

# An Analysis of Cultural Differences between China and the West from the Perspective of Intercultural Communication-- Based on *The Joy Luck Club*

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## Abstract

With the further development of cultural diversification, cultural conflict and integration has become a major issue of worldwide concern. This paper selects the representative characters from *The Joy Luck Club*, and analyzes the cultural differences from three perspectives: conflicts between mother and daughter, husband and wife, and between friends. By comparing the cultural differences between China and the West, the paper also gives suggestions on the strategies of intercultural communication.

**Keywords:** *The Joy Luck Club*, Cultural Differences, Intercultural Communication.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*The Joy Luck Club* is a film about the relationship between four mothers and daughters, their married lives and the way they raise their children. The four mothers and daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* all suffered different cultural conflicts, but what is admirable is that they kept seeking cultural understanding and integration. The mothers in the film moved to the United States to escape from their past lives and pursue a better life. The mothers' subsequent persistence and courage are attributed to the hardships they endured. However, life is not always satisfactory. They often stuck in various embarrassing situations due to cultural differences while living in the United States, especially in their relationship with their daughters. It is the cultural differences between China and the West that prevent them from communicating and interacting successfully with each other. Fortunately, the mothers eventually developed a warm and comfortable relationship with their daughters, and the result comes from their life experience and wisdom.

“For 30 years, these women feasted, forgot past wrongs, laughed and played, lost and won and told the best stories. Each week, they hoped to be lucky, and that hope was their only joy. Their connection with each other had more to do with hope than joy or luck.” *The Joy Luck Club* means cherish blessings. Although

everyone thought that starvation was normal in times of famine, they held weekly parties and continued to laugh and joke even when faced with the separation of their family. Even if the cakes they ate were filled with rotten fruit and the orange peels were covered with mold, they felt lucky. They are not understood by other people, but instead of drowning in painful memories, it is better to meet tomorrow happily [1].

## 2. Cultural Differences and Intercultural Communication

### 2.1 Cultural Differences

Cultural conflict refers to the contradiction or intensified state caused by cultural differences in the process of communication between different cultures. Cultural conflict is an inevitable cultural phenomenon in the process of cultural communication and cultural development. Cultural conflicts are first caused by cultural differences. If there is no difference, there is no contradiction at all, of course there is no conflict. Secondly, cultural conflicts arise in cultural exchanges. There are differences between the two cultures, but the differences only belong to the category of concepts. Only when they communicate with each other will contradictions arise, and only when the contradictions become intensified will conflicts arise. Therefore, cultural conflict is the resultant effect of cultural difference and cultural communication.

Cultural conflict can be regarded as the tendency and trend of mutual opposition, mutual restriction, mutual resistance, mutual exclusion and mutual alienation between different cultures in the process of mutual communication, or the state of mutual separation and mutual isolation between two mutual communication cultures due to contradictions. Among them, cultural conflict includes verbal conflict, non-verbal conflict, social conflict, interpersonal conflict and managing conflict.

## 2.2 Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is not only a subject, but also a social communication activity of human beings. The concept of intercultural communication first came from Trager and Hall's "Culture and Communication: Patterns and Analysis" published in 1954. Hu Wenzhong believes that people's communication activities in different backgrounds belong to intercultural communication, which not only includes people's communication activities across countries and nationalities, but also broadly refers to the communication across regions, genders, ages, identities, classes and other levels. When we conduct the study of intercultural communication, we should first focus on the study of transnational communication, and then on other low-level intercultural communication. The theory of intercultural communication first emerged in the United States and then developed vigorously in the world. It is supported by Edward Hall's *The Silent Language* published in 1959.

As a supplement to the concept of intercultural communication, we need to pay attention to the fact that intercultural communication is a process of two-way communication and interaction in the form of face-to-face communication between the two parties. Therefore, reading foreign literature and watching Hollywood movies do not belong to intercultural communication. The Chinese American women in *The Joy Luck Club* arrive in the United States and communicate with the local Americans in the context of American culture. They timely interact and constantly give feedback based on their language, movements and expressions, which is typical intercultural communication. Secondly, the typical characteristic of intercultural communication is the difference of communication background, which should be carried out based on the large background difference between the two parties. The difference can be cultural factors such as language, writing, religion, values and ethics, as well as other factors such as ethnicity, nationality, age, class and gender. Communication includes not only verbal communication but also non-verbal communication, social communication, interpersonal relationship, management and other forms of communication.

## 3. Cultural Differences Reflected in *The Joy Luck Club*

### 3.1 Conflict Between Mother and Daughter

#### Lindo-Waverly

When Waverley was a child, she had an amazing gift for chess. She took part in various competitions and won various trophies. Every time she won a competition, her mom would like to show off around the street by saying, "Oh, you know my daughter, Waverly Jong, chess champion?" Finally, Waverly Jiang protested to his mother in front of everyone. "Why do you have to use me to show off? If you want to show off, then why don't you learn to play chess?" The mother was furious, feeling that her daughter had disregarded her and humiliated her in public.

Jiang Lindo has a strong desire to control his daughter, including her marriage. Waverley even married a Chinese guy to please her, but she seemed unsatisfied. When they got divorced, she got all upset like it was her daughter's fault. Only later, as Waverley calmed down, did she discover that her first relationship had been sabotaged by her mother. But the mother's interference in her daughter's marriage did not stop there. She then cursed Waverley's new boyfriend, Rich, for his freckles, his drinking habits, the mink coat he gave was made of leftover strips. Waverley was vilified by her mother's harsh words and driven to despair, refusing to communicate with her mother.

Chinese people have a strong concept of "face", they are particularly concerned about other people's views and evaluation of their own, especially keen on face-saving. Because of this, Jiang Lindo showed off her daughter's talent everywhere, for fear that others do not know that she has a gifted daughter who won a chess champion. But her daughter could not understand her mother's behavior. She showed off the achievements as if she had won the trophy, which had hurt her daughter's self-esteem. However, the daughter didn't know that Chinese people never have direct conflicts in front of others, which means impolite and rude. Her scolding of her mother in front of everyone made her mother lose face and aggravated the conflict between them.

Jiang Lindo is a typical Chinese traditional parent who regards her child as an appendage, firmly grasps the power of the family and makes all decisions for her child in the name of love. Jiang Lindo ignored her daughter's feelings to intervene in her marriage, she thought she was able to penetrate the man who cheated and played with women's feelings, and let her daughter stay away from bad men, but she hurt her daughter deeply. Waverley, who grew up in the United States with American ideas desperately wants to be treated equally in the family, to be treated as an independent individual and to be able to choose her love and

marriage. But the mother did not allow it. There is a deep cultural gap between them.

Culture is not a garment that can be put on and taken off at will, its power is small but affect profoundly. Although Lindo is living in the United States, she is always immersed in the traditional Chinese culture across the ocean and cannot be easily taken away. Her daughter was born in the United States, being expected to not only adapt to the environment but also has the Chinese character.

In the film, mothers are the typical representatives of traditional Chinese culture, while daughters are the loyal adherents of American culture. The essence of the conflict between mother and daughter is the clash between Chinese and American cultures in the family.

### 3.2 Conflict Between Husband and Wife

Lina-Harold

Lena and Harold are a classic office romance. They work in the same department and are equally competent, but Harold makes seven times Lena's salary. In the face of Harold's praise, Lena always felt that she did not deserve it. She blamed her good luck for the attraction to Harold.

From the time they fell in love to the time they got married, with most everything, they kept track of what they spent and then split it 50-50. But Harold earns seven times Lena's salary and often adds his expenses to Lena's bill, which causes Lena to resent him. Although Lena unsatisfied with it, she kept silent. The relationship between them became increasingly distant.

