

Mothers and the Motherland in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

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Abstract. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan creates vivid images of Chinese mothers, breaking the stereotypical views of Chinese women and giving voice to their experiences and feelings. Through the narratives of these mothers, Tan builds a bridge both within and beyond the text, fostering an understanding of Chinese society and a search for Chinese cultural roots. With the deep connection between mothers and the motherland in the novel, Tan successfully constructs the spiritual lineage of a new generation of Chinese American women. As a Chinese American female writer, Amy Tan offers a nuanced and profound portrayal of mother-daughter relationships in Chinese American families. In *The Joy Luck Club*, she creates vivid images of Chinese mothers, breaking the stereotypical views of Chinese women in the U.S. and giving voice to their own invaluable experiences and feelings.

Keywords: *The Joy Luck Club*; Amy Tan; mothers; motherland.

1. Introduction

The rise of Chinese American literature in the U.S. is generally regarded as deeply connected to the works of Chinese American female writers. A typical example is Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiographical novel *The Woman Warrior*, which marks the beginning of Chinese American writers' works joining in the mainstream of American literature. A decade later, another Chinese American female writer, Amy Tan, made her further contribution to the development of Chinese American literature [1].

Amy Tan, as a second-generation Chinese American immigrant, was born in Oakland, California, in 1952. After her first fiction efforts of short stories, in 1989, Tan published her first long novel *The Joy Luck Club*, with which she instantly gained fame. *The Joy Luck Club*, as a semi-autobiographical novel, tells the stories of four pairs of Chinese American mothers and daughters by drawing inspiration from the experiences of Tan's own mother and grandmother. Since its publication, this novel has been widely acclaimed in the U.S. and translated into 25 languages. With the success of *The Joy Luck Club* and more, Amy Tan has formed peaks of modern Chinese American Literature together with Maxine Hong Kingston and earned her own space in mainstream literature [2]. As Xiaohuang Yin, a Chinese American scholar, points out in *Chinese American Literature since the 1850s*, Amy Tan has her special position in modern Chinese American Literature as a pioneer just like Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston do [3].

As a member of the second generation of Chinese American female writers, Amy Tan focused on the topic of the relationship between mothers and daughters as well as her predecessors like Maxine Hong Kingston did. Drawing inspiration and material from her own family life, especially from her mother, is thought to be one of the main reasons for Tan's success [4]. *The Joy Luck Club* conforms to this point of view, as it is well known for exploring the tender and tenacious bond between four mothers and their daughters.

2. Figures of Mothers in the *Joy Luck Club*

2.1. Chinese American Mothers as Narrators

The novel's title, "the Joy Luck Club", refers to the weekly gatherings of four Chinese American families in the story. Based on this gathering group, the story centers around four pairs of mothers and daughters and unfolds with their respective first-person narratives. The novel consists of four

sections, each containing four chapters. The narrative perspective shifts between chapters, encompassing the viewpoints of four pairs of mothers and daughters.

The narrative mode Amy Tan used in *The Joy Luck Club* is quite familiar with that in *The Woman Warrior*, named as “talking story” by Maxine Hong Kingston. Featured with female Chinese characters narrating their individual life experiences, this narrative mode is not only simply telling stories, but it also puts female Chinese characters, which had been marginalized in American literature in the long term, in the position of narrators.

The voices of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. experienced long-termed repression. The mothers in *The Joy Luck Club*, as female immigrants, are especially representatives of the marginalized group in American society. Tan’s writing gives a voice to those Chinese American women who have long been voiceless and numb, allowing them to speak for themselves, recount their earlier memories and express their mental experiences [5]. As the Chinese mothers narrate to their American-born daughters their past and fate as Chinese people and as women, this storytelling becomes a powerful weapon to confront and even subvert patriarchal discourse and Orientalist ideology. From the mothers’ narratives in the novel, we can see Amy Tan’s attempt to establish her unique female narrative style and the impact it achieves.

2.2. Subversion of stereotypes of Chinese American Women

The narratives and images of the four mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* are especially groundbreaking. Unlike their daughters who grow up in American culture, the mothers, who are born around the 1920s, flee their painful pasts in war-torn China and immigrate to the U.S. On the one hand, they are raised up with traditional Chinese education and have typical characteristics of women in the old Chinese society: tolerant, hard-working and family oriented. On the other hand, as successful escapees from their miserable fate, these women show great vitality, courage and wisdom in their narratives of their experiences.

