

## Reclaiming Subjectivity through the Maternal Abject in Janie Chang's *Three Souls*

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### ABSTRACT

*Three Souls* by Janie Chang focuses on a changing transformative time in China's history—the 1930s. During this period, China was experiencing political and societal shifts that prompted gender equality movements. Song Leiyin, the female protagonist in *Three Souls*, embodies the experiences of women during this period. She is an ambitious and desiring woman who lives in a family and society that restricts women's roles and abilities. As a woman with aspirations and desires, Song Leiyin is perceived as a threat to traditional values and paternal authority. In her journey towards reclaiming her subjectivity, Song Leiyin encounters many obstacles that force her to confront and challenge the patriarchal structures that oppress her. Despite the challenges, Song Leiyin manages to break free from the patriarchal constraints by reconnecting with her maternal drives. Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection provides an analytical framework to explore the ways in which Leiyin experiences abjection and the consequences of confronting her abject desires. While commonly associated with the abject, this study argues that the maternal can be a site of resistance and empowerment. By embracing the maternal abject, women can assert their agency and break free from oppressive norms.

*Keywords: abject; Julia Kristeva; Chinese culture; gender; Janie Chang*

### INTRODUCTION

During the 1930s, China was going through a period of social and political changes. Although China's economy had grown during this period, the ongoing civil war and invasions by Japanese armies caused numerous setbacks to its efforts at nation-building. Despite these obstacles, Chinese women actively participated in public life by engaging in political movements with their male counterparts as part of their patriotic duty to the country. Women were involved in the dissemination of new ideas through their work as journalists, teachers, and students during this

period (Kristeva, 1977, p. 101). This represents a significant step forward for Chinese women, as it overturns centuries of oppression under Confucian patriarchy. Prior to this, Chinese women were subjected to oppression and discrimination in various aspects of their lives due to Confucianism's emphasis on the concepts of filial piety and proper conduct. The notion of filial piety requires Chinese women to play a subservient role to their parents, brothers, in-laws, and sons. As a result, Chinese women were treated as inferior members of their families and society (S. Chang, 2020, p. 9). Additionally, they were expected to be embodiments of proper conduct. This required them to remain passive, chaste, and virtuous in the eyes of society (S. Chang, 2020, p. 5). The fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the emergence of the social and cultural revolution in the early 1920s and 1930s demanded a re-evaluation of traditional values and thinking, which were typically patriarchal. This led to the abandonment of Confucianism and a call for social and cultural reform in China. The most prominent reform was the introduction of women's rights and gender equality. Under the governance of the Chinese Communist Party led by Chairman Mao Zedong, women experienced a new level of freedom as they were encouraged to pursue an education, vote, and participate in the workforce. Besides, arranged marriage was also abolished as this feudal practice went against promoted values like individual autonomy and self-reliance.

Despite efforts to reform women and build a modernised nation, Confucian-based families persisted within Chinese society. This was inevitable, given that Confucian philosophy had been practised in China for thousands of years. Forward-thinking women were caught between traditional Confucian values and new ideals of the nation. They desire revolutionary change, yet they remain trapped in a system that still endorses traditional values. Song Leiyin, the female protagonist in J. Chang's (2013) *Three Souls*, is an embodiment of this dilemma. Her father is a traditionalist businessman who opposes the progressive ideologies of Communism. Leiyin, on the other hand, is drawn to Communism after her encounter with Hanchin, a left-wing poet and translator. She wants to become a teacher so that she can share the same aspirations as Hanchin. However, her father is against the idea of an idealistic and ambitious woman and even forbids her from pursuing her studies at college. Unwilling to give up on her ambition, Leiyin defies her father and proceeds to leave home for college. Nonetheless, Leiyin's father eventually finds out about her scheme. As a punishment, Leiyin's father marries her to Lee Baizhen, the only son of the Lee family. Although Baizhen treats her well, Leiyin feels desolate. A glimmer of hope emerges when Leiyin becomes pregnant with her daughter, Weilan. As a mother, Leiyin finds purpose and meaning in life again. Nevertheless, fate takes another turn when Leiyin runs into Hanchin at a bookstore. This unexpected encounter propels her into an illicit affair that leads to a second pregnancy, betrayal, revenge, and, ultimately, her death. Upon death, Leiyin finds herself caught between the realm of the living and the afterlife. Surrounded by her three souls and denied entry into the afterlife, Leiyin is urged to atone for her sins so that she can be released from this limbo. However, Leiyin is more concerned about Weilan's well-being and future. Leiyin learns that her second brother, Tongyin, has ill intentions to marry Weilan to the paedophilic son of General Cha, who is from the Nationalist party. Using her supernatural abilities, Leiyin communicates with the living through dreams to help her atone for her sins and change Weilan's impending fate.

