On Conflicts and Integration of American and Chinese Cultures in 
*Joy Luck Club* from Perspective of Intercultural Communication

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**Abstract.** The paper analyzes the conflicts and integration between mothers and daughters in *Joy Luck Club* with the application of Hofstede’s Intercultural Communication Theory in order to explore methods to overcome cultural shocks.

**Introduction**

Intercultural communication is defined as situated communication between individuals or groups of different linguistic and cultural origins.[1] It has existed for a long time since humans with different cultural background initiated contacts with each other, but it is established as a discipline just for a short time of about seven decades. In China, it just has around four decades of development since the 1980s to the present. With the theoretical contribution of the scholars like Gudykunst and TingToomey, it has already formed a complete mature scientific system. Under the influence, there are more than one hundred fifty universities where the subject of intercultural communication has been set up in China and thriving are the theoretical works and novels that reflect the cultural conflict and integration in intercultural communication. One of the representative novels is *Joy Luck Club* [2]by the Chinese American Amy Tan in 1989. The writer narrates the cultural conflicts and contradictions as well as integration through describing the process from conflict to communication and understanding between two generations of mother and daughter. As a writer of a best-seller, *Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan reflects the relationships between two generations of mother and daughter with different cultural background and analyzes the cultural differences between China and America, providing a global vision of cultural collisions and integration. The novel demonstrates that culture plays a significant role in communication for people are deeply impacted by the very culture which they are born in and they form corresponding unique ways of thinking, behaving and communicating, especially their unique values. In the novel, it is common for people with different cultural backgrounds to conflict when they first meet. But with their contacts more frequent and deeper, they learn to compromise with each other and adapt to each other, and eventually they get along well with each other. With the deepening of globalization, it is of enormous importance for people to tackle intercultural communication in order to remove cultural shock, guarantee the smooth communication and absorb the excellent part of foreign culture without denying their own ones. Consequently, the paper intends to put forward suggestions concerning achieving integration of American and Chinese cultures by analyzing the relationship between two generations of mother and daughter from conflict to compromise and eventually to integration.

**Introduction to Hofstede’s Intercultural Communication Theory and Its Application to Analyze Chinese-American Cultural Differences in *Joy Luck Club***

According to Hofstede, culture is the collective model in people's mind that distinguishes different cultural groups. He studies culture from the perspective of the nation rather than of the individual for he thinks that individual characteristics may vary greatly but at the national level, they may display a common persistent tendency. He concluded that national culture can chiefly include the following
dimensions: 1) individualism and collectivism, 2) power distance, 3) uncertainty avoidance, 4) male nationalism and feminism, 5) long-term and short-term orientation [3].

When it comes to the first dimension, individualism and collectivism, they mean that the cultural group is an individual-centered society or a collectivistic one. In an individual-centered society, people have loose contacts with each other, care themselves or at most their direct relatives, and assume their own interests over others’. Their behaviors are mainly decided by their personal emotions, attitudes, and other individual elements instead of other situational ones. They tend to be outspoken when communicating with others. To be concluded, people in an individual-centered society tend to speak and behave out of their own interests. On the contrary, in a collectivistic society, people have intimate contacts with each other, care each other and attach more importance to collective interests than to individual ones. In addition, they are loyal to the collective, their identities are based on the collective traits and their behaviors are impacted by the collective will, group norms, social rules and other situational factors. And people trust each other, but they communicate in an indirect and implicit way. In *Joy Luck Club*, the four mothers were brought up in a collective society in which the family fame and interests are more significant than the individual happiness and they are of filial piety and obedience. As a result, the mothers treat their daughters as their mothers treat them, regarding their daughters as one part of them and sparing no efforts to cultivate them to be a genius. But their daughters are born in America, an individual-centered society. They do not accept their concepts. They rebel when their mothers impose their views on them and express their complaints and dissatisfaction in a candid way for they assume that their own needs and interests are their priority.

The power distance is the attitude to the equal rights in the distribution attitude which a social member for various agencies and organizations, that is, the view of the social level structure. [3] It refers to the extent to which the lower ranking individuals of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. [4] In the society of the lower-power distance, inequality between people is not obvious and significant for people of high power tend to play a low profile and people of low power think people of high power are not always to be correct. Therefore, people of high power do not show their high-class status by the rare and precious items symbolizing their identities. But in the society of high-power distance, there are obvious social hierarchy. People of high power enjoy privileges and adopt the power in their command to demonstrate their status of authority, so they are respected and revered just owing to their high-power social status. In *Joy Luck Club*, the four mothers grow up in China, the society of the high-power distance in which the unequal right distribution is the social norm. They were accustomed to the fact that parents, teachers, leaders, etc. are superior to children, students and subordinates. As a result, they require their daughters to be filial and obedient at home and to follow their teachers’ guidance and instruction all the time at school. In return, they, as mothers offer their daughter thoughtful kindness and meticulous care and they expect the teachers to take good care of their children. But their daughters are born in America, a low-power distance society, in which parents and children are equal, teachers are not authorities, but guides, and the leaders are not superior to their subordinates, instead they have to behave in a fair and radical way. The daughters fight for their freedom for their mothers make them stifled in the name of their meticulous care, fight for their own right to make their own decision concerning their own life, for their right to have their own opinions, to express themselves, to point out the mistakes of their parents in an outspoken way. All their fights offended their mothers, meanwhile, they do not understand why their mothers have such peculiar ideas. All the conflicts are caused by the two different cultures for the United States represents the society of low-power distance while China, the one of high-power distance.

The uncertainty avoidance, a society’s tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, relates to the degree to which individuals of a specific society are comfortable with uncertainty and the unknown. [3] In the society of high uncertainty avoidance, people are inclined to adopt conventional means of thinking and behaving, to avoid the occurrence of the uncertain and the unusual things and to change cautiously and carefully step by step through the plan and enforcement of rules, regulations, laws and policies. In addition, people tend to be afraid of those who differ from them, showing traces of Xenophobia. On the contrary, in the society of low uncertainty avoidance, people are comfortable
with changes and alterations, tolerant of unconventional ways and easy to communicate and interact with those who are different from them. China is typical of high uncertainty avoidance, in which people depend on formalized routines, regulations, policies and procedures to conduct things and interact with each other. Besides, Chinese attach great importance to stability and show strong resistance to alterations. Consequently, it is no wonder that the mothers in Joy Luck Club have difficulties tolerating the different behaviors of their American-born daughters. On the contrary, America is typical of low uncertainty avoidance, in which people show strong tolerance of changes, differences and instability. Americans are open-minded so that they will not have less difficulty interacting with people whom are dissimilar. As a result, it is the daughters in Joy Luck Club who take the initiative to understand their mothers from the perspective of them.

Male nationalism and feminism refers to the social tendency that men and women are assigned certain social roles. In the society of male nationalism, men are supposed to be the bread-winner of the family and the dominator of the society while women, the house-wife and care-taker of the children. In the society of feminism, there is no definite social stipulation concerning the social roles of men and women so that there is obvious gender equality. In Joy Luck Club, the China-born mothers cannot understand why their daughters do things that are supposed to be done by boys for China still is a society of male nationalism although gender equality has been advocated by China’s government for over six decades. And the daughters are born and brought up in America which has already been a feminist society so that they feel it natural and acceptable to do things as boys, which their mothers have hard time accepting.

The long-term trend and short-term trend refers to the orientation to the future or the past respectively. In a society of the long-term trend, a future orientation is adopted, which is characteristic of American culture. Americans are encouraged to look to the future. But in a society of the short-term trend, a past orientation is advocated, which is typical of Chinese culture. Chinese are taught to value and respect the tradition. In Joy Luck Club, daughter are interested in what is happening and changing while mothers are immersed in the glorious traditions, which really lead to the conflicts between mothers and daughters. The mothers often say how they used to behave when they were of their daughters’ age while the daughters usually shout to their mothers, “Just look around, and don’t find everything is different”. The daughters think those who follow traditions are out-dated old fellows while the mothers, filial considerate ones. As the result, the daughters believe that their mothers are obsolete while the mothers maintain that their daughter are rebellious.

Conflict and Integration of Chinese and American Cultures in Joy Luck Club

The cultural conflict and integration are vividly described and demonstrated in Joy Luck Club. In the novel, the Chinese immigrant mothers hold world views based on their roots, Chinese culture, while their American-born daughters completely accept American culture. The mothers try to impart their values to their daughters by sharing with them their life experience in China. But the daughters are resistant to the conversation like that and hold what their mothers talk about is cliché. But with time passing by, the daughters sympathize with their mothers’ miserable pasts and begin to accept Chinese culture for they are moved their mothers’ meticulous love.

Mothers’ Troubles

The mothers in the novel all departed from China for America before the foundation of People’s Republic of China. Their life experience in China is not happy but tragic, so they hold the same belief that they can break away from their past sufferings in China and have a brand-new starting in America. But Chinese Culture is so deep-rooted in their mind that it is no easy thing for them to accept a greatly different American culture. It is really tough for them to adapt to the unfamiliar environment and to learn a new language. Their favorite activities are still to play mahjong and chat when they have a gathering and American activities in the parties are unattractive to them, but they have to master the skills to participate in the activities in order to merge into American society. The culture that they have inherited from their parents and that they have acquired in China makes them
filled with the sense of guilt in America. For example, in Chinese culture it is believed that parents should be selfless when it comes to the love for their children. The parents should be willing to sacrifice everything for their children, which even means that parents have to give up their own happiness for the sake of their children. As the result, the four mothers often feel guilty for they do not provide to their daughters the life that they want. They are eager to share their wisdom with their daughters in order to prevent them from making the same mistakes they have made but their daughters do not accept their advice. When their daughters suffer for they ignore their suggestions, they feel guilty for they think they do not try hard enough. The sense of guilty always accompanies the mothers. On one hand, they want their daughters to merge into American society by accepting and adapting to the American culture. On the other hand, they still hope that their daughters can inherit the good Chinese traditions. When the two cultures conflict and the daughters resist their instruction of Chinese style, they feel lost for it seems hard to find a way out.

