

Chapter Two

Totality in Discourse

I. Madness and Medical Discourse

Modern humanity is dominated by medical science; the latter has taken over our bodies and our minds completely, including our fantasies and unconscious, leaving no room for our privacy. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Tan presents this phenomenon of dual domination through the controversy over madness and the oppression of western medical discourse over other alternatives. This section will be devoted to discussing these two issues in light of Michel Foucault's archaeological method and his theory of discourse.

Madness, in modern western psychiatry, is accorded a pathological status. When people behave or speak in an irrational or unreasonable way, we often call them mad or insane; that is, we consider them as *mentally ill* and in need of psychiatry. We treat madness as some kind of physical illness that can be diagnosed and cured by psychiatry. But Foucault has a different perspective; rather than arguing what madness really is, he turns his attention to how it is formed as a concept. By using what he calls the archaeological method, Foucault argues that discourse is constructed by rules of formation, is discontinuous and subject to changes. Foucault proposes that madness is a product of our discourses, and that it did not always assume the same appearance and status it does today. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault traces the changes of the construction of madness from the Renaissance to the nineteenth-century Europe. A brief review of this history will familiarize us with both Foucault's archaeological method and the nature of madness as a construction.

Madness was not like what we perceive it today and it was at a "relatively recent

date that the West accorded madness the status of mental illness”(MIP 64)¹⁷. During the Renaissance madness was for everyone an “everyday experience that one sought neither to exalt nor to control”(MIP 67). Madness was at that time not considered as illness. Later in the (neo-)classical period, great confinement houses were built to receive not just the mad, but all sorts of deranged people in relation to the order of reason, morality and society—“the poor and disabled, the elderly poor, beggars...those with venereal disease, libertines of all kinds [...]“(MIP 67). It was during this period that madness “entered a phase of silence from which it was not to emerge for a long time. Madness was deprived of its language; and although one continued to speak of it, it became *impossible for it to speak of itself*” (emphases mine MIP 69). In other words, the dialogue that used to exist between reason and unreason was then broken; what was left was only the representational violence of reason. The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of modern psychiatry, which was established on the basis of the “silence” of madness and therefore a “monologue of reason about madness” (MC xi):¹⁸

On the one hand, the man of reason delegates the physician to madness, thereby authorizing a relation only through the abstract universality of *disease*; on the other, the man of madness communicates with society only by the intermediary of an equally abstract *reason* which is order, physical and moral constraint, the anonymous pressure of the group, the requirements of conformity. (emphases mine MC x)

This psychiatry was not so medical as we think it is today but carried more moral and juridical senses within it. Doctors re-used internment but accorded it a medical

¹⁷ In the parenthetical documentation hereafter, MIP stands for Foucault’s *Mental Illness and Psychology*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1976.

¹⁸ In the parenthetical documentation hereafter, MC stands for Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988.

character this time, and they reconstructed around the internee a “family-like structure,” threw him into “a state of juridical and moral minority, deprived of freedom by the all-powerful doctor”(MIP 12). The aim of this practice, Foucault claims, is to “*infantilize* the madman and *make him feel guilty*”(MIP 71). Later it was through this practice that Freud thought he “discovered” the Oedipus complex. As Foucault notes, “Under the name of the ‘psychology’ of madness is merely the result of the operations by which one has invested it. None of this psychology would exist without the *moralizing sadism* in which nineteenth-century ‘philanthropy’ enclosed it, under the hypocritical appearances of ‘liberation’”(MIP 73). Hence madness is “much more *historical* than is usually believed, and much *younger* too”(MIP 69).

As the previous passages show, madness is the product of discourses, rather than some hidden truth found by discourses. If madness appears to have some kind of order, that is because we invent that order. There is no intrinsic order of things but only the ordering imposed by discourse: “We must not imagine that the world turns toward us a legible face which we would have only to decipher. The world is not the accomplice of our knowledge; there is no prediscursive providence which disposes the world in our favor”(OD 67).¹⁹ We act, speak, and think within the limits of the legitimate knowledge mapped out by discourse for us. The entry into discourse draws us into the process of *exclusion*. According to Foucault, this exclusion has three principles—prohibition, a division and a rejection, and the division between true and false knowledge (AK 216-8).²⁰ The prohibition also has three types: “objects, ritual with its surrounding circumstances, the privileged or exclusive right to speak of a subject”(216); they reinforce, interrelate and complement each other, forming a

¹⁹ Michel Foucault’s “The Order of Discourse” in Robert Young’s *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981. pp.48-78.

²⁰ In the parenthetical documentation hereafter, AK stands for Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.

complex web that is subject to modification. In the case of madness, under the regulation of prohibition, only a qualified psychiatrist who has received thorough education and been recognized by the institution has the privilege to practice psychiatry in a medical facility. And the principle of division/rejection is used to separate reason from madness, as we have seen in the history of madness above. Foucault observes that the “tactics of separation” (*MIP* 78) is used as a framework for the perception of madness; that is, it is based on a number of earlier operations and on “the dividing up of social space according to the lines of *valuation* and *exclusion*”(emphases mine *MIP* 78). These lines function as the “threshold” to enable doctors to make judgments. As Foucault points out, “each culture has its own threshold, which evolves with the configuration of that culture, and the threshold is not necessarily linked to the acuteness of medical consciousness” (*MIP* 78). This means that the madman may be recognized and isolated, yet not necessarily have pathological status, as in the Renaissance era. Underlying this rule of division is the logic of binary opposition, in which reason serves as the norm to measure madness; hence, the relation of reason and madness must be seen first as that between the Self and the non-Self [reason and unreason/normal and abnormal], rather than between the Self and the Other.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, We can see the function of principles of prohibition and division in the incident about Kwan’s insanity. In one sense Olivia and Kwan are divided as the opposition between reason and unreason. In the beginning chapter, there is a passage describing Olivia’s relation with Kwan, which reveals Olivia’s ambiguous feeling toward her sister. Olivia introduces Kwan as her half sister, and politely says that she should not mention this in public because that will be an “insult” to Kwan. Then her tone changes rapidly with the conjunction “but”: “*But* just to set the genetic record straight, Kwan and I share a father, *only that*”(emphases mine

