Cultural Differences Reflected by Parenting in the Joy Luck Club

Jiajie, Yu¹
Nanjing, Jiangsu

Abstract:
In the Joy Luck Club, the differences of backgrounds, such as culture and customs, occupying a large part, where communication under different cultural backgrounds between the generations generates a lot of collision. This essay tries comparing the old and new parenting methods and their impacts on the two generation in order to find out the cultural beliefs and views hidden behind the methods. These cultural differences reflected lies in not only generation gaps but also two totally different cultures of China and American.

Key words: cultural difference, parenting, mother-daughter relationships, The Joy Luck Club

1. Introduction

The Joy Luck Club contains sixteen stories about conflicts between Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-raised daughters. Amy Tan, the writer of this novel, is one of Chinese- American writers who live in both Chinese and American cultures. Her bicultural upbringing is her work’s resource of inspiration. Through her writing, she is very sensitive to conflicts of culture that arise in so many American communities and she explores tender and tenacious bond between generations.

The novel is composed of four sections, each of which contains four separate narratives. In the first four stories of the book, the mothers, speaking in turn, recall with astonishing clarity their relationship with their own mothers, and they worry that their daughters’ recollections of them will never possess the same intensity. In the second section, these daughter— Waverly, Jing-mei, Lena, and Rose—relate their recollections of their childhood ""
relationships with their mothers; the great lucidity and force with which they tell their stories proves their mothers’ fear at least partially unfounded. In the third group of stories, the four daughters narrate their dilemmas—troubles in marriage and with their careers. Although they believe that their mothers’ antiquated ideas do not pertain to their own very American lifestyles, their search for solutions inevitably brings them back to their relationships with the older generation. In the final group of stories, the mothers struggles to offer solutions and support to their daughters, in the process learning more about themselves. Lindo recognizes through her daughter Waverly that she has been irrevocably changed by American culture. Ying-ying realized that Lena has unwillingly followed her passive example in her marriage too Harold. An-mei realizes that Rose has not completely understood the lessons she intended to teach her about faith and hope.

The main story which went through the whole book is Jing-mei’s trip to China to meet her half-sisters, twins Chwun Yu and Chwun Hwa. Although Jing-mei fears that she cannot adequately portray her mother’s life, Suyuan’s story permeates the novel via Jing-mei’s voice: she speaks for Suyuan in the first and fourth sections, the two “mothers’ sections” of the novel. Su yuan’s story is representative of the struggle to maintain the mother-daughter bond across cultural and generational gaps; by telling this story as her mother’s daughter, Jing-mei enacts and cements the very bond that is the subject of Suyuan’s story. The trip enables Jing-mei to bring closure and resolution to her mother’s story, but also to her own. In addition, it brings hopes to the other members of the Joy Luck Club that they can reconcile the oppositions in their lives between past and present, between cultures, and between generations.

As a Chinese saying goes, parents are the first teacher of a child. No matter how old their daughters grow, the mothers keep parenting them in different ways, including the old methods they received in their childhood in old China and the new and westernized ones adjusted to a new American community. As a matter of fact, conflicts of parenting concepts and influence embodied in mother–daughter relationships reflect different Chinese and American cultures.
2. Old methods versus new ways

There are four couples of mother and daughter in *The Joy Luck Club*. Mothers can be deemed early Chinese immigrants and daughters undoubtedly belong to the first ABC (American-born Chinese) generation. This part concerns about the conflicts and cross-culture communication between the two generations based on the stories of four groups respectively.

2.1 Old parenting methods shaping the older generation

An-mei’s, Lindo’s, and Yingying’s stories of their childhoods in old China deal with the maternal figures that influenced them and with the societal role of Chinese women in general. All three tell of how they learned of the expectation that they would sacrifices themselves for their family. An-mei suffered because her mother had been disowned for choosing to become a concubine rather than remaining as a widow- for refusing to sacrifices herself for her husband even after his death. Lindo lived a life of near enslavement to her future husband and mother-in-law, and then endured a marriage of further degradation, in which her bed became a kind of prison because she wasn’t fulfilling her wifely duty of giving birth to a son. Similarly, Ying-ying’s lifelong reticence traces back to her Amah’s assertion that girls should not think of their own needs, that they should “only listen” to the needs of others. On the day of the Moon Festival, Ying-ying loses herself not only by becoming temporarily lost from her family but by learning to stifle her own desire.

