

## *Original Paper*

# The Differences of Family Education between China and the United States in *The Joy Luck Club*

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### **Abstract**

*Along with the development of globalization, cultural differences among different countries have been brought into our focus. Family education, plays an irreplaceable role in our educational process, and is also a special and essential aspect in various cultures. This paper will analyze the differences of family education between the Chinese culture and American culture through Amy Tan's work *The Joy Luck Club*. The differences mainly include the aspects of aim of education, content of education, requirements of education, views of family relationship and different ways used in education. Through comparing the different results brought by different styles of family education, it helps readers to learn cultural differences between China and the United States in the aspect of family education, and make them respect different cultures and realize the importance of family education.*

### **Keywords**

*The Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan, family education, cultural differences between China and America, culture comparison*

### **1. Introduction**

As we all know, differences exist everywhere, especially exist in different cultures. Besides, cultural communication and integration is an inevitable trend in our current era and in this global world. However, it does not mean that we should leave it alone or overlook the results brought by cultural comparison. In contrast, we need to take it seriously and attach great importance to this issue. Family education, a critical part of our educational process, is playing an increasingly important role in our culture. We need to study it earnestly so that we can improve our education system continuously.

*The Joy Luck Club*, a novel written by Amy Tan, demonstrates the differences between Chinese culture and American culture vividly. Through describing the stories between four Chinese mothers and their

America-born daughters, the writer shows us many aspects of what will happen when two different cultures are clashing, in particular in the aspect of family education. This book also strikes people's thinking: what should people do when they face the challenge of cultural differences, and what kind of view should we choose to see our domestic culture and other various cultures in the world. Additionally, in this book, by comparing Chinese and American family education, the author helps us to recognize the gap between two cultures and render us find the weakness between two cultures. This novel is also conducive for us to absorb the essence of American family education, so that we can take advice from it and also can adjust our educational direction, it is beneficial to both our school education and family education, and makes sure we can go on a sustainable and healthy development road.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 About the Author

Amy Tan, a Chinese American writer who was born in Oakland, California, in 1972. She grew up in Santa Clara, California, and in here, she received her primary and secondary education. Even though owns the nationality of the United States and deeply influenced by the mainstream of American culture, the author is always hold the opinion that she is a typical Chinese at heart, that makes her use American's thinking way to observe and survey China and Chinese people, and the American's mode of thinking definitely influences her on her attitude and way of thinking. Her books are focusing on the relationship between mother and daughter and she likes to describe the experience of the Chinese in the United States and she is also good at describing the situation when two different cultures are crashing. *The Joy Luck Club* is the representative work of Amy Tan. It not only makes her spring into fame, but also lays her foundation in the area of literature. Besides *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan also write many other excellent books such as *The Kitchen God's Wife*, *The Hundred Secret Senses*, *The Bonesetter's daughter* and *Saving Fish From Drowning* and so on. Even though she won a quiet number of awards in western publishing and literature, Amy is also criticized by some literary critics by having stereotyped image and misunderstanding towards some traditional Chinese customs, but these works are still valuable for us to study and discuss, especially when we analyze the differences between cultures and compare different culture. It provides readers with fresh reading experience and plays an important role in the development of ethnic literature.

### 2.2 About the Book

*The Joy Luck Club* is Amy Tan's most-representative and best-selling book. In this novel, the writer mainly tells us a story about four Chinese mothers and their America-born daughters. When the mothers move to the America from China, they are not familiar with the local culture and cannot forget the custom they kept in China, so they set up an organization in Chinese immigrant group, which is the joy luck club. The joy luck club is a party named by those mothers and they talk with others and play mahjong game at the party. The name of this party also shows their great expectations towards their life in the United States. However, their American daughters could not understand their way of doing such

things, and the mothers also could not understand their daughters' way of thinking. It seems that there has an invisible barrier between the mothers and their daughters. Through describing various aspects of cultural conflicts and differences between mothers and daughters, this book vividly demonstrates the clash of two different cultures, strikes people's thinking about what could we do when we confront cultural conflicts and differences.

