

Article

Prologue – Life-Writing as a Journey to Myanmar (formerly Burma)

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Abstract

Saving Fish from Drowning, the most recent book of Amy Tan, once came to the 7th position as the best-seller in 2006 (Paperback, Best-Seller). ‘This is the first time Ballantine published Amy Tan in trade paper first; in the past, the publisher did her books initially in mass market, then in trade. It worked – there are 290,000 copies in print after 8 printings... These brought huge turnout and great sales. While previous works of Amy Tan focus on mother and daughter relationship– issues that are more intimate and personal *Saving Fish from Drowning* ‘branches out with a broad plot and dynamic digressions with political motifs. The broad plot itself is intriguing, for it invites readers to engage in an unforgettable experience in expedition to Burma. In the journey to Burma, digressions are dynamic. American tourists are missing one by one. They ‘vanish without a trace in the Burmese jungle. What is so unique about this book is that the tone of the work is “ghostly”. ‘Ghosts are a dominant symbol’, as stated in the news article entitled ‘Bumbling down the Burma Road’. The overall style of the fiction is subversive. A novel based on real-life, this work mocks at the ‘ironies of modern life. How can Amy Tan, a renowned Asian-American writer born in America with the Chinese descent, write the foreigners’ adventure in the largest country in Mainland Southeast Asia in such an exotic way? These paradoxes: ‘East and West, ‘America and China, ‘new and old ‘memory and forgetting, ‘truth and myth’ intertwine, turning the story into an uncanny story. By uncanny, I mean readers will find all these - ‘East and West, ‘America and China, ‘new and old, ‘memory and forgetting, ‘truth and myth’, unfamiliarly familiar. Readers’ attachment to the story and withdrawal from the story makes the story incredibly fascinating. It is such a marvelous journey! As Carol Memmott notes, it is ‘a game of Survival Burma style conflated with adventure, humor, tragedy and politics (Memmott, Carol). This essay will discuss the representation of adventure in Burma and its possible effects upon readers to demonstrate how insightful this masterpiece is.

Keywords:

Amy Tan, Burma, journey, irony, adventure

‘To search for yourself,’ as noted by Professor Zhang as the final reminder, in the last class of the research training course entitled ‘Comparative Approaches in Literary Studies’ (ENG 5720), is a lamp guiding everyone of us in the life-journey.

I have never been to Myanmar, formerly Burma, but I think this book can broaden our horizons¹ by leading us to Myanmar through the process of reading, regardless of whether the details inside the book are true or not. Similar to life-writings that are partially true and partially fictional, this book is a novel based on real-life, drawing us to Myanmar that is both fictional and real. The idea of ‘adventure’ in this work is provoking. It gives me some opportunities to relate my own adventures, such as Exchange experiences, to writing this paper, as well as my thesis². Through various kinds of adventures- fictional and real adventures, I can search for my own “self”. Yes, I love excitements! What fascinate me most are cross-cultural experiences, such as New Zealand and Beijing Exchanges; CUHK and HKU studies; and, English and PuTongHua learning.

My Primary School is a Buddhist Primary School. That is how I got to know all the Buddhist traditions and myths. Readers’ theories, such as Iser’s and Fisher’s, do work well here, as my horizons of reading lie in the cultural baggage.

Myanmar as a tourist attraction and a site for military portrayed in Amy Tan’s *Saving Fish from Drowning* and the fictionalized New Zealand town called Puamahara as a tourist attraction and as the murder scene portrayed in Janet Frame’s *The Carpathians* look alike. The representation of the colonized places in terms of their dual nature can be explored in the cross-cultural, comparative study in order to investigate how the mysteries of the two tourist attractions are constituted. This project on women writers and the representation of post-colonialism can be done further in extension to this paper.

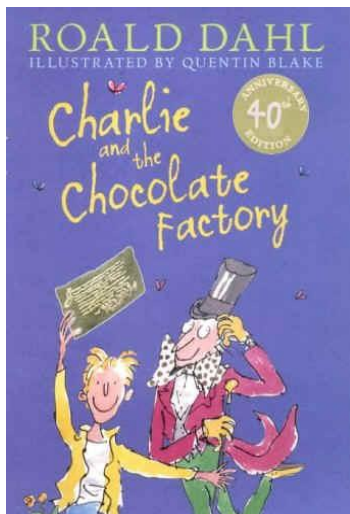
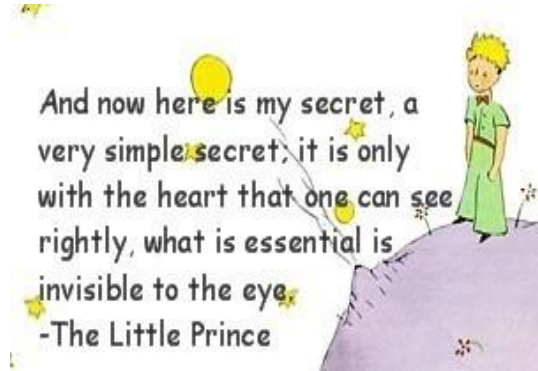
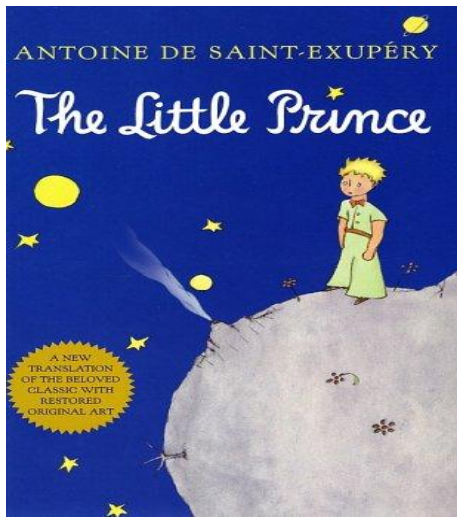
‘Journey’ has been the concept I acquired, since my literary training in high school. Having studied literature in English for more than 10 years, I realize how important literature is, to explore oneself through the life-journey in writing. Therefore, I would like to write this prologue to show how much I appreciate literature, and how literature is relevant to us in reflecting upon human being’s life. Life is a journey. By this opportunity, I would like to thank my beloved, Jebesen Lo (MPhil, Chemistry, CUHK), and all my MPhil teachers, administrative staff and mates for contributing whole-heartedly and meaningfully to such a thrilling adventurous life-journey for me!

