

Chinese and American Cultural Conflict and Reconciliation Reflected in *The Joy Luck Club*

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Abstract: *The Joy Luck Club* is Chinese American writer Amy Tan's most outstanding novel. It is also one of the most important literary works in the history of Chinese American literature. It mainly tells about the stories of two generations of Chinese American women. In this novel, Amy Tan has discussed the issues about Chinese American's cultural identity, as well as the cultural conflicts and the reconciliation. This paper firstly talks about the cultural background of the development of Chinese culture in American society. Then it analyzes the cultural conflicts and reconciliations reflected in this novel, and it reveals the cultural significance of the stories. It finally draws a conclusion that this novel has provided us with a new vision which can help us to better understand the interrelationship between Chinese and American cultures. With the development of human culture and society, Chinese and American cultures will become more harmonious in the future.

1. Introduction

Since the 18th century when the first group of Chinese people arrived in America, the communication and conflict between Chinese and American cultures had begun. For centuries, Chinese Americans had struggled and suffered while trying to integrate themselves into the American society. During this process, they had been oppressed and marginalized by the American mainstream society, and they were always confronted with the issue of cultural identity. Those experiences have later become one of the major focuses of Chinese American writers, especially the writers in late 19th century. In their works, they have paid special attention to the cultural conflict between Chinese and American cultures. They have deeply discussed the marginalized cultural situation of Chinese Americans during their time.

Amy Tan is one of the representatives among those writers. She was born in an immigrant Chinese family in the year of 1952 in Oakland, California. Her father was a Baptist minister who moved to the United States because of the Chinese Civil War in 1940s. Her mother came from a rich family in China. Tan is a typical American-born Chinese, who has received the education both from the Chinese family and the American educational system. Most of the American-born Chinese have a big problem in successfully assimilating themselves into the American community. On the one hand, they are true Americans because they were born and grew up in the United States. On the other hand, they cannot ignore the fact that they are always considered as minorities by the American mainstream society. The cultural conflicts are obvious in their lives.

Amy Tan had a difficult relationship with her mother, partly because of the cultural misunderstanding. She probably could not fully understand her mother until she learned about her mother's previous marriage in China. Tan went to China with her mother in 1987 and met her three half-sisters. This has become the basis of her writing of *The Joy Luck Club*.

The Joy Luck Club is Amy Tan's first and most outstanding novel, which was published in 1989. It mainly contains four different sections with sixteen interlocking stories. By using a unique narrative technique, Tan has shown the life experiences of four Chinese immigrant mothers and their daughters in this novel. Those stories have revealed the cultural conflict between Chinese and American cultures. They have also shown the author's ideas about the reconciliation between the two cultures.

2. The conflicts of Chinese and American cultures

2.1 The binary opposition between cultures

In *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said once pointed out that “The Orient was almost a European invention”, and the Orient is “also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies...and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” ^[1]. The term “orientalism” is actually a political concept, which shows the prejudice of the western countries against oriental countries. Under the power of the dominated discourse in countries like the United States, the binary opposition between Chinese and American cultures is inevitable. The conflict between the two cultures therefore occur. This kind of ideology makes the Chinese Americans suffer a lot. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the relationship between mothers and daughters can be seen as a good example of cultural dilemma faced with the Chinese Americans.

In this novel, “the Joy Luck Club” was started by four Chinese immigrant mothers, namely Suyuan Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong and Ying-ying St. Clair, to play Chinese mahjong and get some fun and relax. At the very beginning of the novel, Suyuan’s daughter Jing-mei Woo was asked to take her mother’s position in the game after her mother’s death. Before that, Jing-mei knew little about her mother’s life and experiences. Suyuan once told Jing-mei about her early life in China, but Jing-mei thought it was nothing but a Chinese fairy tale. What’s more, Jing-mei even consider the Joy Luck Club as “a shameful Chinese customs, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war” ^[2]. This is a good example of the daughters’ misunderstanding about their mothers due to the cultural differences. It also acts as a symbol of cultural conflict. Just as she said, “my mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other’s meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more” ^[2]. This kind of misunderstanding is quite common among the four daughters’ life.

