

## Chapter Four

### Totality and Infinity

#### I. Theoretically speaking

##### Ethical relationship:

In order to abandon the totalizing relationship embodied in western epistemology, in which the Other is *assimilated* into and its alterity repressed by the totality of the Same, represented by the egoistic subject “I” or “the Self,” Levinas advocates a different one—the ethical relationship. To describe the relation of the Self and the Other as a relationship seems to imply a totalizing perspective from which both are seen to share a common ground, which has the consequence that the Other becomes just another version of the Same. To avoid giving this wrong impression, Levinas characterizes this ethical relationship as “a relation without relation”(TI 80). It is a relation because an encounter does take place, but is not a relation because it does not establish parity or understanding, “the Other remains absolutely Other”(Levinas 45). In the ethical relationship of the Other and the Self, the two terms remain *separate* but *connected*, the significance of which is revealed in the title of *Totality and Infinity*. The emphasis is on the conjunction “and;” the book is about totality *and* infinity, not totality *or* infinity. As Levinas notes, the conjunction “and” here designates “neither addition nor power of one term over the other”(TI 39).

##### The face:

“The face” is a key term in Levinas’s ethics. The face is not a look, in the sense that we usually conceive it—the skin that covers the head, with eyes, ears, mouth, and nose on it. The look is conceivable in terms of sensual perception and therefore is

“knowledge”(EI 85).<sup>42</sup> In other words, the look is subject to totality of the same. On the contrary, the face cannot be reduced to perception (*Levinas* 133). To a certain degree we may understand the face as a kind of metaphor, for as Levinas notes, the face can also be the “human body” (EI 97). But before all else the face is the “channel through which alterity presents itself to me” (*Levinas* 135). The access to the face is neither the empirical senses nor the language (as a system of representation) we use to construct our knowledges of the objective reality. That is why Levinas terms the face as “invisible.” As he puts it, the best way to encounter the Other face to face is “not even to notice the color of his eyes!”(EI 85) The access and the relationship to the face is straightaway “ethical” (EI 85). It is not easy to describe the face in the language we are used to, for if we can, then the face will be representable, and then subject to knowledge. For Levinas, the face is “signification without context”(EI 86). In contrast to the language we use as a system of signification, in which the meaning of a word depends on other words, or refers to a signified object, the face is “meaning all by itself,” without referring to other things. Or as Davis notes, the face is “*expression*, a source of meanings coming from *elsewhere* rather than the product of meanings given by me”(emphasis mine *Levinas* 46). The *elsewhere* here refers to the “infinity” of the Other, or to the Other in a “position of absolute otherness,” as Davis asserts.

In Levinas’s account, the face appears like a source of language. As he puts it, “Face and discourse are tied”(EI 87). The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already “discourse”(TI 66). The meaning of the face consists in saying, “Thou shalt not kill”(EI 87). This commandment is the first word of the face, and though this commandment is prohibiting, it is not compelling. In reality one can kill the Other; as

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<sup>42</sup> In the parenthetical documentation hereafter, *EI* stands for Levinas’s *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Trans. by Richard Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1985.

Levinas claims, “the ethical exigency is not an ontological necessity”(EI 87). The significance of this ethical demand/command is that it is *better* not to kill, as Cohen notes (EI 11). Paradoxical as it may seem to be, the source of the face’s commandment comes from its very destitution or its exposure. Levinas explains this “exposure without defense”(EI 86) of the face by referring to the nakedness of the skin of the face. This nakedness or nudity is an “essential poverty” in the face (EI 86); the proof of this poverty is that we try to mask it by putting on “poses” or a “countenance”(86). We tend to put a mask on ourselves before strangers because we do not want them to understand what we think or feel inside. We put on a countenance (very often it could be an indifferent look) to disguise our sense of insecurity. Since this nudity of the face signifies its defenselessness, it makes the face vulnerable to violence. But as Levinas asserts, it is also the destitution of the face that forbids us to kill. As Levinas observes, the Other cannot really be killed or violated by violence, in the ethical way. The Other has its own way to resist violence of the Self.

