



عضو أكاديمية البحث العلمي والتكنولوجيا بالقاهرة

***Chinese-American Cross-Cultural
Communication Through Contemporary
American Fiction: The Joy Luck Club as an
Illustrative Example***

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Chinese-American Cross-Cultural Communication Through Contemporary American Fiction: *The Joy Luck Club* as an Illustrative Example

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify the most salient issues that relate to Chinese-American cross-cultural communication as illustrated by the different major characters in Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club*. This is done based on reviewing the available literature related to the *Joy Luck Club*, the novel and movie version, and based on the critical literary analysis of the major elements of fiction as they relate to the novel. The very nature of contemporary American fiction has certainly changed. Asian-American literature along with other kinds of ethnic literature have become a fundamental part of general modern American literature. This has recently been encouraged by efforts to promote cross-cultural awareness in light of modern advances in technology and under the world-wide spread of globalization.

Keywords: *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan, Cross-cultural communication, Asian literature, Cross-cultural awareness.

1. Introduction

The Joy Luck Club is a story focusing on eight major characters-four mothers and their four daughters. The mothers are four Chinese/American immigrants named Su Yuan, Lindo, Ying Ying, and An Mei, and the daughters are June, Rose, Lena, and Waverly. The story reflects the lives of the four mothers during their early adulthood and the lives of the four daughters who are in early adulthood (Huntley, 1998). *The Joy Luck Club* is a friendship started by the four mothers, spans over a 30-year period.

Set in present-day San Francisco, "*The Joy Luck Club*" focuses on a group of four elegant, late-middle-aged Chinese women who, since arriving in America just after World War II, have gathered together once a week to play mah-jongg. The philosophy behind this gathering of survivors was to celebrate the passing of each week as if it were a New Year; to eat and laugh and tell their

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best stories in an attempt to restore their spirits and resist the grip of poverty and hardship. (Hinson, 1993) .

In the beginning of the novel June, who has just lost her mother Su Yuan to an aneurysm, is asked by her mother's friends to take Su Yuan's place in their Mah Jong foursome and their Joy Luck Club. The family is having a going away party for June who has just found out she has older twin sisters and she is going to China to visit them.

The twin's do not know about June. June's mother recently died and the sisters are unaware of her passing. Later, June accuses Su Yuan of killing her babies (the twins) in China.

The Joy Luck Club, was published in early spring in 1989 by G. P. Putnam's Sons and presents a story of four Chinese women and their American-born daughters.

The Joy Luck Club was a critical and a popular success. Over 2,100,000 copies were sold, Tan received \$1.32 million for the paperback rights, and it has been translated into eighteen languages--including Chinese.

The Joy Luck Club (1989) is a best-selling novel written by Amy Tan. It focuses on four Chinese American immigrant families who start a club known as "*The Joy Luck Club*," playing the Chinese game of Mahjong for money while feasting on a variety of foods.

In 1993, the novel was adapted into a feature film directed by Wayne Wang. *The Joy Luck Club*, presents the stories of four Chinese-immigrant women and their American-born daughters. Each of the four Chinese women has her own view of the world based on her experiences in China and wants to share that vision with her daughter. For example:

The women often come across as noble, self-sacrificing victims instead of courageous and resilient survivors. Listening to their tales of woe, you feel that they are all blameless; that their suffering was imposed from without -- usually at the hands of men. Even if one of the mothers kills her baby, she can take comfort in the fact that she was driven to this extreme by a brutal, philandering husband. It is in this way that the events of the film all too often appear contrived to fit the pattern of feminist ideology (Hinson, 1993) .

The daughters try to understand and appreciate their mothers' pasts, adapt to the American way of life, and win their mothers' acceptance. Regarding this particular issue, Hinson (1993) states:

Through assimilation, the daughters have abandoned the traditions of their Chinese mothers. And though set in more comfortable surroundings, the lives of the daughters mirror those of their parents. And if the rhyming seems forced and a trifle glib, it's because it is.

The book's name comes from the club formed in China by one of the mothers, Suyuan Woo, in order to lift her friends' spirits and distract them from their problems during the Japanese invasion. Suyuan continued the club when she came to the United States-hoping to bring luck to her family and friends and finding joy in that hope.

Amy Tan wrote *The Joy Luck Club* to try to understand her own relationship with her mother. Tan's Chinese parents wanted Americanized children but expected them to think like Chinese. Tan found this particularly difficult as an adolescent. While the generational differences were like those experienced by other mothers and daughters, the cultural distinctions added another dimension. Thus, Tan wrote not only to sort out her cultural heritage but to learn how she and her mother could get along better.