Kristeva's theory enables a deeper understanding of the struggles that women like Leiyin face in their quest to reclaim their subjectivity. Leiyin is trapped in an affluent family that still adheres to traditional patriarchal values. Her gender and her modern mindset render her an abject as the values that she internalised are not in line with the moral codes of Confucianism. Kristeva describes the abject as something that "lies outside, beyond the set and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game" (Kristeva, 1977, p. 230). In other words, the abject is something that

is feared, loathed, and rejected by the subject because it challenges the subject's established beliefs. Femininity, in the context of the Chinese patriarchal construct, aligns with Kristeva's concept of the abject. Women's biological role in reproduction is associated with negative notions of impurity and anxiety. It is perceived as inferior to the male role and disruptive to the social order (Pellouchoud, 2018, p.25). These beliefs that describe women as polluting and threatening to the established system support the Confucian social hierarchies and norms, and they continue to exist during the socialist era of modern China (Pellouchoud, 2018, p.25). The abject nature of femininity, reinforced by Confucian values, perpetuates the oppression of women and relegates them to the fringes of the symbolic order. Apart from being subjected to abjection due to her sex and gender, Leiyin's aspirations to pursue her tertiary studies and be with Hanchin are considered abject as well. This is because they go against her father's gender and political beliefs. Raised in a family that still upholds traditional values, Leiyin is subjected to strict gender norms that limit her freedom and independence. This reveals that women in Chinese patriarchal families are expected to remain ignorant and demonstrate total submission to the men in their families.

For Kristeva, the symbolic realm is associated with paternal law, language, social norms, and established meanings (McAfee, 2003, p.17). Meanwhile, the semiotic domain is linked to the maternal realm, bodily experiences, rhythms, and sounds that convey the subject's desires, emotions, and drives (McAfee, 2003, p.17). According to Kristeva, the subject is always in a state of becoming, never fully formed. The formation of subjectivity requires constant negotiation between the semiotic and symbolic domains. In Kristeva's view, achieving a balance between the symbolic and semiotic is necessary for the regulation of social relations and for developing an identity that can navigate both internal and external worlds (Keltner, 2011, pp. 31-37). In the context of this novel, the Chinese symbolic order silences women like Leiyin by forcing them to suppress their desires, resulting in the negation of their subjectivity. To align with the symbolic realm, women are compelled to occupy the position of the abject. According to Kristeva, the establishment and maintenance of the symbolic order rely on the subjugation of the feminine (Rabine, 1977, p. 45). This pressure to reject the semiotic aspect and conform exclusively to the symbolic domain can have a negative impact on the female subject's sense of self, agency, and well-being. In the case of Leiyin, it may seem as if she will never be able to reclaim her subjectivity within a patriarchal structure that views her as a threat to the symbolic order. Nevertheless, she demonstrates resilience by reconnecting with her maternal identity. By doing so, she manages to assert her agency and break free from male dominance. Therefore, it is hoped that Kristeva's theory of the abject can serve as a conceptual framework to examine the ways in which Leiyin experiences abjection and the consequences of confronting her abject desires. Although the abject is often associated with negative connotations, this study aims to demonstrate that by embracing the maternal abject, women can resist patriarchal norms and reclaim their subjectivity.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent decades, there has been an increasing interest among readers in Chinese fiction written in English. Among the most popular pieces are those written by women of Chinese descent, such as Yangsze Choo, Lisa See, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and Celeste Ng. These critically acclaimed female writers have gained widespread recognition for their narratives that delve into themes of gender and identity. Various research studies have analysed the works of these writers, particularly focusing on topics that centre around position, voice, and identity. In the first study,

Satkunanathan (2020) employs a postcolonial feminist reading of Derrida's theory of hauntology to analyse Malaysian Chinese Domestic Gothic fiction, specifically Yangsze Choo's *The Ghost Bride* and Cassandra Khaw's *Some Breakable Things*. The study explores the patriarchal spectre and its connection with feminine consent and autonomy against the strictures of traditions that extend to the afterlife. Due to these challenges, the female protagonists face difficulties as they try to negotiate between tradition and personal agency. Zhang's (2022) primary study of the novel *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston explores how narration is used as a therapeutic tool. The study utilises transitivity analysis to reveal a character's thinking pattern and demonstrate how narration helps the narrator perceive the world more positively and gain the necessary strength to fight for her rights. Using transitivity analysis, Zhang concludes that there is a change in Maxine's way of thinking and her psychological state. Her use of narration as a tool to gain strength and protect herself from the authorities is related to this transformation. The change in transitivity also corresponds to Maxine's mental growth. The following study by Chen (2022) seeks to examine Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* through the lens of postcolonial criticism. The main findings suggest that Amy Tan writes to give voice to Chinese-American women who suffer from triple oppression based on race, gender, and first-world status. Her writing may inspire others to seek their rights and express themselves freely, as exemplified by successful Chinese-American women in literature, science, and politics.

