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An Interpretation of Mothers' Self-Identity Reconstruction in The Joy Luck Club

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Abstract: This paper examines the reconstruction of self-identity among first-generation immigrants in *The Joy Luck Club*, focusing on the experiences of four mothers who immigrated to the United States after enduring national calamities and familial conflicts. Confronted with a new cultural environment, these women face the complex task of redefining their self-conception while navigating the challenges of assimilation and cultural preservation. In this process, their memories of China, including personal, familial, and cultural experiences, are repeatedly evoked, generating tensions between past and present, tradition and modernity, as well as individual desires and familial expectations. The novel vividly illustrates how these internal contradictions are mediated through mother-daughter relationships, which serve as both a site of cultural negotiation and an avenue for emotional reconciliation. Through the evolving dynamics of these relationships, the mothers gradually integrate aspects of Chinese and Western cultures into their self-perception, transforming their self-images and reconstructing their identities within a bicultural context. This study highlights how the interplay of memory, cultural inheritance, and cross-generational communication shapes the processes of identity reconstruction, emphasizing the nuanced and multifaceted nature of self-identity among immigrant women.

Keywords: The Joy Luck Club; identity reconstruction; mothers; Chinese memories

1. Introduction

Chinese-American novelist Amy Tan established her status as a best-selling American author with *The Joy Luck Club* in 1989, and "mothers" have always been an indispensable keyword in her novel creation. In an interview with *Southern Weekend*, Amy Tan stated: "I write about my mother, which is also a way for me to try to understand myself. At the same time, my writing is also to make my mother understand me." Amy Tan had a complex relationship with her mother, which even became quite strained for a period of time. She wrote because of her mother, attempting to explore the root causes of the problems between her and her mother [1].

In *The Joy Luck Club*, after the four Chinese women immigrated to the United States, their Chinese memories were the hardest to discard. Among them, marriage and traditional culture are the most important elements constituting the mothers' Chinese memories. The existence of Chinese memories has created a generation gap between the first and second generations of immigrants, which is based on cultural conflicts. The resolution of these conflicts is achieved through the mothers' narration of their memories, and the telling of past events enables both sides to understand each other better. This

paper focuses on these mothers with special experiences and interprets their hesitation and confusion in cultural choices from the perspective of their Chinese memories.

2. The Mothers' Chinese Memories

2.1. Marriage Memories

Most of the mothers' memories of marriage in *The Joy Luck Club* are humiliating and sorrowful. Whether it is Lindo, who was forced to be a child bride, Yingying, who obeyed her parents' orders, or An-mei, who witnessed her mother being persecuted, they all felt fear, despair and loss in their marriages. Therefore, they were always very strict with their daughters' marriages when raising them [2]. However, the daughters who grew up in the American social environment, without understanding their mothers' past, would regard this kind of care as interference and destruction of their freedom in love and marriage. In fact, the mothers only wanted to avoid tragedies from happening to their daughters based on their own marital experiences.

When Waverly wanted to tell her mother that she was going to marry Rich, the novel foreshadowed many of Waverly's inner speculations and entanglements. "Mother had won again, turning black into white and reversing my past opinions. In her hands, I was always a pawn, having to hide everywhere. And she was the queen, able to charge around recklessly, pursue relentlessly, and always detect my weakest link." This is what Waverly thought the day before confessing to her mother [3]. In her opinion, no matter how she introduced her boyfriend, her mother could always find a lot of faults to oppose her. Even her friend Marlene encouraged her to elope, and Waverly's first husband was married by elopement. All signs indicate that in Waverly's mind, her mother was someone who would criticize her hairstyle, complain about the service and environment of restaurants, and find fault with her "perfect" boyfriend everywhere. Therefore, she wanted to elope to avoid the process of discussing with her mother. In her second marriage, Waverly used many methods to create opportunities to confess, either in a Chinese restaurant or with the help of Auntie Suyuan. Finally, unable to stand the endless speculation, she rushed to her mother's house in a fit of anger and confessed. In Lindo's marriage memories, she was an intelligent observer. She could perceive what the extinguishing of the red candle meant for the marriage and clearly knew what her mother-in-law wanted. It was through such sharp perception that she arranged a deception of a dream to escape the constraints of fate. Therefore, she always examined her daughter's marriage with sharp eyes, ruthlessly puncturing her daughter's beautiful fantasies about her husband [4].

Because of their own disappointment and sorrow towards marriage, they "interfered" in their daughters' marriages. In addition, the lessons and pressures they gained from their own marriages were passed on to their daughters with deviations, and the daughters found their mothers' strength in this process. An-mei's education for her daughter Rose has always been to be obedient and listen to her mother. She believed that "a girl is like a young tree; you must stand straight and listen to the mother standing beside you. Only in this way can you grow strong and straight." However, the daughter did not live up to An-mei's expectations during her growth. After Rose married Ted, she had no opinions and let her husband make all the decisions. Until finally, when her husband could no longer stand it and proposed a divorce, she still refused to make a decision. Instead, she consulted a psychologist or simply slept to avoid everything. When An-mei was a child, when the second wife gave her that string of pearl necklaces full of hypocrisy, she did not know that there was malice towards her mother hidden in them. Her mother's final death finally woke An-mei up from her dream. She crushed the string of pearl necklaces and began to resist this mountain-like fate. After An-mei learned to speak up for injustice, the outburst of strength in her played a role at the crucial moment of her daughter's marriage. "I only say that you should speak for yourself." Such a plain yet powerful sentence gave her daughter the courage to fight for her own rights and interests. Therefore, as An-mei said, the three generations of them are all "moving in the same direction."

It can be seen that the mothers' marriage memories have an important impact on their daughters' marriages. The mothers always have different views on their daughters' marriages, and some views can even be said to be completely opposite. They do not understand why their daughters would choose such a person to be their husband, why they should adopt the AA system in marriage, and why they always obey their husbands unconditionally. The mothers' confusion all comes from their personal marriage memories, which have shaped the marriage model in their minds. Therefore, they feel puzzled by the problems arising in their daughters' marriages, leading to conflicts [5].

2.2. Memories of Traditional Culture

Without exception, the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* always tried to pass on the Chinese part to their daughters. They showed recognition for traditional Chinese culture and disdain for some American thinking, all of which stemmed from their memories of traditional culture. In the novel, many traditional Chinese images can be seen, such as red candles and the Moon Goddess, many Chinese-style dining habits, such as everyone should appreciate the cook's efforts and the elders present should be the first to pick up chopsticks, and Chinese stories, such as "a goose feather from a thousand miles away" and "the Queen Mother of the West." These cultural memories are deeply etched in the mothers, influencing their ways of thinking and actions. The daughters who grew up in the American social environment lack such cultural memories and therefore cannot understand the mothers' thoughts [6].

The burning red candle represents Lindo's marriage to her husband, symbolizing happiness and harmony. However, as Lindo promised before the wedding ceremony: "I will always remember my parents' wishes, but never forget myself." She wanted to break free from the ropes of fate tied to her. At the moment she blew out the red candle, she knew how she should go in the future. Blowing out the red candle was an act of self-identity reconstruction for Lindo, a Chinese woman. The text provides a close-up of the red candle: "The matchmaker inserted the lit candle into a gilded candlestick and handed it to a maid beside her. The maid took the candlestick carefully, and her duty was to guard it carefully to ensure that both ends of the candle did not go out during the entire wedding banquet. The matchmaker would come to check the next morning. If both ends of the candle were still burning, it was a good omen, symbolizing that this marriage would last a lifetime. This candle symbolizing marriage was more authoritative than the Catholic promise of no divorce. It meant that not only could I not get a divorce, but even if Tianyu died, I could not remarry. This red candle seemed to stick me to my husband and the Hong family forever with its wax, leaving me no way to escape." It is obvious that this cultural memory was extremely heavy for Lindo, and it shaped the unique Chinese part of her.

The night Yingying fell into the water and watched the opera about the Moon Goddess was also a process of identity reconstruction for her. The Moon Goddess is Chang'e, who can help people fulfill their wishes. When little Yingying made a wish earnestly, she found that all her fantasies were shattered-the actor playing Chang'e was a woman, and she was the only one in the world who believed that making a wish would come true. Her wish that night was "I long to be found." That is to say, the innocent little Yingying was lost that night, and what awaited her in the future was the naked reality-a marriage arranged by her parents. Here, the image of the moon also alludes to the tragic fate of women in the old times. In addition, there are many terrifying stories told to An-mei by her grandmother, which have shaped their personalities and identities to a certain extent.

In the mothers' memories of traditional culture, both red candles and the moon are endowed with certain emotional colors. Therefore, whenever the mothers recall the past, their narrations are carried on cultural memories, always recreating stories through certain cultural images. These cultural images have shaped the initial identities of the

mothers, which are the fundamental source of cultural conflicts after coming to the United States, but also an inevitable path to resolving conflicts.

3. The Reconstruction of the Mothers' Self-Identity

3.1. Identity Transformation

Compared with their daughters, the first-generation immigrant mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* have a more fragmented feeling, because they are completely Chinese. No matter where they are, their cultural characteristics can never be erased. For this reason, when they are in a world of heterogeneous culture, the Chinese memories deep in their hearts form a more distinct contrast with American culture, leading to more intense conflicts.