Paradoxically the Other does not have a real power to resist the Self’s violence; he can only resist with “the resistance of what has no resistance—the ethical resistance”(TI 199). As Davis explains, “[I]n ethical resistance lies both the strength and weakness of the Other”(Levinas 50). The Other escapes the Self’s power since the Self cannot possess or even understand him. The Self may kill the Other, but he can never dominate the Other’s infinity. As Levinas puts it, “To kill is *not* to dominate *but* to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension absolutely. Murder exercises a power over what escapes power [...] [The Self] can only wish to kill an existent which is absolutely independent, which exceeds [the Self’s] powers infinitely, and therefore does not oppose them but paralyses the very power of power”(emphases mine TI 198).

In other words, the infinity of the Other cannot really be destroyed by any radical forms of violence; the Other always remains “inviolable and inviolable” (Levinas 51).

The face appears in the Self's world but does not belong to it; the Self can do it no harm.

The relationship between the face and discourse (or language or communication) consists not only in the face's speaking to the Self, but also in its demanding response from the latter. It is difficult for the Self to remain silent in the presence of the Other, be it a stranger or someone the Self knows. Instead of observing and contemplating the Other, the Self feels *obliged to talk to* him. It does not matter what the Self says to the Other; what is important is that the Self *must say* something *to* him. In order to explore further the significance of discourse, Levinas distinguishes a *Saying* from a *Said* in it. The *Said* is the content of what one says, and the *Saying* refers to "the fact that before the face [the Self] do[es] not simply remain there contemplating it, [the Self] *respond[s]* to it"(emphasis mine *EI* 88). The significance of the *Saying* and the *Said* in language is shown in Levinas's *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, which is characterized by its heightened attention to language. Levinas argues that philosophy has traditionally been concerned only with the *Said*, and he proposes that underlying every utterance is a "situation, structure or event in which [the Self is] exposed to the Other as a speaker or receiver of discourse" (*Levinas* 75). This situation, structure, or event is called the *Saying*. The *Said* presupposes the *Saying*, which is "pre-original": "[*Saying*] does not chronologically precede the *Said*, but has priority over the latter because it constitutes the latter's condition of possibility"(*Levinas* 75). In daily life a simple greeting to the Other such as "How are you?" or a courtesy like "After you, Sir" reflects both the exigency of the response to the face and the priority of *Saying* over the *Said*. This greeting to the Other is to tell him that the Self is at his service. Hence this response to the Other also implies the Self's *responsibility* for him. Let me illustrate this connection with the example of the beggar. When I walk on the street and see a beggar all of a sudden, my primary

response is to feel *sorry* for the beggar. Whether I decide to give the beggar some money or food or to ignore him/her is a secondary reaction. As Levinas observes, the mastery and the poverty of the Other, with the Self's submission is "primary" and "presupposed in all human relationships" (*EI* 89).

This relationship with the Other cast in the relation of discourse is what Levinas terms as "ethical relationship." Through discourse the Self finds that he is *not* the exclusive possessor of the world. What had seemed uniquely the Self's is "revealed as shared with the Other (*TI* 173). Discourse is the genuine way to know and reach the Other, the essential of which is the "interpellation, the vocative" (*TI* 69). In discourse, as soon as the Self calls upon the Other, the latter is "maintained and confirmed in his heterogeneity [or alterity, infinity, etc.]" (*TI* 69), so is the Self when the Other calls upon him. Unlike the object of knowledge, which is a fact, an "already happened and passed through," and cannot defend itself, the interpellated one is called upon to speak for himself. His speech consists in "'coming to assistance' of his word—in being *present*" (emphasis mine, *TI* 69). The Saying of the discourse comes from the fact of this very presence of the Other. In discourse, the Self and the Other always remain *other* to each other; as long as they talk, the Self cannot reduce the Other to his knowledge of the Other because the latter is always *facing* the Self, demanding the Self to respond to him.