Journey as Adventure

‘What is essential is invisible to the eye’:

¹ Literature as a vehicle to broaden our horizons had been said in Professor David Parker’s interview with the Campus Radio on 12 June, 2007 when talking about the English studies. (<http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/eng/highlights/interview.html>)

Love, friendship ...in the quest of the "self"



A New Discovery through Adventure:

The Mystery of 11 missing American tourists in Myanmar (formerly Burma)

Saving Fish from Drowning, the most recent book of Amy Tan, once came to the 7th position as the best-seller in 2006 (Paperback, Best-Seller). ‘This is the first time Ballantine published Amy Tan in trade paper first; in the past, the publisher did her books initially in mass market, then in trade. It worked

– there are 290,000 copies in print after 8 printings... These brought huge turnout and great sales.’³ While previous works of Amy Tan focus on mother and daughter relationship⁴ (**Appendix 1**) – issues that are more intimate and personal⁵, *Saving Fish from Drowning* ‘branches out with a broad plot and dynamic digressions⁶’ with political⁷ motifs. The broad plot itself is intriguing, for it invites readers to engage in an unforgettable experience in expedition to Burma. In the journey to Burma, digressions are dynamic. American tourists are missing one by one. They ‘vanish without a trace in the Burmese jungle.’⁸ What is so unique about this book is that the tone of the work is “ghostly”. ‘Ghosts are a dominant symbol’, as stated in the news article entitled ‘Bumbling down the Burma Road’. The overall style of the fiction is

³ Maryles, Daisy. “Paperback Bestsellers/Trade” in *Publishers Weekly*. 253.48 (12/4/2006) : 15

⁴ ‘I realize I would always be deficient in great feeling. It was because I never had a proper mother while I was growing up. *A mother is the one who fills the heart in the first place. She teaches you the nature of happiness* (Tan, p. 32).’ Bibi Chen, in *Saving Fish from Drowning*, also talks about her mother. Yet, mother-and-daughter relationship is not a key issue in *Saving Fish from Drowning*.

‘Tan says she doesn't know yet whether or not whether she has fully explored her complicated, often difficult relationship with her mother. This new book is not about that kind of relationship, *but Tan says her mother is still a part of it. Bibi Chen, the character, the narrator of this book, is very much like my mother*’ (“Interview: Amy Tan on "Saving Fish from Drowning," a new direction for Tan.” Weekend Edition. Sunday. Washington, D.C.: Nov 20, 2005. pg. 1)

⁵ “Interview: Amy Tan on "Saving Fish from Drowning," a new direction for Tan.” Weekend Edition. Sunday. Washington, D.C.: Nov 20, 2005. pg. 1

⁶ --- “Saving Fish from Drowning.” in *Publishers Weekly*. 252.34 (8/29/2005) : 34

⁷ As Said points out, the distinctive nature of humanists is ‘their *ideological color* as a matter of incidental importance to politics.’ (Said, p. 9)

Saving Fish from Drowning belongs to Oriental studies. Orientalism is rather a distribution of *geopolitical awareness* into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts.... It not only creates but also *maintains*; it is, rather than *expresses*, a *certain will or intention* to understand, in some cases *to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different world*. (Said, p. 12)

⁸ Reese, Jennifer. “Travelers Unchecked” in *Entertainment Weekly*. New York. 846 (Oct 21, 2005) :78

subversive⁹. A novel based on real-life, this work mocks at the ‘ironies of modern life’¹⁰. How can Amy Tan, a renowned Asian-American writer born in America with the Chinese descent, write the foreigners’ adventure in the largest country in Mainland Southeast Asia in such an exotic way? These paradoxes: ‘East and West’¹¹, ‘America and China’¹², ‘new and old’¹³, ‘memory and forgetting’¹⁴, ‘truth and myth’ intertwine, turning the story into an uncanny¹⁵ story. By uncanny, I mean readers will find all these - ‘East and West’¹⁶, ‘America and China’¹⁷, ‘new and old’¹⁸, ‘memory and forgetting’¹⁹, ‘truth and myth’,

⁹ Sources on *Saving Fish from Drowning* as subversive fiction :

Amy Tan: ‘I was always keeping in mind that I needed to *lure* the reader, in the way fiction can be *seductive and subversive*, to a place most of us don't want to go. So my charge was a very simple one: Get people hooked into a story with whatever genre worked-- romantic comedy, adventure, murder-mystery, the whole shebang--and get them to this very dark place and simply get people to remember the country Burma, that it's now called Myanmar, that there are people who are suffering and dying.’ (“Interview: Amy Tan on "Saving Fish from Drowning," a new direction for Tan.” Weekend Edition. Sunday. Washington, D.C.: Nov 20, 2005. pg. 1)

‘The wonderful thing about fiction is it's *subversive*: You can get people into a very repugnant situation through fiction, and comedy is one way to get people to let their defenses down.’ (---. “Deceiver and truth-teller Amy Tan riffs on Myanmar's plight” in John Freeman Special to The Denver Post. Denver Post. Denver, Colo. (Nov 6, 2005) : 15)

¹⁰ Maureen, Neville. “Saving Fish from Drowning” in Library Journal. 130.16 (10/1/2005) : 70

¹¹ Churchwell, Sarah. “Bumbling down the Burma Road” in TLS. 5353 (11/4/2005) : 19-20

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Freud, Sigmund. “The Uncanny” (1919) in Art and Literature. UK: Penguin Books, 1962. ‘The German word ‘unheimlich’ is obviously the opposite of ‘heimlich’ [‘homely’], ‘heimisch’ [‘native’] – the opposite of what is familiar; and we are tempted to conclude that what is ‘uncanny’ is frightening precisely because it is *not known and familiar*’ (Freud, p. 341).

¹⁶ Churchwell, Sarah. “Bumbling down the Burma Road” in TLS. 5353 (11/4/2005) : 19-20

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

unfamiliarly familiar. Readers' attachment to the story and withdrawal from the story makes the story incredibly fascinating. It is such a marvelous journey! As Carol Memmott notes, it is 'a game of Survival Burma style'²⁰ conflated with adventure, humor, tragedy and politics (Memmott, Carol). This essay will discuss the representation of adventure in Burma and its possible effects upon readers to demonstrate how insightful this masterpiece is.