### **3. The Importance of Family Education**

As the saying goes, parents are the best teachers and the first teachers for children. Family education plays a critical and irreplaceable role in shaping children's characteristics and their methods of doing things. Besides, the behaviors of the parents will become the objects that the children learn and imitate subconsciously, especially when the children are not boasting a good ability of judgment. Using parents' words and their deeds to cultivate a sound personality of children is also a crucial part in family education. Additionally, of course, the environment in which the children live and grow up is also important. Home is the one of the most critical places in children's educational process. Family education is a crucial part of all around education and it plays an increasingly important role in building children's views of world, views of life and views of value. It is also the first kind of education we receive, and it affects our subsequent educational path. All in all, family education is the foundation and start of people's education.

### **4. The Differences of Family Education between China and the United States in *The Joy Luck Club***

#### *4.1 Differences in the Aim of Education*

In *The Joy Luck Club*, the biggest appeal of the Chinese mother on family education is that her child must obey what she said, in Chinese mothers' view, the action of a single individual in a family is not only represent himself or herself but also represent the whole family, so the mothers educate their daughters in the aim of saving face for her, it seems that her daughter is not only her daughter, but a member of her family, so her daughter need to be responsible for the whole family and shoulder some pressure together with the family. However, the American daughter thinks that the aim of education is render a girl do whatever she likes and attention should be paid in the aspect of achieving her own value. The story of Jingmei Woo and her mother Suyuan Woo demonstrate the different aim of education among two cultures. Suyuan wants Jingmei to learn play the piano because Suyuan believes her daughter has a gift on music and that makes Suyuan gain face, so that she treats it as a showpiece. However, Jingmei refuses her mother's request for learning playing the piano and not willing to learn playing the piano because she is not interested in it and she want to do things she interested and want to be herself. However, Suyuan says to Jingmei: "Only two kinds of daughters. Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!" (Amy Tan, 2006, p. 142). That vividly shows a Chinese mother's standard on her child, the

Chinese mother need to consider other friends' and families' opinion so that they must educate an obedient child, while the America daughter prefer to achieve her own value. That is because they accept different kind of education.

#### *4.2 Differences in Content of Family Education*

Different family has its own content of family education. The content of family education almost makes up a man's thinking and decides his ways of thinking and actions. There is no doubt that faith is a critical part in our daily life, and usually parents' faith will be continued by their children, but in this book, there is a special situation that the mothers are from China and have deep feeling about China and their hometown. Oppositely, their America-born daughter never came to China before, so they don't share the same feeling with their mother, and they accept the education under the guidance of American. Conflicts are unavoidable in their life. We all know that traditional Chinese have many ways of internal beliefs, which leads to different variety of family education. However, western people tend to join religions in their life and their religion cause affect to their life and include their family education. In *the Joy Luck Club*, the author clearly demonstrates what will happen when people from different cultural backgrounds with different faith. She shows us some beliefs of traditional Chinese, such as fengshui, the five elements and physiognomy the mothers believe. For example, Yingying St. Clair believes in fengshui, which means that the layout of the house will affect people's fate. In Yingying St. Clair's mind, if an apartment sits too steeply on the hill, the new baby of the family will die. Besides, Anmei Hsu believes in the theory of five elements which means that the world is consisting of five elements and it also emphasizes entirety, when you are lack one element, you can increase another element to supply it. That all demonstrated through their action and they try to use this traditional Chinese ideology to persuade their America-born daughter. In the book, Anmei is a faithful believer of five elements theory, she gives the name of Rose to her daughter because she thinks her daughter lacks of wood element, and this name can add wood element to her daughter so as to fill the missing piece of her daughter. What's more, Lindo Jong's mother believes one's fortune can be known by his or her face, for instance, she thinks that thin ears cannot hear the calling of luck, so people with thin ears will not be very lucky according to what she said. However, in America, most people believe in God, and they go to church every week. So when the mothers told their each daughter those traditional Chinese thinking, their daughter think that it is not right and suitable for them because the daughters believe that they are American people now, why should we still use Chinese ways of thinking? It is out of the style and not scientific. But the mother believes that no matter where they are, they are all real Chinese, they could not forget where they from and their root. In the book, Anmei Hsu becomes a Christian just because she wants to integrate into local life after she came to America, but she is not used to this kind of region culture and custom. She could not understand why most people in American choose to believe in God and she also confused that why these people social in the church. From this not only can we see the importance of religion in America and we also can see faith plays a crucial part in the content of education, diverse content of education will bring diverse result to a man's life, and

this kind of influence is persistent and profound.

