The Sino US Cultural Conflict and Integration from the Perspective of Joy

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Abstract
The Joy Luck Club is the first novel of Amy Tan, a famous Chinese-American writer. In the novel she mainly describes the relationship between the Joy Luck Club mothers and their daughters and cultural conflicts. The novel is set in the age of globalization and in the multicultural American society; it represents the process of misunderstanding, conflicts, understanding and blending between the mothers and the daughters. Globalization not only brings many chances to China but also brings cultural challenges to China. As the degree of globalization is getting deeper, Chinese culture faces the danger of being integrated and changed by other cultures. Through contextual analysis of the Joy Luck Club and the cultural conflicts and blending embodied in it, this paper demonstrates that in the age of globalization a balance should be kept among different cultures, and a right attitude towards cultural conflicts should be taken, and it suggests that the native culture should not be thrown away when learning from others, and instead, it should be transmitted to others.

Keywords
The Joy Luck Club; conflict; understanding; cultural blending

1. Introduction
In the novel The Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan explores the relationship between mothers and daughters. There are 4 mother-daughter pairs in the novel, mothers are the first generation immigrants, and the daughters are born in America. The Joy Luck Club mothers come from the Chinese traditional families when the dictatorial Chinese power is destroyed by the Japanese insurgents in the 1940s. They escape from the political upheaval of China, but they don't forget their Chinese traditional culture, while their daughters are born in America, they are the second generation immigrants, and they don't understand their mothers' Chinese culture, and their way of thinking, so there are often misunderstandings between the mothers and the daughters. In order to make their daughters know them and the Chinese culture, the Joy Luck Club mothers have made painstaking efforts to remove their differences. They seize every opportunity to tell their daughters their past experiences, demonstrate their courage to challenge the feudal society and never stop extending maternal love to their daughters. Thanks to their great efforts, their daughters gradually understand them and the Chinese culture. Therefore, cultural understanding and blending between the mothers and daughters are achieved.

In the context of globalization, China faces many chances to develop its economic power; meanwhile it faces more challenges to its traditional culture. With the development of China's economic power, China plays a more important role in the world. The communication with other countries and areas whose cultural backgrounds are totally different from China's is increasing rapidly. This paper, through the exploration of The Joy Luck Club, mainly discusses the cultural conflicts, understanding and integration between the mothers and the daughters, and metaphorically between Chinese culture and American culture.
2. Amy Tan and Her Novel The Joy Luck Club

Amy Tan was born in Oakland, California. Both of her parents were Chinese immigrants. Her father, John Tan, was an electrical engineer and Baptist minister. In China, her mother Daisy had divorced an abusive husband but lost custody of her three daughters. She was forced to leave them behind when she escaped on the last boat to leave Shanghai in 1949. Her marriage to John Tan produced three children, Amy and her two brothers. Amy Tan’s family is a typical immigrant family, her parents are the first generation immigrants, and she is the second-generation immigrant.

She has experienced the same kind of conflicts which she portrayed in the novel. She and her mother were in constant conflict when she finished the high school in Switzerland. She and her mother didn’t speak for six months after Amy Tan left the Baptist College her mother chose for her to follow her boyfriend to San Jose City College. Tan further defied her mother by abandoning the pre-med course her mother had urged her to pursue the study of English and linguistics.

In the novel, Jing-Mei abandoned studying piano her mother hoped her to study, because she was allergic to her mother’s arrangement for her. Amy Tan and the daughters in the novel have something in common. They are the second-generation immigrants. But the mothers, as the first generation immigrants, they don’t totally integrate in the American culture. They cannot speak English with fluency. They never discard the tradition and never forget their lives in China.

They show their love for their daughters by planning the daughters’ future and interfering in their activities. To the mothers, they have the compulsory and responsibility to train their daughters to become perfect persons. They want to make their daughters combine the “American Context” with “Chinese Personality” perfectly. Their daughters, however, are often born and grow up in America, and are deeply affected by the American moral standard and acting principles. They cherish their independent spirits and characters, and they are not willing to be interfered and controlled by others. Their narratives justify the puzzle, and the conflicts between two generations they face, when they span the different cultures. They view their mothers as the fossils of the old society, because they fear and hate their mothers’ interference and negation on their activities. When their mothers tell their stories in China they express their detestation on it, when their mothers want to pass their Chinese cultural tradition to them, they are against it firmly. With the clash of different cultures, the two generations have difficulties in communicating and understanding each other.