Instead of being angry with their mothers for abandoning them and for treating them coldly, An-mei, Lindo, and Ying-ying sympathize with them and attempt to excuse their mothers’ actions by portraying a tradition that requires women to sacrifice their daughters. The fact that their mothers had no say in their future may account for their cold behavior: they hoped to harden up their daughters who would follow their suit and face similar sorrows someday. Although the characters recognize the hardship caused by a strict adherence to the patriarchal tradition, they value greatly the tradition of duty and loyalty. For example, Lindo deeply honors her mother’s allegiance to the marriage contract in word and deed, whereas she complains her daughter Waverly’s ideas about promise. She despises Waverly’s promise to come to dinner while it disappears the moment she has a headache, encounters heavy traffic, or finds that a favourite movie is showing on TV. In contrast, Lindo viewed her parent’s
promise as her own, and fulfill it under degradation and humiliation for years. An-mei’s story also reflects their respect for the ancient ways and the elders. Her mother attempts to cure grandma by a superstition of cutting her own flesh and putting it in a soup to show deep love and reverence. An-mei is deeply impressed with the behavior and she sees the scar as her tie to her mother, which always reminds that her mother is in her bones. Even Ying-ying remains loyal to her ancestral traditions. She criticizes Lena for being too Americanized and for being lost to her mother and her ancestors even though Ying-ying herself feels lost and painful because her own mother left her in the care of her Amah and no one noticed when she fell off the boat. Her respect for custom is at odds with her sense of injustice.

In one respect, Lindo’s story diverges from An-mei and Ying-ying’s. In a manner that resembles Suyuan’s willful creation of her own happiness through the Joy luck club, Lindo took her fate into her own hands when she saw the price of keeping her promise to her mother, and to tradition, had become too high. In her second promise, she said to herself: “I would always remember my parents’ wishes, but I would never forget myself.” This promise maintained her respect for the force of promises, but it also shows that Lindo refused to sacrifice her own identity to that force. It is the understanding of tradition that enables Lindo to assert her own power and to get rid of misery without punishment by playing tricks on Mrs. Huang’s cultural superstitions and piety to her ancestors.

An important dimension that researchers have identified as distinguishing cultures is that of individualism and collectivism (e.g., Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Triandis, 1988, 1995). Cultures differ in the relative importance its members place on the notion of personal independence and success as opposed to interdependence and the success of one’s group or groups. The basic distinction can be viewed as the answer to the question of how individuals perceive themselves. China is a strongly collectivistic culture, where roles and social relationships are more rigidly hierarchical and less fluid than in any individual cultures and rules governing social interactions are also more dictated by age and gender roles. A collectivistic culture promotes interdependence, respect for authority, hierarchical roles and relationships, and group consensus. Collectivists generally view themselves as appendages of their group, whether the family, a social group, a corporation, or other. Unlike individualists, collectivists
feel interdependent with members of their groups and are willing to subordinate personal 
goals to those of the group. To the four mothers from a collectivistic culture, the family is 
central. Each person’s behavior is determined and constrained by family need, expectations, 
and responsibilities; at the same time, members can depend on the family always being there 
to assist and support in any way necessary to their well-being. Furthermore, in the story of 
An-mei’s mother, it is obvious that a large part of a person’s self-identity is established 
through the family net-work and concomitant or naturally accompanying in-groups. Raised 
up in such a collectivistic culture, the four mothers bear the norms in mind.

2.2 New parenting methods adjusted to the younger generation

With so many experiences, mothers believe that they have enough wisdom to parent 
their daughters. However, there is a universal struggle between children and parents over 
issues of independence- the struggle over when a child should obey and admit her parent’s 
wisdom versus when a parent should let go and allow the child to discover life for herself. In 
the parable that preceded the second section of the novel, the girl’s mother demands 
adherence to certain tenets, but she refuses to give any explanation for her demands, merely 
making vague reference to a book that her daughter cannot read because it is written in 
Chinese. Although the girl takes her mother’s warnings as manipulation used to control her, 
her fall on her bicycle demonstrates the mother’s wisdom. That parable deals with an 
American-raised daughter’s conflict with her mother. As in many of the stories in the novel, 
the daughter misunderstands the mother’s seemingly tyranny or severity, which causes 
collisions and generation gap.

