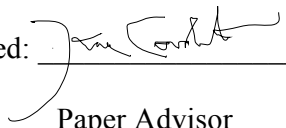


A STUDY OF MULTICULTURAL FEATURES IN THE JOY LUCK CLUB

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Abstract

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Liu Jing

Under the Supervision of Professor Kara Candito

Amy Tan is a distinguished Chinese American writer, who has made a great contribution to Chinese American literature. *The Joy Luck Club* is Tan's first novel which is considered to be her most successful work, and has gained great popularity among readership as well as critics. Through an overall examination of the criticisms on *The Joy Luck Club*, we find that the unique cultural identity is always the focus in Amy Tan's novel from most critics who study the novel from cultural perspectives. Although quite a few critics think that it is a cultural text, most of them only see cultural conflicts between Chinese and American cultures. Few discover evidence of cultural communication in the novel, let alone its multiculturalism. The present thesis is intended to justify that *The Joy Luck Club* is an embodiment of multiculturalism.

The present thesis mainly includes three chapters. Chapter One introduces its research background, research purposes and the significance of the study. Chapter Two concentrates on multiculturalism and Amy Tan's multicultural conception. The United States is an immigrant

country, where there are multiple ethnic groups with different cultural backgrounds. Growing up in such a multicultural environment, Chinese American writers incorporate their multicultural conception into their writings, Amy Tan is an outstanding representative. In Chapter Three, the study of multiculturalism in *The Joy Luck Club* is carried out from perspectives of Tan's narrative strategies, and the theme of the novel. The special narrative language and form are adopted as narrative strategies to construct multiculturalism. Tan's narrative language in the novel is a patois of Chinese and English, which displays the unique cultural identity of Chinese Americans. She writes several short stories in her novel with the ancient Chinese tradition of story telling, which will have all the characters of the stories have the chance to tell their own stories from their own perspective. The central theme of the novel also lends itself to the construction of multiculturalism. The novel focuses on the bitter-sweet mother-daughter relationship between four pairs of mothers and daughters. Mothers and daughters symbolize Chinese culture and American Culture respectively. The relationship between them experiences the process from misunderstanding to understanding which displays the blending and accordance of Chinese and American cultures. To sum up, *The Joy Luck Club* illustrates well Amy Tan's multicultural conception and produces practical significance for the modern world.

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## **Chapter I Introduction**

*The Joy Luck Club* is a well-known American-Chinese writer Amy Tan's representative works. In the novel, she presented to the reader four Chinese immigrant mothers and their daughter. Although living in America, the immigrant mothers cling to Chinese traditional culture. They organize the Joy Luck Club regularly, a weekly meeting of best Chinese friends. Four mothers with their own view of the world, their world view is based on their experiences of life in China. However, the girls from their mothers can not understand the Chinese culture because they are born in America. So the conflicts have been vividly described in this book. As time goes by, after a series of misunderstandings and conflicts, they begin to understand each other. The two generations go into harmony with their efforts of love.

The thesis aims to confirm the multicultural features in *The Joy Luck Club*, it is divided into four major parts: Introduction, The Multiculturalism in *The Joy Luck Club*, Narrative Strategies in *The Joy Luck Club*, Conclusion.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem to be addressed is,

1. What are the remnants of the Chinese cultures presented in *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan?
2. How does the author display the multicultural features by describing the image of Chinese mothers in the novel, especially in the relation with their daughters?
3. What are the narrative strategies in this novel?

### **Definition of Terms**

Diaspora: The term "Diaspora" was initially used in the context of Jewish dispersion after



the Babylonian exile. Bill Ashcroft defines ‘diaspora’ as “the voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands in to a new region” (Ashcroft 2007: 61). However, diaspora is not only a social category; it also refers to the distressing experiences for the new immigrants because of their dislocation of cultures.

Hybridity: The word “hybridity” has its origin from Latin word “hybrida”, referring to the offspring of two plants or animals of different species or varieties according to Concise Oxford English Dictionary (11<sup>th</sup> edition). Later, the term has new meaning in many fields of natural sciences and social sciences. In *The Location of Culture* written by Postcolonial Theorist Homi Bhabha, he develops the notion of hybridity that “all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity” (Rutherford, 1990: 211). Consequently, hybridity has a dual-dimensional transitional space that “gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Rutherford, 1990: 211). Therefore, hybridity has been filled with significance in the process of minority identity formation.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to the multicultural features in Joy Luck Club written by the second or third generations of Chinese immigrants in America.

### **Significance of the Study**

Specifically, the study means to explore the methods of the harmonious coexistence of Chinese and American culture from the Joy Luck Club.