Lena was humble and weak in the marriage. She was excellent enough and had a strong business ability, but she was still unconfident. She felt incredible in the face of Harold's praise. She blames good luck for winning Harold's affections, and even fears losing her husband's love one day. Although Lina grew up in the freedom and equality of the United States, but still permeated with the traditional Chinese women's timidity, inferiority, lack of security and the concept of equality. It's her low profile in the marriage that eventually led to the further exploitation of Harold. It's the imbalance of the relationship between husband and wife that triggered their emotional crisis.

As a Chinese-American, Lena is a double attribute of the Chinese culture and American culture. But owing to the profound influence of personality factors and ancestral culture that they are retained in the marriage more "Chinese". There is no doubt that the white man is a typical representative of the mainstream American culture. The conflict in their transnational marriage stems from the inherent differences between Chinese and American cultures.

### 3.3 Conflict Between Friends

June-Waverly

Growing up together, June and Waverly shared all the intimacy of a little girl, but often they held grudges against each other. Once at dinner, Waverly asked June about her business. June answered, "Although one of my clients seems to think that freelance means free, just because we're friends." Her words offended Waverly. "Listen, June, I don't know how to tell you this. But that stuff you wrote- -Well, the firm decided it was unacceptable...And we are a big firm, we need somebody who understands our style." The atmosphere was awkward at that time.

Unlike the conflict between mothers, the conflict between the daughters is explicit with arguments and awkwardness permeating every corner of the room and being easily felt by everyone. Daughters don't care as much about other people's feelings as mothers do. They think and express their opinions from a personal point of view and don't afraid of confrontation. Compared with mothers, face-saving is not so important to them. They pay more attention to their feelings.

There is also a big difference of the communication styles between the American-raised daughters and those in Chinese-American mothers. Americans regard frankness as a virtue, and they pursue efficient and direct expression. They say what they want without beating around the bush. On the contrary, the roundabout implication of the Chinese style will only make them misunderstand the meaning. Chinese consider it is impolite to quarrel in front of others, so their quarrel caused embarrassment to Chinese mothers.

## 4. Strategies of Intercultural Communication

### 4.1 Eliminating Stereotypes

The way a person thinks affects the way he communicates. People who are open to different cultures are more likely to connect with others. The stereotype is a common misunderstanding in intercultural communication. For example, "Americans are arrogant", "French men are romantic", "Germans are meticulous", etc. This kind of stereotypes can lead to preconceptions and then fall into a "self-fulfilling" prophecy. In intercultural communication, we should respect the condensed national personality and realize the individualization of the communication object. We should make a case-by-case analysis instead of generalizing [2].

### 4.2 Enhancing Language and Cultural acquisition

Chinese and American cultures are typical representatives of the two polar cultures of China and the West, and the cultural differences are very obvious. "A considerable part of the conflicts in Sino-American interpersonal communication mainly originates from the lack of understanding of each other's culture. If people ask each other and judge each other's words and

actions only from their cultural perspective, even if they are well-intentioned and sincere, the relationship between the two sides will be affected or even damaged by the misunderstanding caused by cultural differences [3].”

Therefore, only with cultural enlightenment can we cross the gap of cultural differences and get along smoothly with American students. The American culture we have to acquire includes both the explicit culture such as the language, food and dress, and the invisible culture such as thinking, character and values. In addition to memorizing English words and learning English grammar, it is also necessary to read books about American culture or intercultural communication between China and the United States. Without understanding ancient Greek philosophy and the Renaissance, it is difficult to understand the American concept of individual supremacy and freedom and equality.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Through the film *The Joy Luck Club*, we can truly feel the cultural differences between China and the United States and the negative impact of this cultural difference on our lives. By analyzing the cultural differences between China and the West, on the one

hand, we can have a deeper understanding of Chinese and American cultures, and thus maintain a smooth exchange; on the other hand, we can take advantage of our strengths and complement our weaknesses, and pay attention to absorbing the excellent nutrients of American and even other national cultures while adhering to the excellent characteristics of our own culture, so as to enhance the connotation of our own culture and promote the exchange and development of global culture and civilization [4].

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