

# Seeing The Struggle of Relationship between Chinese Mothers and America-born Daughters through Languages in Joy Luck Club

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**Abstract.** In the social background of the increasing culture blend, immigrant Chinese mothers often have trouble balancing their relationship with America-born daughters. The film Joy Luck Club is a renowned example of looking into such conflict. This passage analyzes the four typical characteristics of mothers' language in the film and ultimately concludes that language itself is the key cause of the misunderstanding and conflict of parentage. Noticing such logical relevance helps to continue and booster the already on-going amelioration on language.

**Keywords:** Joy Luck Club; Immigrant Chinese mothers; America-born daughters; Conflict.

## 1. Introduction

Parentage has always been a strongly concerned topic among the world. The quality of constructing parentage is vital to the growth of the next generation. Due to diverse cultural background, the style of parenting differs in countries and regions. In the 5000-year history, Most Chinese sons and daughters has formed indelible sense of unconditionally obeying their parents. In America, on the other side, typically children are used to independent decision-making. The difference makes it difficult for mothers that immigrate from China to America in adulthood and their daughters, who are born and raised in America, to form a healthy and steady relationship. To reveal such problems to the public and seek adjustment, movies that aim at the life of such parents and children, such as Joy Luck Club, are meaningful at reflecting reality and serving as a guideline of reconciling parentage. On the topic of Joy Luck Club, previous scholars have interpreted the cross-cultural mother-daughter relationship through Joy Luck Club (Zhang 2015). There are also researches that analyze the structure of mother's language (Tan, 2014). However, most previous researches put most of the focus of the novel, but not the film. More importantly, no previous passages have discussed the direct causality between the traits of mother's language and the misunderstanding and conflict between mothers and daughters. This passage thoroughly views the verbal language of the four mothers and summarizes it into four traits. It is eventually concluded that language itself, in fact, has greatly worsened the misunderstanding and conflict of parentage. In the following context, the writer will give a brief on the film Joy Luck Club, analyze the four specific traits of mother's language in Joy Luck Club, evaluate the significance of noticing and dealing with such language problem, and point out the existing amelioration of the problem which is also somewhat presented in the film.

## 2. Context of the film

The Joy Luck Club was a 1993 film adapted from the novel of the same name. Reflecting his identity as a Chinese formerly dwelling in American, the director Wayne Wang constructed a story about the up and downs of four Chinese mothers and their America-born daughters. Rather than a linear narrative, the film is separated into several parallel short stories, each focusing on one character and having correlated in some way with other stories. Overall, Half of the film portrays the suffocating life of the mothers under an environment of gender inequality, and half portrays their and their daughters' life after they travelled to America and founded the Joy Luck Club. They started new families, but were still struggling between Chinese and American culture, while their

daughters grew up immersed in American culture, fluent only in English. Under such circumstances, misunderstanding and conflicts unveiled.

The temporal background of the mothers in *Joy Luck Club* before leaving China is the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, China continuously lost wars and was repressed by the industrialized western countries such as Britain, signing over 1000 unequal treaties with foreign invaders (Shen, 2018). Following the collapse of China's feudal system after the 1840 Opium War, different parties inside China were battling for power. Remnants of patriarchy were prevalent—gunfire and men, sometimes both emotionless, threatened the lives of women. Seeking a more politically and economically satisfying life for themselves and their offspring, many Chinese women stepped on the journey across the globe to America which, at that time, was more peaceful and flourishing compared with China. However, the daughters, who were later born in America, often had troubles navigating their relationship with their mothers as they grew up.

One significant problem faced by those mothers is language. The language of Chinese and American has fundamental disparity, as the former is a logogram (language it demonstrates both sound and meaning) while the latter is a phonogram (language it only demonstrates sound). There is cultural disparity as well. Language is the epitome of culture that reflects the unique background. Different languages will beget unexpected and unfavorable interpretations at times. Through researching and observing the film, the writer finds four typical language traits of the immigrant Chinese mothers: an authoritative education style, mixing Chinese with poor English, obscure due to cultural background, and active in boasting the deeds of their daughters.