#### *4.3 Different Requirements and Customs*

In the aspect of dietary, there are also some interesting differences. Chinese parents like to eat foods which they think are healthy and have good meanings especially in the time of festivals. For example, Yingying St. Clair eats moon-cakes in the Middle-autumn Festival. Besides, the Chinese mothers pay special attention to the way of cooking and freshness of food. However, the America daughters pay attention to speed and convenience. Besides, these America-born daughters usually tipping the waiter when they go to restaurant and this barely happen in China. In *The Joy Luck Club*, when Waverly Jong wants to tip the server because in America everyone will do the same thing like her, but her mother Lindo Jong take the money back and said no tip because she thinks that it is a kind of waste, there is no need to tip the waiter, she hold the view that it is his responsibility to serve customers in the restaurant. It is a typical action of a traditional Chinese because they think their bills are contained these fees while an American will think tipping waiters are normal, that is why the mother and her daughter do opposite action, there has the different requirements and customs in their education.

#### *4.4 Different Views on Family Relationship*

In the aspect of views they choose to consider their family relationship, the Chinese mothers and their American daughters are quite different, details are as follows:

##### *4.4.1 Different Status between Parents and Children*

Differences in the aspect of status in a family between two different kinds of family education are mainly demonstrated in the story of Lindo Jong. It happens when her daughter Waverly Jong with Waverly's fiancé Rich came to Lindo's house for dinner. It is just a subtle detail, the book reads after the dinner, when Rich say good bye to Lindo Jong and her husband, he calls their first name, which is only a few Chinese older family will do that. In traditional Chinese people's mind, only friend or people in older age would only call your first name, so Lindo Jong and her husband felt weird, as if they are humiliated by Rich, but Rich thinks it is nothing, because it is very normal in the United States to call one his first name. In Rich's mind, they are independent and equal individuals for each other. But in Lindo Jong and her husband' mind, Rich should call them aunt and uncle rather than directly call their name. This is because they were brought up by different kinds of cultural backgrounds and family. They had received different kinds of family education.

##### *4.4.2 Different Views on Marriage*

The Chinese parents see marriage as a connection between one family and another family while for parents in the United States it only does matter to two people. Besides, the American people are seeking equality and mutual respect in marriage while Chinese people think it is important to show filial obedience. In the book, when the author talks about Lindo Jong, one of the Chinese mothers, the author refers to Lindo's marriage story. Lindo Jong marries her first husband Tyanyu Huang does not out of her own accord. At that time in China, most girls' marriage was relying on the matchmakers and girls need to bring dowry after they married, which is very different from the American free-marriage.

In the story, Lindo Jong and her first husband are engaged with each other even though they have not met each other before. After the engagement, Lindo becomes the Huang's family member. She moves to Tyanyu's house where four generations live together and need to do housework for the whole family. Lindo is under the pressure in the house because she not only should serve the family like a servant but also be asked by Tyanyu's to give birth to a baby. Tyanyu's mother is very strict with Lindo, at that time in China, women have the duty to do housework, and a wife must obey what her mother-in-law told her. Tyanyu's mother asked Lindo do almost everything in the house but always unsatisfied with Lindo. At the last, Lindo can't receive this unequal position so she left the Huang's family through the mind of her own.

In contrast, the author also talks about Lena St. Clair's story, she is one of the four American daughters, her marriage is various from Lindo's. She knows her husband through work, and marries her husband of her own accord. In Lena's marriage, only she and her husband live together, and she has a list with her husband, it records they spend how much money for the family, and they go fifty-fifty of their bill which is totally equal.