Critics appreciate Tan's straightforward manner as well as the skill with which she talks about Chinese culture and mother/daughter relationships. Readers also love *The Joy Luck Club*: women of all ages identify with Tan's characters and their conflicts with their families, while men have an opportunity through this novel to better understand their own behaviors towards women. Any reader can appreciate Tan's humor, fairness, and objectivity.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to identify the most salient issues that relate to Chinese-American cross-cultural communication as illustrated by the different major characters in Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club*. This is done based on reviewing the available literature related to *The Joy Luck Club*, the novel and movie version, and based on the critical literary analysis of the major elements of fiction as they relate to the novel.

3. Setting

Even though *The Joy Luck Club* takes place primarily in china town San Francisco in the United States, much of the novel occurs in flashbacks, set in China. The serene beauty of this Eastern country, marred by the violence of war, is evoked in the tale of Suyuan and her daughters. During the course of the flashbacks, the cities of Hong Kong and Shanghai, and the surrounding districts and towns, like Kweilin and Taiyuan, are portrayed in detail.

The Joy Luck Club, for which the book is named, is located in modern day china town, where four Chinese mothers have made lives for themselves after leaving their native countries years earlier. A miniature of the old country has been recreated in San Francisco's Chinatown, where most of the immigrants live in the city. Their houses are replicas of homes in the motherland and are adorned with traditional Chinese furniture and decorations. Within Chinatown, the older inhabitants continue to follow their native customs and celebrate their important festivals.

They also gather often to enjoy each other and to eat Chinese delicacies. Although many of the younger generation Chinese descendants still live in Chinatown, they are very different from the older generation of immigrants. They have largely adopted the American way of life.

The novel includes anecdotes and stories from three generations of women, spanning a period of time that is seventy years ending in the 80's, when the book was published. The novel closes with a visit to China in the present day. This ending unifies the geographical and historical settings of the novel in a most fulfilling way.

All the Chinese women has her own outlook of the world based on her past experiences in China and wants to share that vision with their daughters'. The daughters understand their mothers' pasts, and try to adapt to the American lifestyle, and win their mothers' acceptance. The book's name, "*The Joy Luck Club*", was inspired by Suyuan Woo. The club continued in the United states in order to lift her friends spirits from the Japanese invasion Peral Habor going on at the time. hoping to bring luck and joy to her friends and family and finding joy in that hope.

Amy Tan the writer of *The Joy Luck Club* composed the book in order to understand her relationship with her mother. Her parants wanted Americanized children but demanded them to think and act like Chinese. Amy found this very

difficult as a young child: Not only was there a generation gap, but also a cultural distinctions added another dimension. Thus, Tan wrote *The Joy Luck Club* not only to help her sort out her cultural heritage but to learn how she and her mother could get along.

4. Major characters

4.1 Jing-Mei Woo:

Jing-Mei Woo is the narrator who opens and closes the novel. While she is only one of four young women whose stories constitute the novel, the positioning of her story makes her seem to be the primary character, especially since her tales strongly develop the theme and plot of the entire book. Jing-Mei's journeys are also complete within the novel. By the end of the book, she comes to understand her mother and her Chinese heritage, and she travels to China to fulfill her deceased mother's dream. Among all the daughters in the novel, Jing-Mei is the one who best realizes her true identity, for she retains her Chinese values along with her American character.

As a person, Jing-Mei is simple in her tastes and manners. She is happy leading the life of a middle class woman and pursuing the career of a copywriter. She neither aims high nor envies others who hold high positions in life. Like her mother, she believes in "simple living and high thinking." She also possesses her mother's goodness and generosity. She is courteous to everyone and respects the wishes of her elders. When her father asks her to take the place of her mother in *The Joy Luck Club*, she agrees to do so. Later, when An-Mei persuades her to undertake the journey to China to fulfill Suyuan's dream, Jing-Mei consents.

Although Jing-Mei is sensible, she is also sensitive. When Waverly Jong insults her in front of every one, she is devastated and can barely hold back her tears. Later in China, when she witnesses the reunion of her father and his aunt, she bites her lips "trying not to cry." Then when she meets her half-sisters in Shanghai, they laugh and wipe "the tears from each other's eyes."

During the course of the novel, Jing-Mei transforms herself from an immature young girl who tries to assert her rights by defying her mother to a responsible woman who takes the place of her mother in *The Joy Luck Club*. As a child Jing-Mei had rebelled against her mother, who wanted her to be a brilliant student or a concert pianist. Jing-Mei, however, just wanted to be herself. Although her mother saved to buy her daughter a piano, Jing-Mei

refused to practice. After she made a miserable performance at her recital, she never played the piano again. Only as an adult does she take an interest in the piano once again.