The writer holds the perspective that the misunderstanding and conflict between immigrant Chinese mothers and America-born daughters is largely an unintentional outcome of the language of the mothers. Later, the writer will analyze how each listed trait has a potential of exacerbating the conflict between the mothers and the daughters.

### **3. Traits of mother's language**

#### **3.1 An authoritative tone**

The tone of mothers is direct and compulsory. After the immigrant women become mothers, their language when instructing their daughters resembles their mothers. It is mainly composed of declarative and imperative sentences, with little room for negotiation. The film is filled with examples of such tone. One example is that when Lindo's mother wanted Lindo to slow down eating, she said, 'stop stuffing yourself. No girls should eat that fast.' This is a direct command of Lindo's action, even a bit of condemnation in Lindo's ungraceful manner. By contrast, the family educational dynamics in America are often more democratic (Fan, 2009). The daughters resist against violations of their freedom, and they expect mutual negotiation where their own opinions are respected.

Mother's tone reflects a power imbalance between mothers and daughters that Chinese mothers expect to be found. In the long time of Chinese history, such strong power imbalance has been deeply formed, accepted and inherited.

##### **3.1.1 Acceptance of imbalance**

Chinese daughters have been saturated in ideology that makes them voluntarily accept the imbalance. The concept '孝' (filial piety) is highly prominent in traditional Chinese schools of thought. Chinese daughters feel morally obliged to obeying such imbalance. The film shows Chinese daughter's attitude through psychological description. After Lindo was betrothed to the Huangs, a powerful family, as child brides, her mother talked to her as if she already belonged to them. Instead of blaming her mother, Lindo showed understanding and sympathy. 'My mother did not say these things because she did not love me, she said these things so that she would not wish for something that was no longer hers'. The subconscious instillation of '孝' had led Lindo to automatically consider things comprehensively in the perspective of a family, not herself merely.

### 3.1.2 Inheritance of imbalance

After turning into adults, these daughters (mothers of the next generation) are likely to adapt to their mother's education style. In the China's male-dominated feudal society (back in early 20<sup>th</sup> century), women completely submit to men, with little autonomy to break the gender roles prescribed by the society (Fu, 2012). The film vividly shows how women at that time are treated inhumanely: not long after Lindo arrived at the new family, Huang Tai, the mother-in-law of Lindo, prohibited her to leave the bed unless she got pregnant; Yin-Yin married only to discover that his husband was a scoundrel that unashamedly seduced and had sex with other women. Surrounded by the animosity of the society, daughters would feel spiritually isolated, in another word, lonely. In research done by Lingyu Shang, it is said social support is crucial to reducing loneliness, especially for women in an oppressed state (Shang, 2015). Therefore, girls tend to be close to their mothers, who can empathize with them, having suffered the same oppression. Even after the girls turn to women and immigrate to America, they tend to adopt the behaviors of their mothers, including the harsh tone of educating daughters.

### 3.1.3 daughter's dissatisfaction

While the imbalance has been passed in generations in China for a long time, the situation suddenly changes for America-born daughters. Daughters, never experiencing the feudal society, will not find mother's command tolerable or justified. They will hold the idea that their mothers do not wish them to be better but trying to take away their deserved right, and will rebel against their mothers for gaining right. After coming of age, Waverly, the daughter of Lindo, still described Lindo as 'whatever I do, whatever I say, whatever I think, she always has the perfect countermove.' The director edited this clip to immediately follow the childhood story of Lindo, forming a sharp contrast with Lindo's attitude towards her mother. While the degree of parentage is mutually accepted by mothers and daughters in old China society, daughters cannot understand mother's authoritative tone and mothers cannot understand why not to have authoritative tone. The different attitude on tone causes conflict.