### **Responsibility for the Other**

In the genuine relationship with the Other—the ethical relationship cast in the form of discourse—the Self realizes that he is responsible for the Other. This realization is *primary* in the sense that it is *prior to* the formation of the Self's self-consciousness. For Levinas this realization of the Self's responsibility for the Other helps constitute the Self's subjectivity; that is, subjectivity is first "for the

Other.” As Levinas notes, responsibility is the “essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity”(EI 95). The subjectivity Levinas speaks of here is “ethical” in its nature, rather than a constructed one in deconstructionist or psychological sense. In the interpellation of the face to face with the Other, the face of the Other demands the Self’s response to him and thereby *invokes* (in the sense of the invocative in the interpellation) subjectivity of the Self. Sometimes Levinas also puts this subjectivity in a metaphorical way, saying that subjectivity in the ethical sense is initially “hostage”(EI 100), which might sound a little bit unreasonable but not exactly. When someone is taken as a hostage, that means his freedom is restricted, and that he has to do what the kidnapper bids him to. This situation is similar in the ethical relationship between the Other and the Self, because it is not up to the Self to decide whether he wants to respond and takes his responsibility for the Other or not. The very encounter with the face of the Other *immediately commands* the Self to respond to him, before the Self can make any conscious decision; that is what “primary” and “prior to” in the beginning of this passage mean exactly.

In this intersubjective/interpersonal relationship, the Other and the Self are on *unequal* statuses. As Levinas observes, this ethical relation is a “non-symmetrical” one (EI 98), and it is non-symmetrical in two ways. On the one hand, the Self is responsible for the Other, but the Other’s responsibility is *not* the Self’s concern: “reciprocity is his [the Other’s] affair”(EI 98). The Self cannot jump out of their relationship to judge and decide what the Other should do for him. If the Self could speak for the Other, that means the Other belongs to the same species or genus as the Self, and then the Self could *assimilate* the Other and reduce his alterity in the Self’s totalizing thought. Hence it is important that the Self must always remain as the “first person”(EI 99) in their relation. It is in this un-reciprocal, non-symmetrical relation that the Self is “subject” to the Other (EI 98). But on the other hand, this “asymmetry”

also means that the Self's responsibility is "untransferable" (*EI* 100). That is, no one can substitute himself for the Self, but the Self can substitute himself for others (*EI* 101). As Levinas notes, the Self is responsible for the Other to the degree that the former is also responsible "for the Other's responsibility" (*EI* 99), and hence one may deduce that the Self is responsible for "the Other of [his] Other." Ultimately, the Self is responsible for the death of the Other: "The fear for the death of the other is at the basis of the responsibility for him" (*EI* 119).

All these arguments may seem radical or even unreasonable, but it is because they happen in the *ethical* dimension, prior to the real world we live, where there are billions of people to consider. As Levinas explicates, "In the concrete, many other considerations intervene and require *justice* even for me [the Self]" (emphasis mine *EI* 99). It is this idea of the justice that will take ethics further into the world we live in. As mentioned above, the Self is responsible for the Other to the degree that the Self is also responsible for the Other's Other. In the end, the Self must take all the other people, including himself (because at this level the Self is also someone's Other), into consideration of his responsibility. It is at this point of the intrusion of the "third person/party" into the Self's ethical relation with the Other that the ethical relation becomes a *social* one, and that the issue of justice emerges. As Levinas puts it, "[T]he fact of the multiplicity of men and the presence of *someone else* next to the Other" establish "justice" (emphasis mine *EI* 89). Here the appearance of the "third person" is not an empirical event. The third party is always "potentially present in the proximity of the Other" (*Levinas* 83). The face to face of the ethical relationship does not establish an intimacy between the Other and the Self; rather it shows the latter the existence of a whole world outside himself. At the time the Self discovers the Other, the "potential presence of innumerable others" (*Levinas* 52) is also revealed to him. That is what Levinas means when he says, "[T]he third party looks at me [the Self] in

the eyes of the Other”(TI 213).

The simultaneous revelation of the Other and the third party allows Levinas to combine asymmetry and equality within the social relation. As Davis notes, “The third party acts as a corrective to the asymmetry of ethical relations”(Levinas 84). Due to the presence of the “third person,” I cannot commit myself completely to the responsibility for my Other. Consequently it is necessary for me to divide up my responsibility *equally* to every other; or, in other words, to “compare the incomparable”(EI 90) because all the others are supposedly unique and their alterity un-totalizable. The notion of the third party thus brings the ethical relationship into the social and political domain. Hence justice must be exercised through “institutions, which are inevitable” (EI 90). But, as Levinas argues, this justice still has to “be held in check by the initial interpersonal relation”(EI 90) because the ethical relation is the most fundamental human relation and the basis of social relations. Briefly speaking, the social justice that Levinas advocates is practiced from the intersubjective/ethical level to the social and political one, the orientation of which is radically different from that of moral and philosophical thoughts, which presume the priority of general regulations or principles over intersubjective relations.