When Jing-Mei learns that her mother had left behind two infant twin daughters in China, she was shocked. Not understanding how much Suyuan suffered over the incident, Jing-Mei treats the situation lightly. Later, after her mother's death, Jing-Mei learns from the women at *The Joy Luck Club* and from her father, Tin, the whole story of her mother's sufferings in China. The knowledge helps to appreciate all that Suyuan has done for her. It also teaches her to appreciate her Chinese heritage. As a result, when she learns that the twins have been located, she is willing to go to China and meet them in order to share Suyuan's story with them. The journey to her native land makes Jing-Mei proud to be a Chinese.

By the end of the book, she lives up to the meaning of her name; she has become the "pure essence" of goodness and Chinese values that her mother had longed for her to be.

4.2 Suyuan Woo Woo:

During the Second Sino-Japanese War, Suyuan lived in the Chinese town of Kweilin (Guilin) while her husband at the time served as an officer in Chungking (Chongqing). On the day of the Japanese invasion, Suyuan was forced to leave her house only with a bag of clothes, a bag of food and her twin daughters. In the long trek, she was forced to abandon both bags, and eventually abandoned her daughters as well. Her abandonment of the twin daughters will haunt her conscience until she dies, and though she spends many years to find them back later, it is her daughter Jing-mei who will fulfill her long-cherished wish of reuniting with the twins from her late first husband

4.3 Lindo Jong:

Mother of Waverly, Vincent, and Winston. Wife of Tin Jong. Lindo's best friend is Suyuan, but they fight constantly. Lindo has always tried to take credit for Waverly's success, and because she feels close to her daughter, she tries to control her life. She gets upset when Waverly decides to marry a white man, but when he refuses to be intimidated by her, she accepts him. Lindo, like Suyuan, had a hard life in China--she was forced to marry a man she hated--but she used her cleverness to escape her fate. She received enough money from her

in-laws to come to America. She is competitive and intimidating, even to her daughter and husband.

4.4 Ying-ying St. Clair:

Though she was born a rich and spoiled girl, Ying-ying ends up relatively poor and meek. She believes her haughtiness cursed her. Because she thought she was too good for any man, she was forced to marry a bad man. From then on, she believed that she could see things before they happened, and she gives this power to her daughter Lena. She sees herself as still strong on the inside, but knows that she has willingly given up her strength so she will no longer cause herself such pain. She married Clifford St. Clair without really caring about him--she says she could not care about anyone, because she has turned herself into a ghost. By the end of the book, she realizes that she never should have done this: it has made her daughter weak as well. She decides to show her daughter how to be strong.

4.5 An-mei Hsu:

Mother of Rose Hsu Jordan, Ruth, Janice, Mark, Matthew, Luke and Bing. Wife of George Hsu. Mother-in-law of Ted Jordan. An-mei is a mixture of strength and weakness. Like her own mother, who committed suicide to give her daughter a better life, An-mei sometimes accepts her sorrows too easily. She acknowledges that she and her daughter Rose are sometimes too easily influenced by others. But she also has a very strong faith in her ability to make things right. When Bing dies, for a long time she fully believes she can bring him back. She learned to have faith in herself, and to stand up for herself, from her mother, who told her to have a strong identity.

4.6 Waverly Jong:

Unlike Jing-Mei who finds maturity and peace within the novel, Waverly constantly struggles. As a child, she became a chess prodigy and champion, who is featured in *Life Magazine*. She gave up the game, however, to spite her mother, who seemed overly proud of her daughter's accomplishments. Surprising, Lindo Jong does not seem to mind that Waverly no longer wins at chess; Waverly, however, misses the game terribly and begins to play again. Once she ceases to win all the time, Waverly finally quits the game forever.

Throughout life, Waverly has been a driven woman. Intelligent, ambitious, proud, arrogant, and sometimes cruel, she commands attention.

Because she is a successful tax accountant, she becomes wealthy. She wears fashionable clothes and patronizes fancy salons; but she laughs at those beneath her. She is cruel to Jing-Mei at dinner when she criticizes her hair stylist and her copywriting skills. It is like she has to put down others to lift herself up.

Waverly always struggles with her Chinese heritage. She tries to make herself act very American and look less oriental. She often seems embarrassed by her mother, Lindo, and refuses to adopt the traits of humility and respect Lindo has tried to teach her. Concerned about appearances, Waverly takes her mother to see Rory, her hair stylist, so that Lindo's hair can be properly styled when she meets the family of her fiancé, Rich Shields. At the hairdresser, Waverly becomes upset when Rory says that she looks like Lindo, for she does not want to appear Chinese.