For instance, in the third chapter “The Red Candle: Lindo Jong”, Lindo Jong tells her experience of being sold to a rich family as a child bride and finally tricking the Huang family into letting her go. Through Lindo’s story, Amy Tan showcases the deeply entrenched feudal superstitions of old China, including how the Huangs choose a child bride depending on Chinese Zodiac and how they use a burning candle as a marriage bond. However, despite being raised in this outdated cultural environment, Lindo is not trapped by its negative impacts. Instead, she boldly and cleverly utilizes the superstitious beliefs to carve out a brand-new path for herself. Moreover, when ingeniously cheating the Huangs and rescuing herself, Lindo also takes the opportunity to help a servant girl out of her dilemma. Tan uses Lindo’s own mental activity to describe Lindo: “I was strong. I was pure. I had genuine thoughts inside that no one could see that no one could ever take away from me. I was like the wind.” [6].

Represented by Lindo Jong, the figures of mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* are impressively full of subjectivity. Amy Tan uses unique metaphors to describe them, for example, Lindo Jong is compared as a strong horse, and Ying-Ying St. Clair is compared as a tiger. These metaphors collectively point to characteristics of courage, strength and strong self-awareness. Within the novel, the mothers’ narratives, presented as stories told to their daughters, provide the American-born daughters with a deeper understanding of another side of their mothers. Beyond the novel, Amy Tan’s portrayal of these mother figures powerfully subverts the stereotypical and one-dimensional perceptions of Chinese women -- and by extension, Asian women -- in American society.

In *Between Worlds--Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry*, Amy Ling points out that there are two typical stereotypes of Asian women in the U.S.: one is “Dragon Lady” from the movie *The Toll of the Sea*, which is seductive and sly like Fu Manchu; the other is “Shy Lotus Blossom” from the movie *Daughter of the Dragon*, which is always quiet and obedient to men [7]. Mother figures in *The Joy Luck Club* exactly subvert these stereotypes and bring vibrant images of Chinese women to American literature. Thus *The Joy Luck Club* is largely regarded as the best rewrite and protest against the aphasia and silence of Chinese immigrants in the U.S [8].

3. From Mothers to the Motherland

3.1. Construction of Intergenerational Women's History

Besides the four mothers' own earlier life in China, experiences of their previous generation are also crucially mentioned in the narratives of mothers in *The Joy Luck Club*, functioning as mothers' storytelling addressed to daughters. From the first generation of traditional women who spent their whole life in feudal old China, to the second generation of immigrant women who experienced significant cultural shifts, and finally to the third generation of Chinese American women born and raised in the U.S., the vastly different life experiences of these three generations are nonetheless intertwined with emotional resonance and form meaningful dialogues across generations.

A typical example is the storyline of the Hsu family. In the 13th chapter "Magpies: An-Mei Hsu", An-mei Hsu recounts her childhood life in a feudal Chinese family to her daughter Rose Hsu Jordan, which is actually about the experience of An-mei's mother as a fourth wife in that Wu family. An-mei's narrative deeply shows how her mother's mental strength influences her, contributing to the formation of her personality, as she says, "and on that day, I learned to shout." What's more, as the whole chapter is unfolded in the way of An-mei telling the story to her daughter Rose, such influence is passed down to the next generation through narration. This can be found in the 11th chapter "Without Wood: Rose Hsu Jordan", which is narrated from Rose's point of view, as Rose repeatedly mentions what her mother says to her and its impact on her own life. As Rose faces the crisis of her marriage, An-mei emphasizes that "you should speak up". What An-mei tries to deliver to her daughter is exactly what she learns from her mother. Rose's and An-mei's words constantly form dialogues across chapters when they each talk about how her own mother teaches her to speak up for herself and make her own choices. As the chapter "Without Wood: Rose Hsu Jordan" is put ahead of "Magpies: An-Mei Hsu", readers may experience a sense of sudden realization when encountering the latter, uncovering the origins of An-mei's words in the former. This continuous thread of thought weaves together the different life experiences of the three generations of women. They face both their shared predicament as women and their different problems under diverse conditions with the same spirit of Chinese women. Thus, the individual life stories of different women are connected by Amy Tan's skillful writing into a continuous history of Chinese women, which goes beyond generations and borders [9].