### **Delimitation of the Study**

The research will be conducted in and through the library at the South-Central University for Nationalities and Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO, Academic Search Elite and

Google/Google Scholar as the primary sources. Key search topics included “cultural difference”, “cultural blending”, “high-context culture” and “low-context culture”.

### **Methodology**

Read the related thesis and draw some conclusion from that. Meanwhile, a brief review of literature on the influence of American culture on Chinese American first- and second-generation immigrants was conducted. Another review of history on the traditional Chinese style of storytelling was conducted. The findings were summarized and synthesized.

## Chapter II Multiculturalism in *The Joy Luck Club*

With the increasingly frequent communication between different cultures in modern times, most of the western world turns into a multicultural society, the United States is a typical example.

Based on this, many ethnic minorities in America are entitled to reclaim their cultural heritage, including Chinese Americans. Growing up in such a multicultural environment, Chinese American writers combine their multicultural conception into their writings, most of them are influenced deeply by the essence from both Chinese and American cultures and then hybridize them with each other. Amy Tan is one of the initiators. Tan's bicultural identity inspires her writing instead of interfering with her ways of thinking. In her novel, we can see the different traditions and cultures.

In the story of Rules of the Game, Waverly has great gift in playing chess in her early age. She defeated many opponents and won the game a lot. In playing chess, she “discovered that for the whole game one must gather invisible strengths and see the endgame before the game begins”(94)

“Wise guy, he not go against wind. In Chinese we say, come from South, blow with wind—poom! – North will follow. Strongest wind cannot be seen”(89)

That is the core of traditional Chinese culture, and Waverly is influenced by it a lot, even when she grows up to be a lawyer, she still adopts the art of this “invisible strength”.

As many Chinese Americans, Amy Tan is raised between two cultures. She has grown up “in a kind of ethnic limbo, belonging by heritage to a culture and homeland in which [she is a] stranger, yet living and maturing in a culture that persisted in viewing [her] as Other, as alien and marginal.” (Huntley, 1998:26) In this “paradoxical condition”, she is bicultural yet alienated

from both cultures.

She has a typical immigrant experience: “at home, she was an uneasy Americanized teenager at odds with the expectations of her traditional Chinese parents; at school – where she frequently was the only Chinese student in her classes – she was the Asian outsider who looked different from everyone else in the predominantly white American world.” (Huntley, 1998:26)

When reading *The Joy Luck Club*, we can easily find Chinese and American cultures have the equal position, without one privileging over the other. “Commentary is juxtaposed with memory, fable with history, Pidgin English with California-speak, American culture with Chinese tradition, past with present in a collision of stories and voices and personalities.” (Huntley, 1998:19) Such juxtaposition challenges the binary opposition which defines the west and the east as superior versus inferior, highly developed versus underdeveloped.

There are four mothers in the novel who are in San Francisco. They build up the Joy Luck Club because of their miseries in China and their dissatisfactions in America. Before the mothers came to America, they have suffered a lot of miseries in China, which made them try hard to come to the United States with all their good wishes. They place all their hopes on America, because they believe that “you could be anything you wanted to be in America.” (Tan, 1989:132) However, when they arrive in the new country, they encounter all kinds of culture shocks in their lives. They are inevitably silenced by the dominant society and trapped in “the border”. The mothers, just as Amy Tan describes in the prelude fable, “[forget] why [they have] come and what [they have] left behind.” (Tan, 1989:17) Due to the immigration policies at that time, the mothers cannot tell or share their stories with their fragile English and have to keep their “unspeakable tragedies” to themselves. On such miserable occasions, it is too hard for them to survive alone, so they built up a club to gain comfort and support from each other. The Joy Luck

Club, a new form of community, is a shelter for them to help each other to go through between Chinese and American cultures. Through it, Amy Tan intend to build a mechanism for “the making of Chinese American culture,” (Michael, 2006) providing a way of cultural negotiation for both generations of Chinese Americans, and the members’ investment activities.

The traditional Chinese families advocate Confucians which centers on the hierarchies of power and patrilineage structure. However, in the Joy Luck Club, the four Chinese immigrant families have no biological relationship with each other. They get together each week just to play mah jong and talk about investment. The kinship stems from their “similar circumstances, proximity, friendship, support, and nurturance” (Michael, 2006) It is a democratic community. In the club, everyone is equal, there are no differences between men and women. Being American immigrants, they are normally marginalized which stimulates a great desire in these immigrants to survive physically and mentally. That is no wonder to see the equal rights among men and women in the club, while in the past men used to be prior to women in the country of patrilineage structure.

