

ENGLISH B EXTENDED ESSAY

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Research Question: To what extent is the feeling of “hope”
explored through cultural translation and mother-daughter
relationships?

*“And even though I taught my daughter opposite,
still she came out the same way! Maybe it is because
she was born to me and she was born a girl.
And I was born to my mother and I was born a girl.
All of us like stairs, one step after another,
going up and down, but all going the same way.” (241)*

ABSTRACT

Amy Tan, Chinese immigrants' daughter, depicts the story of Chinese immigrants in the incident of Japanese invasion to China, Chinese mothers and their American daughters' relationships in her book "The Joy Luck Club". In this essay, the feeling of hope through cultural translation and mother-daughter relationships are explored according to the research question:

To what extent is the feeling of "hope" explored through cultural translation and mother-daughter relationships?

The conflicts in mother-daughter relationships which are rigorous normally, trigger even more with cultural conflicts and miscommunication caused by language in the novel. For Chinese mothers' who left their homes, belongings and even their Chinese daughters back in China; America and their American daughters are their only hope. Without grieving for what is left behind, the need of preserving Chinese identity versus adapting American culture is envisioned by the mothers. While the mothers are in need of preserving identity, the daughters are in a search for identity. The cultural conflicts are affected by language and miscommunication ending up a daughter worrying about not knowing her mother.

The scope of this essay is the separation of mothers' and their daughters due to generation clash triggered by cultural conflicts and language barrier. Where mothers' only wish is to pass on their wisdom, knowledge and story to the next generations, preserving their Chinese identity is basis of their hope and also hope is the basis of their relationship between their daughters. Despite the conflicts which make them feel strangers, the unity and shared knowledge, the reflection of mothers on daughters are explored throughout the essay.

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INTRODUCTION

From 1937 to 1945 The Second Sino-Japanese War was between Japan and China. The largest Asian war of the 20th century caused many deaths and forced immigrations out of China. Nowadays, the gap between the mother-daughter relationships increases rapidly. With foresight, Amy Tan, an American writer, has realized these conflicts from late 1980's and wrote her best-known novel *The Joy Luck Club*. The novel is inspired by her own story which includes her mother who is forced to leave her children in Shanghai¹. Tan envisions the theme with addition of cultural conflicts between American daughters and Chinese mothers. Mother daughter relationships undergoing cultural translation and identity confusion through the feeling of hope for future while leaving the past, war and its destruction behind, are envisioned throughout the novel.

Joy Luck Club is a club set by four Chinese immigrant women. What they try to do is to preserve their cultural identity, the strong and resistant spirit, and to offset the sacred, valuable spiritual balance around them which is essential for their tradition. The women starting a new life in America, leaving the sorrow, belongings behind in China go through the challenge of mother daughter relationships. The Joy Luck Club is where all the hopes started. For mothers, their daughters are their reflections who will reveal their hopes for the future. Daughters will inherit their story to next generations to prove how strong their grandparents were and show how to expand their hopes whatever the situation is. Thus, through hope and faith to change the fate, the mother daughter relationships experiencing identity dispute, generation clash and cultural conflicts are envisioned.

¹ "About." Bio. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Feb. 2015. <<https://www.amytan.net/bio-1.html>>.

The generations although belonging to the same origin reflect distinct identities and reflections of culture. The confusion of cultural translation causes for younger generations a search for identity whereas for elders, the need to preserve their identity.

The house had been in family for many generations. It was not really so old or remarkable, but I could see it had grown up with the family. There were four stories, one for each generation: great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, and children. The home had a confused look... reflecting too many opinions.” (48)

In the novel the house metaphor illustrates the confusion of generations and how they are disperse from each other but complementary at the same time. All of the generations supporting each other like the stories of a house, one backing the other to keep the house standing. The sense of distinction, separation but unity at the same time is depicted. The mothers who assumed by learning the language, they will be able to reach their daughters missed the fact that language may be translated but the culture cannot. Like the house, same colors, same furniture may be used in each store but as long as divergent generations exist the decoration will be adverse. Nonetheless, in the end the characters will explore that although they are so separate from each other they reflect one another. Each store comprises shadows from the previous.

In the novel “The Joy Luck Club” the search for identity and need of preserving it with cultural translation challenge are explored by Chinese mothers and their American daughters. Although they seem so apart from each other their relationship is based on hope of mothers to pass on their stories to the future generations and hope for a new life without grieving for what is lost and left behind instead hoping for what lays ahead, their reflections, daughters.