## **II. In Practice:**

So far we have sketched the outline of Levinas’s ethics. Now I will try to put it in practice, to see how it is practiced in the novel. Before doing so, I have to stress once more that Levinasian theory we discuss happens in the ethical dimension, which is different from the actual world we live, where things are much more complicated due to the presence of infinite “third person.” The presence of the third person arouses the concept of justice, but the ethical relationship between the Self and the Other must remain as the guiding principle of the concept and the institutions of justice, which is

based upon that ethical relationship. In order to facilitate the discussion about the practices of ethics in the novel, I (the author of this thesis) must stand as an objective observer (in the sense of the third-person position, which is not the same with the third person in ethics), trying to take the position of certain character from time to time, to see his/her intersubjective relationship from his/her own perspective. The third-person perspective I take is ontologically necessary here, but I am aware that in talking (or writing) about ethics I am also *responding* to my Other, who is the reader of this thesis. The awareness of this ethical fact results from my reading of Levinas. For me, Levinas is like my primary Other, whose face *awakens* my infinite responsibilities for the others.

Now let us return to the discussion of Tan's novel. Readers of *The Hundred Secret Senses* may have the feeling that the character that lives up to Levinasian ethics best in reality is Kwan/Nunumu. Kwan's definition of the "secret sense" is similar with Levinasian ethical relationship. It is always "between two people," and is a "language of love"(238). This love is not just romantic love between a couple; it can be any kind of love: "mother-baby, auntie-niece, friend-friend, sister-sister, *stranger-stranger*"(emphasis mine 238). Kwan offers this explanation for love between strangers because they knew each other in previous life. In fact whether two strangers meeting each other know each other or not in some other life does not really matter, but through viewing all the people we meet in our life as someone we knew before, we could actually make the world a community of brothers and sisters.

In fact, Kwan always puts the Other's interest prior to hers, especially in her relationship with Olivia. We can take a glimpse of this in what she says about *loyalty*, "If you ask someone to cut off his[someone's] hand to save you from flying off with the roof, he immediately cuts off both hands to show he is more than glad to do so"(14). From this somewhat figurative definition of loyalty, we can see that its

essence is exactly to be responsible for the Other, even to the point of sacrificing one's own life. In fact, in their relationship Kwan is always selfless and generous to Olivia, "You need something, ask. My answer always *yes*"(emphasis mine 173). The power of this *goodness* is overwhelming, but it does not force people to do something; rather, it *affects* people to do the good deeds as well. The contagion of the responsibility for the Other can be seen in Olivia's feeling about Kwan's infinite love to her, "[S]he turns all my betrayals into love that needs to be repaid. Forever we'll know: She's been loyal, someday I'll have to be"(28). In the end of the novel, Kwan actually *sacrifices* herself to bring Simon back. Because of all Kwan's selfless love for Olivia, the latter finally comes to a new understanding of love.

When we talk about ethics or ethical relationship, we do not mean they are adults-only terms or relationship. Little kids know how bad it is to hurt someone's feeling. When Olivia is a little girl, she hates Kwan for acting weirdly or saying things that embarrasses her in front of her friends. Sometimes she would hurt Kwan on purpose, but there are also times when she shows her sympathy, which is a feeling *for the Other*. For example, once Olivia's friends calls Kwan "retarded" and makes Olivia cry. To *soothe* (an evidence of Kwan's deep affection for Olivia) little Olivia, Kwan buys her ice cream. After Olivia explains what "retard" means, Kwan asks Olivia, "Libby-ah, you think this word is me, *retard*? Be honest"(49). On hearing this, Olivia feels "the inside of [her] chest began to feel tickly and uncomfortable;" she just keeps licking her ice cream, "*avoiding* her [Kwan's] stare"(emphasis mine 49). The question Kwan addresses to Olivia is an ontological one (the content/*the Said* in the question requests affirmation) carrying an ethical demand (*the Saying* of Kwan's question demands Olivia's response). Although Olivia avoids Kwan's stare, this act of avoidance obviously indicates that she is highly conscious of Kwan's face (or her eyes) looking at her. Olivia is like the Self in the ethical relationship of the face to face with