Although Waverly projects a tough exterior, it is clear that she has some insecurities. Although she constantly argues with her mother and refutes her traditional Chinese views and values, Waverly also seeks her approval. She dreads telling Lindo that she is going to marry Rich, but she desperately wants her mother's blessing. When her mother gives her approval, Waverly is greatly relieved.

Although Waverly struggles internally through most of the novel, she is developed as one of the most powerful characters, who has a zest for living, a drive to succeed, and a commanding personality. Completely opposite in nature from her mother, Waverly does come to understand Lindo better and fear her less by the end of the novel. She even begins to appreciate some of the Chinese heritage that her mother has tried to instill in her.

4.7 Lena St. Clair:

Daughter of Ying-ying and Clifford St. Clair. Wife of Harold Livotny. Lena has always known that her mother was fragile, and she spent her childhood fearing that their family could fall apart at any moment. She thus became fragile and easily frightened herself. Today, she allows her husband to bully her, but is slowly realizing how angry with him she is. She is disappointed with her mother and never understood her father very well. Even though she looks English-Irish like him, she has always felt Chinese. She seems to believe, like Ying-ying, that she and her mother have the same spirit (Lyll, 1995).

4.8 Rose Hsu Jordan:

Wife of Ted Jordan, daughter of An-mei Hsu. Rose often feels guilty and powerless. She sometimes thinks that she was responsible for her younger brother's death. She accepts the blame that Ted heaps on her for the failure of their marriage. She has nightmares where a traditional Chinese character chases her. At first, she believes that her mother does not understand her, and wants her to stay in her marriage even if she is unhappy. But then she realizes that all her mother wants is for her to be strong. She finally stands up to Ted and suddenly realizes how powerful she really is. Then she feels connected to her mother in a way she never did before.

5. Plot summary

As the novel opens Jing-Mei "June" Woo has just lost her mother, Suyuan, to an aneurysm. She is asked by her mother's three friends to take Suyuan's place in their Mah-Jong foursome and their "Joy Luck Club". The novel unfolds with interspersed chapters by each of the three remaining members of the Club and their American-born daughters. Lindo and Waverly Jong began their war over Waverly's childhood chess stardom and the effects it has on every aspect of Waverly's adult life. An-Mei Hsu recounts the tragedy that gave her strength, and worries that her daughter, Rose, lacks the same determination. Lena St. Clair tries to care for her eccentric mother, while her mother recounts a secret history that has allowed her to see more deeply than her daughter imagines. Through it all, June Woo tries to piece together the stories that her own mother can no longer tell, and to be faithful to her mother's memory despite their sometimes rocky relationship.

6. Conclusions

Based on the available literature related to *The Joy Luck Club*, the novel and movie version, and based on the critical literary analysis of the major elements of fiction as they relate to the novel, the following cross-cultural issues related to Chinese-American cross-cultural communication may be identified through the major characters in the novel:

- Jing-mei thinks of her mother's life in China as mysterious, and so removed that she hardly even believes it was real. She always thought of it as just a Chinese fairy tale, so she was shocked when she found out that there was still some of her mother left in China: her two younger

sisters. Her mother, however, is a master storyteller. She brings the past to life with her words, making Jing-mei see it, even though she doesn't understand half of it.

- Even though Lena looks white unless someone is looking for her Chinese features, Lena identifies more with her mother than with her father. She views her father, in fact, almost across the same rift as her mother does. They understand Chinese language and superstition, he doesn't. They understand what Lena thinks of as "Chinese fears," and he seems blind to them.
- June doesn't understand her mother's "Chinese" personality traits. She hates the way her mother brags about her to Lindo Jong. She cannot understand why she has to be obedient all the time. She does not want to bend to her mother's every whim. But this is exactly what Suyuan expects from June, and she gets very angry when June doesn't listen to her.
- Lena, who has always identified with her Chinese mother more than her American father, wonders if being Chinese has given her evil powers. She and her mother talk in ways that Harold cannot understand, just as they used to talk in front of Lena's father. Lena believes she has a terrible bond with her mother: they can see bad things before they happen, but they don't know how to stop them.
- No matter how much Waverly loves Rich, and how American she is, she needs him to understand her mother's Chinese attitude, even if she herself rejects it. Rich completely fails at this: he doesn't understand the complex way to compliment someone, or how to eat at dinner, or how to be polite and yet friendly. And even though Waverly dislikes these Chinese customs, she desperately wants Rich to understand them the way she does. Whether they like it or not, their cultural backgrounds are in conflict (Rothstein, 1991).
- Just as they were divided between American and Chinese culture, Rich, Waverly and Lindo connect over it. The couple decides to have their honeymoon in China, and they are even considering all going together. Lindo needed to be reassured that the American Rich could fit into her life, and that Waverly understood her Chinese heritage. Once they understood this, their differences began to disappear.