The club provides a place of cultural negotiation for both the first-generation and second-generation of Chinese Americans. For the mothers, the club offers them “a link to the life that [they have] left, with the homeland that [they] will never see again.” (Huntley, 1998: 58) In the club, mothers can hold on to the elements of Chinese culture so that they are not culturally rootless after immigration. They can preserve their Chinese heritage by sticking to Chinese customs and rituals; they can communicate freely and share their past stories with each other; they can share the idea of teaching their American daughters; more importantly, they can provide their daughters with an entity to develop their Chinese character which they consider as the best. The daughters also benefit a lot from the club. They once dislike the Club that it is only “a

shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war,” (Tan, 1989: 28) but gradually they are aware of the good to them. It offers them “a familial, familiar, nurturing space within which they can negotiate their difficult positions as Chinese American women.” (Michael, 2006) In the club there are Chinese-born seniors and American-born juniors who are under the similar circumstances with the daughters. All these members can help the daughters negotiate their bicultural identities for they are all caught between two different cultures. As a result, the daughters can get spiritual support from the community whenever they need help.

Another important plot to display the combination of Chinese and American cultures is their participation in the stock market. They believe the name of the club can bring them a good luck because in the stock market, each investor desires for “joy”, namely, profit, which relies on their “luck” to some extent.

Within the Joy Luck Club, cultural negotiations take place all the time, which promotes the shape of Chinese American culture. By creating the club, Tan empowers the characters to struggle against the dominant white culture and produce their unique Chinese American culture which contributes to the multicultural society.

### Chapter III Narrative Strategies

As a representative of Chinese American writer, Amy Tan creates her distinct narrative strategies. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the Chinese immigrant mothers are all speaking imperfect English, which makes the story seem real and vivid, especially talking with Chinese accent. When writing the trifles of these four immigrant families, narrative language plays an important role in the novel. For example, mothers and daughters can not communicate in the same language. Every time when the daughters speak to their mothers in English, the mothers normally answer them in Chinese. In the story of the Voice from the Wall, Lena recalls,

My mother was from Wushi, near Shanghai. So she spoke Mandarin and a little bit of English. My father, who spoke only a few canned Chinese expressions, insisted my mother learn English. So with him she spoke in moods and gestures looks and silences and sometimes a combination of English punctuated by hesitations and Chinese frustration: ‘Shwo buchulai’ – Words cannot come out. So my father would put words in her mouth (106).

Just because of the lack of common language, it is difficult for them to communication without any barriers. The daughters often laugh at their mothers’ imperfect English, as the result, the mothers are unwilling to share their thoughts and secrets with their daughters any more later on. We also can see a lot of Pinyin in the novel, mostly spoken by the mothers. This is quite normal for the mothers since when they immigrated to America, they were already adults, and it was hard for them to grasp a new language. It is natural for them to use some Chinese Pinyin when they try to speak English with their family members. On the other hand, it is not easy for the mothers to find the exact replacement for the Chinese traditional elements in English, so Pinyin is used in order not to lose the original meaning of some words. For example, in order to

help her daughter Lena from the empty life, Ying-ying tries to turn herself from a “ghost” into a “tiger lady”. “I must tell my daughter everything. That she is the daughter of a ghost. She has no *chi*. This is my greatest shame. How can I leave this world without leaving her my spirit”(252)? The *chi* Ying-ying refers to perhaps is difficult to translate completely into English. What’s more, with the Pidgin English, the novel gains some unique artistic flavor.

The narrative skill of *the Joy Luck Club* is also a good combination of the east and the west narrative strategies. In the novel, Amy Tan introduces a narrative strategy to foreign readers, which is based on the narrative form of the novel in ancient China. In the past, the stories were normally very long, and the speaker used to divide it into several parts and told one on every occasion. In order to make the story easier for the audience to understand, a title or a subtitle was often given first. Each of the title often consisted of two parallel sentences, which contained about similar number of words and revealed the summary of the part. Like traditional Chinese novels, *The Joy Luck Club* also adopts the same narrating style. There are sixteen stories in the novel, and there is a short passage with a title at the beginning of each story. But Amy Tan makes some changes in the way of narrating. In the traditional Chinese novels, there was often only one storyteller while there are eight in *The Joy Luck Club*. In traditional Chinese novels, each part was ended with a suspension or at a critical point, in order to arouse the audience curiosity and follow the storyteller to find out what will take place in the next part, whereas in *The Joy Luck Club*, each story is independent, and each chapter focuses on different characters.

The narrative structure of *The Joy Luck Club* also reflects that concept of balance and harmony. There are four sections in the novel, each consisting of four stories. Apart from the first and last stories, in which Jing-mei tells stories instead of her mother, the rest stories are arranged by the structure of daughters’ stories being surrounded by stories of mothers. The



structural arrangement itself reveals the concept of balance and harmony. When Jing-mei and her sisters look at the photo of themselves, Jing-mei realizes that her mother is in the composite of the three sisters: “Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish” (288).