## 3.2 Chinese for majority with English mixed

Though living far away from China now, mothers still prefer to stay with Chinese language, mixing minor English vocabulary. So many years after moving to America, these mothers surely know English well enough to understand basic English grammatical rules like be-verbs, yet when playing mah-jongg, Lindo said "Chinese mah-jongg very tricky". Interestingly, the Chinese version of the sentence "中国麻将很难" also does not contain a morpheme of be-verb. This correspondence indicates the mothers' subjective preference to stick with their family language.

The reluctance to changing is a result of mothers maintaining mental security. As Anzaldúa, G. stated in *Borderlands: The New Mestiza* (1987) 'ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am the language', usage of the language somewhat reflects the identity of users in the social environment. To mothers that arrived not for long, the social environment of America cannot be categorized. This is because Chinese traditional culture inevitably leads to their unwillingness to embracing new environment.

Chinese culture places great significance on the unit of family—people make a clear boundary between 'ones inside the family' and 'ones outside the family', seeing the former as safe, cozy, and emotional, and the latter as perilous, unpredictable, and secular. This can be extended to the environment, where Chinese hesitate to leave a familiar environment to the unknown. America is an utterly unfamiliar environment for immigrant Chinese women. The mothers do not know the social norms, nor is it easy for them to learn because of the language barrier.

After immigration, mothers' mindset is still the same as when they were in the patriarchal society where it is no astonishment that men rape women. The film gives an example of An-Mei's mother, who was invited into the house of a rich man to play mah-jongg, but was then raped. What happened next was that she not only could not sue him, but raping mandatory turned her into his

concubine. This cruelly yet truly reflects how easy and common it is and how little responsibility is needed to take for men to sexually assault women then. Perceiving every stranger on the street as a potential rapist, Chinese women built an invisible shield from the external society they entered, treating people as 'ones outside the family'. Comparatively, Chinese were more intimate with these women because of the positive associations like 'childhood', 'homeland', and mostly importantly 'family', as their family (the literal one) is in China. To create the security of a family, these mothers searched for space, preferably sealed, where they can use familiar language. The example in the film is, without doubt, the club itself. No profound story took place in the club, and there was no necessity for the club to be founded or for all its members to be immigrant Chinese mothers, but the club has existed exist for decades. It was maintained as a comfort zone where the immigrant mothers could speak Chinese and therefore would feel less uncertain.

Conversely, the daughters care less about family values. They can comprehend little Chinese language, and it sometimes can be nonsense that belittles and discomforts them. When Jingmei, the daughter of Suyuan, played mah-jongg with the other three mothers after the death of Suyuan, she asked them not to use Chinese since she could not tell if they were cheating. She said this partly as a joke, but also as a manifestation of dissatisfaction. Daughters can hardly understand the motive of their mothers saying Chinese and they did not share the same cultural background, so they only will be displeased by the unfamiliar Chinese words.

### **3.3 Obscurity of language due to high-context culture**

Mother's language may be self-explanatory to themselves but not so much to their daughters due to mother's high-context culture. The word originates from Edward Hall, a humanist that had researched various cultures and eventually divided them into high-context cultures and low-context cultures. The former usually has strong, stable historical context that most people share, so the expected result of communication (even through only gesture or silence) can be easily achieved without purposefully supplementing extra background. The latter, on the contrary, usually contains people with distinct experiences so that they must explain thoroughly to communicate effectively. China is often viewed as a high-context culture, while America more a low-context one (Zhu,2008). Hall's theory combines language with culture well. As previously explained, many mothers entering America were reluctant to throw themselves into American culture, their daughters, whether born in China or America, thus shared at least some portions of traditional Chinese culture. But the degree of common cultural background can be quite different. Joy Luck Club shows two contrary examples. Rose, the daughter of Yin-Yin, comprehended her mother's resentment towards her marriage with Harold even though all Yin-yin did was to sit solemnly, saying nothing. Jingmei and Suyuan, on the other hand, are sometimes short of tacit understanding. During a dinner party, after Waverly grumbled about Jingmei, Suyuan responded, 'True, cannot teach style. June (American name of Jingmei) not like Waverly, must be born this way.' Jingmei took this as an insult and felt frustrated, but her mother later explained, 'you have style no one can teach, must be born this way'. Here the lack of common high-context cultural background caused misinterpretation, and such lack is likely to bring permanent rather than coincidental effect to parenting. Through the entire film, Rose never had major arguments with Yin-yin, while conflicts between Jingmei and Suyuan seemed unstoppable until Suyuan's death. Through strong contrast, the film demonstrates how obscurity of mother's language due to high-context cultural background plays bring a lot more conflicts.