'Saving Fish from Drowning'

The title, '*Saving Fish from Drowning*', literally means that fish is saved from drowning. It is supposed fish is drowning in the sea, and saving fish from drowning in the sea will do fish more good than harm. Yet, if we ponder over the idea of 'saving fish from drowning' deeply, we may realize that fish will eventually die if fish is saved from drowning in the sea. The paradoxical nature of 'saving fish from drowning' prompts readers to reflect upon the battle between the good and the evil. Does it mean that human beings are good simply because they save fish from drowning? Or is it more apt to say that human beings are evil, as they have to kill to fish for the survival of the fittest with the seemingly reasonable justification of 'saving fish from drowning'? Prior to "A Note to Readers", Amy Tan cites the two quotes as epigraph in the prolog. Albert Camus says, 'The evil that is in the world almost always comes of ignorance and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence if they lack understanding.'²¹ What Camus attempts to account for is that what appears to be innocent can be evil, whereas what appears to be intentionally good can be malevolent. Another quote is anonymous. 'A pious man (explains) to his followers: It is evil to take lives and noble to save them... With the money I receive, I buy more nets so I can save more fishes.'²² To take one's lives sounds evil. To save one's life seems noble. This quote states that, in real life, even a pious man explains to his followers that he catches fish with nets for the sake of saving more fishes. Saving more fishes for selling more fish to maintain one's life, according to the pious man, is inevitable. The gloomy cover picture of fisherman saving fish from drowning (**Appendix 2**) seems to suggest that the writer's vision of Burma is not a promising one. Can there be feasible changes in Burma politically, historically and socially so as to envision a better future, like fish being saved from drowning? In fact, saving fish from drowning alludes to Buddhist

²⁰ Memmott, Carol. "Tan's Fish will hook Readers" in USA Today. 11/01/2005

²¹ Tan, Amy. "Prologue" in Saving Fish from Drowning. New York : Ballantine Books, 2006, p. 0

²² Ibid.

myth. Heidi, 1 tourist in Burma, has the impression that Burma is a Buddhist country. She thinks that the Burmese will not kill animals (Tan, p. 169). But what she sees is the bloody carnage of a dead pig (Tan, p. 169). Walter then explains to her that butchers and fishermen there are usually not Buddhist. Even if they are, they approach fish with reverence (Tan, p, 169). They scoop up the fish, and bring them to the shore. ‘They say they are saving fish from drowning²³’. Vera gives out a snort, questioning ‘so there is absolutely no way someone can *sincerely* say they are saving fish from drowning (Tan, p. 171).’ Harry replies, ‘They are drowning on land (Tan, p. 171)’. The paradox of ‘saving fish from drowning’ is ironic though. In Buddhist beliefs, saving fish with the intension of saving fish from drowning is humane. Human beings are obligated to be compassionate towards other creatures. Killing a being is a sin. Saving a being is holy. However, Harry seems to suggest that drowning in the sea and drowning on land make no difference at all for fish. Greediness and selfishness of human beings lie underneath the façade of triumph of rescuing fish. ‘Saving fish from drowning’ does not really mean saving fish, but saving the lives of human beings. It is a satire by which Tan addresses the kernel of Burma. Is Burma fish being saved from drowning, metaphorically speaking?

Bibi Chen recalling her past

Saving fish from Drowning begins with a female narrative recounting events of the past. The old events unfold. Bibi Chen, 63, is a socialite (Tan, p. 2). The way she presents her own story is ‘automatic writing’, an altered state of consciousness, as “Notes to Readers” put it (Tan, p. xi). ‘The truth of Bibi’s story can be found in numerous sources citing the myth of the Younger White Brother, the systematic killing of the Karen tribe, and even the military regime’s ban on reporting losses by its national soccer team.’²⁴ ‘Tan reports that she (discovers) the real Bibi Chen in a spiritualist’s memoir Chen (is) an art maven and socialite in San Francisco whom Tan (knows) briefly.’²⁵ But, she ‘(apologizes) for any glaring inaccuracies, most of which are no doubt (hers), but some may be “Bibi’s”.’²⁶ Bibi Chen’s dead body is first found, as reported on the news. The news tragedy headline is ‘Socialite Butchered in Cult

²³ Tan, Amy. *Saving Fish from Drowning*. New York : Ballantine Books, 2006, p. 169

²⁴ “A Note to Readers”, Ibid, p. xv

²⁵ Caldwell, Gail. “Roads to Burma. In her tale of Americans seeking Wisdom” in *Boston Globe*. Boston: Mass (Oct 16, 2005) : 8

²⁶ Tan, Amy. “A Note to Readers” in *Saving Fish from Drowning*. New York : Ballantine Books, 2006 Tan, Amy. *Saving Fish from Drowning*. New York : Ballantine Books, 2006, p. xv

Slaying (Tan, p. 1)'. Even though she is dead, she recalls her incidents of being drowned (Tan, p. 3), which echoes to the title '*Saving Fish from Drowning*'. Interestingly, a dead woman narrator taking advantage of an altered state of consciousness to record the past is imaginative. In reality, a dead woman cannot tell what happens to her in the future after death, for instance, her funeral (Tan, p. 5), and coffin (Tan, p. 11). According to Tan, 'Bibi Chen is a ghost. She dies unexpectedly and violently just weeks before she's supposed to lead a group of her friends on an art tour of China and Burma.'²⁷ Through the first-person narrative "I", the dead woman enables the readers to experience her past, present, and future. Her spaces of the past, the present, and the future cross-over each other, plunging readers to fall into an amazing life-journey. The journey is not a physical journey, but a spiritual journey, an inner journey to the "self". News reports, Buddhist myths, others' narratives, such as Sweet Ma (Tan, p. 20), fiction, and historical information enrich Bibi Chen's narrative fruitfully. 'In 'a Note to the Reader' at the beginning of the book, Tan claims to have discovered the story of Bibi Chen and 11 American tourists who went missing in Burma in the Archives of the American Society for Psychological Research. Tan also includes a supposed news clipping about the missing tourists. All of this is presented as if it were true, but it is not.'²⁸ The past connected to historical information, news reports and recalling memories of the others; the present presented by the narrator; and the future conceived by the predictable power of the myths overlap with each other. The plot itself is out of sequences or chronological order. This marks one of the features of postmodernism. As Linda Hutcheon in *the Politics of Postmodernism* notes, 'the process of making stories out of chronicles, of constructing plots out of sequences, is what postmodern fiction underlies...'²⁹. The tone of Bibi's narrating events in the past is philosophical, solemn, and nostalgic. It is as if Bibi Chen is reading sutra aloud like a monk, mumbling life and death, leading readers to a state of resurrection or 'rebirth'. Bibi's writing is 'a form of exorcism'³⁰. For example, she evinces her feelings of the self and of the others by allusion to the Buddhist myth of 'The Mind of Others'. She writes,