Kristeva's concept of abjection, as explored in various scholarly studies, offers a multifaceted framework to comprehend the intricacies of complex identities, the transformative potential of the abject experience, and the mechanisms employed to maintain a stable sense of self within diverse literary contexts. Skalle's (2019) examination of Igiaba Scego's literary work examines how cultural identity is achieved through the protagonists' struggle with bodily pain. Skalle concludes that the characters' acts of abjection have helped them to deal with their complex identities, allowing them to safely establish themselves as hybrid individuals. Similarly, Zsadányi's (2019) analysis of Imre Kertész's *Fateless* and Alaine Polcz's *One Woman in the War* reveals instances where power breaches the boundaries of the protagonists' bodies. The study demonstrates that it is the inherent motherly aspect that provides a human perspective to an abjectified person. The author concludes that an abjectified existence can become an empowering experience. Meanwhile, Kumar's (2022) examination of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* seeks to understand how racism can lead to extreme dehumanisation and the profound consequences of such experiences. The study explores how the concept of abjection and the lexicon proposed in the study can be employed as a tool to describe the experience of grieving for something or someone without taking away from the uniqueness and extreme nature of that loss. This nuanced approach allows readers to gain a deeper understanding of the complex and often painful experiences depicted in Morrison's novels. Besides, it also highlights that abjection can be a tool for engaging with complex identities and dealing with grief and loss. In conclusion, these analyses collectively demonstrate the versatility of the concept of abjection in literature and suggest possibilities in which the abject can be harnessed to further understand the complexities of identities and power dynamics in various cultural contexts. However, much of the research up to now has been based on literary works set in Western contexts rather than Eastern settings. To date, little attention has been paid to the notion of abjection in Chinese fiction in English. This gap indicates a need for further research on narratives that revolve around the Chinese setting.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE ABJECT

Kristeva's theory of the abject suggests that separating from the mother's body is necessary for a child to form its identity. According to her, the child initially exists in what she calls the semiotic chora, which is a maternal space where the child learns to communicate its needs and desires through sound and energy. At this stage, the child does not have the ability to differentiate itself from its environment. However, as the child's awareness grows, it begins to understand its surroundings and recognises that language can be utilised to refer to things outside of itself. Kristeva uses the term 'thetic break' to refer to the moment when children realise the difference between themselves and the world around them, which can also be described as the distinction between the subject (self) and the object (others). The moment when a child leaves the semiotic chora and enters the symbolic world of language marks the beginning of signification and the formation of the child's identity as a subject. The mother's body is the first thing that the child rejects during this process. Kristeva argues that the abject never truly departs from the subject. The abject continues to stay in the subconscious mind of the subject, posing a threat to return and disturb one's self-boundaries. Such a situation induces anxiety within the subject as the constant presence of the abject can negatively impact their sense of self. However, this very fear of the abject helps to keep the subject alert since it has the potential to deceive and distort one's self.

According to Kristeva, the abject is not solely a personal psychological experience but is also embedded in cultural and social structures. She views abjection as an essential yet unpleasant aspect of establishing and preserving boundaries between different social groups, as well as a means of reinforcing a culture or society's symbolic order. As such, it is possible to interpret the study of the abject as a social phenomenon. Social theories posit that the self is constructed as a stable, proper, and pure entity. According to Mary Douglas (2002), things that are considered unclean are universally avoided because they are perceived as out of place and do not conform to societal norms. She argues that uncleanliness is a cultural perception of anything that lies outside of the system and has the potential to cause defilement in a person or society. Therefore, societies maintain order by excluding anything that is considered impure, unclean, or unstable. Consequently, things that exist in a grey area between these categories are considered dangerous and threatening because they do not fit into the system. Kristeva builds on this idea by proposing that the abject is an integral part of the concept of the unclean due to its ambivalent and transgressive qualities. The abject indicates a reluctance to be classified under any of these categories and opposes unity. Therefore, to establish or uphold a state of order and cleanliness, the process of abjection is deemed essential for an individual or society. Arya (2014) suggests that although the sources of abjection may differ among cultures, the phenomenon is still universally relatable since it is experienced by all cultures. This indicates that the experience of abjection is not only limited to the individual but also to the collective. This is because the development and functioning of the self are influenced by social, cultural, and historical factors.