### **3.4 Frequent appearances of boasting**

The difference extents of familial bonds caused the mothers' and daughters' distinct attitudes towards boasting. Chinese families are willing to 'take the pain together, share the happiness together'; parents and children are strongly interdependent (Zhu,2008). Moreover, under gender inequality that existed in China for thousands of years, the task of mothers is child caring and doing chores. Subconsciously, mothers regard themselves more as a component of the family than an independent person, so their emotion tends to fluctuate drastically with changes in the family's

condition. Boasting then is the externalization of happiness of mothers. By contrast, America was founded as a capitalist society where individuals own the power, contributing to the promotion of personal heroism. Americans believed that each person is an atom where survival and self-actualization is on their own (Liu, 2001). In the films, the daughters are annoyed by the mothers' pleasure in boasting about them. After Waverly won the chess championship, Lindo excitedly boasted her victory to strangers on the street. This irritated Waverly, who then said 'if you want to show off, then why don't you learn to play chess,' which confused and enraged Lindo. Lindo saw it as the success of the whole family, similar to that Suyuan constantly boasted about Jingmei's piano skills. But from Waverly's point of view, her mother deprived and made awkward use of her own success. The different opinions on who the carrier of the success is therefore cause mothers and daughters incapable of understanding each other.

## **4. Discussion**

Joy Luck Club vividly and accurately depicts the language of a special social group: immigrant Chinese mothers in America. The language has led to common misunderstanding and conflict between mothers and their America-born daughters. Such problem is not limited to the fictional film, but a portrait of struggle of families in real life. Fixing such struggle is demanded by not only these immigrants, but also the entire society of America. To be more specific, it will result in two benefits which will be briefly explained.

### **4.1 Multicultural formation**

The proliferation of relationships between immigrant Chinese mothers and their American daughters is beneficial to developing a multicultural society. A survey shows that in 1975, 42% of American citizens express wish to reduce the number of immigrants into America; in 2021, on the other hand, 91% of American citizens hold welcoming attitude to immigrants (CATO Institute, 2021). Citizens have come to appreciate the significance of cultural diversity, and citizens with dual cultural identities begin to draw more attention (Hu 2009). Multiculture requires mergence, not a collision of cultures. Solving conflict between Chinese mothers and American daughters is, in essence, solving incompatibility between Chinese and American culture. The merging of two cultures helps the concept of multiculture to come true.

### **4.2 Productivity promotion**

Another benefit of regulating the family relationship is to increase productivity at work. Research shows that the relationship of productivity and family pressure is reversely U-shaped (Cen, 1989). That is, productivity firstly increases non-linearly when family pressure increases from zero, but when family pressure passes the threshold value, productivity begins dropping. To try maximizing productivity, mother-daughter relationship needs to be appropriately maintained to keep family pressure from rising too high.

### **4.3 Already on-going improvement**

Fortunately, Joy Luck Club does not merely depict a pessimistic picture of disputing mothers and daughters. Eventually, the daughters found their ways to make peace with their mothers, illustrating that the aphasia is not perpetual. The story started from Jingmei sitting on the east side of a mah-jongg table, and ended with Jingmei going to back to the eastern China. This process symbolized the certainty that Chinese and American culture would separate and contradict but eventually fuse together (Peng, 2006).