Shear reached conclusion that in this case family reunion is one way to know more about Chinese culture in the mainland as a real Chinese, but the returning implies more for her although there are more actual barriers to handle, such as geography, politics and cultural differences.

Chinese traditional storytelling is not only the way Amy Tan uses to depict the lives of the mothers and daughters, but also the way for Chinese immigrants to educate their children who were born in America. Linda Ching Sledge once pointed out that the talk story “served to redefine an embattled immigrant culture by providing its members immediate, ceremonial access to ancient lore” (Linda 1994: 67); it also “retained the structure of Chinese oral wisdom (parables, proverbs, formulaic description, heroic biography, casuistical dialogue)” (Linda 1994, 68). In the novel, Amy Tan makes the mothers share their histories by storytelling. For them, it is a good way to keep their past alive in their memory by storytelling, relating their past to their present. Storytelling is also a good way to introduce Chinese culture to their children who might encounter cultural shock in children’s growth. By telling the story of their own, the mothers can teach their own lessons to their children, warning and educating their children. They also give advices according to their past miserable experiences in China by storytelling. In the novel, Ying-ying advises her daughter Lena to get rid of passivity and submissiveness by sharing her own sufferings and bitterness, thus it is also a way of conveying love and pride. At the same time, the mothers hope these stories can teach them to respect their Chinese ancestors and

Chinese history as well.

In addition, Amy Tan also writes *The Joy Luck Club* in multiple perspectives. There are eight narrators in the novel. Both mothers and daughters tell stories about their own lives from their own perspectives. In this way we not only get to know about their lives, but also their thoughts which might lead to the conflicts and misunderstanding between the mothers and the daughters later on. Amy Tan is good at writing in multiple perspectives. She combines relatively independent stories of different characters into a coherent whole. From the narration of different perspectives we know the characters and plots better. Amy also makes these Chinese-American women of the novel be the insiders and the outsiders at the same time by this perspective. Since the mothers and daughters have totally different cultural and educational background, they tend to solve problems in different approaches. By this narrative way, the author can create the characters and extend informational content of the novel in an all-round way, which can make the reader understand the characters more deeply and get involved into the stories more easily. From aesthetic perspective, multiple perspectives can create the third-dimensional feelings and strengthen the impact of art. In addition, it is easy for readers to learn about the dilemma of the author between two identities. Amy Tan not only gets familiar with Chinese culture from her mother, but also advocates American modern ideas. She skillfully makes use of both the advantages of first narrative and third narrative.

There are more examples on other western techniques in the novel. Each narrator in the novel is in the state of equality, there is no explicit boundary between each story, and related stories can also be independent from each other. This narrative skill not only breaks the traditional constraints on time and space, but also builds a circular structure with monologue. The stories often happen without a certain order, the time varies between 1940s, 1960s and

1970s, while the space drifts between China and America, between mothers and daughters. These narrative skills are affected by fragmented narrative style of post-modernism. Moreover, Amy doesn't adopt the traditional linear frame of development, conflicts and climax, but combine the variety of fragments into a synthetic whole. From Amy's writing we can see it is feasible to show the marginal, drifting and hesitant position of Chinese American in one novel.

From the narrative skills of combining storytelling and multiple narratives, Amy Tan voices ideas from different viewpoints, creates the history of Chinese American women and forms a third-dimensional narrative structure. As a writer grown up between two cultures, she often came up with some ideas seemingly contradictory, which can help people reflect from different perspectives. To sum up, *The Joy Luck Club* is textual collage with many fables and stories. Another difference from the traditional narrative is women can utter their stories by storytelling. Besides, the novel has a balanced structure, which reveals the emphasis of Chinese value on balance and harmony.

## Chapter IV Conclusions

As multiculturalism has been accepted as a norm in America, American people have come to realize the diverse origins of their culture. As a branch of Asian American literature, Chinese American literature has received more attention recently. Amy Tan can be the representative of the current Chinese American writers in America. Although they were born and brought up in America, got education in the American mainstream culture, it is difficult for them to get rid of Chinese cultural genes. Two different cultures and traditions were carried on by Chinese American writers. In the conflict between Chinese and American cultures, Chinese American literature is the way for them to seek cultural identity.

In her novel *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy starts with the conflicts between mothers and daughters and ends with the reconciliation which, in fact, reflects the compromise between two cultures and two generations.

The expectation of Amy Tan for the combination of two cultures expresses her unwillingness to give up and disguise Chinese cultural identity. In her works she just want to express the information of eliminating cultural identity opposition and realizing communication and peaceful coexistence of the global multiculturalism. Changing from collision to combination for Chinese and American cultures is the common wish for most Chinese American writers including Amy Tan.

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