

The History Writing in Chinese-American Novel The Joy Luck Club

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Abstract

The Joy Luck Club, a Chinese-American novel, shows the survival history and the surviving style of those Chinese mothers as the first generation of American immigrants, their surviving reality and coping strategies of those Chinese daughters as the second generation of American immigrants, the cultural collision between China and the United States, and the new roles and new identities of the second generation of American Chinese immigrants. The history writing in the novel The Joy Luck Club shows readers a historical stage with both authenticity and literariness through personal stories, folk stories, family stories and historical events. From this historical stage, we can understand the historical evolution process of Chinese American identity change in a specific historical situation.

Keywords

Chinese-American Novel; The Joy Luck Club; Amy Tan; History Writing.

1. Introduction

The Joy Luck Club is the first work of Amy Tan, a Chinese American writer. It was published in 1989 and was immediately recognized by readers and critics. In the year of publication, the book continued to be on the New York Times bestseller list for nine consecutive months, and the sales of its first hardcover edition reached 275000 copies, which was a great success. This paper will interpret this work from the perspective of historical writing. We can understand the concept of "history" in the historical writing of novels in two aspects: first, history refers to the field of human activities, including its time and space; second, history refers to the historical text, which records all kinds of human activities in the historical field of specific time and space [1]. The historical writing in novels should emphasize the authenticity of the story and pay special attention to the historical perspective; the novelist should not look for history from books, but should pay attention to folk history and the historical information hidden in people, which is the most authentic historical writing [2]. The historical writing in the Joy Luck Club shows readers a historical stage with authenticity and literariness through personal stories, folktales, family stories and historical events. From this historical stage, we can understand the historical evolution of the identity change of Chinese Americans in a specific historical context.

2. The Living History and Ways of Chinese Mothers

2.1. The Past of Chinese Mothers

Wu Suyuan, a Chinese mother, married a KMT military officer. During the Anti-Japanese War, she followed her husband to Guilin, and then she went to Chongqing. When the Japanese army attacked Guilin, Wu Suyuan and her twin daughter fled to Chongqing on foot. Her hands were badly wounded and she had diarrhea. She threw away her carry-on luggage, everything she could throw and her twin daughters. Finally, she fainted on the road and was rescued to Chongqing by missionaries. After learning that her husband was killed in Chongqing, she met her current husband and traveled all over China. Finally, she went to San Francisco [3] (281-

285). In China, she lost everything: her parents, home, her ex-husband and twin daughters [3] (132). Wu Suyuan's miserable experience of losing her husband and abandoning her daughters made her feel uneasy and guilty all her life.

The Chinese mother Xu Anmei lived in Ningbo with her uncle since childhood, because her mother remarried to Wu Qing. She had a very indifferent impression of her mother. Her grandmother told her that her mother was a ghost. Grandma usually used ghost stories or other strange stories to teach her to listen to the elders, to be clean and contented, otherwise the consequences would be very terrible. Anmei also experienced the wretched life of her aunt beating and abusing her brother and herself. In the process of Anmei's mother's visit to her dying grandmother, her uncle and aunt made a big uproar, upset the hot pot and scalded Anmei's neck. Then she saw her mother cut off the meat of her arm and cook soup for her grandmother to show her filial piety [3] (42-48). Later, Anmei followed her mother to live in Wu Qing's family. After witnessing Wu Qing's wife and concubine's intrigues, her mother won a better future for Anmei by committing suicide [3] (238-240). Xu Anmei's experience of living under the influence of others as a child and the pain of her mother's death made herself cautious in her life, afraid to do one thing wrong and shut up.

Zhong Lindong, a Chinese American mother, sacrificed her whole life to fulfill a promise made by her parents: "listen to the Hong family and don't disgrace our family." When she was two years old, she was betrothed to a boy who was one year younger than her from a big family on the side of Fenhe River. When she was 12 years old, the Fenhe River was flooded, and her mother's family was forced to leave their hometown and go to her uncle. She had to live in her future mother-in-law's house. She lived in her mother-in-law's house and worked as a servant. When she turned sixteen, she married Tianyu. Because they were so young and ignorant, they could not have conceived a child at all. Her mother-in-law blamed Lindong for all her sins. She scolded and imprisoned her. Finally, she designed to escape from Hong family and got a train ticket to Beijing, her clothes and the fare to the United States [3] (49-66). Zhong Lindong suffered the pain of separation from her parents and inhumane treatment in her husband's home. All these hardships will be with her all her life.