#### **4.3.1 Tenderer education**

Worldwide and especially in China, the education style is turning more tender. Even a traditionally patriarchal society like China has begun to value equality, with the shadow of

patriarchy on Chinese mothers getting thinner. The writer has released a questionnaire on WeChat, China's primary social media platform, regarding the education situation of two generations. The two focus groups are, respectively, Chinese women in the age of 35 to 55 (A group) and Chinese women in the age of 10 to 34 (B group). When asked approximately how frequently their parents force them to do something they are unwilling to, among 101 respondents in A group, 71% choose 'once or less than once a week', whereas among 130 respondents in B group, only 35% choose this option while 32% choose 'almost never'. When asked if their parents have ever imposed gender stereotypes on them, 66% of A group members choose yes. Their specific responses include 'you must be obedient now, or you won't be a good wife' and 'girls all choose liberal arts, science is for boys'. By contrast, 29% of B group members choose yes. Respondents who have at least one brother in the family are asked if parents give more privilege or solicitude to the brothers. 84% of these A group members and 46% of these B group members choose yes. Chinese mothers have become less forceful with their daughters, giving them space to make their own decision. Although Suyuan initially pushed Jingmei to continue practicing piano after her performance failed, after Jingmei clearly demonstrated her refusal, Suyuan let her daughter off the hook. Years later, she told Jingmei, 'not expect anything! Never expect! Only hope.' Although her words sounded harsh, she only wished her daughter not to waste her talent instead of trying to control her. Chinese parents are becoming less tended to compulsorily command on their daughters.

#### 4.3.2 Gradually embracing English language and culture

While many immigrant mothers see Chinese as their first choice, they come to gladly accept the disparity and gradually embrace some parts of American culture as they start adapting to this new environment. As time passes, the unfamiliarity mothers feel towards the new environment will weaken, so they will feel less rejected to English language and culture. Though the film does not illustrate such phenomenon because of limitation of context, the novel indirectly gives an example that when An-Mei prayed for her son, she did not mention Chinese sacred figures such as Pu-Sa. Instead, she started the sentence with 'my god' and ended it with 'amen' (obviously western concepts in Christianity) with Chinese words scattered throughout the praying (Peng, 2006). This shows mothers seem to even subconsciously treat English as their idiomatic language. Also, the fear of daughters that their mothers are mean enough to despise those that cannot interpret high-context culture usually turns out to be unfounded. Waverly thought that Lindo tried to make Rich seem worthless all the time, but she never expressed her concern. When Waverly finally did, it turned out she was overthinking. 'If I don't like your Rich, I act polite, say nothing, let him have big cancer, let my daughter be a widow. I like Rich, of course I do.' Lindo answered. The conflict in such case is not really mutual. Some daughters assume that their mothers would expect everybody else to have the same profound cultural background and would feel unhappy if not. But it is more of a stereotyping—mothers seldom feel the same way daughters assume.

#### 4.3.3 Willing to change for daughters

Mothers are willing to make a difference in language for daughters, but they may not realize daughters' demand due to lack of active mother-daughter communication in depth. Many problems can be solved as soon as they are discussed. As presented previously, Waverly and Jingmei both solved the problem through nothing but talking with her mother. In the boasting case, if Waverly expressed wish to keep her private accomplishment to herself instead of getting mad at her mother, or if Lindo expressed that the family was just proud of her instead of questioning Waverly, the conflict could have been perfectly avoided. Through communication, mothers and daughters can both compromise and enhance to find the appropriate balance between the two cultures.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, mainly four aspects of the language of immigrant Chinese mothers lead to the troublesome misunderstanding and conflict between them and their America-born daughters:

authoritative education style, mixing Chinese with poor English, obscure due to cultural background, and active in boasting the deeds of their daughters. Each has been implied in *Joy Luck Club* and has a real-life theory and evidence to support its trueness.

Fortunately, as time progresses, the problem has seen improvement as mothers are adjusting to a language whose style is more acceptable to daughters. This is a result of better merging between Chinese and American language and culture. Still, we need to be aware that language is not the sole factor of conflict between mothers and daughters. Solving issues on language is not enough—other factors also need to be recognized, which may be beyond the topic of *Joy Luck Club*. The writer hopes that new perspectives on how the conflict between immigrant Chinese mothers and America-born daughters is formed can be developed in future.

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