According to Jing-mei Woo's account, when her parents first came to the United States, they joined a choir and met the later members of the Joy Luck Club. "Mother could feel that each of these women had their own hidden sorrows left in China and visions for a new life. However, their broken English prevented them from expressing this vision freely. At least, Mother read the dullness brought by this oppression from their faces." It can be seen that several Chinese women who had just come to the United States shared common pains, and they could understand each other precisely because of their similar Chinese memories.

After coming to the United States, the novel describes the direct identity transformation of Lindo and Yingying. First, Lindo: "In America, it's hard to keep a Chinese face all the time. From the very beginning, even before I came to America, I had to hide my true self." Before Lindo set off for the United States, she found a girl raised by Americans in Beijing to ask for help, letting her guide her on how to integrate into American society. She had to change her identity before going to the United States. She became a theology student, and her birthday was changed to three months after the Spring Festival. The girl also instructed her that she must marry an American citizen. Under the girl's series of instructions, Lindo frequently showed doubts. When conflicts arose with her daughter later, she also sighed: "You should understand the real situation I was in, how I came here, how I got married, and how I lost my Chinese identity, so that you can understand why you are the way you are." Amy Tan directly describes Lindo's identity transformation. Identity transformation starts with fabricating a false personal identity card, and gradually makes psychological adjustments.

Similar things happened to Yingying: "In mother's immigration application, father proudly named her 'Betty St. Clair' and erased her former name 'Gu Yingying' with a stroke of the pen. Later, he changed mother's year of birth from 1914 to 1916. Therefore, with father's stroke of the pen, mother not only lost her name but also her zodiac sign, changing from Tiger to Dragon." The mothers' identity transformation is very straightforward. For Chinese people, surnames and names are undoubtedly of great importance. This act directly and forcibly reversed the mothers' identities, meaning that the mothers had to abandon certain Chinese cultural memories in the future, suppress their original Chinese identities, and strive to cater to American culture.

It is almost impossible to achieve a complete identity transformation, because they always have Chinese blood flowing in their veins. Therefore, cultural conflicts occur in many aspects, the most concentrated of which is in the handling of mother-daughter relationships. They do not understand each other, but it is precisely in the process of conflict that the reconstruction of the mothers' identities is realized.

3.2. The Realization of Identity Reconstruction

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan constantly changes the narrative perspective, allowing us to more clearly capture the different views of mothers and daughters on the same thing. It is through these constantly changing narrative perspectives that we can see the original thoughts in the characters' hearts and the ways to realize the reconstruction

of the mothers' identities. Constant conflicts will make people reflect, and then achieve mutual understanding.

"I always wanted my children to have the best combination: adapting to the American environment while retaining Chinese virtues. But how could I know that these two things are fundamentally irreconcilable?" This is Lindo's sigh when educating her daughter. She did not know how to teach her daughter the Chinese way while fully integrating into American society. This question has lingered in her mind for many years. Through the mirror in the barbershop, Lindo examined herself and her children. This act was actually examining her own heart and those issues that made her feel confused and hesitant. When the daughter rushed to the house to confess to her mother, the mother and daughter had an unprecedented communication. This open-hearted communication between them helped the mother realize the reconstruction of her identity.

Through communication, the daughters can better understand why their mothers always make such demands on them, and also eliminate the negative image of their mothers in their minds. Thus, the mothers' identities are reconstructed through communication. They are no longer constrained by the previous Chinese traditions but adopt a way of tolerance and absorption. Later, the mothers reflect, no longer clinging to the cultural memories that are inconsistent with the current life, but sharing their memories with their daughters, and realizing identity reconstruction in this process. Therefore, they no longer blindly pursue a purely Chinese or American identity, but calmly accept the identity of cultural marginal people. This more flexible cultural identity enables them to maintain a balance in the communication of various cultures.

4. Conclusion

The identities of the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* are constantly changing. Whether in China or the United States, their identities are always in a fluid state. The mothers grew up in the feudal traditional old society. Marriage was the first turning point in their lives, immigrating to the United States was the second turning point, and after giving birth to the second generation, they had to face the third dilemma. Therefore, the mothers grew up in various environments, underwent identity transformation, and finally realized the reconstruction of their identities through reconciliation with their daughters. The issue of identity has always been an unavoidable problem in the novel *The Joy Luck Club*. In the context of the further intensification of globalization today, people's identity transformation has become more frequent. Studying the mothers' identity confusion, reflection and reconstruction is of enlightening significance.

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