2.2.1 Old solutions to new problems

Individualistic cultures structure social experience around autonomous individuals. In an 
Individualistic culture individuals view themselves as autonomous, independent of groups, 
and reluctant or unwilling to subordinate personal goals to those of the group. It is considered 
weak or unassertive to be overly interdependent on others (Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999:86). 
Individualistic cultures emphasize self-reliance, individual growth, personal achievements, 
and satisfaction. In the enculturation process of their young, individualistic cultures not only 
promote the fostering of independence but strive to nurture individual achievement,
self-expression, and individual or critical thinking. Individuals in these cultures generally make educational and career choices based on their own personal needs and desires, rather than those of their families. These significant differences can be seen clearly between the traditional Chinese culture and the American one in the Joy Luck Club. In traditional Chinese culture, family means that parents have absolute rights to their children and have mutual dependence on each other. While in American culture it encourages individualism, stimulates individual to realize their value. Perhaps the word *freedom* is one of the most respected popular words in the United States. The strong belief in self-reliance continues as a traditional basic American value. It is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of the American character to understand, but it is profoundly important. Most Americans believe that they must be self-reliant in order to keep their freedom.

Lindo’s daughter, Waverly Jong says that when she was six, she became a child chess prodigy. Waverly owes the honor to her effortless practices all by herself. Therefore, she wants chess to be strictly her own achievement, part of her own separate achievement. She clashes with Lindo because she misunderstands her mother’s pride in her achievements. Like the little girl in the parable, she attempts to defy her mother. When her mother hovers over her during her practice sessions, serving as a protective ally, she feels invaded, as though her mother is somehow taking credit for what Waverly sees as her own personal strength. Moreover, she is irritated and embarrassed when her mother brags about her success in the street. When Waverly has her own child, she eventually realizes that her mother’s pride actually functioned as an invisible support. It is the art of invisible strength that her mother taught her, a lesson that helped her success with chess. It is the same ability aligns her with her mother that they both gain strength through the strategically timed concealment and discourse of secrets.

From Waverly’s story, parents in traditional Chinese culture believe that success of children is their pride. They are entitled to arrange life, future and marriage for their offspring who must be obedient and filial. By contrast, in American culture, kids are encouraged to realize their value, holding individual characteristics, because in their eyes, to be different rather than common should be one of the goals of life, which can be seen in Jingmei’s
experience in the next section.

While Waverly’s story testifies to the strengths of hidden truths and silences, Lena’s story demonstrate their danger. Her mother, Ying-yiing always lives in perpetual fear of unnamed danger. As growing up in the insecurity, both Ying-yiing and Lena are in fear that the worst will invade their home, snatch them from happiness, and pull them into agony. Lena always anticipates the worst from all situations. It is ironic for Lena to worry about whether fighting beyond her wall will cause some deaths. In fact, the worse set of circumstances may lie on the St. Clairs’ side of the partition. By keeping silent, Ying-yiing may be trying to avoid confrontation with a painful past. But, meanwhile, she also builds a wall between herself and her beloved family. Ying-yiing is too fragile to bear sole responsibility for the emotional barrier in her home: the wall also results from problems of communication and translation. Following in the footsteps of her mother, Lena keep silence when her marriage is facing broke-up. She gets used to listening to Harold, her husband, and loses her own voice for things that she deserves, such as love, respect and one job promotion even after giving such selfless help in Harold’s career.

Language and communication are more than words and grammar; they are also reflection of the cultural and social context of the speakers. According to pragmatics and discourse of language, speakers use language to convey meanings that go beyond the words. The anthropologist Hall (1976) had distinguished between two broad types to cultural communication styles, high context and low context. High context communication occurs in cultures that emphasize communication through context of the social interaction (e.g., speakers’ social roles, gender, age, status, and other variables deemed important by the culture) and the physical environment in which the interaction is taking place while low context communication takes place in cultures that stress communication via explicit verbal messages. Hall notes that high context communication styles tend to be found in homogeneous cultures, such as China, with a long shared history. However, Low context communication styles are generally found in more individualistic cultures, such as North America, as there tend to focus more on the individual and to have less of a common history. Therefore, Ying-yiing with high context communication style cannot get herself across to
Lena and other family members with low context communication style, only letting them understand her in their own ways.