But the novel doesn’t end with the conflicts; instead, in the process of growing up they understand their mothers’ love and the cultural reasons of the conflicts between themselves and their mothers in a deeper level. Therefore, at the end of the novel, the reconciliation between mothers and daughters forms naturally. Jing-Mei takes her mother’s place to travel back to China which proves the understanding between the two generations.

When Amy Tan embarked on her new career her mother was ill, she promised herself that if her mother recovered, she would take her mother to China, to see the daughters who have been left behind almost forty years ago, Mrs. Tan recovered and they departed for China in 1987. The trip was a revelation for Tan, and it gave her a new perspective of her often-difficult relationship with her mother.

3. The Conflicts Between American and Chinese Cultures

Embodied in the Novel

The Joy Luck Club presents many conflicts in the mother-daughter relationship. The conflicts are embodied in 3 aspects. First, the mothers and the daughters are in different cultural backgrounds, and the daughters cannot understand their mothers. At the beginning, Jing-Mei fears that she cannot tell her mother’s story to her half-sisters, which, in fact, reflects the fear of other daughters of the Joy Luck Club members. They have identified themselves with Americans. Jing-Mei’s fear also reflects the mothers’ common feelings. They offer the chance to go to America to their daughters, and make them self-sufficient; they wonder whether they have their daughters away from tradition. So in the story “The Joy Luck Club” Jing-Mei feels puzzled, “What will I say? What can I tell them about my mother? I don’t
know anything.” (Tan 26) The way in which the mothers express their love cannot be accepted by the daughters. Jing-Mei believes that her mother’s constant blame is the embodiment of lacking of affection. However, in fact, the mother’s severity and high expectations are expressions of love and faith in her daughter. Other mother-daughter pairs experience the same misunderstanding. In some ways, this misunderstanding comes from cultural differences. The Chinese traditional concepts such as filial obedience, criticism-enveloped expression of love are all different from the American concepts such as the individualism, freedom, self-esteem and direct expression.

The mothers in The Joy Luck Club hope that their daughters can get close to them as they were so close to their own mothers in China. For instance, Am-mei’s Popo tells her that her mother is a ghost to make Am-mei forget her mother. Although Am-mei hasn’t seen her mother for years, she gets to love her mother when her mother combs her hair, and all these things they do are as natural as they do them everyday. And Am-mei says, “This is how a daughter loves her mother. It is so deep it is in your bones.” (Tan 41) when she has seen her mother cutting her flesh to cook soup for her Popo.

But in America, children always do not follow all that their parents tell them and behave what they want to. They emphasise their individuality and do not think they have so deep relationship with their mothers. So when Lindo asks her daughter Waverly to finish her coffee, Waverly says: “Don’t be so oldfashioned, Ma. I’m my own person.” (Tan 227) However, Lindo thinks she is always beside her daughter, and she never gives her daughter up.

Perhaps Lindo experiences the largest crisis of cultural identity among the characters. She regrets having given Waverly the American context, at the same time, given her Chinese character, but the two can never be combined. In the story of “Double Face”, Lindo says:

“… I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstance and Chinese character. How could I know these two things do not mix? I taught [my daughter] how American circumstance work: If you are born poor here, it’s no lasting shame… In America, nobody says you have to keep the circumstances somebody else gives you. She learnt these things, but I couldn’t teach her about Chinese character… How not to show your own thoughts, to put your feelings behind your face so you can take advantage of hidden opportunities… Why Chinese thinking is best.” (Tan 227)

She thinks since she gives her daughter the American name (the name of the road they live in), she lets her daughter be too American, and this becomes the barrier between them. But at the same time, she realizes the American character in herself. She knows that she is no longer Chinese. When she travels to China, the Chinese treat her as an oversea traveler. She is very sad, and she wonders, in the process of changing herself, what she has lost. Her strategies of concealing inner powers is like what Waverly says that it is related with her ability to maintain two aspects of character—American and Chinese.