the Other; the destitution represented by the nudeness of the Other's eyes arouses the Self's bad conscience (the "tickly and uncomfortable" feeling inside Olivia's chest). The face/eyes of Kwan is so overwhelming *ethically* that young Olivia feels she can not stand but to submit to that demand. It is in that act of *subjection* to Kwan's ethical demand (as well as an ontological one), Olivia becomes an *ethical subject*: "The tickly feeling grew, until I let out a huge sigh and grumble, 'Not really'"(49). By her response, Olivia answers not only Kwan's question for affirmation but also *for* the ethical call in the Saying of that question.

The relationship between Olivia and Simon provides some interesting examples to illustrate Levinas's points about ethical relationship. Although they are married, Olivia and Simon separate later but still see each other often because of their work. They often quarrel with each other, sometimes over Simon's dead ex-girlfriend Elza, and sometimes over trivia just because they cannot stand the differences of their values and habits. For instance, there is one time they argue over Bubba, Olivia's dog. Simon and Olivia have the custody spat over Bubba; he wants visitation right to take Bubba for a walk sometimes. What annoys Olivia is that Simon likes to walk the dog off leash, which Olivia considers as an irresponsible attitude because once Simon walked Kwan's dog, Sarge, and ended up with Sarge biting someone's dog and Kwan paid the veterinary bill herself. Below are listed part of their argument:

"Bubba's a dog," Simon said. "He has the right to run free once in a while."

"Yeah, and get himself killed. Remember what happened to Sarge?"

"What if Bubba runs into a dog like Sarge?" I said.

"The boxer started it," Simon said flatly.

"Sarge was a vicious dog! You were the one who let him off leash, and Kwan ended up paying the vet bill!"

Simon twisted his mouth to the side, a grimace of his that always preceded a statement of doubt. "I don't remember that," he said. (46-7)

As one can see that the conversation proceeds vehemently; Olivia and Simon seem unable to reach a consensus. But even in a bitter dialogue like this, there is still *something positive* going on between them, ethically speaking. As we recall what Levinas says about *the Saying* and *the Said* in a discourse, despite the content of what one says in his/her words, what really matters in communication is that the two parties *respond to each other by the Saying* in their speeches. That is, in the ethical dimension Olivia and Simon recognize the ethical responsibility that each bears for the other regardless of the violent and bitter emotions transmitted in their expressions, although they may not be aware of that ethical *hospitality* they carry for each other.

When Olivia goes to the college, she, Simon and their friends would talk about heaven and hell or the afterlife. The religious topic they discuss is significant because it concerns ethics. Olivia says that at that age she does not believe in "metaphors for reward and punishment based on absolute good and evil"(59), which she thinks are biased. She and her friends do not believe that Christianity is the only way because that means "that Buddhists and Hindus and Jews and Africans who had never heard of Christ Almighty were doomed to hell, while Ku Klux Klan members were not"(59). If Christianity is the only truth, they would wonder, "What's the point in that kind of *justice*?"(emphasis mine 59). The justice that Olivia and her friends talk about is *unjust* because that is not based on the ethical relationship between the Self and the Other, in which the Self *is* responsible for the Other. True justice based on ethics should be equal; any religions or institutions that exclude and even oppress the equal rights of others do not deserve to be called just; they only exert the violence of the Same. Also there is one time when Olivia, Simon and one of their friends are talking about a dead friend of theirs, Simon thinks that their friend, Eric, is so great that he

deserves to go the paradise if there is such a place. Hearing this, Olivia thinks, “I remember I loved Simon for saying that”(60) because that is what she feels too.

Whether there is paradise or not is another question, the important thing is Simon and Olivia’s feelings about their friend, which indicate that they wish the best for their Other.