3). It seems that Olivia does not want people to think they have many things in common, as if she were afraid of something bad in Kwan's blood that might infect her as well. Because of their cultural and age differences, Kwan appears strange to young Olivia in many ways. For example, Kwan would use her ragged English to ask lots of stupid questions, such as "what M&M?" and "what ching gum?"(11)—things that American children take for granted, and that makes Kwan look like mentally retarded to Olivia. Although we usually believe that children are innocent, they also have prejudices as the grown-ups do. Kwan's dumb questions make all the neighborhood kids think she "had come from Mars"(11). One day one of Kevin's (one of Olivia's brothers) second-grade classmates even says to Olivia: "Is that *dumb Chink* your sister [Kwan]? Hey Olivia, does that mean you're a dumb Chink too?"(emphases mine 12). The boy not only calls Kwan stupid but also debases her ethnicity. Olivia feels insulted because Kwan is *her* sister, so she wants to deny their blood relationship. This incident echoes Olivia's genetic statement above, and shows that deep within Olivia's consciousness she feels it is a "shame" to have a sister like Kwan. From these instances we have seen a surfacing contrast between "normal" and "abnormal."

This contrast grows sharp when Kwan is sent to the hospital. After Kwan tells Olivia that she has "yin eyes"(15), Olivia is so frightened by her ghost talks that she tells her mother Kwan's secret. Kwan's yin-talk arouses different responses between Olivia's parents, whose reactions again testify that the western experience of madness has not always been pathological. Olivia's mother views Kwan's condition from a religious angle, and suggests that a talk with the priest may help Kwan drive away those obsessions. But Olivia's stepfather Bob, from a pathological perspective, thinks that Kwan has "delusion," and decides to book her into the psychiatric ward at Mary's Help. The phenomenon of "religious delusion" that Louise thinks Kwan has, according to Foucault, is a "function of the *secularization* of culture: religion may be

the object of delusional [sic] belief insofar as the culture of a group no longer permits the assimilation of religious or mystical beliefs in the present content of experience”(emphasis mine *MIP* 81). The claim of seeing or feeling spirits is not a modern phenomenon but has existed for centuries. In Medieval Europe, lots of women and men were executed by the Church for allegedly exercising witchcraft to summon devils for evil ends. Also the Church itself has the records of countless good deeds of saints who claimed they were called by God. In brief, what used to be regarded as normal or acceptable in one era might be viewed as “insane” now. But neither religious nor medical perspective can render the truth of Kwan’s phenomenal ability. Both represent the arbitrary violence of dominant western discourses, as will be substantiated later in the electroshock treatments. Besides, Kwan’s identity as a “cultural marginalized” intensifies the strangeness of her unusual ability, and this will be discussed in the following chapter.

Olivia’s family finally decide to send Kwan to the hospital, and their decision proves that modern psychiatry has successfully convinced the public of its authority in dealing with madness. After Kwan is sent to the hospital, the doctors diagnose her intentional silence as “catatonic” and her Chinese ghosts as “a serious mental disorder”(17). Foucault’s observation can provide an insight into how psychological diagnoses are made. Foucault claims that language “is the first and the last structure of madness, its constituent form; on language are based all the cycles in which madness articulates its nature”(MC 100). The doctors’ diagnosis of Kwan’s ‘illness’ basically relies upon her language—her initial reticence and the consequent irrational description of the Yin world. Foucault also observes that if madness appears to have the aspects our psychiatry knows it by, that is “not because in the course of centuries we have learned to ‘open our eyes’ to real symptoms; [...] it is because in the experience of madness, these concepts were organized around certain qualitative

themes that lent them their unity, gave them their significant coherence, made them finally perceptible”(MC 130). In other words, modern psychiatry measures and organizes the “symptoms,” which are nothing but superficial phenomena, according to certain pre-established norms; that is, modern psychiatry just aims to assimilate singular cases into universally understandable psychological terms.

This questioning of the formation of psychiatric diagnosis inevitably leads us to questioning the circumstance of its production, namely, the medical facility itself and power that the doctor assumes over the disease and his patients. As Foucault puts it, the hospital, as the very institution in which doctors and patients are placed in an unbalanced relationship, is “an ambiguous place,” “a place of investigation for a hidden truth and of testing for a truth to be produced”(PP 39).²¹ Its role is “not only to bring to *light* the disease as it was but to *produce* it finally in its heretofore-enclosed and blocked truth”(emphases mine PP 40). The “light” here, as the sign of reason, indicates the system of the Same in Levinas philosophy, and the produced truth, which is but a representation, can thus be comprehensible within this light.

The doctor himself, who judges the patient through his diagnosis, is the very embodiment of medical power itself. It is clear that not everyone can make a medical diagnosis, and this plain fact leads us to the “practice of exclusion”(Mills 12) which sanctions the “access to discourse”(14). That is, only people who are recognized as medical experts by the institution have access to the medical discourse. Foucault’s observations about the nineteenth-century asylum physician may provide us with a clue to the formation of the modern psychiatrist’s power. He points out that medical power finds its guarantees and justification in “the privilege of expertise.” The doctor is *qualified* (gaining access to medical discourse) as “the master of madness” (PP 43)

²¹ In the parenthetical documentation hereafter, *PP* stands for Foucault’s “Psychiatric Power.” *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. New York: The New Press, 1997. p.38-50.

through the techniques and procedures employed in the asylum: “The doctor knows the disease and the patients, he possesses a scientific knowledge that is of the same type as that of the chemist or the biologist, and that is what authorizes him to intervene and decide”(PP 44). In order to justify the power the institution has given to him, the doctor has to produce a “phenomenon that can be integrated into medical science”(PP 44).