With the interwoven mother-daughter narratives in *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan constructs a spiritual lineage of Chinese American women by tracing the life journeys of their female ancestors. Tan approaches the writing of her mothers' memories with a vibrant optimism; what's more, she extends this positive outlook from the life histories of Chinese American women she constructs to the Chinese society she reflects upon, which carries the cultural and psychological roots of her characters. For example, Tan uses a story of Chinese peasants driving away birds in the fields as the end of the chapter "Magpies: An-Mei Hsu". "But now they can do something else. Now they no longer have to swallow their own tears or suffer the taunts of magpies." With this story, which is narrated by An-mei Hsu as news in the novel, An-mei and her mother's experiences and their spirit of resistance are implanted into a broader horizon of Chinese social history, indicating where the spirit comes from and how it functions in a wider range [10].

3.2. Mothers as Carriers of Cultural Memories

At the end of the first chapter "The Joy Luck Club: Jing-mei Woo", Amy Tan writes an important sentence at the perspective of Jing-mei Woo, one of the daughters: "And I am sitting at my mother's palce at the mah jong table, on the East, where things begin." [11]. It points out a significant dimension of the novel: by listening to their mothers' early experiences in China, the American-born daughters gradually learn to see things from their mothers' perspectives, and accordingly reconnect with the Chinese culture they have once grown distant from.

In Chinese culture, the figure of the mother is endowed with a special sense of sublimity and cohesion, especially exerting a profound impact on daughters [12]. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the Chinese

mothers constantly face cultural conflicts and tensions with their daughters, which arise from their different backgrounds. Yet, at the same time, these mothers also serve as cultural reference points, offering their daughters an alternative way of viewing the world and sometimes even becoming a true spiritual anchor for them in times of difficulty. For instance, mothers' crucial role in daughters' life and mind can be clearly seen in Jing-Mei Woo's thoughts in the 12th chapter "Best Quality: Jing-Mei Woo": "And she's the only person I could have asked, to tell me about life's importance, to help me understand my grief." [13].

In the absence of any direct connection to Chinese cultural backgrounds, the mothers become an essential, if not the only, bridge between the daughters and Chinese culture. Even though in some of the families the fathers also hail from China, Amy Tan intentionally minimizes their influence in her writing. The shared gender identity between mothers and daughters creates a subtle yet solid bond, allowing them to better share a continuity of spirit, even when they do not fully understand each other. One direct expression of this in the novel is the frequent use of Chinese proverbs in the mothers' speech, such as "hulihutu" and "heimongmong" said by An-mei Hsu in "Without Wood: Rose Hsu Jordan". The daughters often feel puzzled by these sayings at first, but as the story progresses, they gradually grasp the deeper meanings behind the proverbs, which cannot be easily conveyed in English. This is exactly one of the ways the daughters get in touch with Chinese culture through their mothers.

It is pointed out that the four mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* are all portrayed as individuals swept up in the tide of historical events, and the author consistently roots their identities in the traumatic histories they experienced in old China [14]. These historical memories are passed down from mothers to daughters through their narratives, prompting the daughters to gradually develop a true understanding of Chinese society and the cultural background they come from. Through the mothers' recollections, mothers connect their past with the present, while daughters seek their roots and search for their identity.

With the use of interwoven narratives, Amy Tan puts the mothers' past and the daughters' present together within the text, creating dialogues that span both time and geography. These mother-daughter dialogues deconstruct the binary oppositions between history and the present, China and the U.S., highlighting the complexity and inclusivity of cultural integration. In doing so, Tan constructs a relationship of inheritance and development between Chinese history and the contemporary identity of Chinese Americans, as embodied in the new generation of Chinese Americans. The subtle relationship between these daughters and their mothers, marked by both conflict and mutual understanding, exactly mirrors their connection with Chinese culture as second-generation immigrants: sometimes they hate it, sometimes they misunderstand it, but they are always profoundly influenced by it. As it is pointed by Amy Ling in her *Between Worlds -- Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry*, every Chinese person must bear the burden of this historical legacy when stepping into the world; they accept history through rebellion and understand rebellion by seeking out history [15].

4. Summary

Through the narratives of these mothers in the novel, Tan builds a bridge both within and beyond the text, fostering an understanding of Chinese society and a search for Chinese cultural roots. In Tan's writing, mothers are closely intertwined with the motherland. This connection is closely linked with her own life experiences as a second-generation Chinese immigrant. By tracing the individual life journeys of mothers and grandmothers, Amy Tan successfully constructs the spiritual lineage of a new generation of Chinese American women. Exploration and understanding of mothers and motherland are not only what the daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* experience, but also Amy Tan's own purpose of writing and life lessons.

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