Yingying St. Claire, a Chinese mother, was born in Wuxi, a water town in the south of the Yangtze River in 1914. She was a child with high social status, but her mother taught her to be quiet and obedient, to listen more and ask less, so that she would not be punished by the gods. In the Taihu Lake cruise, she ran wildly everywhere. As a result, she fell into the water and was brought ashore by fishermen. After landing, she saw Chang'e who was played by a male actor dressed as a woman. All this made her feel terrible and confused [3] (69-82). Later, she married a bad man. After she was pregnant with this man's child, he had affairs with many women, such as dancers, American wives, prostitutes and her cousins. Such a beautiful and rich girl was ignored and abandoned by her husband, making her want to drown herself and become a grouch. Yingying hated the man and killed the child in the womb [3] (244-248). Yingying's painful experience of marrying a wrong husband made her live-in pain all her life, and the pain of losing her son often tormented her, and caused a chain reaction to her American life.

The suffering history of the nation and the toxic dogma in the family culture make the Chinese American family bear and repeat the trauma from the previous generation; the indifference to individual value, self-suppression, physical and mental abuse, heavy sense of guilt, compulsive control and so on hurt the mother generation in the novel [4]. All kinds of tribulations experienced by the four Chinese American mothers did not extinguish their desire for freedom and a new life, which was also the germination of their awakening of female consciousness in old China. Wu Suyuan kept the silk clothes on her body and the hope in the bright eyes on her face after the painful separation of life and death. In her painful experience, Xu Anmei broke the fake pearl necklace that her second aunt gave her and learned to shout to show her resistance. Zhong Lindong almost lost her whole life and fulfilled her promise to his parents. At last, she

lifted the shackles on her body on the Tomb Sweeping Day. Finally, she woke up and found a real self, and let this "I" thought lead her. Years of suffering had made Yingying more sensitive and effective to all omens. She had to prick her daughter with a sharp angle of pain to wake her up. Because both of the mother and daughter are tigers, they will fight. Fighting is the nature of tigers, but she will win over her daughter and pass her spirit to her daughter.

2.2. American Life of Chinese Mothers

When Zhong Lindong first came to the United States, she hoped to find a job as a salesperson, but her English was not good. Later, I found a job of 75 cents an hour, but it was a job to massage foreign men, just like the fourth class prostitute in China, and she quit immediately. Finally she went to work in the cookie factory. What she had to do was grab the hot little pancakes that were constantly being delivered from the machine, insert a fortune slip into them, and then fold them in half before they hardened. After only one day, her ten fingers were red. The next day, her eyes couldn't bear it, because she had to stare at pancakes all day long. On the third day, she couldn't lift her arms. Lindong later got to know Xu Anmei, a female worker of the same age next to her.

When Yingying first came to the United States, she lived in a smaller house than she lived in China. She wore large American clothes, did all the work that should have been done by a nanny, clumsily rolled her tongue to speak foreign language, and learned western life.

Wu Suyuan made a living by renting out houses, worrying about the tenants' waste of her garbage bags, water or bad sanitation. In order to train her daughter to learn piano, she worked as a free cleaner for a retired piano teacher on the first floor of the apartment. He taught her daughter piano for free and provided his piano for her daughter two hours a day for free.

Due to the constraints of knowledge level, English level and other factors, Chinese mothers cannot find a good job, they can only do some heavy physical work, and their living conditions are very hard. They are very dependent on their husband economically and spiritually. After having children, their life focuses on children. But the children are born in the United States and receive American education, so their way of thinking has been completely Americanized, and there seems to be a gap between the daughter and the mother. Yingying feels that she and her daughter are separated, unable to see, hear or understand each other. She seems to be looking at her daughter on the other side of the river. Lindong has also been wandering between the Chinese style and American style rules of life, considering the choice. When Lin Dong returns to China, she feels confused by her experience of being treated as a foreigner. Suyuan, Lindong and Anmei are also confused and sad because of their daughters' independent and rebellious behaviors. Their daughters are ignorant and indifferent to the norms and aspirations their mother brought to the United States. They found that their daughters were impatient with their mothers' Chinese conversation. When their mothers explained or annotated some intention to them in stuttering English, their daughters laughed at their English and thought that they were not flexible. Mothers think they are happy, but not necessarily in the eyes of their daughters. They helplessly watch these daughters grow up, have children, and children will have children in the future, but they can't see the possibility and hope of passing on their mothers' norms and expectations from generation to generation [3] (40-41).