The dominant values in society dictate who or what is accepted and who or what is abjected. Patriarchal societies particularly abject women to reinforce the belief that men are superior. According to Lawless (2003), the view that men are clean, whole, and proper while women are impure, sinful, and abject has been propagated through various cultural, religious, and social discourses over the years. Notions such as femininity, the maternal, and the Other are associated with the abject due to their ambiguous and transgressive qualities. To maintain the patriarchal monotheistic system and preserve gender distinctions, women's desires must be suppressed. Drawing from Kristeva's (1977) insights, Rabine (1977, p.45) elucidates, "The

paternal function structures both the family and social behaviour by repressing the pleasurable impulsive processes associated with the maternal phase.” The privileging of male subjectivity in male-dominated societies renders women powerless as they are pushed to the margins of the abject. The pressure to suppress their semiotic desires and conform exclusively to the patriarchal symbolic order can have a negative impact on their agency and subjectivity (Arya, 2014, p.68). With no avenues to channel their emotions and desires, women are left feeling unfulfilled and disconnected from their authentic selves. When a woman does not have access to the semiotic realm, she is unable to express herself. As explained by McAfee (2003, p.41), “Without the semiotic, our language would have no force; it would be devoid of meaning”. This can lead to a sense of alienation and a fragmented sense of self. According to Ainley (1990, p.60), Kristeva believes that women can assert their agency and reclaim their subjectivity by embracing the maternal abject. For Kristeva (2010, pp. 85-88), motherhood goes beyond its biological and cultural aspects because it involves a complex interplay of bodily and emotional aspects. On this note, motherhood represents more than the emotional bond between the mother and her child; it is also the bridge that links the semiotic and the symbolic. Feelings of love, attachment, and detachment that accompany the unique maternal experience enable the expansion and transformation of individual subjectivities (Kristeva & Goldhammer, 1985, p.149). With this in view, Kristeva argues that motherhood is a subversive space for women to disrupt traditional gender roles and expectations and reconfigure their sense of self.

### THE ABJECTED WOMAN IN *THREE SOULS*

Leiyin’s character in Janie Chang’s *Three Souls* sheds light on the challenges faced by women as they attempt to gain independence and transform themselves in early 20th-century China. As a Chinese woman in a patriarchal family, Leiyin is subject to strict gender expectations and social norms. Despite the social and cultural reforms in China, her family still adheres to Confucian values that place men in positions of power and women as subordinates to men. As such, the women of Leiyin’s family occupy the abject position, as not only are they expected to be subservient to the men of the family, but they are also denied the autonomy to make any decisions concerning their lives. According to one of the oldest Chinese classics, *Classic of Changes*, “Yang takes the lead; yin acts in concert. The male acts; the female follows” (as cited in Wang, 2003, p. 171). This line of thought suggests that women should remain passive and obedient. Hence, any attempt to violate these norms would render women immoral and dishonourable. In the case of Leiyin, she is a woman with desires and aspirations. Although she has been raised in privilege, she is not content to live a life that is based on her family’s expectations. Her aspirations to become a teacher and a Communist activist are fuelled further after an encounter with a left-wing poet named Han Chin. Determined to impress Han Chin, Leiyin tries to persuade her father to allow her to pursue her tertiary education at Hangchow Women’s University. However, despite her persuasion, Leiyin’s father is firmly against the idea. Leiyin’s plea to her father is shown in the lines below:

“But, Father I want to work. I want to be a teacher. Madame Sun Yat-sen says China needs more teachers. It’s... it’s my patriotic duty.”

“Third Daughter, always so idealistic. But families such as ours do not need our women to go out and earn money. What would people think of you teaching peasants?”

“Then why did you bother sending me to school at all? Why did you bother caring about my grades?”

“I sent you to school because you will marry an educated young man who will want an educated wife. High school is sufficient. As for grades, in any effort, one should always strive for the highest achievement.”

(J. Chang, 2013, pp. 70 – 71)

From the conversation shown, it appears that the education that Leiyin has been receiving is merely to prepare her for marriage and increase the status and prestige of her future husband's family. As S. Chang (2020) states, "It was useless for some women to develop their talents because after they had received education, good breeding only ensured a better chance of success as a wife and a mother" (p. 8). Drawing on Kristeva's theory of the abject, Leiyin's desire to become a teacher indicates an intention to occupy the position of an autonomous, speaking subject. However, this is a privilege that only men could have access to in the symbolic order. In this context, Leiyin's desire is considered abject as it challenges patriarchal norms that relegate women to their domestic roles and space. As a woman in a patriarchal family, Leiyin is supposed to be a passive object and not a desiring subject. As a filial daughter, she is supposed to suppress her desires and follow her father's wishes. In relation to this, Oliver (1993) states, "[W]oman is set up as inarticulate Other and then she is articulated within the Symbolic order. Of course, the trick is that the inarticulate cannot be articulated and retain its status or power. When represented, the unrepresentable woman becomes what she is not" (p. 108). This claim serves to illustrate that due to women's position as the Other, their voices will always be silenced by the patriarchal discourse and that they will never be able to be their authentic selves. This statement parallels Zhan's explanation of monotheistic patriarchy. As highlighted by Zhan (1996), "[F]emale obedience...preserve[s] patriarchal power and stability. The stability of the patriarchal family provides stability and security for the patrimonial state" (p. 282).

Nevertheless, Leiyin refuses to be silenced. She is determined to pursue a teaching career so that she can fulfil her patriotic duty as a revolutionist together with Hanchin. Thus, Leiyin secretly plans an escape with the help of her eldest sister. Despite knowing that her actions will upset her father, Leiyin is willing to take the risk. However, Leiyin is not able to realise her dreams as her father manages to stop her before her plans come to fruition. Due to her actions, Leiyin is berated by her father for being "irresponsible, spoiled, stubborn, and deceitful" (J. Chang, 2013, p. 131). She is even reprimanded for being unfilial as she has abused the privileges granted to her and disobeyed his orders. As a result, Leiyin's father decides to marry her off to a stranger.

"Your husband's name is Lee Baizhen. I met his father on my trip. Their clan lives in Pinghu, a town south of Shanghai. It will be a very favourable situation for you. Lee Bai Zhen is an only son. Your wedding is in two weeks' time, in Pinghu."

"Please, Father, no! Don't send me away to a strange town and a strange family! Father, beat me and lock me up, but don't do this!

"You've proved completely lacking in judgement. Impulsive. Disobedient. You're going to live in a small country town where no one ever goes and nothing ever happens."

(J. Chang, 2013, p. 141)

As shown above, Leiyin's intention to address her desires is met with hostility as it is seen as an attempt to subvert the patriarchal symbolic order. These abject desires are associated with the semiotic as they are deemed as "passions that might disrupt the social order" (McAfee, 2003, p. 15). In this regard, Leiyin's attempt to identify with the semiotic domain is curtailed as her behaviour is seen as transgressing the paternal law. Thus, she is compelled to identify with the values of the symbolic domain. This leaves Leiyin with no other alternative but to accept her fate. Married life is a torment for Leiyin as she still longs for Hanchin. However, not long after, Leiyin learns that she is pregnant. Eventually, Leiyin gives birth to a baby girl, whom she names Wei Lan. Wei Lan's presence brings Leiyin the joy and hope that she has been missing in her life.

## IMPLICATIONS OF CONFRONTING ABJECT DESIRES

Nevertheless, this happiness is short-lived as soon after Leiyin discovers that Hanchin, the person whom she once loved, is now a fugitive hiding in the same town where Leiyin and her husband's family reside. He is pursued by the Nationalist authorities for his active involvement in the Communist Party. Leiyin is caught in further emotional turmoil when she runs into Hanchin and finds out that he intends to have her help him hide the Communist manifesto from Nationalist authorities and pass it to an assigned courier. Taken aback by the request, Leiyin questions him:

"How can you ask me to do this? I have a husband, a child..."

"Leiyin, I'm only asking you to do what you feel is right. Once you wanted to make a difference to our country. You should know that even in small towns such as this all over China, men and women are taking a stand."

In my new life, in this town, there was no point holding on to my convictions. Or so I had told myself. I felt ashamed for losing sight of Madame Sun Yat-sen's vision for a new China, one where women had a voice. But this vision didn't include helping a wanted criminal.

"Leiyin, you understand better than anyone else what this work means to me. There's no one else I would trust with this document. As for the other reason why I came to this town..."

(J. Chang, 2013, p. 273)

Leiyin is confronted with her abject desire for Hanchin as their chance encounter revives some of the long-lost feelings and connection she once had for him. As a married woman and a mother, Leiyin knows that she should draw a line between her and Hanchin. Nonetheless, Leiyin struggles to do so as she is still drawn to the possibility of rekindling her romance with Hanchin. Although Leiyin is fearful of the repercussions of helping Hanchin, she allows herself to be driven by her emotional impulses. In this scenario, Leiyin's abject desire appears as a threat to her sense of self. Despite Leiyin's attempt to define herself in opposition to the abject, she fails to do so as it eventually penetrates the borders of her selfhood. This explains her rash decision to help him and subsequently engage in an extramarital affair despite being aware of the danger that will befall her and her family.

I still can't believe my foolishness. I had wanted excitement, and Hanchin had rekindled my cravings for a different life.

Hanchin made me feel seventeen again. It was so potent, the rush of passion, my remembered longings, and impatience to make up for all those lost years.