Daughters Confusions

The daughters are confused for they are immerged in American culture outside of their home but they are imparted Chinese culture and expected to behave like Chinese at home by their mothers. They consider themselves as Americans, but their mothers think of them as Chinese. That is why Rose's mother opposes her marriage with Ted. She objects to the marriage mainly because Ted is an American instead of Chinese. Although Rose emphasizes that she is an American, too, her mother still holds that they are so different that it is hard, if not impossible, for them to make a happy couple. Rose proceeds to marry Ted without her mother’s consent, for she thinks that it is her right to decide who to marry. But her mother cannot accept that she marry without her approval. The daughters value their privacy so much that they prefer pouring themselves out to the psychological consultants than to their mothers, which really hurts their mothers for the behaviors of their daughters reflect that the daughters are not close and intimate to them enough. The daughters complain why their mothers cannot understand that they do that just to protect their privacy. Although the daughters think they are Americans, yet they are not treated as the so-called real Americans for they inevitably suffer from racial discriminations. To sum up, their lives are packed with confusions.

Mutual Understanding

As the daughters grow up and get to know the past of their mothers, they come to really know their mothers and grandmothers and learn to appreciate the love from their mothers. For example, Jing-mei used to think that that her mother forced her to learn to play the piano had deprived her of her childhood happiness. But when her mother died and she played the piano, she found she really had a talent and passion for the piano as her mother said. And she realized that her mother required her to play the piano not for she wanted to show off but for she wanted her daughter to enjoy herself and give a full play to her talents. When they are lost, their mothers are always there for them. Their mothers spare no efforts to help them find their self-value and establish positive attitudes toward life, which make them deeply feel the love from their mothers. On the other hand, the mothers learn to understand their daughters’ uneasiness to fit in the American society. They stop cramming Chinese culture into their daughters. Instead they try to help their daughters adapt to their lives. In conclusion, the grown-up daughters are mature enough to appreciate the culture imparted by their mothers and the old mothers are rational enough to accept American culture.

Individualism and Collectivism Reflected by Interactions between Mothers and Daughters

In China and America, individualism have different cultural connotations. In Chinese culture, individualism is a derogatory term which means selfishness. If one is accused of individualism, then he or she may intend to benefit himself or herself at the cost of others. In American culture, “individualism is the idea that the individual’s life belongs to him and that he has an inalienable right to live it as he sees fit, to act on his own judgment, to keep and use the product of his effort, and to pursue the values of his choosing. It’s the idea that the individual is sovereign, an end in himself, and the fundamental unit of moral concern. This is the ideal that the American Founders set forth and
sought to establish when they drafted the Declaration and the Constitution and created a country in which the individual’s rights to life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness were to be recognized and protected.”[5] As a result, individualism is blamed in China while advocated in America. Unlike individualism, collectivism share the same cultural connotations, which means “the idea that the individual’s life belongs not to him but to the group or society of which he is merely a part, that he has no rights, and that he must sacrifice his values and goals for the group’s ‘greater good.’ According to collectivism, the group or society is the basic unit of moral concern, and the individual is of value only insofar as he serves the group.”[5] And collectivism can be vividly demonstrated as “Man has no rights except those which society permits him to enjoy. From the day of his birth until the day of his death society allows him to enjoy certain so-called rights and deprives him of others; not . . . because society desires especially to favor or oppress the individual, but because its own preservation, welfare, and happiness are the prime considerations.”[6] But it is worth pointing out that although collectivism have the same connotations, yet it is attached different importance to for it is more highly advocated and praised in China than in America. It is no wonder that the daughter feel that their rights have been infringed when their mothers interfere with their lives while the mothers hold that their daughters are selfish and stubborn when they refuse to follow their directions. But the longer the mothers live in America, the more easily they learn to respect their daughters’ individuality. The mothers understand that their daughters just want to live their lives in the way that they want and like instead of in the way that they arrange them, which does not intend to offend them, but to pursue their dream. Meanwhile, the older and more mature the daughters become, the better they understand their mothers’ love for them. They understand their mothers offer their assistance and guidance to them not to intrude their rights, but to show their love for them. They learn to be grateful that their mothers sacrifice their time and interests to assist and guide them. The mutual understanding of mothers and daughters in Joy Luck Club demonstrate the integration of Chinese and American individualism and collectivism.

Summary

The happy ending of Joy Luck Club demonstrates the correct attitudes towards Chinese and American culture of the Chinese immigrants and their next generation. On one hand, they should keep, inherit and develop Chinese culture. By doing that, they will not feel lost, moreover, more Americans learn Chinese culture and then it is easier for them to be accepted. And on the other hand, they should absorb American culture. Only in this way can they adapt to the mainstream of American society. When the two culture conflict, they should learn to reconcile them instead of accepting one while abandoning the other. The harmonious co-existence of Chinese and American culture can help them adapt to American society without the feeling of disobeying or even betraying their parents and live harmoniously with their families without the difficulty adjusting themselves to American society.

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References