Second, in the novel, the communication problems also arise because the mothers are from China, while daughters are born in the United States, their cultural backgrounds are different, and also because they speak different languages. For example, June says, “My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other’s meaning and I seemed to hear less than was said, while my mother heard more.” (Tan 27) June looks for meanings in what is stated and does not understand that her mother omits important information because she thinks that her daughter knows it; Suyuan, on the other hand, looks for meanings in what has not been stated and adds many things to what has been stated and comes up with meanings that surprise her daughter June.

Third, the mothers and the daughters have totally different experiences. The mothers have been to America during the World War II, when China was intruded by Japanese army. They come to America with their American dream. They have suffered a lot before arriving America, and they come to America to search a better life putting all their hope in America, but after living in America for many years, they feel that they lose some of their Chinese tradition and they try to hold fast of the Chinese tradition and pass it to their daughters. The daughters are born in America, they don’t appreciate the Chinese tradition and view their Chinese history as a barrier to their dreams, they resent their mother
pouring the Chinese tradition to them and their Chinese way of love, so they do things opposite to what their mother told them to do to disappoint their mothers. In the story “Two Kinds” Jing-Mei says, “It was not the only disappointment my mother felt in me. In the years that followed, I failed her so many times, each time asserting my own will, my right to fall short of expectations. I didn’t get straight As. I didn’t become class president. I didn’t get into Stanford. I dropped out of college.” (Tan 124)

4. The Cultural Understanding and Blending

Although Amy Tan mainly describes the cultural clashes in her novel, her real aim is to explore a balance of cultural conflicts. An important theme of the novel is the reconciliation of the multi-cultural clashes. From the beginning of the novel, Jing-Mei views the gap between her and her mother from two aspects, and this double point of view doesn’t emphasize the generation gap, but instead, it works as the bridge of the communication between the two generations. In the third part of the novel, the four daughters narrate their dilemmas after they grew up, problems in their marriage and in their careers. Although they think their mothers’ ideas are out of date, when they search for the solutions, they inevitably come back to the relationship with the older generation. At last, mothers offer solutions and support to their daughters, for example, Rose Hsu Jordan finds herself unable to persist in her ideas, to protect herself or to make any decisions. Although she expresses her ideas by disobeying her mother to marry Ted, she still makes herself the victim to Ted. At home, Ted decides everything. At last, she needs her mother’s intervention to realize that to refuse to make decision is itself a decision. The last two groups of stories demonstrate that the cultural understanding and blending are formed.

Although Jing-Mei fears that she cannot tell the whole story of her mother, Suyuan runs through the novel with Jing-Mei’s voice, and Jing-Mei speaks for her mother in the first and fourth sections. Suyuan’s story represents the struggle to maintain the mother-daughter bonds through cultural and general gaps. Jing-Mei’s trip to China not only makes reconciliation between Suyuan’s two different life styles, but also the reconciliation between cultures and mother-daughter relationship. In addition, the journey brings hope to other mother-daughter pairs. So they can reconcile the oppositions in the lives between past and present, between cultures, and between generations.

The understanding and reconciliation between mothers and daughters are shaped gradually. As in the last part of the novel, Jing-Mei and her father go to China to look for Jing-Mei’s half sisters. When they arrive in GuangDong and see her father’s aunty, she still can’t understand her mother’s words of how to rebuild Jing-Mei’s genome to let her be a Chinese again. After Jing-Mei’s father tells her Suyuan’s story after she runs away from GuiLin, she knows why her mother leaves the twins on the road. At that time, she feels she just knows a little about her mother who has gone away forever. When she sees her sisters she realizes the Chinese quality which is hidden in her body and totally understands her mother.

In this multi-cultural novel, the author makes us understand the generational and cultural disparity. The daughters once think that their mothers’ Chinese cultural background is the barrier of communication. They cannot understand their mothers’ belief and their ways of love. But when they meet some difficulties in their life, they turn to their mother to find help, and from their mothers’ stories, they finally understand their mothers. Ying-Ying begins to change herself only when she realizes that she has passed her passivity and fatalism to her daughter Lena. She sees the sadness of her daughter’s marriage, and urges her daughter to take an active position. In the story “Waiting between the Trees”, Ying-Ying says: “Her wisdom is like a bottomless pond. You throw stones in and they sink into the darkness and dissolve. Her eyes looking back do not reflect anything. I think this to myself even though I love my daughter. She and I share the same body there is a part of her mind that is part of mine. But when she was born, she sprang from me like a fish, and has been swimming away ever since. All her life, I have watched her as though from another shore. And now I must tell her everything about my past. It is the only way to penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved.” (Tan 216)