(J. Chang, 2013, p. 280)

In the above instance, Leiyin is once again presented with emotions that she has fought so hard to suppress. Driven by her semiotic impulse, Leiyin now resembles a disorientated subject who is unable to act and think rationally. Her eagerness to identify with the semiotic domain – a realm where paternal law does not exist – eventually drives her to develop an unhealthy obsession with Hanchin. This is because Hanchin's presence not only helps Leiyin to evade the harsh reality of her unhappy marriage but also offers her a false hope that she can start all over with him again. As such, their rendezvous continues until Hanchin informs Leiyin that he must leave the town for another mission. Overcome with sorrow and desperation, Leiyin pleads for Hanchin to stay or allow her to follow him. Leiyin's abject desire for Hanchin is so intense that she is even willing to leave her husband, Baizhen and daughter, Weilan, behind. Consumed by her desires, Leiyin becomes out of touch with reality. In his analysis of abject characters, Alexander (2019) points out, "Abjection often leads characters into what appear to be bouts of madness.... Abject figures loathe and long for a lover, and this causes them to suffer from disordered states manifested



through heightened language in the chora as they encounter signs or signifiers of death” (p. 5). In this regard, Leiyin’s obsession with Hanchin has altered her capacity to make rational decisions to the point where she is willing to leave her daughter in return for her happiness.

Nevertheless, Leiyin’s plan to elope with Hanchin is hindered as Hanchin manages to persuade her to stay behind to protect the Communist manifesto until the courier comes to collect it from her. Hanchin assures Leiyin that he will send for her once he has settled down at his next hiding place. However, time passes and still no word from Hanchin. This leaves Leiyin anxious as she eventually finds out that she is pregnant with Hanchin’s child. As the story progresses, Leiyin gradually discovers the truth about Hanchin. Her perception of Hanchin shatters when she learns that he is already married to another Communist member and that he has impregnated her servant, Little Ming. Out of anger and hurt, Leiyin discloses everything she knows about Hanchin to her second brother, Tongyin, who is an acquaintance of General Cha’s family from the Nationalist Party. Leiyin hopes that Hanchin will be caught and imprisoned by the authorities of the Nationalist Party after all that he has done to her. Nevertheless, this does not ease the feelings of hurt and loss. As shown in the lines below:

I didn’t think a person could live with such pain every hour of the day. Before my eyes opened in the morning, before I could even remember my name, I felt the nagging, dull pain in my chest. Some days, I woke cold with anger at Hanchin’s casual manipulation of my feelings.

(J. Chang, 2013, p. 320)

It took great effort to be amiable, and I didn’t always succeed, but everyone just assumed I was having a difficult pregnancy. No one commented on my melancholy state or my desire to be left alone... Had I actually planned to abandon my daughter or take her away from her loving father? What sort of insanity had come over me? Had I really been willing to put my innocent child through such grief? Ready to devastate a kind, decent man like Baizhen, who in all these years had never raised his voice or hand to me?

(J. Chang, 2013, p. 321)

Leiyin’s inability to remain vigilant and protect the borders of her identity has led her to experience abjection. She is now doubly abject as she is a married woman carrying an illegitimate child of a fugitive. Leiyin is considered licentious, breeched, and polluted as it has undermined the boundaries and limitations of the symbolic identity. Furthermore, she is also left to deal with the emotional effects of confronting the abject. Leiyin withdraws herself from her family as she mourns the loss of the unnameable, unspeakable object. She grieves over the loss of her thwarted desire for Hanchin, a chance to escape from her unhappy marriage and mundane life, as well as the opportunity to reconstruct her identity as a lover and a revolutionist. Besides, she blames herself as she reflects on her intentions to abandon her husband and daughter. Unable to share her frustration and sadness with those in the symbolic realm, Leiyin resembles a melancholic whose ego is, as described by Kristeva (1989) in *Black Sun*, “incomplete, empty and wounded” (p. 7). This explains the emotional turbulence that Leiyin is experiencing as not only is she angry and hurt for being betrayed and manipulated, but she is also disappointed with herself for being so naïve, selfish and impulsive. Determined to put her past behind and start anew, Leiyin vows to forget Hanchin and dedicate her life to Baizhen, Weilan, and the unborn child. However, Leiyin’s wishes are not fulfilled as she discovers from the news that Hanchin has been captured and executed by the secret police of the Nationalist Party. Startled by the news of Hanchin’s execution, Leiyin accidentally collapses against the rotting veranda railing and falls to her death.

## RECLAIMING SUBJECTIVITY THROUGH THE MATERNAL ABJECT

Following her accidental death, Leiyin finds herself in a liminal realm accompanied by her three souls – *yin*, *yang* and *hun*. She learns that her unborn baby has most likely reincarnated since he is sinless. Leiyin, on the other hand, is urged by her three souls to make amends for Hanchin's death so that they can ascend to the afterlife. Failing to do so will cause her soul to dissipate and eventually turn her into a hungry ghost. However, trapped in between the realm of the living and the dead, Leiyin questions the possibility of her soul's proposition. Feeling worried and uncertain, she thinks to herself:

How can I atone for Hanchin's death when I can't even make myself heard, seen, or felt? When I don't even know what the gods consider proper penance?

(J. Chang, 2013, p. 329)

Leiyin's presence as a disembodied soul renders her doubly abject. As a woman and a spectre caught between the liminal space of the human and the non-human, she is rendered abject as she occupies a position of ambiguity and transgression. Although she has yet to discover her spectral abilities, her ghostly existence is threatening in nature as she embodies remnants of the past that could return to impinge upon the present. As explained by Hey (2018), "The abject, though not a physical, tangible object, is the residue of the repressed semiotic material returning from a realm where individual identity was not asserted or understood, a preservation of pre-object relations" (p. 135). In this context, Leiyin, in her spectral form, epitomises the abject semiotic figure who has the disruptive power to collapse and traverse the boundaries that construct the realm of the living. Despite Leiyin's predicament, she is more concerned about the well-being of her daughter, Weilan. She discovers that her in-laws have arranged for Baizhen to marry a young woman called Meichiu and that the Lee family's dowry money is depleting. Therefore, Leiyin is determined to find a way to communicate with her husband to secure Wei Lan's future.

It's more important to find a way to make amends, says my hun soul.  
I'd rather find a way to talk to Baizhen, I snap. The most important thing is to ensure he makes good decisions for my daughter. There's plenty of time for making amends. However, I'm supposed to accomplish that.  
My yin soul looks distressed, and dried lemongrass fills the air. I don't know exactly how much time you have, but it's probably less than you think.  
I think, my hun soul says, that if you manage to communicate with the living, it will lead you to an understanding of how to make amends.

(J. Chang, 2013, p. 344)

The above demonstrates Leiyin's intention to reconnect with her maternal identity, an identity she once attempted to neglect to elope with Hanchin. Unlike her previous self, who acts in her self-interest, Leiyin now assumes the role of a maternal protector who puts her daughter's needs before hers. Leiyin's determination to change the fate of her daughter by penetrating the realm of the living positions her as an abject maternal figure. With this ability, Leiyin continues to follow her daughter around, and in doing so, she discovers that she can enter her daughter and maidservant's dream to communicate with them. However, this is only possible if people dream about her. This gives her hope as this will allow her to finally communicate with Baizhen.

I can enter anyone's dream, but I have to enter my own dream image to be seen and heard. I can only make myself known if people dream about me. Otherwise, I'm as invisible as I am in the real world. One step at a time, says my hun soul. We don't know what use dreams can be to a ghost who needs to get to the afterlife. But perhaps they can be of use to a mother who wants something for her child.

(J. Chang, 2013, p. 363)

As everyone copes with the aftermath of Leiyin's passing, they dream about her, providing a portal to the unconscious for Leiyin to make her presence felt. Leiyin's ability to disrupt the symbolic realm of the living illustrates the power of the abject. As pointed out by Kristeva, the abject cannot be fully eradicated from the symbolic order. Hence, it has the power to disrupt the borders of existence. This perspective is shared by Hey (2018) in his analysis of the abject entity:

The abject and abjected semiotic ghosts occupy the same temporal and spatial frame as the living, and the two worlds infiltrate one another with little difficulty. This serves to demonstrate Kristeva's assertion that the semiotic and the symbolic are inextricably intertwined and that the abject is always already within the symbolic.

(p. 216)

In this context, dreams serve as a semiotic window through which Leiyin can communicate with the living. Using her spectral abilities, she invades the realm of order by relaying messages to the living in an ambiguous space that resists any systemisation. This allows her to influence the people in her family to fulfil her wishes. An opportunity arises when Baizhen eventually dreams about Leiyin. Following her advice, he convinces his mother to let Weilan receive an education. With Meichiu's help, Baizhen gains his mother's approval and seeks help from Leiyin's brother, Tongyin, in finding a suitable tutor for Weilan. In the following events, Leiyin finds herself in the dream of a servant called Fong. She discovers his intention to rape Weilan's nanny, Dali. Leiyin proceeds to inform her old house servant, Kwan, to get rid of Fong before he sexually assaults Dali. Shortly after, Leiyin has a vision of Dali's fate, which leads her to a realisation of how to atone for Hanchin's death. However, she must act fast before her close ones dream of her less or pass away. To avoid this, Leiyin continues to enter people's dreams and do good deeds, causing her souls to glow brighter.