CULTURAL IDENTITY UNDERGOING CULTURAL TRANSLATION

The immigrants, who are trying to subsist Chinese culture in America, undergo challenges of cultural translation and need to preserve their identity while adapting to the new culture they are in. The generation clash which is rigorous for typical mother daughter relationships becomes even more challenging with cultural and language barrier between them in the novel. Words might have English translations but cultures do not have, thus the perseverance to preserve identity versus the effect of cultural translation on identity, comes to the scene. Need of belonging and loss of the identity of where the Chinese mothers belong, shake the balance of the mothers. Where the spiritual balance is substantial, sacred and valuable in Chinese culture such a flutter is destructive for the mother daughter relationships. In Chinese culture balance is essential and Yin Yang is an appropriate example of how separate things compose balance and unity. "Yin and Yang represent the two opposite principles in nature. But yin and yang are not static or just two separated things. The nature of yinyang lies in interchange and interplay of the two components."² Mothers and their daughters are like Yin and Yang separate but also an entirety.

There are three main generations in the novel. Although they all belong to the same ancestry, their interpretation of culture and reflections are adverse from each other. Marriage serves a vital role in Chinese culture for women to have a place in society; is envisioned adversely by the generations. "In Chinese culture marriage is not based on love or romance but it is a transaction between the families where the women is transferred from one family to

² Shan, Jun. "Yin and Yang." N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Feb. 2015.
<<http://chineseculture.about.com/cs/religion/a/aayinyang.htm>>.

another.”³ The first generation which is the grandmother of the daughters in the novel, thus the mothers’ mothers are the women of following perception: “*A girl in China did not marry for love. She married for position.*”(256). Thus An Mei Hsu narrates her mother’s story, how she was perceived as a concubine of a prestigious and rich man and forced to marry him because her family denied her. Second generation’s marriage is influenced by traditions, Lindo Jong betrothed when she was only a baby, forced to marry that boy just because the elders think he was her fate. “*I didn’t have instant love for my future husband the way you see on TV today.*”(46) The third generation women are the ones that make marriages like the ones on TV, who marries for love unlike their parents. Although, mothers raised their daughters with Chinese culture collated with American culture, girls become as much as equal with their husbands in their marriages, having choices, thoughts and voices. The idea of woman sacrificing herself for her husband in the Chinese perception tumbles down with third generation. Despite carrying the inheritance of Chinese culture, “*And everybody knows that suicide is the only way a woman can escape marriage.*”(264) they divorced and remarried and become the concrete example of cultural transition.

The daughters are in a phase of denial of their culture and rejection of their Chinese identity at the beginning of the novel. That’s why they use their American names in society like Rose, Waverly, Lena. From clothes to marriage, life style or point of view; as often mentioned in the novel daughters are Americans whereas the mothers are Chinese. “*These clothes were too fancy for real Chinese people, I thought and too strange for American parties.*” (16) The conflicts in cultural traditions and challenge of adapting a new culture are concrete. Moreover,

³ "My New Life in Asia: Love, Romance, Duty: Marriage in Chinese Culture." My New Life in Asia: Love, Romance, Duty: Marriage in Chinese Culture. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Feb. 2015. <<http://my-new-life-in-asia.blogspot.com.tr/2013/01/marriage-in-chinese-culture-love-romance-duty.html>>.

girls' rejection is depicted throughout the novel with their husband choices. For Rose, Ted is special because he is different, "*I have to admit that what I initially found attractive in Ted were precisely the things that made him different from my brothers and the Chinese boys I had dated.*"(123). For the girls, it was only dating with Chinese boys, whereas for future they were looking for some people like Ted who they might easily take as a foreigner since they are not Chinese. Also, Waverly depicts Rich as "*Rich was not only not Chinese...*"(196) With the wish of being out of the Chinese culture and being a part of American society as an American individual not an immigrant, the girls choose the life that an American man can offer them.

The identity and culture which girls try to estrange from themselves become the reason of their wrong actions when they need excuses. This shows the confusion they are in, the conflict of belonging to that identity and denial of the culture they actually belong. Rose who cannot decide anything, confused all the time reasons her personality and actions to "lacking wood". "The Thaiotic Theory of the Five Elements represents an aspect of a dynamic process, a processe's phases of change. In this sense, Wood is not only the actual wood of a tree as defined by the substance, but describes the character, the dynamic state, the elemental force of the element where it means rising, development and impulse."⁴

While daughters' approaches to the cultural conflict are denial and rejection; mother's approaches are confusion and displeasure. Daughters, perceiving their mothers as imposing the Chinese identity to them, envision the search for their identity whereas mothers experience the threat of losing their identity. With immigration to a new country, where the culture has nothing similar to what belonged to them in the past, with a new start away from a

⁴ "___ Five Elements or the Five States of Change." Five Elements. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Feb. 2015. <http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/Chinese_Customs/five_elements.htm>.

war, having nothing physical from their past, nor a family nor a silk dress, the Chinese women are lost in a new life. *"They declared her Displaced Person, lost in the sea of immigration categories."*(107) Here, sea is a metaphor of cultural and identity confusion the immigrants are experiencing. Confusion and dissatisfaction comes with the new life, are the reason why they are so oppose to "those Americans". While trying to preserve their culture and identity, to adapt a new culture is a harsh thing for elders above a certain age. Thus, not only cultural clash but also age is a factor that cause the mothers become confused while preserving their identity. *"So with the sweep of a pen my mother lost her name and become a dragon instead of tiger."*(107) "In the study of Feng Shui, dragon is regarded as an auspicious animal; it connotes prosperity and activity while the tiger is considered as a vicious and harmful animal that is being feared and venerated."⁵ Thus, with marriage the women succeed in prosperity and had a place in the society as a dragon with her new identity.