Here the diagnosis of Kwan’s doctors shows the absurdity and defect of western positive psychiatry, for Kwan just does not want to let people know her secret about the Yin World. Her behavior is understandable as a defense mechanism. When Kwan uses the “language of reason” to communicate her experience of another world to Olivia, she is denied acknowledgement. Kwan knows that there is no chance for her secret to be recognized, so she chooses to remain silent. However the doctors do not seem to care about the real cause of Kwan’s silence; they simply judge her surface condition arbitrarily as the symptom of mental illness, and decide to “cure” her disorder with the electroshock treatments.

The electroshock treatments Kwan undergoes display a double significance of discipline and domination. Tracing the development of therapeutics of madness in the classical period, Foucault discovers that the madman’s body “was regarded as the visible and solid presence of his disease”(MC 159). Like those strange therapeutics in classical medicine, such as consolidation, purification and immersion, electroshock treatments bear the same mark in curing Kwan’s madness. Her yin talk is regarded as some kind of the hallucination out of biological derangement, which the doctors think can be healed through somatic readjustment. Psychology as a means of curing, ever since its initial appearance in the first half of the nineteenth century, has been organized around “punishment”(MC 182); hence Kwan’s treatment retains a *disciplinary* meaning. Besides, Kwan’s reception in the hospital reveals that

institutional doctor-patient relationship is one of *domination*: the more power the doctor has, the weaker the patient's power becomes. The patient, "from the mere fact that he is interned, becomes *a citizen without rights*, delivered over to the arbitrariness of the doctor and the orderlies, who can do what they please with him without any possibility of appeal"(emphases mine *PP* 48).²²

But as the result turns out, Kwan's treatment cannot eliminate her "delusion;" instead they set her tongue freely "bragging about the world of Yin"(17). As Kwan recalls: "All that electricity loosened my tongue so I could no longer stay silent as a fish"(17). Furthermore, the therapy arouses some mysterious side effects on Kwan's body. After the treatment, Kwan begins to carry electricity within her body, so she cannot get near to electronics such as radio, television and watch. Besides, she becomes very good at pointing out the technical problems of those electronics. Neither Kwan nor Olivia can explain these strange phenomena. The only comment Olivia has is: "All I can say is, I've seen her do these things"(19). In a sense, Olivia's words reflect not only her empirical attitude, but also another plain but ignored truth—that is, reason *cannot* explain everything! This incident shows that as a cultural Other, Kwan refuses to be *com-prehend-ed*, in the sense of both understanding and control, by the western psychiatry represented by the doctor's diagnoses and treatments.

Compared with her condition in America, Kwan is more acceptable and tolerated in her country. People in her Chinese village can tolerate her unusual ability, even though they cannot see ghosts themselves. For example, when Olivia asks Du Li-li whether she sees the ghost of Big Ma, Du Li-li replies: "Maybe Big Ma's ghost is here, maybe not. What does it matter?"(268). Du Li-li's reaction reveals her tolerance of things she cannot know through her five senses. Contrary to Du Lili's reaction to

²² Foucault quotes the original text from Basaglia.

Kwan's yin eyes, Olivia's is obviously suspicious. Olivia demonstrates the empiric attitude of western science, which insists that only things that can be perceived and measured by the five senses are real.

Another example that can testify to Changmian people's tolerance of things they cannot comprehend is Kwan's taking her best friend's body. Kwan used to be a slim girl, but after the flood in the village, she mysteriously took the body of her best friend, Buncake. At first, everyone in the village thought Kwan's transformation was strange, but then they grew used to it and "pretend[ed] nothing was matter" with Kwan (286). As Kwan explains the villagers' attitude to this sort of things: "This was the attitude people had to take with many things in life. *What was wrong was now right*" (emphases mine 286). In this event, no one ever thinks that Kwan is mad, no matter how strange the transformation of her body is. We only see that Kwan lives as usual after the accident. And after the death of her adopted daughter, Du L-li, Du Yun begins to fantasize that she becomes her daughter. In a sense, she seems to be "mad," but she is still normal in other aspects. And the villagers seem to have no problem with her condition; they just let her be. Thus, by comparing two different cultural attitudes toward madness, we can be more positive about the nature of madness as a spatial-temporal discursive construction.

In addition to constructing madness through the principles of prohibition and division in psychiatry, western medical discourse²³ also establishes and maintains its status as the producer of medical truth by excluding alternative medical discourse. To call western medical discourse the producer of medical truth means that the so-called truth is a spatial-temporal construction that is vulnerable to change as medical discourse undergoes transformation itself through the invention of better instruments

²³ Here I use the term "western medical discourse" in the sense of stressing its discourse about physical diseases, as a contrast to the psychiatry as a mental medicine above.

for experiments, or discovery of new ideas or new diseases, etc. Take equipment for medical testing for example. They cannot have a measure that reaches perfection. According to Jean-Francois Lyotard, the quest for precision is impossible because uncertainty goes up as accuracy does, rather than decreases (Lyotard 56).²⁴ The evidence for this medical imprecision can also be found in the novel. For instance, at first the sterility specialist diagnosed Simon as sterile, but Olivia gets pregnant after they come back from China. When they go to see the doctor again, he does *more* tests and the result proves that the previous test was wrong. The only reasonable explanation the doctor can offer is: “You were *probably* trying too hard”(emphasis mine 398). For a discipline that is fastidious about reason and exactness, medical science (or any sciences at all) still cannot be definitely positive about its discovery. We often see or read news about some new scientific discoveries that overrule what used to be deemed as truth before. In short, it can be said that, to use Olivia’s phrase with a little modification, what is right now may be wrong tomorrow. It seems that with the rapid development of new technology and science, people are becoming more and more anxious about and uncomfortable with our scientific breakthroughs, rather than relieved by them.