Amy Tan shows us that a person can remain selective of her culture without giving up the heritage of her tradition. At the beginning of the novel, June Woo says, “My mother and I spoke two different
languages… I talked to her English, she answered back in Chinese.”(Tan 20) but after her trip to China, she says: “My mother was right, I am becoming a Chinese.”(Tan 239) The last part of the novel Queen Mother of the Western Skies represents the theme. The mothers are queen mother, whose wisdom the daughters should listen to. The mothers who suffered a lot never lose hope for the daughters and their relationship with their mothers; finally, June visits her half-sisters to fulfill her mother’s wish.

5. A Correct Attitude Towards Culture

An unprecedented development happened in America during the 20th century. This rapid development on economy has accelerated the worldwide immigration. There are more and more people who put themselves into the totally new American context while leaving their homeland, being separated from the historical and cultural background they used to live in for political, economic, scientific and cultural reasons. As the living environment is gradually changing, these Chinese immigrants has something changed in their mind, in other words, they feel that their history is gradually fading away, especially their offspring, lose the relation to their native culture. The second and third generation immigrants don’t keep their family tree anymore. They cancel the memory of their elder family members, and they always can’t understand the words of their parents and the legendary stories of their ancestry. They lose the memory of their own nation’s history and the cultural symbol which match with their figures and station. These people, such as Amy Tan and other Chinese-American writers as well as the daughters in The Joy Luck Club, are born and grow up in America, so they don’t realize the meaning of their yellow skin and dark hair. They feel confused and embarrassed to lose the relationship with history only when they are considered as Chinese by others, but they know nothing about their native culture.

Although Chinese people are deeply affected by the western culture, especially American culture, in the process of globalization, more and more people realize that Chinese culture has its own value, and it cannot be eliminated. Chinese culture can absorb other cultures’ essence and can keep pace with the world’s development despite the backward aspect of it.

Culture should be treated seriously, and anything that belongs to culture can’t be discarded easily, such as the dragon symbol. Dragon in Chinese culture symbolizes the stubbornness and the Chinese nation, but in western culture, it symbolizes the evil, so some one argues to cancel the dragon symbol. More people, however, argue that the dragon symbol could not be cancelled, for it is the root and the most important thing in Chinese culture. If it were cancelled many Chinese idioms and expressions would lose their root, such as “long teng hu yue” and “long ma jing shen”. Chinese people should have confidence on Chinese culture while learning the excellent cultures from other countries; our own culture should be transmitted to others so that there will be less difficulties in the process of communication.

The westerners view China as a closed country and the people are conservative, lacking of creativity, so a correct attitude to our culture should be held. At the end of the novel, the understanding and reconciliation not only shows the author’s inheritance of Chinese traditional novels, but more important, embodies a correct attitude towards culture, that is, to inherit the mother culture and to absorb the new culture and to find balance between cultures. Today, in the multi-cultural context, if the traditional Chinese culture is given up, there would be no bridge between tradition and new cultures, but if only the native culture is taken seriously and the differences between cultures is exaggerated, the conflicts between cultures will be more intense, and then, there will be no hope of peace, common development and prosperity.

6. Conclusion:

In the novel the Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan describes the conflicts between the mothers and the daughters. The misunderstandings between the mothers and the daughters in the novel are caused by the different cultural backgrounds and experiences. Fortunately, through painful efforts, the mothers and the daughters begin to understand and communicate each other at the end of the story, which
metaphorically demonstrates the transition of the relationship between Chinese and American culture from conflicts to blending.

A to our Chinese culture, it faces many challenges in the context of globalization. Although learning new technologies from other countries and absorbing the essence of other cultures are necessary, Chinese culture should be protected. History and present interacts each other, and they inherit each other. There's no country in the world which can ignore the past with today’s prosperity. If anyone forgets his past, and loses his history, he will become a person without history and tradition, and he cannot really locate himself in the multi-cultural society, and he will lose the base of development. The Chinese nation has a long and old history; the Chinese-American's history which is bestowed by their nature shouldn't be ignored, and this is the real reason for the mothers to try to combine their history with their lives in American and pass them on to their daughters. In this sense, the aim of recalling the history is to grasp the present and the future better.

References:


