

A Study of Chinese Images in Chinese-American Literature —— *The Joy Luck Club* as an Example

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Abstract

As the new era is changing dramatically, the presentation of Chinese image in literary works is one of the ways for the people of China to understand the international perspective. This paper takes the image of China portrayed in writer Amy Tan's work *The Joy Luck Club* as the main object of discussion, briefly describes the portrayal of Chinese image, and provides some references for people how to set up Chinese images and how to confirm their our identity in the context of the new era.

Keywords: Chinese-American literature, Chinese image, cultural identity, *The Joy Luck Club*.

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INTRODUCTION

The Joy Luck Club is one of Chinese-American author Amy Tan's masterpieces, and since its first publication in 1989, the novel has had a profound impact around the world. By depicting the lives and emotional entanglements of four Chinese-American families and two generations of Chinese-American people, the author revealed with delicate strokes the situation of Chinese people struggling to gain a foothold in American society and the identity issues of two generations of Chinese.

This paper will explore the Chinese image portrayed in *The Joy Luck Club* and its significance in Chinese-American literature, taking the conflict and integration of tradition and modernity, the portrayal of mother-daughter relationship, and the comparative analysis of Chinese and American cultures as the entry point, analyzing the position and status of Chinese people, Chinese culture and other Chinese images in different environmental backgrounds in the United States, and exploring the Chinese-American cultural communication in the new era and providing reference and reference for the establishment and dissemination of China's international image, how to establish cultural identity, and how to deal with the realities of the new era. At the same time, it explores Sino-American cultural communication and exchange in the new era, and provides reference for the establishment and dissemination of China's international image in the new

era, how to establish cultural identity, and how to cope with realistic difficulties.

1. Shaping the National Image

National image is a complex and multifaceted concept, which is often regarded as an important part of national soft power and a reflection of the strength of a country's comprehensive national power, and is emphasized by governments of all countries. The word "image" is defined in the *Han Dian* as "a tangible or visible manifestation that is portrayed and described in effective and vivid language". From this, it can be seen that the image of a country can be initially summarized as the manifestation of a country portrayed in vivid and effective descriptive language. By further inference, country image can be considered as the overall judgment and social evaluation of a country by both external and internal publics (Tang Guanghong, 2004). Based on this understanding, the constituent factors of country image and its shaping methods can also be slightly decomposed.

1.1. Constituents of the country's image

The comprehensive national strength of a sovereign state is the basis for the composition of a country's image. Although there are various criteria for judging comprehensive national power, it can be roughly divided into material factors and spiritual factors, and the combination of the two is the basis for the composition of national image. The shaping of national image is closely related to these two factors. The country's image

is also jointly constructed by the external collective and recognized by the international mainstream groups. When the public outside the country has a common perception of a country's performance, the country's national image has been initially shaped. In the international community, the national image expresses a country's national strength and national spirit, and can be shaped. As the public's overall judgment and social evaluation, national image is characterized by duality, diversity and complexity. Generally speaking, the public perception of the image and the country's virtual image is basically consistent, but with the country's physical image is often a discrepancy (Duan Peng, 2007). When a country's national image has a positive impact, it can continue to use the existing means to maintain the status quo, on the contrary, it can also use the public opinion media, the national system, diplomacy, etc. to reverse and reshape it.

1.2. Methods of shaping national image

According to the relevant theoretical research, the shaping of national image can be basically divided into "self-shaping", "other shaping" and "joint shaping" (Liu Xiaoyan, 2002), i.e., self-evaluation by the public of the home country, overall judgment by groups in other countries, and collective judgment by the home country and other countries. Self-assessment, collective judgment of other countries, and collective judgment of the country and other countries. Self-assessment carries the emotional will of the self, and can produce clearer results under the premise of strong influence of the country; other-assessment is a foreign evaluation, accompanied by the will and recognition of others, and the results may be biased by the influence of ideology and interests; and the combined-assessment requires that the voice of the country be able to compete with other countries, and the result of the comparison of the two may be close to the real image of the country, or may still contradict the truth, and is a mutual attachment of the voice of the country or the country's propaganda. The result may be close to the real image of the country, or it may still be contrary to the truth, which is the result of the mutual attachment of the voices of other countries or the country's own propaganda, and needs to be analyzed rationally in the light of the actual national situation.

The shaping of China's image in Chinese-American literature can essentially be seen as a process of "co-shaping" China's national image. Due to the deep cultural background and blood ties between Chinese Americans and China, when Chinese Americans talk about China, they will inevitably bring in their own will and emotion, and describe China with their own subjective perception, which is a kind of "self-molding". Chinese Americans live in the United States and are surrounded by the social environment and cultural customs of the United States, so their views are deeply influenced by the subtle influence of American society and culture, and their judgments about China are a kind of "self-shaping". As a result, the combination of "self-

molding" and "other-molding" has become "syncretism". The present study takes the theoretical background and cognition of "syncretism" as the underlying logic, and analyzes and explores the literary work "*The Joy Luck Club*" in depth.

2. The Shaping of Chinese Image in Chinese-American Literature

This part uses descriptive-interpretive research methods, extensively collects and organizes relevant literature, and adopts the methods of literature analysis, textual close reading and comparative study to analyze the character images, plot arrangements, language styles and other contents of the works, so as to carry out an in-depth research on the image of China in Chinese-American literature, and to take *The Joy Luck Club* as an example, to explore the plurality and complexity of the image of China and the cultural implications shown behind it.

2.1. Conflict and Integration of Tradition and Modernity

The Joy Luck Club takes the story of four Chinese families in the United States as its background, interspersed with the life experiences of mothers and daughters, in which the portrayal of China reflects the fusion of tradition and modernity.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan integrates traditional Chinese culture with modern life, creating a complex cultural characterization of China that is influenced by both traditional and modern culture. Drawing on Saussure's viewpoint in linguistics, this paper describes such features as "diachronicity" and "synchronicity". The so-called "diachronicity" refers to the historical changes in the development of a system, while the "synchronicity" refers to the relationship between the factors within the system at a particular moment. On the one hand, the novel shows the different attitudes of two generations of Chinese families towards traditional Chinese culture, which reflects the changes in attitudes towards Chinese culture at different times; on the other hand, the novel also depicts the cultural conflicts and identity dilemmas faced by Chinese families due to the collision of Chinese and Western cultures at that time, which reflects the different attitudes towards self-identity within the Chinese community in the same era. This kind of collision and integration makes the image of China in the novel more real and three-dimensional.

The images of China depicted in the works are deeply influenced by the cultivation of traditional Chinese culture. First, it is manifested in the description of traditional Chinese festivals and customs and the presentation of concepts of family and marriage. The novel describes in detail the celebration of traditional festivals such as the Chinese New Year and the Mid-Autumn Festival by *The Joy Luck Club* group, as well as the strict patriarchal system and the concept of marriage

in the family. The four mothers in the novel are, to varying degrees, typically characterized by the controlling and self-sacrificing nature of Chinese parents. For example, June's mother has always wanted her daughter to become a genius, strictly controlling her daughter's free time, sending her to take piano lessons, and forcing her to become a genius. At the end of the novel, even June, who has never been to China before, embarks on a cruise to China to look for her twin half-sisters with the Chinese obsession for blood relatives. These elements profoundly demonstrate the traditional values of the Chinese culture - the importance of rites, devotion, family, and so on. Not only that, the novel also shows the unique aesthetics and imagery of Chinese culture through the use of Chinese language and cultural symbols. In the novel, the author skillfully uses Chinese language and dialect, as well as some Chinese cultural symbols and imagery, such as the color red, dragon, phoenix, and bridge. These symbols and imagery are not only important parts of Chinese culture, but also unique aesthetics and imagery in Chinese culture. Through the use of these symbols and imagery, the novel presents a world with Chinese cultural characteristics and unique charms, and at the same time demonstrates the unique imagery in Chinese culture.

The image of China in the novel is also characterized by modernity. One is manifested in the awakening of women's consciousness. Before coming to America, Auntie Lindo's mother-in-law treats her as a reproductive tool to carry on the family line, and she can't bear to see her destiny come to an end, so she resolutely flees to the United States to start a new life for herself; the daughters of the second generation of immigrants who grow up in America also pursue equal and respectful marriage, and when they are not in love with each other, they will choose to separate from their husbands in an expedient manner. Secondly, it shows the influence of technology on the lives of the characters in the context of the new era. The novel also mentions modern elements such as Waverly working in a technology company and the mothers' use of cell phones, showing the image of a generation of Chinese Americans who have progressed and developed with the process of modernization.

It can be seen that the fusion of tradition and modernity in the novel is not a simple superposition or compromise, but a process of mutual penetration and mutual influence. This fusion is reflected in many aspects of the novel's plot, character relationships and ideology. For example, although the mother maintains her respect for and inheritance of traditional culture, she is also trying to integrate into American society, accept modern lifestyles and values, and change her attitude toward her daughter; although the daughter was born and raised in the United States, she is also trying to learn and understand Chinese culture, and to respect and pass on the culture of her own mother tongue and ethnic group.

The image of China in *The Joy Luck Club* reflects the fusion of tradition and modernity, and demonstrates the problem of identity and cultural inheritance of Chinese-American people in a cross-cultural context. At the same time, this fusion also provides an important perspective and reflection for us to understand and pay attention to the development of Chinese American literature.

2.2. A portrait of a mother-daughter relationship

The mother-daughter relationship serves as a pivotal theme in *The Joy Luck Club*, embodying the image of Chinese American women. Through the portrayal of four mother-daughter pairs, Amy Tan reveals the status and roles of Chinese women within the family and society. From a societal perspective, the first-generation immigrant mothers often present themselves as homemakers, and if they have their own jobs, they mostly work in the service industry. Within the family, mothers harbor excessively high expectations for their daughters and exhibit a pathological self-sacrifice reminiscent of traditional Chinese women. As exemplified by June's mother, who willingly cleans for the piano teacher, to motivate her daughter's piano studies. These expectations stem from the mothers' own experiences and values, believing that only through diligence can one's worth be realized. Conversely, the daughters aspire to greater freedom and choices in pursuit of their interests and dreams. This discrepancy in expectations fosters tensions and conflicts between mothers and daughters. This depiction of the mother-daughter relationship mirrors the identity issues faced by Chinese American women in a cross-cultural context. "People possess dual ethical identities: one inherent and based on blood ties, the other acquired through continuous social construction" (Amy Tan, 2017). The interplay of blood identity and social identity shapes the mother-daughter relationship, exemplified in the conflicts and reconciliations between Waverly and her mother. Furthermore, it showcases the daughters' choices and reconstructions of their ethical identities.

In addition to differing expectations, another factor contributing to mother-daughter conflicts lies in their distinct personalities. Mothers tend to be conservative and stubborn, whereas daughters are more open-minded and independent. This disparity hinders mutual understanding and acceptance of each other's thoughts and behaviors, thereby exacerbating the tensions between them.

The conflicts in the mother-daughter relationships portrayed in *The Joy Luck Club* primarily stem from disparities in cultural values. Mothers aspire for their daughters to uphold traditional Chinese cultural values, whereas daughters seek to establish their identities and sense of belonging within American culture. The lack of communication and understanding between mothers and daughters hinders consensus-building.

In summary, the strained mother-daughter relationships depicted in *The Joy Luck Club* are difficult to alleviate. Resolving these conflicts necessitates efforts from both sides to understand and accept each other. Compromising might be a viable option. Cultivating an attitude that embraces and understands different cultures, and allowing personalities shaped by diverse environments to adapt for the sake of our closest bonds, can contribute to the establishment of healthier, more harmonious mother-daughter relationships. Respecting each other's cultures and values, and embracing differences with an open and tolerant mindset, are essential.

3. Significance of China's Image in Chinese American Literature

3.1. Embodiment of Cultural Identity

One of the defining characteristics of Chinese American literature is the authors' pursuit of their cultural identity. Suyuan's statement to her daughter June, "As long as you born a Chinese, you will unconsciously use the Chinese way to feel, to think," can be seen as a response to the question of cultural identity.

Without a doubt, most first-generation Chinese American mothers strongly identify with their Chinese heritage. Despite the influence of Western culture, their fundamental cultural identity remains unwavering. However, for their daughters—the second-generation American immigrants—their cultural foundation has been shaken. In their living environments, the most Chinese-centric settings are confined to family gatherings and organizations like *The Joy Luck Club*. Consequently, they have grown up imbibing American ideologies, and their sole source of knowledge about China is their parents.