Despite its own imprecision and uncertainty about the truth of its discoveries, western medical discourse nonetheless holds its sway in western society by suppressing alternative medical discourses. This oppression of other forms of discourse is what Foucault’s third principle of exclusion, the division between true and false, concerns. Foucault argues that this division between true and false is motivated by the will to truth and the will to knowledge under the mask of seeking neutral Truth. As he comments, “This will to knowledge thus reliant upon *institutional*

²⁴ Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1986.

support and distribution, tends to exercise a sort of pressure, a power of constraint upon other forms of discourse”(emphasis mine AK 219). The institution that fosters this will to truth functions by the principle of prohibition. As mentioned above, this principle concerns *who* has the right to speak and *what* can be said under what circumstances. In the case of Kwan’s alternative medical practice, because she is not a legitimate doctor recognized by medicine institution, she does not have the access to making medical statements and writing prescriptions a qualified physician does. In other words, she is a charlatan to orthodox medical institution. As for what can be said as an effective medical statement, it has to do with the whole medical theorization about illness and therapy, and the particular procedures to make a qualified statement within that discourse. Western medical science is characterized by its empirical tendency, as evidenced by its emphasis on observations, experimentations and frequent use of terms like “symptom” (such as fever, dizziness, rhinorrhea) and “syndrome” (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, for instance). By contrast, the Chinese medicine Kwan adopts has a different theory about illness. Olivia says that Kwan “is really good with all the musculo-skeletal stuff”(19). These maladies, according to Kwan’s diagnosis, are caused by “eating hot and cold things together,” the theorization of which is unfamiliar to western medicine but has been working well in China over thousands of years. But this effective alternative medical discourse is not accorded an equal privileged status western empiric medicine enjoys in western society. The patients who often go to the drugstore where Kwan works are mostly “gay men,” who have long been a minority group in heterosexual societies, and whose name is often defiled and equated with AIDS, which is considered by religious and moral conservatives as God’s punishment to those who engage in perverse sex. This is of course a wrong idea; Susan Sontag points out that AIDS is “predominantly a heterosexually transmitted

illness in the countries where it first emerged in epidemic form” (*Illness* 149).²⁵

Besides, AIDS can infect people through channels other than sexual contact, such as blood transfusion or sharing the same needle. These facts, however, cannot change the bias against gays and lesbians. In short, by juxtaposing homosexuals and the Chinese medicine practiced by Kwan, Tan accuses the Western medicine of marginalizing alternative medical discourse.

Tan’s intention of singling out the marginal stand of alternative medical discourse and of the homosexuals cannot be over-appreciated, but there is a problem concerning Kwan’s and Olivia’s descriptions of gays. Consider the following passage: “Most of the people who pick up their descriptions there are gay men—‘*bachelors*,’ she [Kwan] calls them. And because she’s worked there for more than twenty years, she’s seen *some* of her longtime customers *grow sick with AIDS*”(emphases mine 20). Instead of addressing these male homosexuals directly as gays, Kwan uses a term that derives from the heterosexual origin. According to *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*, a bachelor is “a [heterosexual] man who has never married [a woman]”(105). The missing words “heterosexual” and “a woman” stresses that heterosexuality is so prevalent that we are almost unaware of its existence. On the contrary, “gay” refers to a homosexual man. By addressing these gays as “bachelors” Kwan means to include them in the major heterosexual community; this patronizing euphemism, however, tends to eliminate their homosexual identity. There is no doubt that Kwan is friendly to her gay customers, always soothing their pains with her “healing touch.” But the improper usage of a heterosexual term to describe gays indicates that Kwan may still feel uncomfortable with their sexual orientation. Kwan’s mistake, in my opinion, can be regarded as the looming of the pseudo-liberal image of

²⁵ In the parenthetical documentation hereafter, *Illness* stands for Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York: Anchor Books, 1989.

melting pot in contemporary multicultural milieu, in which condescension is sometimes confused with genuine respect for difference.

As for Olivia, she makes the same mistake as the general public bias incurs—associating the homosexuals with AIDS. AIDS does not just happen within the homosexual community, as it is not the only death cause of gays, as the word “some”(20) testifies. But the fact that Olivia omits other death causes and only mentions gays that died of AIDS gives the impression that they are intensely connected. In fact, quite a few people still believe that it is the homosexuals who pass AIDS to the “innocent public.” This misconception probably has to do with the clinical fact that during the early phase of its discovery, many AIDS infected patients were homosexuals, as Susan Sontag observes (*Illness* 113). Sontag argues that metaphor is an important element in the discursive formation about illness in western medicine. AIDS is itself formed by way of metaphors and also functions as a metaphor in its turn. AIDS is not simply a definition under medical discourse but contains moral judgment as well. The unsafe behavior that produces AIDS is judged to be “indulgence, delinquency—addictions to chemicals that are illegal and to sex regarded as deviant”(113). The sexual transmission of AIDS, considered by most people as a calamity one brings on oneself, is judged more harshly than other means—especially since AIDS is understood as a disease not only of sexual excess but of perversity. The most important reason why homosexuals are associated with AIDS, according to Sontag, is that “there is a link between imaging disease and imagining foreignness”(136). The link lies in the very “concept of wrong, which is archaically identical with the *non-us*, the *alien*”(emphases mine *Illness* 136). AIDS is regarded as the invasion of alien virus as homosexuals are as non-heterosexual/non-us. Once they are related, the image of each infiltrates into and functions as the metaphor for the other. Hence AIDS becomes morally degenerate and

homosexuals appear to be deadly viruses to public imagination.