2.2.2 New ways to break through old issues

Jing-mei’s story deals with a clash between a mother’s faith and belief in persistence versus a daughter’s inner sense of futility. Suyuan thinks in America, people can accumulate wealth and gain reputation rapidly. She puts hopes, therefore, on her daughter Jingmei. The immense energy that Suyuan devoted to the research for Jing-mei’s inner prodigy- cleaning for her piano teacher, saving up for a used piano- demonstrates her deep love for Jing-mei and faith in her daughter’s ability more than her desire to show off at church each Sunday. Suyuan’s inflated expectations and excessive pressure backfire, contributing to Jing-mei’s failure to achieve what she might have achieved if left to herself. Jing-mei believes that she is simply not fated to be a prodigy, that ultimately there resides within her an unchangeable element of mediocrity. When she tells her reflection in the mirror on night that she will not allow her mother to change her, that she will not try to be what she is not, she asserts her will in a strong but negative manner. At that moment, she recalls, she saw the prodigy side of herself in the anger and determination that were in her face. This comment suggests that prodigy is really one’s will, one’s desire to succeed. In retrospect, Jing-mei muses that perhaps she never gave herself a chance at the piano because she never devoted her will to try. At the end of her narrative, Jing-mei adds that her mother offered her the piano for her thirtieth birthday, a gesture that shows that Suyuan understand the reasons behind Jing-mei’s refusal to play and a chance for Jingmei to try for herself. Although Jing-mei did not take the piano right away, she is comforted by Suyuan’s expression of faith in her ability to do what she wants. Not until her mother’s death did Jing-mei understand that her conflicts with her mother did not arise from any high expectation on Suyuan’s part but from her love and faith in her.

In Half and Half, Rose recalls her mother telling her about the Twenty-six Malignant Gates, the book that is mentioned in the section’s opening parable. She explains that every child is exposed to one particular danger on certain days, according to his or her birthday. However, they do not know when to worry about the coming danger, because neither Rose
nor her mother, An-mei, can totally understand the book. Rose’s explanation of the traditional book sheds light on the section’s parable and asks more questions: Did the mother in the parable know for sure that the daughter was fated to fall on her bicycle, or was she, like An-mei, constantly worried about her inability to translate the book into English, etc. After Bing’s death, each member of the household feels responsible, including Rose. Rose sank into passivity and connects her reluctance to make decisions to her feelings of guilt surrounding her little young brother’s death: not wanting to feel accountable for bad outcomes, she fears to take on any responsibility. After her husband, Ted, loses a malpractice lawsuit and also becomes the victim of failure, she is blamed for her unwillingness to make decisions and they are facing divorce. The sad and stolid Rose believes that An-mei is overwhelmed by the feeling of guilt and resignation too. She seems lose her faith faith in God after her son’s death. As evidence, she stopped carrying her Bible to church and began using it as a wedge under a too-short leg of the kitchen table. Yet, by the end of her story, she eventually notices that her mother sweeps the Bible off and keeps it from gathering dust. The fact that Bing’s name is written under the heading Deaths in erasable pencil demonstrates that An-mei still values the Bible enough to find meaning in the act of inscribing her dead son’s name there. The erasable pencil speaks to her belief and expectation that Bing might still live.

After the loss of Bing, An-mei may have become less openly religious, but she never resigned herself to think that human beings have no control over what happens to them. Therefore, instead of An-mei, Rose herself suffered the most lasting emotional damage. An-mei’s strong opinion against the fate teaches Rose to regain hope and courage to claim what she deserves in her marriage with Ted.

3. Conclusion

From the Joy Luck Club, it’s not hard to figure it out that people living in the culture shock and conflict are the mixture of contradiction. Through probing into this novel, we have known much more about differences between the west and the east- thoughts, lifestyle through parenting. It is indispensable to notice the trend of cultural compatibility, which means not only resurrection of daughter’s love to mother, but cultural identification to China. In American society today, with increasing globalization, marginal culture gradually
challenges and enriches the mainstream culture so that it can glisten in American Continent, which reflects, of great significance, not only the attraction of Chinese-American works to American readers, but identification and compatibility of American mainstream society to Chinese-American culture. This research is beneficial to cross-culture study in the future.
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