2.3. The Survival of Chinese Mothers

As early as the Anti-Japanese War, Wu Suyuan united with the other three sisters to set up the joy luck club to fight against the pain and pressure brought by the war. Wu Suyuan thought, in fact, it's not that we are blind to pain and insensitive. We are also in fear, and we all have our own pain. But what is disappointment? The so-called disappointment is that we are looking forward to the return of something that no longer exists, or that we are just prolonging those unbearable torments. What's wrong with waiting for death rather than waiting for it [3](24)?

Therefore, they decided to turn the weekly party into a festival that is like New Year's Day, so that every week they will have a chance to forget the past. They don't let themselves think of any unhappiness and sorrow, just want to eat, drink and have fun. They gamble and tell the best stories. Every week, they are looking forward to a joyful party, which becomes their only joy. That's why they name their party "Joy Luck Club."

Their playing mahjong to win money is not the sole aim, which is an activity for them to find their own identity value, and a way to continue their Chinese identity in western society. The money they have won is pooled to invest in stocks and pay an average dividend, so that the pressure to win and lose is gone. And every time in the Joy Luck Club Party, it is the winner who takes the winning money and the loser takes the rest of the food. As a result, everyone is happy, creating a harmonious atmosphere of Chinese big family. Therefore, the Joy Luck Club is not only a group organization for Chinese mothers to play mahjong, but also a way of life for them.

3. The Social Reality and Coping Strategies of Chinese American Daughters

3.1. American Life of Chinese American Daughters

Chinese American Daughters live in the crevice between the eastern culture from their families and the western culture around them, and bear the dual pressure from their families and society.

Chinese American mothers hope that their daughters will struggle hard from childhood and grow up to be outstanding, so as to avoid the social and psychological pressure of their first generation immigrants. Wu Suyuan trains her daughter to learn piano from childhood. She is strict and actively encourages her daughter to take part in stage performances. When Jingmei couldn't bear the pressure of practice, she wants to give up and cries to her mother: "I can't be the daughter you want, I can't be the daughter you want [3] (142)." Wu Suyuan severely teaches her daughter a lesson: there are only two kinds of daughters in the world, obedient and disobedient. In my family, only obedient daughters are allowed to live in [3] (142)! This kind of family education will certainly produce great psychological pressure on children.

Lena's mother Yingying uses ghost stories to teach Lena to behave, just as Yingying's mother and wet nurse taught Yingying with those strange stories. This kind of education mode also has a negative impact on Lena's psychology. When Lena was a child playing with sand in the sandbox, from the hole she dug, she seemed to see the demons dancing; she even saw their green faces, their eyes flashing green, and they were eyeing [3] (103-104).

As a child, Waverly shows her talent in chess. Through her hard work and family support, such as being exempted from the housework of washing dishes, she wins numerous Championships in various levels of chess competitions. Therefore, her mother Zhong Lin Dong praises her daughter's brilliant achievements, which makes her very embarrassed. She objects to her mother's practice of showing off everywhere. As a result, "my mother was so angry that she narrowed her eyes, like two unexpected cracks in her face. She said nothing but tormented me with silence [3](99). Her mother said to her brothers: ignore her, and she doesn't care about us at all. No one answered me, and I could hear the sound of chopsticks rowing their rice bowls [3] (100-101) The pressure of her mother makes her feel that her body is floating to the boundless sky, and there is no sign of decline. Her mother's severe attitude has caused her great pain and is deeply embedded in her memory. Without her mother's support, Waverly's chess record is getting worse and worse, and her confidence and feeling of manipulating the whole situation are gone.

When Chinese daughters grow up, they have to find jobs, get married and have children. Wu Jingmei studied biology for half a year, then turned to art, and then became a secretary of a

small advertising agency. At this time, both biology and art classes just gave up halfway. Now, she is a freelance writer [3] (30-31). She didn't finish her college education, and she found an ordinary job, working as an advertising copywriter for a small company. The advertising copy written for the company cannot pass the examination, and the social situation is not very good. Waverly works as a tax consultant. Lena and Ruth both work in design.