In short, western psychiatry and medical discourse impose their violence and ensure their domination by the three principles of exclusion—prohibition, division/rejection, and the division between the true and false. Modern psychology has long ceased its communication with madness and become a monologue about the Other; hence it cannot really understand madness. On the contrary, it is “madness that holds the truth of psychology”(MIP 74), because ever since its beginning modern psychiatry has based itself upon its comprehension of madness. The knowledge that psychiatry establishes and the violent measures that it takes on the mad only disclose its conspiracy to control madness. By comparing Du Li-li's case with Kwan's in the hospital, we can see more clearly western psychiatry functions by first diagnosing people as “insane,” and then forces its “cure” upon the patients. It transforms discursive violence into a concrete disciplinary force. Also, the different receptions that Kwan receives in modern America and China indicate that the social context plays an important role in the development, maintenance and circulation of discourses. As Mills points out, “A discourse is not a disembodied collection of statements, but groupings of utterances or sentences, statements which are *enacted within a social context*, which are *determined by that social context* and which contribute to the way that social context continues its existence”(emphases mine Mills 11). What is recognized as madness in one culture may not be recognized as such in another one. It takes Olivia thirty years to realize that the idea of normality she has been used to is not universally valid, and that the concept of normality presupposes the exclusion of what is thought to be abnormal: “Every once in a while, I wonder how things might have been between Kwan and me if she'd been more normal. Then again, who's to say what's *normal*? Maybe in another country Kwan would be considered ordinary. Maybe in some parts of China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan she'd be revered”(emphases

mine 21). This self-interrogation of the idea of arbitrary *norm* suggests that the Self that Olivia represents has become aware of the violence of her freedom, that she has now started to take the presence of the Other seriously and is about to walk out of her self-centered world and tries to establish a genuine relationship with the Other.

II. Counter-Memory

History, as we often see in traditional historiography, is treated as a smooth totality of time with one instant succeeding another, as a chain of events with logical causality, and as the synonym of culture or tradition. History is thought to provide people with a firm foundation for their cultural and ethnic identities, and to enrich civilizations with their glorious past of generations of the “spirit of the age.” History books instill into us the existence of immovable historical laws. For example, history is governed by the succession of war and peace by turns, or one regime is destroyed by another for some logical explanations. These historical common senses seem so self-evident that we rarely question their authenticity. In this section, I will investigate the credibility of these historical beliefs and discuss some historical issues that Tan raises in the novel by utilizing the common points of Levinas’s historical critiques, especially the idea of “interiority,” and Foucault’s genealogical concept of “counter-memory.”

To begin with, I will briefly introduce Levinas’s idea of history. Basically Levinas views history in an economic way. He thinks that historical events link up in works that are created by human wills through their labor (*TI* 227). Levinas contends that a person is not equal to what he wants to do, but in history the person’s will is congealed into a personage that is interpreted on the basis of its works. While the being of that will lives, this person can defend his own works against a foreign will through his speech. Once he perishes, the works become the “heritage of the dead

will” and fall into the merciless hand of other person that can turn them against their author. As Levinas notes, “[B]oth the historical and the past are defined as themes of which one can speak. They are *thematized* precisely because they no longer speak. The historical is forever *absent* from its very presence”(emphases mine *TI* 65). This passage shows that Levinas not only focuses his concern about history on the injustice that the present does to the past, but also insists upon the “face to face” ethical relationship in the historical area. In other words, he urges that the other’s voice should be heard, but traditional historiography cannot do this. Levinas views history of the historiographers as a fictitious totality constructed from the perspective of the present, argues that those discovered materials of the past are interpreted by the historiographers for their interests, and urges us to question the authenticity of this past piled up by the dead materials. Historiography, as Levinas sees it, “recounts the way the survivors *appropriate* the work of dead wills to themselves; it rests on the *usurpation* carried out by the conquerors, that is, by the survivors; it recounts *enslavement, forgetting the life that struggles against slavery*”(emphases mine *TI* 228). This appropriation or usurpation, as the manifestation of totalization, is achieved through the medium of “representation,” because in representation “the I loses its opposition to its objects,” and only brings out “the identity of the I.” For Levinas, to represent to oneself is to “remain the same”(TI 126). This kind of history is teleological in nature, for the historiographers consider the past events according to the results they produce in the present, and then impose an invented causality on them, thereby presenting the past events in an inevitably logical sequence. “*Fate* is the history of the historiographers,” as Levinas perceives it (emphasis mine *TI* 228). In fact, however, history is not a series of events that always have logical explanations; on the contrary, it is full of unpredictability and uncertainty. As Levinas observes, “The identity of the present does not consist in one instant linking up with another,

but “splits up into an *inexhaustible multiplicity of possibilities* that suspend that instant”(emphases mine *TI* 238). No one can really foresee what will happen in the future; it is chance that determines the result. Therefore historiography should not be understood merely as a neutral account of what happened in the past, but as a record of rationalizing the discursive violence that the survivors do to the deceased.

In addition to the discursive violence that the present does to the past, which I would term as the “diachronic mode” for comparison, Levinas is also concerned with the “synchronic mode” of discursive violence, which means the simultaneous existence of different narratives about the same event and the oppression of one narrative over the others. Though Levinas does not state this synchronic mode of discursive violence directly, one can still deduce it from his manner of writing. In *Totality and Infinity*, there is a passage describing the nature of history: “History, as an identification of the same, cannot claim to totalize the same and the other. The absolutely other [...] maintains his transcendence in the midst of history. The same is essentially identification within the diverse, or history, or system. It is not I who resist the system [...] it is *the other*” (emphases mine *TI* 40). Here Levinas does not specify the same and the other, but uses those terms in a general way. The model described above can be applied to describe any relations containing totalizing violence in history/historiography, including the attempt of one historical discourse to oppress others about the same historical event.

Since history is the identification of the same, it is cruelty and injustice, and cannot meet Levinas’s ethical relationship of the face to face. To realize his ethical assertion in the realm of history, Levinas proposes the idea of “interiority” to replace the traditional historiography. This “interiority,” as Levinas explains, is “the very possibility of a birth and a death that do not derive their meaning from history”(TI 55); the essence of this interiority is “memory”(TI 56). Unlike the time of history, which is

assumed to be absolute and universal, interiority recognizes the existence of individual consciousness of time, because mortal life “unfolds in a dimension that does not run parallel to the time of history and is not situated with respect to this time as to an absolute” (*TI* 56). Instead, it “flows on in a dimension of its own where it has meaning, and where a triumph over death can have meaning”(TI 56). It is through this affirmation of individual memories that the totalization of the universal time of history is fractured and the plurality of historical events can be recovered in the midst of the face of face between different interiorities.