Some critics point out that one of the major themes of the novel is the communication gap between mothers and daughters. They think that one of the reasons why the communication gap occur is that the mothers come from a high context culture, while the American-born daughters come from a low context culture. They actually have different ways of thinking and expression. That is to say, Chinese and American cultures are binary opposite, and the binary opposition has caused many problems and misunderstandings between mothers and daughters.

Similar things can also be found in the other daughters’ life. Waverly Jong, daughter of Lindo Jong, was once a talented chess player when she was a child. She had won the championship in a competition. After that, her mother Lindo always tried to grasp every opportunity to show off in the neighborhood. Lindo’s behavior made Waverly have a strong feeling of disgust. She once said to her mother, “why do you have to use me to show off? If you want to show off, then why don’t you learn to play chess.” ^[2]

This is a reflection of the binary opposition between Chinese and American cultures. Here, the relationship between mothers and daughters can be seen as the relationship between the Other from the oriental world and the Subject from western society. Under those circumstances, the mothers acted as the Other, while the daughters are the Subject who dominate in their relationship. In this novel, the mothers cannot speak fluent English, and some of their behaviors are considered as “bad habits” by their daughters according to the mainstream American culture.

This phenomenon lead to the long-term misunderstanding of the daughters against their mothers. The misunderstanding caused various conflicts. The daughters always look down upon their mothers and do something to confront them. As a result, they cannot have a harmonious relationship with their mothers.

It is reasonable to consider the mothers as the symbol of Chinese culture and the daughters as the symbol of American culture. The misunderstandings and conflicts between them are the authentic reflection of the cultural conflicts in the United States. And this is almost unescapable for every Chinese American.

2.2 The loss of cultural identity

Another reflection of cultural conflict is the difficulty in building their independent cultural identity. For most Chinese Americans, it is quite essential to establish an independent cultural identity so that they can successfully integrate themselves into American society. However, the four daughters in this novel have not succeeded in doing so. The cultural conflict seems severe in their lives. For many years, they are living under a cultural dilemma. They have been struggling against it. But because of the influence of both Chinese and American cultures, some of them may feel confused. In this process, their cultural identity is lost.

In the novel, Suyuan Woo once told Jing-mei that she could be any kind of person she wanted to be in America. With this hope, Suyuan had been trying hard to cultivate her daughter to become a prodigy. Jing-mei learned to play piano when she was a child. Suyuan thought Jing-mei could be able to succeed, but Jing-mei didn't do well in a piano contest. Jing-mei eventually gave up. According to her, "I did not believe I could be anything I wanted to be. I could only be me."^[2]

As an American-born Chinese, Jing-mei has been educated under the mainstream American culture, which pays more attention to people's independence. Suyuan wants her to be an obedient daughter so as to work hard and become successful. Jing-mei does not want to follow her mother's instructions without her own independent thoughts. As a result, she has done a lot of things to disappoint her mother. The cultural conflict actually prevents Jing-mei to establish an independent cultural identity as a true American. It is one of the barriers for Chinese Americans in American society.

Racial discrimination is also a problem. An-mei Hsu felt disappointed when her daughter Rose Hus started to date an American doctor named Ted Jordan, because Rose's older sisters only dated Chinese boys before they got married. As American-born Chinese, it seems that Rose's older sisters have never get into a complete American community.

