

# Chinese-American Identity Differences Revealed in the Conflicts in *The Joy Luck Club*

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*The Joy Luck Club* focuses on Chinese immigrant families in the U.S. through intricate descriptions of mother-daughter relations. The words of “joy” and “luck” all mean good wishes and happiness, the same as in English. On the crossroad of Chinese culture and American culture, the two generations conflict with each other. This paper using post-colonialism theories to analyse life experiences and daily conflicts between the daughter Waverly Jong and the mother Lindo Jong. It turns out that the identity difference between the first generation Chinese-American and the second generation is all the cause.

*Keywords:* Chinese Americans, post-colonialism, identity difference, *The Joy Luck Club*

## Introduction

Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* takes place in the San Francisco China Town. The mother comes to the U.S. for various reasons in 1940s. Amy Tan depends on her self-experience writing through the sorrows and pains of the four Chinese American families: the Woo’s, the Hsu’s, the Jong’s, and the St. Clair’s. Although her works subconsciously or unconsciously express her superior feeling towards western culture, *The Joy Luck Club* is not only literarily remarkable but also socially meaningful (Zhan, 2007, p. 110).

Amy Tan’s novels mainly focus on the relationships between the mother and the daughter. Her descriptions to the mother-daughter daily conflicts are real and detailed, highly capable of creating a picture and scene in the readers’ mind. The mother, Lindo, is born in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, China. The daughter, Waverly, is born on Waverly Street in the China Town of San Francisco. Niu Muyuan (2023) studied the important image of mahjong in *The Joy Luck Club*. Zhou Yin and Ma Jin (2012) pointed out the different family values between Chinese and American families shown in *The Joy Luck Club*. This paper aims to focus on daily conflicts between the daughter Waverly Jong and the mother Lindo Jong. What is identity? According to *Merriam-Webster’s Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary* (Merriam-Webster, 2009, p. 817), the word “identity” has two explanations: (a) Who someone is, the name of a person; and (b) the qualities, beliefs, etc. that make a particular person or group different from others. It turns out that the identity difference between the first generation Chinese-American and the second generation is all the cause.

## Lindo and Waverly’s Different Life Journey in *The Joy Luck Club*

Lindo Jong is born in a rich family in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, China. Her family has some kinship with the famous Chinese revolutionist Sun Yat-sen. At the age of two, Lindo was made to engage a boy who was one

year younger than she was. A matchmaker and Mrs. Huang (Huang Taitai, the mother of the boy) did all according to traditional Chinese fortune telling. As is engaged, Lindo is looked after by her own mother as a daughter from her fiancé's family. She does not have a chance to meet her fiancé until the age of eight. At the age of 12, her own family moves south, as the big flood from Fenhe mixed everything in her house. Lindo is left to go to her fiancé's family, and be a daughter-in-law. In her own words, she is living a life of a housemaid, not a future daughter-in-law. She does the cooking heart and soul for Huang Taitai, her fiancé's mother. Later, Huang Taitai asks Lindo to have a baby. Therefore, she can have a grandson. However, Lindo's young husband does not have any interest in Lindo at that time. As Lindo has no sign of pregnancy, Huang Taitai treats her badly. After a close plan and a perfect act, Lindo escapes the Huang family and goes to Shanghai.

In Shanghai, Lindo finds a job of typewriter. She saves her salary for five years. Together with the money Huang Taitai gave her as a redundancy fee, she comes to the U.S. Then, she meets Waverly Jong's father Tin Jong, a Cantonese who has the prospect to win a citizenship in the Chinese American Church service. They both come from China. However, at the beginning, they two cannot understand each other's Chinese dialect.

Lindo has two sons and a daughter, Waverly. As Waverly plays chess really well, Lindo values her as a proud of the family. Waverly Jong is born in China Town, San Francisco. Her name comes from the street their family lives. She is the third child, as well as the last one in her family. At a young age, she learns to play Chinese chess by chance through watching the group of Chinese men playing chess on the street for leisure. Unexpectedly, Waverly Jong enters a chess contest and wins a first prize. Her mother, Lindo, comes to realize daughter's chess talent. She sends Waverly to learn chess and to compete with other children, wishing to win more. Waverly Jong at first fulfills all mother's dreams. However, as Waverly gradually grows up and enters puberty, she no longer listens to her mother any more. She refuses to take Lindo's advices and leaves the chess table while she is still in the game. She quits the chess area thereafter.

Waverly has two marriages and her husbands are both American natives. Although her first husband has an Asian face, the first husband and his family have nothing related with Chinese. Their unhappy marriage breaks, due to personality clashes. She has a daughter in this marriage. Later, Waverly meets her second husband. She thinks they are born for each other. Every part of them two perfectly matches. However, her second husband is younger than she is. After their engagement, she introduces her husband to Lindo. Unexpectedly, her mother expresses neither any satisfaction nor any dissatisfaction. Besides the future son-in-law's inappropriate table manners, all seems so good. The honeymoon of Waverly is in China, where she embraces her Chinese identity.