As for Nunumu, her best example will be the relation between her and Miss Banner. Their first encounter happened when Nunumu saved Miss Banner and Lao Lu. Miss Banner and Lao Lu fell into the river; many people saw them drowning, but “nobody was trying to help the injured boatman [Lao Lu] or the shiny foreigner [Miss Banner]”(42). There were two fishermen in a small boat, who had the best chance to save Lao Lu and Miss Banner. But instead of saving their lives, the fishermen chased the contents that spilled out of the fallen trunk. Miss Banner’s companions did not help because they were afraid of drowning themselves, and the Punti people did not because they thought they “would be responsible for those two people’s undrowned lives”(42) if they interfered with the fate. Of all the people witnessing this critical situation, only Nunumu tried to save Lao Lu and Miss Banner. It is proper to say that Nunumu’s *first response* is to save them, and she actually realizes that ethical concern in reality. Nunumu’s help reflects her attempt to fulfill her infinite responsibility for the Other, as one can see from her feeling, “Our three different fates [Nunumu’s, Miss Banner’s and Lao Lu’s] had flowed *together* in that river and became as *tangled* and twisted as a drowned woman’s hair”(emphasis mine 42).

When Zeng (the incarnate of the previous life of Kwan’s husband, Georgie) told Nunumu the news of the coming of the Manchu soldiers and offered to save her life, which, according to Kwan, means that Zeng proposed to Nunumu, Nunumu did not feel happy for herself; instead, all she thought of was about *other* people. As Nunumu told us,

But I had no room in my mind to think about marriage, I was wondering what would happen to Miss Banner, Lao Lu, Yiban—yes, even those Jesus Worshippers, those white faces of Pastor and Mrs. Amen, Miss Mouse, and Dr. Too Late. How strange, I thought. Why should I care what happens to them? We have nothing in common [...]. Yet I could say this about them: Their intentions are *sincere* [...]. When you know this about a person, how can you not have something in common? (emphasis mine 240-1)

In the ethical sense Nunumu's first reaction to Zeng's news is a typical concern for the Other. Here Nunumu's reaction testifies to what Cohen observes on Levinasian ethics, "One does the good *before* knowing it"(emphasis mine, *EI* 11). Nunumu thought of the other's safety *before* wondering why she did that. It is this *priority* of ethics to any practical considerations in Nunumu's response that reveals the importance of ethics. As to why Nunumu cared about the foreigners, she said it was because their intentions are "sincere," and that made them have "something in common." By "sincerity" Nunumu meant that what the foreign missionaries did was out of good will, or *goodness*. That is, Nunumu thought that these foreigners meant to help *others* by what they did even though sometimes what they did led to bad results. But what really matters is that they "try very hard"(241). When Nunumu told Zeng that she wanted to stay with the foreigners, Zeng finally promised her that they could take the foreigners with them. It is interesting to note that both Zeng and Nunumu were thoughtful for the others: Zeng cared about Nunumu, and Nunumu weighed the lives of the foreigners over her own personal happiness. Because of his love for Nunumu, Zeng decided to help other people. In a sense we can say that Zeng recognized the "third person(s)" in the eyes of his Other, Nunumu, and in being responsible for Nunumu, he was also taking up Nunumu's responsibilities for her others. Zeng's love for Nunumu was so

deep and strong that even after he died, his spirit showed up to guide Nunumu the way to the safe place in the mountain.

When the news of the coming of the Manchu soldiers reached the Ghost Merchant's House, all the Chinese servants fled for their own lives, except Nunumu and Lao Lu. Nunumu informed us that she and Lao Lu stayed partly because they had duck eggs buried in the garden, but more importantly, they knew that if they left, "none of those foreigners would know how to stay alive"(205). Also Lao Lu stayed partly for Nunumu because she saved him once. Besides, he and Nunumu were good friends, as Nunumu's comment above on the day she and Lao Lu and Miss Banner met one another indicates. When they ran out of food, Nunumu decided to dig out her duck eggs to share with others. Here Nunumu's "duck eggs" can be seen as the symbol of her love for the Other. When the Manchus came, Lao Lu was the first victim killed by their hands. To some extent, one may conclude that Lao Lu died for the others.