Like Levinas, Foucault also concerns himself with the discursive violence within historiography. By adopting what he calls the genealogical method to investigate history, Foucault proposes the concept of “counter-memory” to challenge the impression we have of traditional history. According to Jeremy Hawthorn, “counter-memory” refers to a memory “which counters the sense of a continuous, self-aware and homogeneous identity, whether of a person or a culture, with a history of *oppositions, discontinuities, and exclusions*“(emphases mine Hawthorn 36). In order to have a better understanding of why Foucault has such an idea, we shall proceed with his genealogy.

Similar to Levinas, Foucault opposes the teleological tendency of traditional historiography, claiming that genealogy “rejects the metahistorical²⁶ deployment of ideal signification and indefinite teleologies” and “opposes itself to the search for ‘origin’”(LCP 140).²⁷ We believe that everything has an origin which provides it with a firm identity, but Foucault reminds us that if we dig deeply enough, we will find “numberless beginnings” instead of one (LCP 145). Take the descent of the English

²⁶ Metahistory means the traditional historiography, which uses present perspective to see what happened in the past as an entity, thereby to impose an order of causality, which is exterior to the past events, on them.

²⁷ In the parenthetical documentation hereafter, LCP stands for Foucault’s *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977.

for example. They actually have the Anglo-Saxon, Roman, Gaul (French), Celt, and Scandinavian in their blood. As for the teleology of history, as discussed above, it is an invention of the historiographers to show that they can control historical change and development. Regardless of these historical illusions, the genealogy aims to “record the *singularity* of events outside of any monotonous finality”(emphasis mine *LCP* 139). In order to achieve this aim, Foucault elaborate a theory of power relations, proposing that the emergence of an event is the eruption of relations between forces, which adopts a war model: “The history which bears and determines us has the form of a *war* [...]. History has no ‘meaning’ [...] but is intelligible and susceptible of analysis down to the smallest detail—but this in accordance with the intelligibility of *struggles, of strategies and tactics*”(emphases mine *PK* 114).²⁸ The history of humanity is not the progress from combat to reciprocal peace, as the teleological historians propagate, but is “the endlessly repeated play of dominations”(LCP 150). The replacement of warfare by the rule of law in civilized society is not a sign of evolution, but merely an installation of humanity’s violences in a system of rules. Furthermore, this model of power relations rejects the principle of causality. History is not a chain of causes and effects; the emergence of historical events is the result of force relations determined by contingency. That is, Foucault does not believe that things happen for particular reasons or that one thing will definitely lead to another, given the fact that event A does not always lead to result B simply because there are too many uncontrollable variables we may never think of. History is not a seamless continuum of time, but full of interruptions instead, with each instant filled with multiple possibilities. As Foucault claims, “By virtue of its splintering and repetition, the present is a throw of the dice [...]. The present as the recurrence of difference, as

²⁸ In the parenthetical documentation hereafter, *PK* stands for Michel Foucault’s *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.

repetition giving voice to difference, affirms at once the totality of *chance*”(emphasis mine *LCP*194).

Since this illusory historical continuity and identity are framed by the historiographer through constructing a fictitious supra-historical subject standing at the end of history and pretending to “base its judgments on an apocalyptic objectivity” (*LCP* 152), Foucault finds it necessary to dispel the apparition of this historical subject in his historical analysis. As Foucault notes, genealogy is “a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history”(PK 117). By dissipating this apparitional subject of the “suprahistorical perspective,” Foucault argues for the “effective history,” in which nothing in man is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men, not even the knowledge that we affirm as universal truth (*LCP* 152-3). Foucault asserts that truth is the illusion initiated by our “will to knowledge,” the genealogical analysis of which reveals that “all knowledge rests upon injustice [...] and that the instinct for knowledge is malicious”(LCP 163). Instead of conceiving knowledge as immobile truth, the genealogist affirms it as “perspective”(LCP 156). As Foucault observes, the historiographers and historians work hard to erase the elements in their work that may reveal “their grounding in a particular time and place, their preference in a controversy”(LCP 156). And by smashing the grand construction of the historiographers and historians, Foucault devotes himself to digging out the “subjugated knowledges”²⁹ that have been silenced

²⁹ According to Geoff Danaher et al., “subjugated knowledge” refers to “a form of knowing that has been subjugated or ‘buried’ under the official or dominant forms of knowledge that emerge within a social order” (Danaher et al.xv). Danaher, Geoff, Tony Schirato, and Jen Webb. “History and Geopolitics.” *Understanding Foucault*. London: SAGE Publications, 2000.

by the dominant official knowledge. It is in the search for those forgotten or silenced voices that Foucault's historical analysis meets Levinas's ethical concern for the Other in history.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Tan also explores this controversial issue of historiography, albeit in a delicate way. In Kwan's narrative about her previous life in China as Nunumu, Tan sets her story against the background of the Taiping Event.³⁰ Although Tan does not directly deal with the Taiping Event in her novel, she provides some information about the Heavenly Kingdom and the impact of the event from Nunumu's personal narrative, which will be discussed in detail later. In the novel the scene that the Qing soldiers intruded into the Ghost Merchant's House, beheaded Lao Lu first and then tortured the other people to commit suicide metaphorically plays out the discursive contestation between the Qing authority's official documentation of the Taiping Event and various unofficial accounts of that event as represented by Nunumu's story. This scene represents the authority's attempt to silence these dissenting voices. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the pretentious objectivity of the Qing historiography and point out the possibility of restoring the other dimensions of the Taiping Event through the alternative of interiority.