### **On Lindo and Waverly's Different Life Journey**

Lindo's path from China to America is different from Waverly's growth in America. Lindo, her life experience in China seems to be somewhat miserable. Her life totally depends on the traditional Chinese patriarchy society. Her own mother treats her as a daughter of Huang family. While after her marriage, the Huangs never take her as a real family member. The only value of Lindo in Huang's is to have a baby, a grandson. Lindo's sense of alienation is permanent in all the novel chapters about her early days. After Lindo's leaving China to the U.S., her life becomes positive. She can choose her husband; she can have a job as well. She hopes her children could be one member of the U.S. society, so she gives Waverly the name, hoping her could remember the road their family lives when she was born.

Waverly is a second generation Chinese American. At every point of view, Waverly merges well into the U.S. society. Her marriage is with American; and her life circle goes out from the China Town. However, inside Waverly's heart, she is still in want of Chinese culture, where her life derives from. Waverly's mother and father are Chinese American immigrants. Therefore, Chinese culture influences Waverly more or less.

### **Lindo and Waverly's Cultural Identity Revealed in Daily Conflicts**

The mother, Lindo Jong, is a child bride at first. She experiences the inequity between boy and girl after her own family's move. Although she is a daughter-in-law, the mistress treats her as a servant. She escapes from the family and saves enough money to come to the U.S. Successfully being a Chinese American, she herself seems to be the one she used to be in China. Her children dislike her Chinglish tone, and her life circle is all inside the China Town.

While the typical American family is independent, the parents choose not to interfere in their children's life after they grow up. However, Lindo not only interferes in her daughter's chess career but also interferes in her daughter's marriage afterwards. The hybridity of identity leads to such contradictions. Lindo is an American now; but she is not living as a real American. The early years she stayed in China have left so many touches on her. She lives in America. She is a Chinese American. Nevertheless, she is still a Chinese to those identical Americans, especially to her children. In the novel, Lindo finally gets a chance to fly back China, to step onto her motherland. In the city she was born in, she finds that local Taiyuan people treat her as a foreigner. The merchants sell things to her at a high price, the same as to foreigners. Her gestures seem so strange in China that everyone could define her American identity.

The daughter, Waverly Jong, is a so so-called ABC. She spends her entire life in the U.S. To most people, the evidence of her being a Chinese American only lies inside her skin color. However, she still lives under the influence of Chinese culture. Her mother, Lindo Jong, treats her and educates her in the Chinese way. Chinese people value children's education extra sensitively important. Education first has become a burden not only to the parents but also to children. When Waverly complains that the room that she shares with her brothers is too noisy to play chess, her mother asks the boys to live in the sitting room without hesitation. When Waverly plays the chess, Lindo blames her why she did not take her advice.

To Waverly, her mother is the so-called them. Through her mother, she sees herself as a newborn Chinese American. For Waverly's mother is used to making decisions for her, she herself will never make any decision for her child in the future. Besides, she will never be too focused onto the re-clean process of the chopsticks and bowls in Chinese restaurants. But, through her first husband, she finds herself different to the traditional American society. In the end, she chooses to embrace all the differences, keep her life tidy, and then she meets her second young husband.

At an argument between Lindo and Waverly, different identities are revealed. Mother Lindo says her motherland is Taiyuan, to her daughter Waverly. However, not till the very end does Waverly figure out Taiyuan is a place other than Taiwan. This misunderstanding is ironic, for the daughter even does not know the place she comes from.

To mother Lindo, she sees herself from the local Chinese merchants' eye. The Chinese local merchants are "them" to Lindo. When she left China to America during the middle 1900's, she always treated herself as a Chinese. Yes, of course, she is a Chinese in American society. However, when she came back to China many years after her left, she is a total American, a foreigner in the local Chinese' eyes. Every stance and every gesture

of hers point out her figure as a foreigner. After all these, Lindo asks herself which one of her faces is American and which one is Chinese. To her, she must sacrifice one if she chooses the other.

Having lived in America for so long years, Lindo herself is a person in between America and Chinese world. She owns a hybrid identity. Traditional Chinese culture and modern American dream shed their light on Lindo Jong's actions. However, as Lindo Jong's daughter, Waverly Jong, holds a different point of view towards her hybrid identity. Compared to her mother, Lindo, Waverly is a more American than Chinese. She has never been to China before her second marriage's honeymoon. However, the Chinese culture has passed down to her through her family—her mother and father. She herself and her brother's complaint about their mother Lindo's Chinese-accent-English is a sign to their exclusion of Chinese culture. As a new generation, Waverly holds a more flexible attitude towards her homeland China. Rather than her mother Lindo's determination towards Taiyuan, Waverly views China from a more objective view. She harbors her identity, while she takes herself as a Chinese American, without dreaming herself being a Chinese once again.