Nonetheless, this effect is short-lived as Leiyin soon experiences an unsettling feeling. She discovers that her brother Tongyin has recommended her childhood friend Nanmei as Weilan's tutor. Leiyin is relieved but soon learns that Nanmei is Hanchin's wife. Nanmei is here to search for the Communist manifesto that Leiyin has hidden for him. Meanwhile, Tongyin is attempting to matchmake Weilan and the pedophilic son of General Cha. Upon entering Tongyin's dream, she discovers that he is a two-faced traitor who is being held hostage by General Cha. To gather information, Tongyin pretended to be on the side of the Communists and sent Nanmei to retrieve the manifesto. Desperate to save Weilan, Leiyin plans to warn Baizhen and the others about Tongyin's true intentions. Fortunately for Leiyin, Nanmei dreams of her. Without hesitation, she reveals the location of the manifesto, warns Nanmei of Tongyin's true intentions, and helps her find the manifesto, which lists Tongyin as one of the traitors.

"Please, Nanmei, repeat back to me what you must write down as soon as you're awake."

"Don't trust Tongyin, he betrayed my husband. Stop him from arranging a marriage for Weilan. Look in the clothing trunk, inside the lid."

"Nanmei," I say, reaching out to her, "please, remember this dream when you wake up."

(J. Chang, 2013, p. 439)

When pushed to a breaking point by symbolic powers, Leiyin associates herself with the semiotic by joining forces with another female Other, Nanmei. Nanmei, who is also a figure of resistance, comes through in Leiyin's time of crisis and acts as a pillar of support. Similarly manipulated by Hanchin and Tongyin for their agendas, Nanmei is also a victim of the heterosexual male narrative. Besides being cheated on by Hanchin, Nanmei is also used by Tongyin to find the hidden manifesto. By agreeing to help Leiyin, Nanmei shows her refusal to comply with traditional conceptions of femininity, that women are passive and obedient. Together with Nanmei, Leiyin forms a bond that is powerful enough to usurp the symbolic figures that subject them to oppression, manipulation, and exploitation. As explained by Aktari (2010):

The semiotic is powerful; the symbolic order can attempt to repress it, but it can never annihilate it. The semiotic has the potential to threaten and haunt the symbolic order by abject entities. Therefore, if the symbolic prefers not to unite with the semiotic in the embodiment of the subject-in-process, then it is possible for the semiotic to assert its power and revolt against the patriarchal and oppressive symbolic order through expressions of rage and hatred. Thus, the semiotic proves that the power of the abject is the "power of horror" for the symbolic order.

(p. 154)

In this regard, the subversion of boundaries is significant as both Leiyin and Nanmei actively orchestrate events on their terms to resist and challenge male dominance. In the end, Leiyin saves her daughter but realises that she cannot move on to the afterlife until she atones for the lives of her brother and Hanchin. Nevertheless, Leiyin feels liberated and relieved as she knows that both herself and her daughter, Weilan, are no longer confined by the oppressive influence of patriarchal figures.

## CONCLUSION

Life has taken many unexpected turns for Leiyin. As a daughter of a family that adheres to traditional values, Leiyin is regarded as an abject that needs social regulation and control. Thus, after being forced to pursue her college education and marry someone whom she does not love, Leiyin decides to reclaim her agency. A chance encounter with Hanchin brings back many repressed memories and feelings, and this drives her to relinquish her maternal role and start a new life with Hanchin. However, her abject desire for Hanchin has led her to experience betrayal and, ultimately, the loss of her life and herself. Leiyin's time in the liminal realm is not spent in vain as she soon realises that there is still a purpose to her existence as she needs to protect her only daughter, Wei Lan, from harmful patriarchal figures and practices. Upon reconnecting with her maternal drives, Leiyin finds meaning again. Not only is she able to make her presence felt, but she is also able to influence the people around her. By making use of her position as the repressed abject, Leiyin returns to disrupt the symbolic world of order by communicating with the living in their dreams. As a result, she is able to alert the people she knows of the impending misfortunes that might befall them and protect her daughter, Wei Lan, from oppressive and manipulative male figures. Leiyin's enduring love for Weilan and refusal to be silenced go against the preconceived notion of the mother as a 'lack,' or as the unspeakable. Her representation as a woman and a mother may have been controlled by her object status, but her discourse, when it is voiced, moves her from the position of an object to a subject. In this sense, motherhood has enabled Leiyin to gain the courage and confidence needed to fight back against existing power structures, which leads her to reclaim her subjectivity again. This substantiates Kristeva's point that the maternal is a

heterogenous realm that includes, rather than excludes, a site where females can access and speak from and, most importantly, a space that enables transformation and new forms of female subjectivity.

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