Conventionally the access to historical events can only be gained through the official archive, so I will first describe the Qing government's attitude to the Heavenly Kingdom through some official records. The following documents will show that there is a clear binary opposition between the terms that describe the Qing authority and the Taipings: The Qing Government addressed itself as *wo* (I/we), and called those who want to overthrow its regime as *nizei* (rebels), *fei* (bandits), *wei* (fake) to

³⁰ Some people prefer to call the Taipings' action as "revolution" while others prefer to call it "rebellion"; both terms seem partisan, so I adopt the neutral term—"event."

stress its “legitimate” status. For instance, in the Preface to his *Zeiqing Huiquan*³¹ (*Collected Information about the Rebels*), De-jian Zhang names the Taipings as *zei* (thieves or rebels)(27), and *wei* (fake)(Zhang 31-2) in the table of contents. Also in his famous “Taozei Xiwen” (“The Official Denunciation of the Rebels”) (qtd. in Mao 34-5), the Qing General Guo-fan Zeng called the Taiping leaders as *nizei* (rebels) and their followers as *yuefei* (Guangdong bandits), claiming that the Taipings were tormenting the civilians and devastating the country; on the contrary, he addressed the Qing government as *wo daqing*(We the Great Qing Dynasty)(Mao 34).³² But whatever causes Zeng used to justify his punitive army, they had nothing to do with the battle result. As a matter of fact, this famous scholar general experienced several times of defeat in the first few battles against the Taipings. According to Ying-zhang Mao, Zeng was so angry and humiliated by his defeats that he tried to kill himself by jumping into the river, but was later saved by his subordinates (Mao 35). Had Zeng really killed himself at that time, he might not have become so famous in history and his army would not have been called the *Changshengjun* (The Victorious Army). In fact, this seemingly unimportant incident not only punctures the illusion of self-appointed legitimacy and the fabricated historical inevitability in the official documents, but testifies to the historical contingency that Foucault contends.

What is revealed in those official documents is that the authority claims its legitimacy and authenticity on the one hand, and debases the challenging force on the other hand, so that the readers would be more likely to identify with the authority’s position and regard the Taipings as outlaws that deserved to be eliminated. According to Mao, Zeng listed four reasons why he opposed the Heavenly Kingdom: First, the

³¹ This book was written by the order of Guo-fan Zheng, the famous Qing general in Eighteen Fifty-three (Yang 25). The text quoted here is reprinted in Jia-luo Yang’s *Taiping Tianguo Wenxian Huibian San* (*Collective Documents of Heavenly Kingdom Vol. 3*) Taipei: Dingwen Bookstore, 1973.

³² This article is reprinted in Ying-zhang Mao’s *Taiping Tianguo Shimoji* (*The Rise and Fall of Heavenly Kingdom*) Taipei: Taipei Publishers, 1979.

Taipings killed innocent civilians and devastated the peace of rural villages. Second, they practiced communism, which caused people's insecurity. Third, they ruined traditional ethics and Confucianism. Fourth, they destroyed temples. But a scrupulous reader will find that these reasons could barely be sustained. First, the Taipings obeyed strict martial laws and religious codes at first, and their morals deteriorated later due to the lower moral personality of many of the new soldiers (Mao 16).

Besides, the Qing armies were not better than the Taipings, maybe even worse. They beheaded Lao Lu (247) and were responsible for the other foreign missionaries' death (371). Also, their slaughtering of the Taipings is unforgettably horrible. As Yiban reported their atrocities, "The Manchus and foreigners were attacking all the cities ruled by the Heavenly King. Ten-ten thousand Taiping killed, *babies* and *children* too. In some places, all a man could see were rotting Taiping bodies, in other cities, only white bones"(emphases mine 204). Second, the Taipings practiced communism so that the poor could be taken care of. Nunumu mentioned that the villagers received food from the Heavenly Kingdom in the first few years, so that they did not suffer hunger (39). The system was benevolent in itself; it was men that corrupted it. Third, the maintenance of traditional manners and Confucianism was self-deluding.

According to Foucault, the purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is "not to discover the roots of our identity but to commit itself to its dissipation [...]. It seeks to make visible all of those *discontinuities* that cross us"(emphasis mine *LCP* 162). The Chinese culture itself in fact absorbed many foreign elements during its five thousand years of history. Even certain provinces were considered as foreign countries in the past, such as Tibet and Mongolia. Even the so-called Confucianism actually split into many schools; besides, it was not the only doctrine of Chinese culture, so it would be arrogant to identify it with Chinese cultural tradition. The fourth reason is relevant to the third. Buddhism was an imported religion from India in the Han Dynasty, just as

Christianity becomes one of many religions in Chinese culture today. For those God Worshipers at that time, the forbiddance to worship their ancestors and pagan gods was normal.

After examining the Qing authority's attitude to the Taipings, let us see an unofficial account about the Taipings narrated by Nunumu for comparison. Despite the initial favor she had for the Taipings, Nunumu did not completely take sides with the Taipings. After all, she had her own experience that was different from the Taipings', which could be seen in her description both of the good and the bad things about them. According to Nunumu, the Taipings canceled the practice of pigtail hair—originally a Manchu custom—to signal their Han identity. They also made laws against “opium, thievery, the pleasures of the dark parts of women's bodies”(37). When the Taiping army entered the Thistle Mountain to recruit new bloods, they promised warm clothes, food, private land, school and homes to those who would join them and food to their families left behind. The Taipings kept their promises in the first few years, sending food to the village. But the villagers were not glad for a long time. The Heavenly Kingdom gradually forgot their existence and began to corrupt itself. As one of the returned villagers disappointedly commented that he was sick to death of the Great Peace: “When there is great suffering, everyone struggles the same. But when there is peace, no one wants to be the same”(39). Everyone started to seek luxuries, pleasures, and dark places of women; the Heavenly King himself had many concubines, and General Cape betrayed the Great Peace to join the Manchus for his own interest.