### **Choice and Acceptance of Lindo and Waverly's Identity**

According to Homi Bhabha (1994) as a post-colonial theorist, the identity is not inherited. The identity of a person or a group is shaped and formed by family, life experience, and self-cognition.

#### **Lindo's Choice From Chinese to American**

In the novel *The Joy Luck Club*, we readers clearly see a shift of mother Lindo's identity. She experiences the cultural conflicts after her immigration to the U.S., in between traditional Chinese culture and the modern American one. The delicate handling by Amy Tan of Lindo's self-cognition shows a typical Chinese-American first generation's identity cognition process, especially in the episode of Lindo's visit to China, the two faces from Lindo's feeling. "I think about our two faces. I think about my intentions. Which one is American? Which one is Chinese? Which one is better? If you show one, you must always sacrifice the other" (Tan, 2006, p. 266).

In this scrip, the hesitation and feeling of identity to Lindo is clear. She thinks she must sacrifice one, the Chinese identity to embrace the American one.

#### **Waverly's Acceptance of American and Chinese**

But my daughter has no ears for my words. She puts her smiling face next to my worried one. "Don't be silly. Our nose isn't so bad," she says, "It makes us look devious." She looks pleased.

"What is this word, 'devious,'" I ask.

"It means we're looking one way, while following another. We are for one side and also the other. We mean what we say, but our intentions are different." (Tan, 2006, p. 266)

This is a conversation in between Lindo and Waverly. Lindo feels unsatisfied with her Chinese nose in the mirror and Waverly comforts her. To the Chinese blood, Waverly is more acceptable. She accepts herself in the third space between the Chinese one and the American one. Other than her first generation mother, she feels ease about her Chinese Identity.

### **Lindo and Waverly's Identity Gradual Shift**

Postcolonial theorists hold the point of view that one's identity is not born with, but it is shaped in one's life gradually. Both the historical reasons and reality reasons form one's identity. In between Lindo and Waverly's hybrid identity, the gradual shift from a Chinese identity to a more American is clear.

### **Faith Conversion**

The mother, Lindo Jong's belief is a traditional Chinese one before her coming to the U.S. When she escapes from her first miserable child bride marriage, from Huang Taitai's control, she pretends that the ancestors of her husband's family possess her. She makes a prediction that she herself is cursed. Thus, she escapes from the first unhappy marriage. This Chinese theology action gives her a second life.

When she applies for the immigration permission from the American Government, she writes her occupation as Christian theology (Tan, 2006, p. 258). After she moves to the U.S., she meets her husband in a church. These movements show that Lindo Jong is gradually accepting the U.S. belief.

When it comes to Waverly Jong, the belief goes simpler. When she is in her family way of her first marriage, she once wants to have an abortion. In addition, she even comes to the clinic. After the clinic gives her a puritanical brainwash, she refuses to have the abortion at last. Waverly loves her daughter Shoshana very much. She feels thankful to her last decision.

The belief conversion of Lindo Jong and Waverly Jong indicates their acceptance towards American identity. Nevertheless, the belief issue is critical to all human beings.

### **Different Attitudes Toward Love**

The mother and daughter have different attitudes to love. The mother, Lindo, owns a child bride marriage without love at first. Then, she meets Waverly's father under a friend, An-mei's recommendation in the America. The good words from An-mei about Waverly's father, Tin Jong are about to become a legal American citizen. As Tin Jong is a Cantonese, the two can only communicate through English and Chinese paper writing. However, the two Chinese young people prove their love by more than 20 years' handholding.

The daughter, Waverly, is bold in love. Her marriage first starts from an elope. While the two find no match for each other under true life after marriage, they choose to divorce. The second husband of Waverly is two years younger than her. The sister and younger brother relationship is not so acceptable to traditional Chinese, as her mother did not agree to the marriage at first. The daughter, Waverly, values match of the two characters most in a love.

### **Different Eating Habits and Table Manners**

Mother Jong and daughter Jong's life styles are different due to their different life journeys. When the daughter invites her mother to the Four Direction Chinese restaurant to introduce her boyfriend who she wants to marry for the second time, her mother obstinately washes her dishes with hot water according to the Cantonese traditions. The daughter thinks this action as superfluous. The daughter cannot stand eating viscous food. She and her peers view the shop in China Town selling live fish for cooking ridiculous, just the same as Americans do. The different eating habits are a sign of their different identity.

### **Conclusion**

The identity hybridity of the daughter Waverly Jong and the mother Lindo Jong causes the conflicts. Through others, they themselves finally locate each other themselves. The mother holds that she must sacrifice one identity (Chinese) as long as she chooses to accept the other (American). While to the daughter, she thinks all her identities can live together. With the passing away of both parents, the meaning of family has transferred into the place the one now lives. Is he the stranger in the city? The answer of both Lindo Jong and Waverly Jong has clearly pointed out.

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