'But I (sense) others as clearly as I (sense) myself; their feelings became mine. I (am) privy to their secret thoughts: their motives and desires, guilt feelings and regrets, joys and fears, as well as the shades of truth within what they (say), and what they (refrain) from saying. The thoughts (swim) about me like schools of colorful fish, and as people (speak),

²⁷"Interview: Amy Tan on "Saving Fish from Drowning," a new direction for Tan." Weekend Edition. Sunday. Washington, D.C.: Nov 20, 2005. pg. 1

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, UK: Routledge, 1989, p. 63

³⁰ ---. "Saving Fish from Drowning" in Booklist. 102.11 (2/1/2006) : 76

their feelings (drive) through me in a flash. It (is) that shocking and effortless. The Mind of Others- that's what the Buddha would have called it.'³¹

In the second paragraph in the opening of the book, Bibi Chen speaks of her reminiscence of the journey into Burma in the Buddhist traditions. The tone is serious and nostalgic.

"Following the Buddha's Footsteps" is what I (name) the expedition. . It was to have begun in the southwestern corner of China, in Yunnan Province, with vistas of Himalayas and perpetual spring flowers, and then to have continued south on the famed Burma Road. This would allow us to trace the marvelous influence of various religious cultures on Buddhist art over a thousand years and a thousand miles --- a fabulous journey into the past...'³²

Tan historicizes, romanticizes, and beautifies the expedition to Burma in the Buddhist context. Located in Southwestern part of China, Burma, which is surrounded by Himalayas Mountains and spring flowers, appeals to many readers (which will be discussed in details later). It is a fabulous journey into the past. Buddhism existed a thousand years gap and a thousand miles away (Tan, p. 1). The quest of 'a prolonged life', 'immortality' (Tan, p. 45) ... in the Buddhists conventions renders the expedition fantasizing yet fascinating.

The West meeting the East: Burma in the Buddhist traditions

In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, the journey to Burma is the West meeting the East³³. Like Burma, Tiefert (**Appendix 3**)³⁴, known as 'the Roof of the World', is a primitive place in Asia,

³¹ Ibid, p. 36

³² Ibid, p. 1

³³ *East and West* is the autobiography written by Chris Patten, the last governor of Hong Kong. "The West meeting East" has been a profound idea for long, since pilgrimage.

'This a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists and imperial administrators, have accepted *the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point* for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind" destiny and so on. (Said, p. 2-3)

'In the late 17th Century and the early 18th, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz ardently promoted the mutual understanding of the East and the West, and he saw *China as opening up the possibilities of a great civilization beyond the confines of his own* and offering a good remedy for many of the moral and social problems in the Europe of his time.' (Zhang Longxi, p. 31)

³⁴ Tibet is a plateau region in Asia, north of the Himalayas, and the home to the indigenous Tibetan people and some other ethnic groups. With an average elevation of 4,900 metres (16,000 ft), it is the highest region on Earth and has in recent decades increasingly been referred to as the "Roof of the World".

where indigenous Tibetans³⁵ live, appealing to swarms of Western tourists to explore. In the expedition to Burma, in *Saving Fish from Drowning*, 11 American tourists are so surprised to be led by a tour guide, who looks Western, in the Chinese accent (Tan, p. 43). The landscapes, and the Buddhist setting as well as the Buddhist myths the sightseers ‘see’ and ‘engage in’ are apparently fabulous and exotic. For example, ‘(the tourists) are in this gorgeous pagoda with a fantastic gold Buddha³⁶.’ Apparently, Burma in its Buddhist traditions engulfed by nature is well-known as a tourist attraction, especially to the Westerners. The temples (Tan, p. 103), the shrines, various Buddhist myths (Tan, p. 103), the monks, Lijiang as the fabled city of Shangri-La described in James Milton’s *Lost Horizon* (Tan, p. 44), the wheel of life in Buddhism (Tan, p. 153), the Buddha as the Indian son³⁷ (Tan, p. 154), ... gives rise to novelty for Westerners. The East³⁸ is the “Other” in relation to the West. Unknown to the West, Burma, with spectacular Eastern qualities, draws Westerners to experience the Eastern lives in an exotic way. Burma is a land of illusion (which will be discussed), in accordance with Buddhism. Westerners never realize they are distorted by illusions constructed by romanticizing Buddhist myths in the East, until they get into the crux of Burma.

Crossing Borders in Burma

Situated in mainland, Indo China or Southeast Asia, Burma (currently Myanmar) is bordered by the People's Republic of China on the northeast, Laos on the east, Thailand on the southeast, Bangladesh

In the history of Tibet, it has been an independent country³ divided into different countries, and a part of China each for a certain amount of time.

Today, Tibet is part of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in reality and claimed by the Republic of China (ROC) in its constitution^[4] while a small part, according to the PRC and the ROC, is controlled by India.

³⁵ Indigenous Tibetans are ethnic minorities in Tibet.

³⁶ Tan, Amy. *Saving Fish from Drowning*. New York : Ballantine Books, 2006, p. 402

³⁷ Buddha, in *Saving Fish from Drowning* is criticized as an Indian son, ‘famous but desiring none of the rewards’ (Tan, p. 154). ‘Not that all Indian families want such a son (Tan, p. 154)’ reflects the desire of Indian families to own a son to rise above the predicament of poverty in India.

