kind of chastisement, to function as a sign of their falling behind, still woefully linked to the category of the raw.

Amy undergoes a similar initiatory experience that begins in the kitchen, this place of transformation, where raw ingredients undergo processes like cutting and searing, in order to make them edible. What she sees here and experiences later at the dining room table amount to a maturation process as she is subjected to the cultural pressures coming from her Chinese family, on the one hand, and the pressure to come across as desirable to a non-Asian boy, on the other. This scene in the kitchen is therefore key in understanding the protagonist’s dilemma.

Amy’s view of the meal preparations in the kitchen recalls the adage, if you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.” Clearly, she is uncomfortable here. But it is not the heat, but rather the *lack* of heat, the rawness of the foods, that bothers her. The mise-en-place elicits a kind of fear. More a scene of carnage than a site of the culinary arts, the kitchen is a place where whole cod, so fresh it seems to still be alive, is humanized, with “bulging eyes...[it] pleaded not to be thrown into a pan of hot oil” (57). We cannot help but pity this creature. Seen in this light, the kitchen becomes something akin to a chamber of horrors, with Amy’s mother then, a torturer, who tosses innocent fish into hot oil and brands defenseless squid, “their backs crisscrossed with knife markings” (57).

While Amy herself is not a victim of physical suffering, she is nonetheless pained by the embarrassment she suffers. After the meal, her mother acknowledges that her daughter had indeed “*suffered* (emphasis mine) during the evening’s dinner” (58). Like the poor cod, Amy is subjected to a social trial by fire, orchestrated by her mother. Just as the function of rites of passage in pre-modern societies was – as Mircea Eliade put it, to help “the novice emerg[e] from his ordeal endowed with a totally different being from that he possessed before

his initiation... [to] become another" (qtd. in Chernin 166), so, too is the ordeal Amy endures. Hence, the once raw fish is made edible through cooking, signaling a move from a natural to cultural product; similarly, the protagonist emerges from her ordeal more mature and eventually, with an appreciation of her culture. The story highlights "the problems and challenges of integrating two cultures; intergenerational struggles within immigrant families; the conflict between acculturation and adherence to an ancestral tradition; and between assimilation and parochialism" (Huntley 330). When, at the end of the story, the girl's mother drives home the message, "inside you must always be Chinese. You must be proud you are different," she does so while handing over a peace offering, "a mini-skirt in beige tweed" (58). The mother recognizes that a fashion statement will go a lot further in placating her daughter and expressing her love than anything else she can say or do. The gift of the mini-skirt allows for the perfect integration of the two cultures, forming a bridge between mother and daughter, between Asia and America.

Interestingly, the mother's concession comes in the form of a mini-skirt and not a Coke or a box of donuts. Fashion comes and goes, and the adolescent Amy will likely outgrow the mini-skirt or grow tired of it in short order. But these handmade culinary gifts are the most enduring guarantors of culture. Even when the children of immigrants no longer speak their parents' native tongue, family recipes continue to be passed down. However excruciating the dinner may have been, Amy would later go on to "fully appreciate her [mother's] lesson and true purpose behind [this meal made up of all her] favorite foods (58). The ordeal she suffers on this Christmas is indeed a kind of situational crucible where family customs collide with teenage insecurities. How fitting that a story about resisting the effects of assimilation and the melting pot ideology should lead us to the image of the crucible. After all, the expression "melting pot" comes from the title of Israel Zangwill 1908 play about Jewish immigrants and does not in fact refer to a stew, but is rather an utterly violent image, that of a crucible in which immigrants, like smelted metals combine to form a single people, who must regrettably relinquish their difference. In "Fish Cheeks," however, the protagonist emerges from the crucible intact. This first published work of Tan's, by its sheer brevity and poignancy, serves as a kind of appetizer for her longer works that deal with intergenerational struggle and ethnic identity.

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