Tan probes into the problematic about the historiography not only through the example of the Taiping Event but also through the perspective she chooses to present it. Nunumu is chosen as the narrator of the Taiping Event for two reasons. First, Tan wants to challenge the traditional historiography for its focus only on certain

important figures—emperors, their feudal barons, politicians, or leaders of rivaling forces. The biggest flaw of this selective historiography is that “it silences entire categories of people”(Danaher et al. 103). Women and various kinds of minority groups have all been marginalized and silenced within such a historiography, being presented as supporting actors behind great heroes that had history happen to them rather than being the creators of history. Hence Tan adopts the strategy of “counterhistory” to protest against the official history. According to Hawthorn, “counterhistory” indicates:

An account of the past which consciously rearranges known and/or hitherto unknown events in an explanatory pattern which counters a previously accepted pattern or patterns. Counterhistories are ideologically or politically motivated: they attempt to usurp ‘standard’ views of the past in order to replace them with an *interpretative* rearrangement of processes and events which illustrates or justifies a (normally oppositional) set of principles or theories. (emphasis mine Hawthorn 36)

Unlike traditional historiography, which documents historical events from the totalizing perspective of bureaucrats or aristocrats, Tan describes the Taiping Event from the local and concrete experience of a peasant girl. In this way Tan’s presentation can be said to both embody Levinas’s idea of interiority and be genealogical. For the part of interiority, Nunumu’s experience is presented as a personal memory, which exists in a dimension different from the universal time of history and has a value only for herself/Kwan. In this way, Tan gives an example of the possibility for realizing the face to face in history. As for the genealogical part, according to John E. Grumley, Foucault’s assault on totalizing view of society is “a protest against the pretensions of the traditional intellectual and the reification of theories and associated political movement which *abstract from REAL experiential*

needs and stifle the CONCRETE aspirations of LOCAL struggles”(capitals mine Grumley 189).³³ The local and actual experiences are important because they dissipate the supra-historical illusion of the historiographers, and help to restore the multiple and divergent dimensions of the historical events. Besides, unlike the popular written historiography, Nunumu’s story is presented in the oral mode through Kwan’s narrative because Nunumu could not read and write. Tan’s utilization of the oral traditional to pass down history or knowledge reminds us that although experiences of the uneducated are no less authentic than the educated, the former are more likely to be ignored since they rarely leave any documents behind them.

The second reason is to expose the illusory unity of ethnic identity. As Foucault asserts, “‘The whole of society’ is precisely that which should not be considered except as something to be destroyed”(LCP 233). He regards this concept as a totalizing and homogenizing thought that derives from “a utopian context.” Also Grumley notes that the idea of society as a whole is “a utopian ideal that paralyses local initiative”(Grumley 188). As we can tell from Tan’s novel that, under the general term of Chinese, there are at least Hans, Manchus, Yaos, Miaos, and Zhuang tribes (39), and even the majority Hans are divided into Puntis and Hakkas that fight against each other from time to time. As Nunumu introduces her people, “We were not Puntis, the Chinese who claimed they had more Yellow River Han blood running through their veins, so everything should belong to them [...]. We were Guest People [...] guests not invited to stay in any good place too long”(33). The Hakka are “a people of North China who migrated to upland areas of South China at various times but *never fully assimilated* with their neighbors. They retained their distinctive customs and a

³³ Grumley, John E. “Michel Foucault: Anti-totalising Scepticism or Totalising Prophecy?” *History and Totality: Radical Historicism from Hegel to Foucault*. London: Routledge, 1989.

language with links with both Cantonese and Mandarin”(emphases mine *GME*).³⁴ Historically the Hakka were excluded by and often had fights with their neighboring Punti. The hostile environment made the Hakka more united than the Punti; this is why the earliest God Worshippers were Hakkas, and many other Hakkas joined the Taiping military immediately when Hong and his fellow Taiping leaders (they were all Hakkas) rose against the Qing dynasty.

Besides the macro-historical dispute over the power struggle on the national scale, Foucault’s genealogy also applies to the micro-historical controversy concerning the individuals. The argument over the identity and the past of Olivia and Kwan’s father, Jack Yee, provides a good example here. Initially Tan presents Jack Yee as a loving father on his deathbed in Olivia’s narrative. As Olivia recounts, her father’s first wife died of a lung disease, then he left for Hong Kong to find a job, leaving little Kwan in the care of his wife’s sister. He sent money back to Changmian, and could not return after the communists took over China (6). We are convinced that Olivia’s account of her father is true because we identify ourselves with her when we read her narrative, but apparently Tan does not want her readers to feel comfortable with that identification. She presents Kwan’s description to counter the authenticity of Olivia’s version. In Kwan’s account, we see a different Jack Yee, who was greedy and cruelly irresponsible, having no love for his wife and daughters. As Kwan tells Olivia, their father caught “a disease of too many good dreams”(14). He was originally a poor college student who had a low-paying part-time job that could barely support his family. When he found someone’s suit containing immigration papers and a ticket to America, he was then possessed by the idea of living a richer and easier life. He took the name Jack Yee from the visa and became the man in the photo: “arrogant and

³⁴ From the electronic text of *Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia* (1995).
<http://courses.wcupa.edu/fletcher/hakka.htm>

powerful—eager to be rid of his past, in a hurry to start his new fate”(180). This controversy over Jack Yee’s identity precisely plays out Foucault’s genealogical proposition of history: “The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the *heterogeneity* of what was imagined consistent with itself”(emphasis mine *LCP* 147). The juxtaposition of two oppositional narratives about Jack Yee also realizes Levinas’s proposal for the face to face relationship in history. The memory about their father each sister has is true to herself, and no one has the right to claim that her account is more accurate.

To summarize, in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Tan illustrates Foucault’s counter-memory and Levinas’s proposition of the face to face by way of interiority with the example of Nunumu’s personal account about the Taiping Event and Olivia and Kwan’s argument over the identity of their father. History is not equal to the “objective” story we see in traditional historiographies. It is not a seamless continuum of time with a clear chain of causes and effects; it has no origin, no end, but the endless power struggle between different forces. Contrary to the continuous, homogeneous, and orderly history that we are used to, Foucauldian genealogy argues that it is discontinuous, heterogeneous, and chaotic. As Foucault asserts that purpose of genealogy is to disclose “dispersion and differences, to leave thing undisturbed in their own dimension and intensity”(LCP 156). The only way to prevent the discursive violence of dominant historiographies is to destroy the domination of the universal time of history and restore the multiple and heterogeneous dimensions of historical events by way of interiority. No one can jump out of himself to view an event objectively; we must admit that every perspective is partial and allow the equal right for the voice of the Other.