³⁸ Lecture Handout on “Orientalism” and “Some Terms”. ‘The Orient signifies a system of representation framed by political forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and Western empire. *The Orient exists for the West, and is constructed by and in relation to the West. It is a mirror image of what is inferior and alien (“Other”) to the West.*’

on the west, India on the northwest, and the Bay of Bengal to the southwest with the Andaman Sea defining its southern periphery (**Appendix 4**). The physical location of Burma indicates that Burma is bounded by different countries with borders. Crossing borders is a sign of transgression. The eleven American tourists are the first Westerners coming to Burma by crossing the borders of China (Tan, p. 175). Wendy, during the bus ride to Lijiang, sees people on the roads smashing rocks, sharpening her sensibilities about despotic rule (Tan, p. 51). What is so thrilling about crossing the border between China and Burma in entering Burma is that ‘the traces of tribal tenacity, the contradictory streaks of obedience and rebellion...’³⁹ can still be seen, despite the fact that the border between China and Burma has been crossed (Tan, p. 104). While crossing the border into Burma, one can spot the pretty flowers seen from the bus window in China (Tan, p. 151). Beneath the beautiful scenery, AIDS is rampant in China and Burma, especially on the border (Tan, p. 118). In fact, the border between China and Burma itself has historical significance. It is a key location of Japanese and Kuomintang armies. During the Second World War, Japan and China had a terrible fight (**Appendix 5**). The battle was disastrous. Many Japanese died. They were not allowed to openly honor a soldier who tried to kill Chinese. Crossing the border enables the tourists to move forward to Burma.

Burma as the Land of Illusion

Having crossed the border, the tourists succeed in entering Burma, suddenly realizing that an epiphany takes place. Burma is the land of illusion (Tan, p. 154)! ‘The charming religiosity of taking (one’s) shoes off before stepping into a temple⁴⁰’ is a Burmese ritual. There are other traits of the Burmese culture. ‘Along steam-beds, graceful ladies (lean) over huge buckets and (splash) themselves as part of their twice-a-day bathing ritual.⁴¹’ ‘Tiny children (perch) on water buffaloes, having already mastered perfect balance on a furry hump.⁴²’ It is true that many Western tourists would find these customs different from what they are used to have. Westerners are simply different from Easterners. *Differences* do exist in the world. Provided that Westerners are accustomed to the Western culture, the Western tourists would eventually conceive these behavior exquisitely Oriental⁴³. It is as if Westerners

³⁹ Tan, Amy. *Saving Fish from Drowning*. New York : Ballantine Books, 2006, p. 104

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 153

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 186

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ ‘The Orient was almost a *European invention*, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences. ... Americans will not feel quite the same about the Orient, which for them is much more likely to be *associated very differently with the Far East (China and Japan, mainly)*. (Said, p. 1)

are spontaneously drawn to Chinese paintings, Chinese calligraphy, Chinese china, etc. A Western fantasy of “the other” emerges. ‘What is seen in the Western eye as the Orient is only a cultural myth⁴⁴,’ as Zhang Longxi puts it. What is striking though is that when the Western tourists are aroused to have a closer look of these traditional rituals and customs, they find out that what they desire to see is illusive. The Buddhist myths echoed in the stream of consciousness almost leads tourists to a state of hypnosis. Tan writes,

‘It (is) a Chinese kind of Buddhism, which is a bit of this, that, and the other --- ancestor worship, a belief in ghosts, bad fate, all the frightful things. But it (is) not the Burmese version that desires nothing. With our kind of Buddhism, we desired everything --- riches, fame, good luck at gambling, a large number of sons, good dishes to eat with rare ingredients and subtle flavors, and first place in anything and not just honorable mention. Certainly we (desire) to ascend to heaven, the topmost level in the wheel of life. If there is anyone listening with influence in these matters, please know that oblivion has never been high on my list of places to reside after death. Don’t’ send me there! ...

Can you imagine anyone wishing to be obliterated for eternity if there were another choice besides hell? And who can honestly desire nothing ...’⁴⁵

Ancestors, ghosts, fate... are blended into the Buddhist myths, creating a sense of alienation. All the frightful things shock the Western tourists, resulting in sensations of appearance as illusions. Desire and reality conflict with each other. What appears to be desirable cannot be reached at the end. The Buddhist myths in stream of consciousness reinforce the consciousness of tourists. Burma is not a land of desire, to Westerners. Rather, it is a land of illusion, a land that distorts tourists’ perceptions, like the mirage in the desert. With the purpose of trapping Western tourists into the spectacle of a ravishing tourist attraction, Burma is a land of illusion that tourists cannot evade.

Burma: the Heart of Darkness

Poverty, violence, child abuse, illegal drugs trade, ... constitute the reality tourists cannot believe in. The land of illusion is, after-all, an illusion. Social disorder, political turmoil, poor health conditions... show the darker side of Burma. As Edward Said says, ‘There were – and are – cultures and nations whose location is in the East, and their lives, histories and customs have brutal reality obviously

⁴⁴ Zhang Longxi, “The Myth of the Other” in Mighty Opposites: from dichotomies to differences in the comparative study of China from dichotomies to differences in the comparative study of China, Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 51.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 153-4

greater than anything that could be said about them in the West.⁴⁶ In Burma, freedom of speech is not allowed. Henceforth, when the Americans arrive in Burma, they feel that their rights to speak are not in this realm. Their liberation of freedom of speech is strictly forbidden in this space of “the others”. Wendy, one of the American tourists, ‘(wants) to fight for Burmese rights, for democracy and freedom of speech.’⁴⁷ Enclosed by other countries, Burma is not just physically separated from other countries, but is also politically a “closed” country. Why it is a “closed” country probably because it does not want to reveal to outsiders how dark it is in order to preserve the attraction of tourist resort. That is why journalists, the ones who are supposed to report the most updated-news of a country, are prohibited from the country. Tan writes,

‘Journalists (are) prohibited from visiting Burma... Worse, the government there would deny that it detained any political prisoners ... don’t engage in activities that would jeopardize the safety of others.’⁴⁸

The image of journalists being political prisoners detained in Burma is stunning. Similar to China where not all journalists were not allowed to report what they want in the past, Burma does not welcome journalists to tarnish its perfect image of holiday resort. Burma is the “heart of darkness” indeed. One place in Burma is called ‘No Name Place’ (Tan, p. 318). The name ‘No Name Place’ coined is horrifying, like ‘No Name Aunt’ in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warriors*. In Burma, more distressing and depressing stories about Burma from the reports go on. ‘...Memoirs of sacrilege, torture and abuse, one after another.’⁴⁹ Burma is not an ideal land at all. The soldiers shoot, and rape the women (Tan, p. 294). Women scream like piercing pigs (Tan, p. 294). Even the soldiers shoot the Karen (**Appendix 6**)⁵⁰, ethnic groups in Burma and Thailand (Tan, p. 299). Illegal drug trade is common in Burma, since contact on the China side of the border is easier (Tan, p. 185). The gloomy, unpleasant side

⁴⁶ Said, Edward. “Introduction” in *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 46

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 48

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 152

⁵⁰ The *Karen*, self-titled Pwa Ka Nyaw Po or Kayan, and also known in Thailand as the Kariang or Yang, are some languages and many ethnic groups in Burma and Thailand. The Karen make up approximately 7 percent of the total Burmese population of 47 million people.