Miss Banner's love for Yiban and the love among the rest of the foreign missionaries are also good examples to illustrate the self's responsibility for the Other. When General Cape and the Manchus came all of a sudden, Miss Banner threw herself in Cape's arms at once because she knew well that if she did not please Cape, he might kill Yiban and other people. In order to save Yiban, Miss Banner asked Nunumu to take Yiban to the mountain; as for Miss Banner herself, she chose to stay to make sure that Cape would not look after Yiban and kill other people. To fulfill her promise to Miss Banner, Nunumu had to lie to and hurt Yiban, making him despise Miss Banner, so that he would leave with Nunumu. Here we see how Miss Banner puts the life of the Other prior to her own to the point of being ready to sacrifice her life at any moment.

As to the foreign missionaries, they had time to escape from the Ghost

Merchant's House when Nunumu told the foreign missionaries that the Manchu soldiers were coming. But among the missionaries, Pastor and Miss Mouse were not able to flee with others. Pastor was mad; Mrs. Amen was worried that out there Pastor would "call attention to himself, bring danger to *others*"(emphasis mine 245). Miss Mouse was not in good health; the escape into the mountain would kill her. So Mrs. Amen stayed for her husband, and Dr. Too Late stayed for Miss Mouse (and for Pastor as well) because he loved her. At this moment we witness Mrs. Amen and Dr. Too Late weighed the lives of the others over their own so much that they would rather die with the people they love than escape by themselves. In other words, one can say that Mrs. Amen and Dr. Too Late recognized the ethical transcendence of their others, which was also their very destitution.

If we compare Olivia and Kwan, we can find that the two sisters have lots of different features that presents a sharp contrast, such as Olivia's holding on to rationality and Kwan's unexplainable gift in communicating by the hundred secret senses, or Kwan's generosity to people (Olivia and Kwan's gay clients in her pharmacy) and Olivia's keeping avoiding receiving Kwan's hospitality and unwilling to return it. Given that the story of *The Hundred Secret Senses* is told mainly through Olivia's narrative, even though there is the juxtaposition of Olivia's and Kwan's narratives, we can assume that the relationship between Olivia and Kwan is somewhat like that between totality and infinity. And if we take the differences of their cultural background into consideration, we can see more interesting things reflected in their relationship. As a Chinese immigrant to the United States, Kwan always remains a marginalized other in many aspects. She keeps habits she had in China and her Chinese way of thinking. As Olivia testifies, "Time did nothing to either *Americanize* [Kwan] or bring out her resemblance to our father"(emphasis mine 22). The "Americanization" here can be viewed as "assimilation," which represents the

violence of the dominant values in American society that tries to impose itself on a recalcitrant other. The word that can best *represent* or *symbolize* (not *is*) Kwan's alterity is the adjective "odd" Olivia uses to describe Kwan's character: "But Kwan is *odd* [...]. Occasionally it amuses me. Sometimes it irritates me. More often I become upset, even angry—not with Kwan but with how things never turn out the way you hope"(21). In a sense, Kwan does look odd because she cannot really fit into American society. This oddity is somewhat reflected in her pidgin English; for example, she always pronounces Olivia's name as "Libby-ah." But mostly Kwan appears *odd* because in many ways she is *beyond* Olivia's understanding; that is, her oddity/alterity cannot be represented by Olivia's totalizing thought.

If we consider Kwan's relationship to American society at large, we can also find it to be one in which the alterity of the Other cannot be assimilated or corrected by violence of the totalizing system. For instance, as I mentioned in Chapter Two about the electroshock treatment Kwan undergoes regarding her "madness," the relationship between western psychology and Kwan is like one in which the system of the Same tries to appropriate the alterity of the Other through its violence (both discursive and empiric). The doctors try to *cure* Kwan of her "catatonic"(17) condition by putting electricity through Kwan's body, but the result turns out to be useless. Despite all the torturing she suffers, Kwan still remains who she is: "They do this to me, hah, still I don't change. See? I stay strong"(18). This sentence can be seen symbolically as futile efforts that totality does to try to dominate the Other's alterity.