When An-mei warned her that Ted is American, Rose immediately responded that she is American too. Rose considered herself as an indigenous American, having nothing different from the other white Americans. Obviously, however, this cultural identity has not been accepted by the mainstream American society. When Rose took part in Ted's family reunion as his girlfriend, she got a heavy strike from Mrs. Jordan. "She assured me she had nothing whatsoever against minorities...But Ted was going to be in one of those professions where he would be judged by a different standard, by patients and other doctors who might not be as understanding as the Jordans were. She said it was so unfortunate the way the rest of the world was, how unpopular the Vietnam War was."^[2] Rose has always been working hard to become a true member of the American society, but it seems that in the white Americans' eyes, she is just a member of the minority group who came from Asia in history. Whether she is Chinese or Vietnam, it is not a matter at all. It is a common cultural phenomenon in American society. After so many years of struggling, Chinese Americans are still confronted with great cultural identity crises in America.

3. The reconciliation between Chinese and American cultures

3.1 The reconciliation between mothers and daughters

In the latter part of *The Joy Luck Club*, we can see the final reconciliation and understanding between mothers and daughters, which is quite touching. The fact that the daughters gradually begin to understand their mothers' ideas and thoughts in the end is quite significant and worth being discussed.

One of the examples can be found in Jing-mei's life. she is the most important character in this novel, who has been struggling against her mother's typical Chinese cultural concept and ideas since her childhood. Because of those cultural differences, Jing-mei suffers a lot and always acts as a rebellious girl. However, after her mother's death, when she had to take her mother's place in the joy luck club to play mahjong with the other three mothers, she began to learn more and more about her mother's life experiences. That becomes the basis of her understanding about her mother. She began to think about the meaning of the "life's importance"—the necklace her mother gave her, and finally

decided to go to Shanghai to meet her half-sisters. In the last part of the novel, Jing-mei went to China with her father to see her two half-sisters. This is her first visit to China, and it is quite significant. “She knew all about genetics. There was no doubt that in her mind, whether I agreed or not: Once you are born Chinese, you cannot help but feel and think Chinese”^[2]. When Jing-mei left Hongkong border and entered Shenzhen on the train, she finally understood her mother. For so many years, she didn’t even know what Chinese meant to her. At that moment, she thought that she was becoming Chinese. This is a description of an American-born Chinese woman who came to China for her own “root” and identity, and this is also a reconciliation between the daughter and her mother.

Similar examples can also be found in the other daughters’ life in this novel. Rose Hsu always considered that “Chinese people had Chinese opinions. American people had American opinions. And in almost every case, the American version was much better”^[2]. However, when some problems happened in her marriage with Ted, she gradually realized that “there was a serious flaw with the American version. There were too many choices, so it was easy to get confused and pick the wrong thing”^[2]. This shows that she finally began to understand and accept Chinese culture. Rose was encouraged by her mother An-mei to “speak up”, as a result, she began to face with the problems in marriage bravely and actively. With the help of her mother, she eventually got rid of the unhappy marriage.

Those are clear reflections of the reconciliation between mothers and daughters. As time goes by, after the daughters have suffered a lot in their life, all of them actually reconcile with their mothers.

3.2 The cultural significance of mother-daughter relationship

In *The Joy Luck Club*, mother-daughter relationship is one of the most important focuses. The conflicts and misunderstandings between two generations clearly show the cultural conflicts between Chinese and American. Therefore, the reconciliation between mothers and daughters embodies important cultural significance.

In this novel, Amy Tan has successfully shown the collision and conflicts between Chinese and American cultures by telling the stories of the two generations. Meanwhile, she has also expressed her wishes to establish a harmonious relationship between eastern world and western society, so that the absolute binary opposition of the two against each other can be eliminated. From this point of view, we can say that this novel undertakes significant cultural meanings. It also provides us with a new vision by which people can solve the problems caused by cultural conflicts in a better way.

4. Summary

Amy Tan’s novel *The Joy Luck Club* is a significant work in Chinese American literary history. By the stories of the eight Chinese American women, this novel not only provides us a vivid description of the living condition of Chinese American, but also discusses the cultural conflicts and the final reconciliation between two cultures. By discussing the cultural conflicts and reconciliation reflected in this novel, we can get a new idea about cultural differences. With the development of the world’s different cultures, Chinese and American cultures can become more harmonious in the future, which will become an important part of the development of human civilization.

References

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