The Karen have fought for independence from Burma since 31 January 1949. Consequently, 31 January is recognized amongst the Karen as Karen Revolution Day. In 1938 the British colonial administration recognised Karen New Year as a public holiday.

of Burma foreshadows that Burma is doomed to misfortune. Can anybody ‘save (Burma) from (dying)’⁵¹? This let readers to have a deeper thought.

On one hand, Burma is a place of joy and happiness as a holiday resort. On the other hand, Burma is in a state of disorder and chaos. The nature of Burma is dual⁵².

The History of Burma: Colonization

The gay and dark side of Burma constitutes multi-faceted layers of Burma, prompting readers to get into the core – the history of Burma. Burma, like Hong Kong, is a British colony. Since its British colonial rule, the country itself is named as ‘Burma’. Until 1989, the military government changes its name to ‘Myanmar’ and also other names in the country. Linda Hutcheon points out that ‘all history is a kind of literature.’⁵³ She claims that characters and events from known history are all subjected to ‘distortion, falsification and fictionalization’⁵⁴ (Conner, p. 132). By the history of Burma, Burma is fictionalized as Miss Burma by Tan in *Saving Fish from Drowning*, as shown below,

‘Miss Burma is now married to a lunatic despot who has changed her name to Myanmar... The husband is vile and beats his wife. The children have been abused as well, and now they bear scars and are hinging in corners. Poor Miss Burma, the former beauty queen, she would be gorgeous still if it weren’t for the gaunt limbs, the missing eye, the lips mumbling the same babble.’⁵⁵

The country, Burma, is personified as Miss Burma who is married to a lunatic despot. The lunatic despot refers to Britain. Britain, personified as a vile husband, beats his wife Miss Burma cruelly. Violence is suggested in the context of colonization. Before being colonized by Britain, Burma is personified as a gorgeous beauty queen. Burma has abundant

⁵¹ This is the question I come up with from the analogy to the title ‘*Saving Fish from Drowning*’.

⁵² The dual nature of a place can be commonly found in any detective stories, like Graham Greene’s description of Brighton in *Brighton Rock*.

⁵³ Steven Conner. “Postmodernism and Literature” in *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*. UK: Blackwell, 1989, p. 132, cited from Linda Hutcheon

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Tan, Amy. *Saving Fish from Drowning*. New York : Ballantine Books, 2006, p. 154

economic resources, such as raw materials, which tempts Britain to colonize Burma. Sarah Churchwell, in ‘Bumbling down the Burma Road’ comments that

‘Tan's novel, like Orwell's essay, is a satire on imperialism and ineptitude in Burma that not only allegorizes killing animals in its title, but even borrows the reverberating gerund to suggest the perpetual violence of (neo)colonialism.’⁵⁶

In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Tan writes, ‘many Burmese had bad feelings about the British colonists...’⁵⁷ The Burmese resent the British colonists. The “self”, to that the Burmese are referred, is against the “others”. But, to most of the Western world, Burma is an unknown land, an invisible land, an illusion (Tan, p. 156) (as discussed above). An ‘invisible’ land, in the eyes of sightseers, is invisibly visible. Tan writes,

‘Like the Burmese dissenters who (disappear), the country formerly calling itself Burma is invisible to most of the Western world, an illusion. Well, I still call it Burma, so does the U. S. government... But to me, “Myanmar” sounds sneaky, Myanmar, like the twitchy miao-miao of a cat before it pounces on a trapped mouse.’⁵⁸

The sound of the new name of the country Burma ‘Myanmar’ sounds sneaky, according to the narrator (Tan, p. 156). On 18 June 1989, the State Law and Order Restoration Council adopted the name “Union of Myanmar.” This was recognized by the United Nations, but not by the US or UK Governments. In 1997, Burma's ruling military junta announced it was changing its name from the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to the "State Peace and Development Council" (SPDC) in order to make it friendlier (Tan, p. 156). As a matter of fact, it was an image-consulting company based in Washington, B. C. (Tan, p. 156). Image plays an important role in the country Burma, or Myanmar in order to appear friendlier to outsiders. Most Asians have adapted to new names, while Westerners do not even notice history is linked to the names, thinking naming must be a deliberate choice (Tan, p. 157). Burma's political system is military-driven. It remains under the tight control of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the military government led, since 1992, by Senior General Than Shwe. The Burmese military has dominated government since General Ne Win led a coup in 1962 that toppled the civilian government of U Nu. ‘Since the military coup, Burma has been plagued by civil

⁵⁶ Churchwell, Sarah. “Bumbling down the Burma Road” in *TLS*. 5353 (11/4/2005) : 19-20

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 196

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 156

unrest and has often been cited for human rights violations.’⁵⁹ The lives of tourists are at stake (Tan, p. 300). What seems impossible could be possible in Burma. Burma is a “site” for tourists to experience what is impossibly possible. ‘... The tourists may have been imprisoned for unknown offenses to the regime. One of the missing is suspected of being an activist and supporter of Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Su Kyi, the popular leader of the National League for Democracy, who is now under house arrest. In the meantime, tourists in Burma are leaving the country as fast as they can.’⁶⁰ The history of the colonized Burma reflects the political, social, and historical changes in Burma. The political unrest in Burma, during contemporary times, scares many tourists away, as an activist and supporter of Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, the popular leader of the National League for Democracy, is under arrest.