Cultural differences always give people fresh experience; sometimes it is amazing, exotic, but sometimes it can also be disappointing, even annoying. Olivia and Simon's trip to China with Kwan provides abundant examples. But I think many of these unusual experiences result from people's holding on to the way they use to see the world. If we put that situation in the context of the relationship between the

Same and the Other, it is like that the Same always gets shocked or annoyed by the Other because it can never totally comprehend the Other. As Olivia complains, “In China, where I have no control, where everything is *unpredictable*, totally *insane*”(emphasis mine 292). China has nothing wrong in itself; it looks unpredictable and insane because Olivia cannot figure it out by her American way of understanding. For example, when Olivia and Simon know that the bird peddler is selling the white owl to them for food, they feel disgusted. Simon even curses that peddler, “That’s disgusting. Tell him he’s a fucking goon”(215). If Olivia and Simon can lay down their bias against foreign customs, they can also enjoy themselves. When they drink the “pickle-mouse wine”(300) for the first time, it does not taste good. But after a few rounds, they feel different. Simon says he feels great. And after they know that the thing lying at the bottom of the wine bottle is a mouse, instead of retching, Olivia and Simon “look at each other” and just “start laughing”(300). In some way, we can see this experience as a turning point that Simon and Olivia begin to put down their biased opinion against foreign cultures.

The ethical relationship is also reflected in the narrative design of the novel. The novel is composed of Olivia’s and Kwan’s separate narratives, each of which has its own characteristics. Olivia’s narrative is rational and linear/chronological while Kwan’s is more irrational and cyclic. The rationality of Olivia’s narrative is characterized by her words about herself: “To me, yin isn’t yang, and yang isn’t yin. I can’t accept two contradictory stories as the whole truth”(277). Contrary to the rationality reflected in Olivia’s narrative, Kwan’s is full of yin people, the hundred secret senses, and stories about her last life. Given that Olivia is the main narrator of the novel, that the novel begins and ends with Olivia’s narrative, and that Amy Tan is targeting mainly at the Americans as her implied readers, her readers are more likely to identify with Olivia’s narrative. That is, readers will tend not to believe what Kwan

says unless Olivia testifies to it. Hence to some degree we can say that the totality that Olivia's narrative/perspective represents is more powerful and convincing than Kwan's, and that the former is trying to assimilate or dominate the latter. As the story progresses, however, Kwan's narrative remains almost in the same style, while Olivia's seems to undergo some changes. In the beginning of the novel, she always feels suspicious about Kwan's story about the yin people or her previous life, but after having many unusual experiences in China, she becomes opener to those *irrational* things or tales: "Why question the world in which they [Changmian people] live"(276)? Olivia gradually comes to realize that the world does not only have one way and that it has more possibilities than we can think of. To use Levinas's terms, once the self realizes that he is not the sole possessor of the world, that there are also the Other and infinite *third persons*, he finds himself obliged to work out an ethical relationship where the self's totality *and* the Other's infinity are separate but connected. The "love" in Olivia's epiphany at the end somewhat represents this responsibility for the Other in the ethical relationship:

I think Kwan intended to show me the world is not a place but vastness of the soul. And the soul is nothing more than love, limitless, endless, all that moves us toward knowing what is true [...]. And believing in ghosts—that's believing that love never dies. If people we love die, then they are lost only to our ordinary senses. If we remember, we can find them anytime with our hundred secret senses. (399)

To conclude, the primary relationship between the Self and the Other is ethical. The presence of the Other calls into question the Self's freedom. In the face to face with the Other in dialogue, the Other demands the Self's response to him and invokes the Self's subjectivity, the essence of which is subjection to the Other. The face of the Other is "invisible" and hence not representable to the Self's knowledge. The Self

cannot dominate the Other's alterity/infinity, which is also his destitution and nakedness. The Other resists the violence of totality by an ethical resistance, which is not an real force at all. In reality the Self can kill the Other, but the former can never assimilate or annihilate the alterity of the latter. And through discussions about the interpersonal, intercultural relationships in the novel and the formal design of it, we see that ethics can be and is actually practiced in our daily life, even in a trivial conversation. But the most important thing we learn from Amy Tan through Levinas's ethics is to establish a society of justice, which is based on the ethical relationship between the Self *and* the Other, between totality *and* infinity.