#### 4.4.3 Different Attitudes to Their Peers and Friends

When Chinese people in interpersonal interaction, they are particular about treat each other with sincerity and feel for others. They think friends need to help each other and be generous to each other. Besides, they show special respect to the elder. As for American people, mutual respect in a relationship is very important and they are independent individuals for each other. In the book, when the author writes the formation of the joy luck club and these Chinese mothers' friendship, we can feel clearly they are considering and feeling about each other. Especially when Jingmei Woo wants to fulfill her mother's dying-wish, other women in the joy club prepare money and offer opinions for her enthusiastically. However, relationship between friends in America is tighter than it in China, friends are tend to compete with each other and peer pressure come easily, which clearly shows difference between Chinese family education and American family education.

#### 4.5 Different Ways of Family Education

Chinese parents usually tend to use an implicative way to express their ideas to their children while western parents tend to say their opinion directly. That is because Chinese culture belongs to high context culture which means that the creation of intersecting information does not depend on the communicative language itself, but on the communicative context. However, most European cultures belong to low context culture, which are on the contrary to high context culture (Zhang, 2017, p. 54). In the book, when Waverly Jong invites her fiancé Rich to meet her mother Lindo Jong at home, Lindo Jong cooks a meal for Waverly Jong and Rich, and Lindo made disparaging remarks about her cooking to show her humility, as it is Chinese cook's custom. However, be an American, Rich does not know Lindo's implication and he really criticizes the dishes and even add some soy sauce in the dish which is a special pride for Lindo, it makes the dinner very embarrassing. Because Rich is from backgrounds of low context culture and in his family he accept the family education of direct style, so he tend to use

direct way to express his opinion. But for Waverly Jong's family, they are more implicit compare to Rich.

### **5. The Results Brought by Different Styles of Family Education**

Different family education brings about different results, for that family education is first and foremost in a man's life. It continues to influence and children's habits of life, moral conduct, conversation and behavior, etc., and its influence is quite large. This kind of lifelong education often reflects a family's family style, and the family style will affect several generations. So formulate a well family education style is quiet important for a family and their children. *The Joy Luck Club* contains both Chinese family education forms and American family education forms, it shows differences and conflicts exist in different families of two different countries. On the other hand, it reveals individual style of American family education and Chinese style of family education. Obviously, the mothers and the daughters in this book demonstrate quite different ways of thinking and doing things, which are the results brought by different styles of family education.

A good family education will bring about a good family style, and a good family style will bring about national prosperity. Excellent traditional family education not only helps children to achieve lofty ideals, but also promotes the prosperity and rejuvenation of the country. Indeed, family is the basic unit of a country, countless families made up a country and these families play a critical role in their motherland. The families and the country are interacted on each other and they are independent. The reason why our Chinese traditional culture forms its own distinctive characteristics is precisely because these families' excellent family education has been passed down from generation to generation. This fact also remind us that in this modern era, we should absorb the essence of traditional family education, inherit and carry forward its spirit, so that we can form a correct family education and good family rules.

### **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the influence of family education has a vital impact on children's whole life. Both Chinese and American family education has its own strengths and weaknesses. When we take it into consideration, whether it is Chinese family education or American education, we should think more, question more, and make the best use of the strengths and try our best to avoid the weaknesses. Chinese education has gone through thousands of years of history, and there is no doubt that there is a complete set of educational thoughts and concepts. But with the globalization of education, we should draw on the advantages of other education culture, constantly improve and develop our education system, and train more qualified talents for China's development. *The Joy Luck Club* describes the stories of four Chinese mother and their America-born daughters, and through the description of their talking and actions, it is clear to see the differences between Chinese culture and American culture. The comparison of Chinese and American family education is significant, because through it the two

cultures can learn from others' strong points and make up one's deficiencies. Apart from this, it is also beneficial for the parents to extract each other's essence and remove their dross in the process of family education.

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