Chinese American daughters can't identify with some of their mothers' clothes and behaviors, and even feel embarrassed for them. For example, both Suyuan and auntie Anmei are wearing "funny, stiff, stand collar Chinese style clothes with flowers embroidered on the front chest. Such clothes are too fashionable for real Chinese people, but they are too strange to wear at parties in the United States." Wu Jingmei described the Joy Luck Club as "a community with special rituals, such as the KKK Party's rally and the ceremony before the Indian army in the TV or film. Anyway, it has a set of mysterious and strange rituals [3](28)". Lena was embarrassed when her mother stuck her nose into an open can in a food store and was stopped by a salesperson; and Waverly was embarrassed when her mother refused to tip in a restaurant and criticized the hygiene of the restaurant's tableware and toilet. They also felt very helpless to have such an oriental mother.

In addition to Wu Jingmei's being unmarried, all the Chinese daughters have married foreigners, because the physical charm and personality characteristics of foreign boys can attract them, and the most important thing is that they are not from China. They hope that through marriage with foreigners, they can better integrate into American society and realize their own value. Later, their marriage had their own problems, such as Lena's husband's selfishness, Waverly's husband abandoned his wife and daughter, and Ruth's husband evaded responsibility because of "middle-aged career crisis". They were deeply in the situation of divorce and had to face painful choices.

3.2. Coping Strategies of Chinese American Daughters under the Pressure of American Life

In the face of family pressure, Chinese American Daughters adopt face-to-face confrontation or flexible strategies. Wu Jingmei said to her mother, "well, I hope not to be your daughter, and you are not my mother [3] (142)! A new idea rose from her heart: I am who I am, and I don't want her to change me at will. I swear to myself that I will always be the same [3] (134). In the face of her mother's strict control over herself, Waverly countered: "why do you have to show me off? If you want to be in the limelight, why don't you learn to play chess [3](99)? In her first marriage, Waverly resisted her parents' will and took the way of elopement to fly away with her sweetheart. Sometimes, in order to avoid increasing her mother's burden of understanding, Lena deliberately changes her words, and even adds something she wants to say. For example, "once, the school sent a notice about vaccination to prevent poliomyelitis. In addition to translating the time and place above to her, I also picked up some private goods without authorization. I said that the school stipulated that all students must use metal lunch boxes, because paper bags can infect poliomyelitis [3] (106-107)." The resistance of Chinese American Daughters reflects their consciousness of pursuing independent identity, which is a very westernized ideology.

In the face of marriage problems, they adopt the strategy of forbearance and compromise. Waverly is very tangled when she meets the problem of new marriage candidates, afraid that she won't get her mother's blessing. First, she discussed with her best friend, and finally, she had a showdown with her mother in an unnatural way. Xu Ruth's marriage is on the verge of crisis, and her psychology is suffering a lot. She is constantly looking for solutions from psychologists. She just doesn't talk to her mother. As for her husband's attitude, Ruth endured it again and again, until she finally couldn't bear it, and then she communicated with her mother. The practice of sharing everything equally between Lena and her husband and her husband's

unfairness and indifference to her in the company and family make her miserable, but she always takes the practice of forbearance, which makes her husband worse, and her marriage is on the verge of collapse. This kind of compromise in marriage reflects that the Chinese daughters inherit the Oriental consciousness from their mother's forbearance.

It is the timely help of mothers that helps their daughters find the true meaning of life. Mothers use their own experience to tell their daughters that they should face the problems bravely and communicate with their husbands in order to solve the problems in the end. The Oriental awakening of women's consciousness has grown up in the Chinese daughters.

4. Sino-US Cultural Collision

Chinese culture advocates obedience to parents in the family. So the daughter who lives in the United States will sigh: "I don't know if there are such obvious regulations in Chinese laws, but anyway, that you can't shut up to a Chinese mother is almost as treacherous as murder [3] (173)." American families stress equality. Parents can talk and even quarrel equally. Take the quarrel between the mother and the daughter who are Lena's neighbors as an example, in Lena's view, the daughter should have died hundreds of times, the result is that the daughter is still happy to live, which makes Lena surprised.

Western Psychology believes that "parents should not always criticize their children. On the contrary, they should encourage them more." You know, the reason why people rise up and work hard is to meet the trust and expectation of the world. When you just criticize, it seems to mean that what you want is failure [3] (31). Chinese parents treat their children harshly in order to create an environment for their children to grow up in adversity. For example, Wu Suyuan and Zhong Lindong treat their daughters cruelly in order to cultivate their willpower and determination to overcome difficulties.

Chinese culture stresses Fengshui and follows the Yellow calendar. Gu Yingying said to her daughter, "this house seems too narrow and high. A strong wind from the top of the mountain blows all your strength back to the foot of the mountain and cancels it out. So it's hard for you to develop." She pointed to the walls and doors of the apartment and said, "look how narrow the aisle is, it's like a throat that's stuck, and the kitchen is facing the bathroom, so everything you eat is just washed away" [3] (108-109). When the mother saw her daughter's new house with a large cabinet with a mirror on the opposite side of the bed, she called out: "how can you put the mirror opposite the bed? In this way, it will wash away the happiness of your wedding. It will wash away everything. [3] (147)" American culture advocates system, and everything is done according to rules. Because Americans follow the rules, they love to go to the top. In their spare time, they like to go to the seaside for vacation; most of them have religious beliefs.

Chinese culture stresses the difference between the old and the young. The young should respect the old and show respect for them when they speak and act. The interpersonal relationship of Americans is relatively equal, generally speaking, they accept to be called by their first name. So Waverly was "thrilled" by her fiance's performance in front of his future father-in-law and mother-in-law: how Rich held my parents' hands tightly and shook them, patting them on the shoulder, just like he used to treat clients, and saying, "goodbye, Lindong, Zhong Ding, we'll see you again. [3] (179)"

Chinese people have Chinese suggestions, and Americans have American suggestions. Xu Ruth thinks that the American proposal is more suitable for her. Later, she found that "there is a big defect in the American opinion, that is, it has too many orientations, so it is easy to be confused. That's why I can't decide how to deal with the relationship between Ted and me. I can have so many orientations, and each orientation can lead to a completely different ending [3] (191). Compared with American advice, Chinese mothers give Chinese advice: "mother is the best psychologist. She knows you very well. That kind of psychologist will only confuse you more

and more. A girl is like a tree. You must stand up and listen to your mother. Only in this way can you grow tall and strong. If you bend down to listen to others, you will become weak, and a gust of wind will blow you down [3] (188-191). This kind of proposal is not acceptable to Chinese American daughters who are influenced by American culture because their independence is seriously threatened. But in reality, Xu Ruth, who accepted her mother's advice, has regained the confidence and motivation to start a new life, and has bravely challenged her husband's patriarchal status.

The way that Chinese mothers show their love for their children is different from that of American parents. Instead of hugging and kissing, they always steam soup dumplings, cook dried duck gizzards and crabs for them [3] (202). The temperament of children cultivated in the respective environments of China and the United States is different. The temperament of the East and the west is incompatible. Lindong let her daughter learn to adapt to the American environment, finally she soon learned all these points: What is the American environment? If you were born poor in the United States, it's not a shame that you can never turn over. You can get a scholarship first. If you let a roof tile break your head, you don't have to cry for your bad luck. You can sue the owner. In the USA, you can change your situation at will. But she can't teach her daughter about Chinese temperament: how to obey her parents, listen to her mother's words, keep quiet in everything, and don't be sharp. Easy things are not worth pursuing. We should recognize our true value and keep improving [3] (254). What a daughter has learned is to maintain her independent personality and not to let others or even her mother interfere in her personal freedom.

5. The New Roles and Identities of the Second Generation of Chinese American Immigrants

With the development of science and technology, the increasing number of multinational companies, the more convenient global communication and transportation, the more valuable immigrants with mixed culture and their descendants have played an important role in the global economic and cultural exchanges. While American society shows great interest in these immigrants with dual cultural identity, these people with dual cultural identity also pay more attention to their own Chinese cultural factors. Therefore, they also try to give full play to their dual cultural identity. The Joy Luck Club reflects the subtle change of this idea of Chinese Americans [5], [6].