- Rose always thought that American ways were better than Chinese ways. But now she realizes that sometimes Chinese opinions are less complicated and more understandable than American opinions. Rose was always afraid of her mother and Old Mr. Chou, the Chinese character who guarded the land of sleep. But once she realizes that she doesn't need Ted, her American husband who overly complicates things and doesn't care about her, she begins to feel closer to her Chinese heritage.
- An-mei wonders, like her daughter Rose, whether their Chinese culture might have created problems for them. Are they indecisive and weak because they were taught to accept their fates, however sad, without protest? An-mei feels that their histories are inescapable--her own mother, herself, and her daughter have all turned out this way. She wonders if, being women in Chinese culture, they had no choice.
- An-mei draws a distinction between Western culture and Eastern culture. Americans, she implies, use psychiatrists who encourage them to talk about their suffering as a way of understanding themselves. Chinese people like her mother, however, suffered and cried because they had no choice. There was nothing to understand--they could not change their sad fates, so they cried. An-mei describes the Chinese peasants as banding together to kill their sorrows (the birds), rather than just talking about them and allowing them to continue.
- Lindo believes that only Waverly's physical features are Chinese: inside, she is "American-made." Lindo even thinks that Chinese and American culture don't mix. Yet Lindo can see how similar she and Waverly look, and she knows they have much of the same personality traits. It's obvious even to the hairstylist, no matter how much Waverly would like to deny it.
- Furthermore, it may be deduced from the novel as well as the movie on which it was based that: Children in the Chinese culture show respect and loyalty to their parents regardless of the situation and how they hold their parents in highest regards.
- The Chinese culture appears to be different in the sense that Chinese people's loyalty to one another differs. For example, when An Mei's mother dies and her vow to avenge her family. In addition, when An Mei's grandmother dies and An Mei's mother cuts her arm to honor her

mother in order to make amends with her before her death. The loyalty also reflects in Rose who is so unusually submissive to her husband and feels she has no worth at all.

- The characters world perspective is unique in the sense of how they believe life is so great in America. For example, the swan feather and how it represents hope passed down and good intentions for June. Su Yuan signifies the feather as a goose stretched-neck and flying to America on a journey. Su Yuan hopes her daughter will have a life full of prosperity without any sorrow. It may also be concluded that the American audience was generally impressed with the movie which was based on Tan's novel. This is very clear in Ebert's remarks that "*The Joy Luck Club* is like a flowering of talent that has been waiting so long to be celebrated. It is also one of the most touching and moving of the year's films" (1993).

Ebert also adds that:

"The Joy Luck Club comes rushing off the screen in a torrent of memories, as if its characters have been saving their stories for years, waiting for the right moment to share them. That moment comes after a death and a reunion that bring the past back in all of its power, and show how the present, too, is affected - how children who think they are so very different are deeply affected by the experiences of their parents" (1993).

Expressing his opinion about the movie, Ebert considers it as abridge between the past and present saying that: "*The Joy Luck Club* moves effortlessly between past and present, between what was, and how it became what is" (1993). This goes in line with what the author of the novel herself expresses in a personal interview stating that:

*Some of my past remarks about my discomfort with labels in literature had to do with what was happening fifteen to twenty years ago. There was American Literature, which consisted mostly of books by dead white males, and there was Women's Literature, Black Literature, and Multicultural Literature, which was also called "required reading." The labels were there because those books had not been included in the regular canon of literature. Here's an example of how things have changed. In the past, *The Joy Luck Club* was included on required reading lists because*

the stories were different from the mainstream and thus would give young readers exposure to another culture. Those were in the days when communities were not that diverse. The irony today is that educators select my book so that young readers can identify with the story. The student population is multicultural and the same books once selected to understand others are now chosen to understand ourselves. What is in the canon of American literature now includes many different voices, reflecting that America includes many different voices (Tan, 2006).

In conclusion, it might be safe to claim that the very nature of contemporary American fiction has certainly changed. Asian-American literature along with other kinds of ethnic literature have become a fundamental part of general modern American literature. This has recently been encouraged by efforts to promote cross-cultural awareness in light of modern advances in technology and under the world-wide spread of globalization.

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