The golden time of Burma : fun, friendly and romantic

Replacing the word ‘Burma’ by ‘Myanmar’, tourists cannot associate the famous glories and beauties of the past of the country with the name of the country. ‘To Western tourists, ‘Burma’ (sound) fun, friendly and romantic.’⁶¹ Burma has its tourism potential (Tan, p. 352). ‘...“Myanmar” (has) been the first name and a more egalitarian one, whereas “Burma” (refers) to the Bamar ruling class.’⁶² ‘The old Burma is the new Myanmar!’,⁶³ everyone in the tour shouts fervently. On January Fourth, the Myanmar officials announced, ‘the unified people of Myanmar proudly celebrate our Independence Day, our liberation in 1948 from British colonial rule.’⁶⁴ Myanmar gained independence in 1948. The transition from the old Burma to the new Myanmar indicates changes the country Burma has undergone. Despite the changes, Western tourists will not fail to remember how fun, friendly and romantic Burma is. Burma becomes part of their unforgettable memories, contributing to their colorful adventurous lives. Many exciting events or activities take place in the tour in Burma.

i) Exotic Luxuries : nature + artificiality = hybrid

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 338

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 330

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 352

⁶² Ibid, p. 352-3

⁶³ Ibid, p. 353

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 355

Enamored of Burma, Phineas sets up his business in Burma in order to earn huge profits.

Tan writes,

‘In Burma, he (starts) a small export business in feather fans, the feathers plucked from the marvelous array of bird found in this tropical land. In short order, his business (includes) other exotic luxuries: elephant-leg stools, stuffed-monkey lamps, tiger-skin rugs... the profit margins (are) high enough to make Phineas a wealthy man again.’⁶⁵

Phineas resorts to creatures from the natural world to creatively start his own business. He turns bird feathers into feather fans; elephant-legs into elephant-leg tools; tiger skin into tiger skin rugs. The exotic luxuries he sells are like those exotic goods that are sold in Gold Coast and Stanley fairs in Hong Kong for foreigners (**Appendix 7**). Natural and artificial elements are combined in the “hybrid” form of the marketable exotic luxuries. These funny products appeal to many foreign tourists.

ii) Ecotourism trips : to become self-sufficient

Not only is Burma fantastic for setting up business for foreign tourists, Burma can also provide ecotourism trips to support its economy. Wyatt, one of the tourists, suggests visitors to join ecotourism trips to which to pay a lot of extra money to plant trees or do research on endangered species. He says,

‘I’ve done guiding on a number of ecotourism trips.... where the clients pay a lot of extra money to plant trees or to do research on endangered species. Maybe they can do something like that here. Get people to come and help them set up ways to become self-sufficient.’⁶⁶

‘To become self-sufficient⁶⁷’ is significant for Burma. Burma is the largest country by geographical area in mainland Southeast Asia or Indochina. Given that Burma has massive natural resources by its landscape, Burma can provide tourists with ecotourism trips to make profits. Boosting tourism by ecotourism trips is one of the advantages Burma can take. To get itself self-sufficient is an ultimate aim or goal in the operation of Burma, which is to help Burma survive.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 284

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 301

⁶⁷ Ibid.
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Identity Crisis of American foreigners in Burma: passports

Such wondrous activities are parallel to dangerous happenings in Burma. In Burma, when a foreigner, having wandered into a restricted zone, shows his/her passport to the military policemen, his/her life can be at risk (Tan, p. 200). A danger signal is alarmed whenever a foreigner trespasses. It is incredibly dramatic to see a foreigner, whose identity is unknown, being killed in Burma. ‘(Harry) (pictures) his mum weeping, saying she always (has) such bad luck, the bad luck to have had a son who (is) killed in Burma in a stupid misunderstanding about a passport.’⁶⁸ To the American tourists, revealing or disclosing the American identity to others in Burma by the passport is always a struggle. Struggling between hiding their identities or not, the American tourists have the dilemma of what to do about their identities in the unknown land Burma. Identity crisis arises. Does showing their identities enable them to get back their own identities in the place not belonging to them or allow others to take over their identities by killing them with violence? Certainly, the passport does not necessarily validate the truthfulness of the American identities. But rather, it signals an invitation of killing. Tan writes, ‘Harry (fumbles) at his pocket. (Is) it good or bad to show an American passport? He (has) read once that in certain countries, it (is) a badge of honor. In others, it (is) an invitation to be shot.’⁶⁹ Killing the foreigners solely because of transgression is terrifying in Burma.

Journey as Life-Journey : Problems and Solutions

The entire journey is a metaphor of life journey replete with problems and solutions. Adventurers put in lots of effort, face challenges, and have to come to terms with the difficulties. Facing obstacles, adventures would immediately question themselves whether they should advance on themselves. The journey itself is full of problem-solving tasks for adventures to tackle. For Heidi, the trip to China makes her stronger. It strengthens her, empowers her, and enlightens her.

‘Taking this trip to China (is) part of her effort to overcome her problems. She (is) determined to throw herself into many unknowns, face situations she’d ordinarily avoid. She (believes) she would be able to handle them, in part because she would be able to handle them, in part because she would be in a completely different country. The unknowns would prove to be nothing, and having survived them, she would be stronger and could return home

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 197.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 196
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practiced at pushing aside her phobia. China would be good for her, really, really good, she (tells) herself.’⁷⁰

Getting lost delays the adventure. Taking a wrong way is digression. Sense of directionless is inevitable in any adventure. A challenging adventure creates fun, excitement and pleasure. For example, some adventures get puzzled once they take a wrong way. ‘... where they had crossed, they were puzzled. Where was the bridge? They must have come down the wrong way.’⁷¹ Due to the danger imposed by military in Burma, sometimes they wonder if they should visit Burma or not. Heidi regrets of having been to an unsafe place, as exemplified in the stream of consciousness.

‘Heidi (sighs). ‘I just wish Bibi (has) told us more about the military here, the bad stuff. I mean, I sort of (know) about it, but I (think) it was a long time ago.’ ... If only someone had warned them. If only they knew that lives were at stake. If, it, if. You see how it was. In their minds I should have provided the information, the arguments, the reasons why it was all right to visit or not...’⁷²

The journey itself is a life-journey fraught with uncertainty, puzzlement, regrets, frustration. Only by determination, perseverance and efforts, one can become more courageous, able to withstand difficulties with strong ‘will power’ in life. Life is a challenge for human beings to reflect upon the existential meanings of life.