Zhong Lindong introduced the social situation in mainland China, "in China, almost everyone has a TV now. Our relatives in mainland China all have not only black and white TV sets, but also color and remote control ones. They have everything, so when we ask what we need to bring back, they say nothing, just go back and see them [3](35)." Wu Jingmei's relatives introduced her family. "You don't know how successful my son is now. He makes a lot of money by buying and selling vegetables in the free market. Recently, we build a three-story building with new bricks. It's very comfortable to live in. There are too many rooms to live in. Chinese people can also earn more money, not only Americans can do that [3] (276). "With China's reform and opening up, China's social and economic situation is getting better and better. After all, the strength of their country of origin can inject positive elements into their dual cultural identity. In fact, "it has become fashionable for Chinese Americans born in the United States to use Chinese names. When Chinese American mothers say that their daughters are not Chinese in nature, they will not be happy. Ten years ago, she would be applauded for not being like Chinese, but now, she is eager to be Chinese, which is very fashionable nowadays [3] (253-254). In the hearts of the second generation of American immigrants, there is always an indescribable kindness and flesh and blood feeling towards them from their home country. I finally see my part of Chinese blood. Oh, this is my home. The genes that melt in my blood, Chinese genes, after

so many years, have finally begun to boil. In the new era of globalization, the identity of the second generation of Chinese American immigrants to their home country is bound to give them new roles and identities. In the cross-cultural communication between China and the United States, the second generation of Chinese American immigrants can take advantage of their dual cultural identity to play an important role as a bridge. [7] [8].

6. Conclusion

The creation of most literary works is based on different degrees of historical framework, and the multi-ethnic literary texts will create a strong multi-ethnic social and cultural context. How to understand the complex concepts and social structure in literary texts has become the key to the interpretation of literary works. The historical writing in the novel *Joy Luck Club* shows readers the image of old China before 1949 and the image of new China after the reform and opening up in the 1980s. The Chinese things described in the novel, including mahjong, food, family relations and folklore, can reflect some social structure relations. These complex concepts and social structures have become the starting point of understanding the novel text. The novel *The Joy Luck Club* describes the emotional disputes between the mother and daughter of two generations of Chinese American women, and the family origin extends to the 20th century; the novel emphasizes the importance of national inheritance, and puts more pen and ink into historical writing. No matter what the form of historical writing is, they are helpful for the author to convey the images and thoughts of the characters. The writing of the history of old China reflects that under the historical background of suffering from both physical and mental torture, Chinese American mothers from old China still retain their vision of the future, which better highlights their awakening of female consciousness. The historical writing after immigrating to the United States reflects the loss of identity of Chinese American mothers. As the first generation of immigrants from the mainland of China, they can't speak English well. In the new world of the United States, they are cultural strangers. The only place where Chinese American mothers can find their identity is the *Joy Luck Club*, where they recall the past and tell those interesting stories.

The history of contemporary American society also includes the growth history of Chinese American daughters, who have been living under the dual influence of Chinese family culture and American social culture from childhood to work, marriage and birth. Because of their American education, they have actually become Americans with mainstream American values. They treat Chinese culture as an outsider. They feel that their mothers' Chinese clothes, *Joy Luck Club* and Chinese dumplings like nurse hats are very strange. In real life, they will still be regarded as foreigners and not accepted by Americans. For example, Xu Ruth is despised by her future mother-in-law. This difference in social identity makes Chinese daughters feel painful. In the marriage life of Chinese American daughters, the disharmony between them and their husbands still reflects the cultural differences between them, and their husbands' ideas still can't be understood by their wives who have both eastern and Western identities. This ideological gap between the East and the West still needs to be solved through communication. With the encouragement of Chinese American mothers, Chinese American Daughters face problems bravely and try to communicate and solve them.

The Chinese history of reform and opening up reflects the new changes in China, which makes the second generation of American immigrants, such as Chinese daughters, have a certain sense of identity with their Oriental identity, and begin to understand their Chinese roots and their Oriental identity. Under this new historical background, the new generation of immigrants can take advantage of their eastern and Western identity to play an important role as a bridge and make important contributions in cross-cultural global communication.

Acknowledgements

Supported by the National Scholarship Committee of the people's Republic of China in 2019.

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