Unlike traditional Chinese culture, American culture emphasizes individual value, pursues democracy and freedom, advocates exploration and competition, and upholds rationality and pragmatism. Consequently, American family values tend to be more liberal and diverse. American family education advocates encouragement, independence, and freedom to pursue one's aspirations without being constrained by dogma. In the novel, Waverly is a prime example. She dislikes her mother's indecisive thoughts and actions and resents being forced to learn chess. She desires her mother's respect for her independent personality rather than using her as a showpiece. The Western individualistic values have taught her that success is the result of personal striving, unrelated to others.

Amy Tan, through the portrayal of Chinese images in *The Joy Luck Club*, delves into the cultural identity of Chinese Americans. Despite living in the United States, the Chinese American families in the novel retain a deep love and respect for Chinese culture. This cultural identity manifests not only in their inheritance of traditional culture but also in their critical

examination of mainstream American culture. The embodiment of this cultural identity endows the Chinese images in the novel with greater practical significance.

3.2. Reflection of Social Reality

The image of China in *The Joy Luck Club* embodies cultural identity while also mirroring social realities. Having delved into the specifics of cultural identity and mother-daughter relationships, this paper argues that the novel also contains depictions of racial and gender discrimination. The four Chinese immigrant women in the novel experience unequal treatment in American society, failing to secure deserved opportunities and respect. This prevalent discrimination urgently requires attention and redress.

In this regard, the Chinese virtue of forbearance offers a novel perspective. Enriching one's inner self may serve as a solution, rather than being preoccupied with external factors. This does not imply that those subjected to discrimination should remain silent or refrain from resistance; rather, it encourages them to uphold their beliefs unwaveringly in the face of external discrimination. "Even amidst racial tensions, gender discrimination, and cultural differences overseas, Chinese people have shifted their focus away from being 'accepted' or 'recognized' and towards preserving and transmitting traditional Chinese culture" (Qiu Lan, 2024).

The final aspect to be elaborated upon concerns the pursuit of happiness and the realization of self-worth. Each character in the novel embarks on a journey to discover their own unique happiness. Confronted with various predicaments, they ultimately find their own goals and aspirations. This exploration is a universal process that every individual must undergo. The Chinese families portrayed in the novel confront multiple pressures, including racial discrimination and cultural conflicts, stemming both from American society and within themselves. Through the depiction of these pressures, Amy Tan sheds light on the status and circumstances of Chinese Americans within American society, thereby prompting readers to delve deeper into cross-cultural communication and societal justice.

4. CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of the Chinese American literary work, *The Joy Luck Club*, we can discern that the portrayal of China's image is a distinctive aspect of Amy Tan's novels. By depicting the fusion of traditional Chinese culture with modern life and delving into themes of mother-daughter relationships and cultural identity, Tan has successfully crafted a multicultural image of China. This image not only reflects the profound love and respect that Chinese Americans hold for their heritage but also exposes the cultural conflicts and issues of identity they confront within American society. Reading this work holds significant importance for our

understanding and attention to the development of Chinese American literature.

Firstly, the characters and storylines in the novel illuminate the dilemmas and pursuits of Chinese Americans in terms of cultural identity. Even amidst a multicultural society, Chinese Americans choose to respect and preserve their cultural heritage while actively integrating into other cultures, balancing diverse cultures and values, maintaining self-esteem and self-love, and ultimately achieving cross-cultural communication and understanding. Furthermore, the portrayal of character relationships, particularly mother-daughter relationships, not only embodies the bidirectional emotional entanglements between mothers and daughters under the combined influence of Chinese and Western cultures but also reflects the identity issues faced by Chinese American women in a cross-cultural context, showcasing their struggles to uphold rights and dignity. Lastly, the depiction of individual growth experiences showcases the aspirations for new life and the pursuit of dreams after overcoming adversity among different individuals.

As a classic Chinese American literary work, *The Joy Luck Club* not only showcases the emotional world of Chinese Americans living in a foreign land but also serves as a valuable retrospective of the development of Chinese American literature. It offers practical insights into how China can uphold its beliefs and foster correct values amidst a multicultural society.

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