Myanmar admitting into ASEAN:

Superstition & Government – the Search of Missing people

Ironically, the life-journey is parallel to Myanmar joining ASEAN. ASEAN is a geo-political and economic organization of 10 countries located in Southeast Asia, which was formed on 8 August 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Since then, membership has expanded to include Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Its aims include the acceleration of economic growth, social progress, cultural development among its members, the

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 139

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 303

⁷² Ibid, p. 300
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protection of the peace and stability of the region, and to provide opportunities for member countries to discuss differences peacefully. The narrator, in *Saving Fish from Drowning*, bears a skeptical mind as to it is a right step for Myanmar joining AEASN. ‘(Has) it been a mistake to admit Myanmar into ASEAN?’⁷³ The rationale behind is that Myanmar can follow China by governing with its own style (Tan, p. 349). The narrator explicitly elucidates her philosophy to argue for Myanmar’s capability to govern itself. It is wrong for Myanmar to join ASEAN.

‘A country (has) to handle its own affairs. China (handles) its affairs. Why shouldn’t Myanmar? China (governs) with its own style. Why should Myanmar be singled out for criticism for doing exactly the same?’⁷⁴

What is so special about Myanmar, according to the narrator, is that ‘even in the higher echelons of the Myanmar government, many believed in Nats, ghosts, and signs.’⁷⁵ Superstitions and government institution do not oppose each other in Myanmar. It is the characteristic of Myanmar that many Myanmar government officials become more and more intuitive and superstitious by relating themselves to the supernatural world. ‘Sixth-sense’ comes from the Eastern superstitious beliefs. Traditional Eastern superstitious ideologies are injected into the government body as part of the Myanmar’s culture. ‘The Shan people around Inle Lake (believe) that angry Nats (have) taken the 11 Americans.’⁷⁶ To rescue them, every effort is being made in the search of missing people amid the world-astounding Buddhist temples.

‘...Every effort (is) being made to find the missing people. The tourism office would be in touch with the military police to create a methodical plan. The world would be shown how hard the warmhearted people of Myanmar (are) seeking the group’s whereabouts --- searching high and low among the 2200 sacred temples and beautiful stupas of Bagan; in the intriguing monastery outside Mandalay, with its world-astounding collection of Buddhist statues.’⁷⁷

In Myanmar, the tourism office has a close connection with the military police to ensure the missing people can be found. Myanmar appears to be a flourishing tourist place, deep inside which, the military police executes plans to indoctrinate its people to control their minds. The people of Myanmar are very warmhearted though. They search among the sacred temples and beautiful stupas in the monastery with its world astounding collection of Buddhist statues. The grandeur of

⁷³ Ibid, p. 349

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 350

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 349

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 331

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 351

magnificent religious setting stirs up a flavored mythical mood, plunging readers to engage in the search of rescuing people contextualized by the traditional Buddhist beliefs of saving one for goodness sake.

Tourism, military, temples and Buddha in Myanmar

Tourism, military, temples and Buddha statues intertwine in Myanmar, intensifying the distinctive, memorable, and monumental nature of Myanmar. The mystery of the missing tourists in Burma is reiterated at the end of *Saving Fish from Drowning*, echoing the beginning of the tale Bibi Chen narrates in flashback. The narrator says,

‘When I died, I thought that was the end. But it was not. When my friends were found, I thought that would be the end. But it was not. And when 49 days had passed, I thought I would instantly be gone, as some Buddhists think a person will. But here I am. That is the nature of ending, it seems. When all the missing pieces of your life are found, put together with the glue of memory and reason, there are more pieces to be found. But I won’t stay much longer. I now know what’s beyond here.... I can’t say more than that, for it should remain a mystery, one that never ends.’⁷⁸

A mystery never ends. From the beginning to the end, 11 American tourists missing in Burma remains a mystery. A mystery is unresolved. The mysterious feeling entraps readers into the psychology of fear and bafflement. The mystery of missing tourists in Burma is recollected by Bibi Chen at the beginning and at the end in *Saving Fish from Drowning*. The infinite sounds emerging from the pursuit of “Zen” – nothingness out of desire - ripples. A mystery begins and at the end goes back to its origin, one that never ends. This kind of narrative of mystery catches the attention of readers, plunging them to fall into the enigma of unresolved mystery.

To conclude, *Saving Fish from Drowning* is a subversive work of Amy Tan. Her writing style has been shifted from mother and daughter relationship to politics. With the ironic, paradoxical nature of the title ‘*Saving Fish from Drowning*’, this book is narrated by a dead woman character Bibi Chen by recalling memories of her past. The Eastern Buddhist traditions in Burma appeal to Western tourists in an exotic way. Bounded by other countries with ‘borders’, Burma allows visitors to transgress the borders to experience what could possibly happen in the borders region through the lens of the borders. Sadly, upon arrival, they find out that Burma is a land of illusion. Social unrest, political turmoil, poverty and poor health, detaining journalists in the prisons ... indicate the darker side of Burma.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 491
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In Burma, torture and abuse prevail. The dual nature of Burma invites readers to get to know the history of Burma, which is Burma as the British colonized country. A military-driven country, Burma experiences historical military changes in military junta. The old Burma is the new Myanmar. Tourists will not forget the glorious past of the old Burma, for Burma provides stalls to sell exotic luxuries made by natural elements for foreigners, and opportunities to start ecotourism trips for self-sufficiency. However, restricted zones in Burma are not safe for tourists. Some American tourists dare not to show the passports to others to risk their lives in an unknown land. Foreigners being killed because of trespassing are victimized. In a nutshell, the journey itself is, metaphorically speaking, a life journey. Satirically, the writer questions the journey itself if it is a mistake to admit Myanmar into ASEAN. Superstitions are instilled into the mind of the Myanmar government. Connected to the tourism office, the military police orders the warmhearted people to rescue the missing tourists who are found to angry the Nats. Tourism, military and Buddhist traditions co-exist in the intoxicating Burma. The mystery of missing people in Burma begins, but never ends at the end. In the quest of the truth, the readers are eagerly to dig deep down into the unending mystery to seek infinitely on-going pleasure.

The journey to Myanmar constitutes “*the best memory*” not only for the rescuers, the victims, and the narrator, but also for the READERS.

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