Language is the only way to communicate that the mothers reason the lack of communication with their daughters by language. However it is more than that. The age gap and most importantly the cultural gap is reason of their conflicts and although, the language may be translated, it is not enough for them to understand each other and emphasize because for instance, when a foreigner learns how to speak Chinese it does not make them think like or live like a Chinese person. Then, the mothers cannot be Americans by learning English. Language is identity and the confusion in the dialects of the mother daughters' constructs the confusion of identity and culture between them. *"I talked to her in English and she answered back in Chinese."* (23) The miscommunication is inevitable with language barrier through cultural conflicts. The confusion of preserving identity and invasion of a new culture causes

⁵ "Dragon and Tiger Symbolism and Meaning." HubPages. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Feb. 2015.
<<http://susanwong.hubpages.com/hub/dragon-and-tiger-Symbolism-and-Meaning>>.

the immigrant mothers' articulation of their confusion with their "*half broken English and half Chinese dialect*" (23) usage.

Jing Mei, who refused her Chinese identity, tried to isolate herself from the Chinese culture; at the end of the novel wants to go on a trip to China and become a Chinese person. Leaving all the conflicts, differences behind from East to West, cultural translation and the search for identity are ceased. Jing Mei as the narrator, from the beginning till the end is a bridge between daughters' and the mothers' conflicts and a bridge between Chinese culture and American culture. Although all of the daughters used their American names throughout the novel, instead of June the preference of her Chinese name is not coincidental. This way, Jing Mei acts both as main character and foreshadowing of the novel. The Chinese name she uses, proves that the identity they were searching for was in fact always there. They cannot deny their American identity whereas they are also Chinese, raised with a culture and ancestry by their mothers.

MOTHER DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS

"I wanted my children to have best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these two things do not mix"(289) Cultural conflicts in identity influence mother-daughter relationships and end up with a daughter worrying about not knowing who her own mother is, as Jing Mei experiences. The relationship is based on confusion and conflictions. Jing Mei is the voice of her own generation who does not know the sorrows their own mothers experienced in China. With the language barrier, culture and age, generation clash is depicted throughout the novel, where the daughters try to deny their Chinese identity and ignore their resemblance with their mother at the beginning of the novel.

Mothers' only wish is, to pass on their knowledge, culture, identity, memory and wisdom to their daughters, preserve them from the sorrows of life and to teach them to deal with the pain with a strong spirit. *"Kill her own weak spirit to give me a stronger one."*(227). The first generation, the mothers' mothers never had right to choose whom to marry. That's why they became so cold and apart from their children, that they raised them to become resistant to pain. *"And that's why you must learn to swallow your own tears."*(244) In Chinese culture women sacrifice their daughters, thus the mothers emphasize with their own mothers for abandoning them and with that bitterness they try to raise their own daughters. However, this time the girls who are Americans so distant to Chinese culture, lack of empathy, conflicts and disunity occurred between the mothers and their daughters. *"I didn't have to do what my mother said anymore. I wasn't her slave. This wasn't China."* (152) Mothers had the fear of their story being lost by the generations.

Through generations inheritance is passed on. *“Give her my spirit, because this is the only way a mother loves her daughter.”*(286) Thus, the daughters should enliven their mother’s memory and identity and bring their hopes to the present and the future. *“And that’s why I named you Waverly... If I named you after this street, soon you would grow up, leave this place and take a piece of me with you.”* (303) Mother’s only wish to pass their identity, culture to their daughters; eventuates by carrying a piece of her mother for the rest of her life with her name.

In the chapter “Twenty-six Malignant Gates”, the conflicts between parents’ wisdom about how to look after their children is depicted. The mothers are always right and protective towards their daughters in Chinese culture. *“A girl is like a young tree. You must stand tall and listen to your mother standing next to you. That’s the only way to grow strong and straight.”* (213) Mothers’ this overprotective approach sometimes cause them to fall apart because after all, the teenagers are always in rebellion of being free. For instance, when Waverly’s success improved in chess she becomes disturbed by her mothers’ boastings that she quits chess just because she thinks it’s her mother’s ambition and identity, not only hers. However, later on she realizes that her mother was right and she was successful with her mother’s support. Moreover, Ying Ying’s prevision about the imbalanced table as a metaphor of Lena’s imbalanced marriage again shows that the mothers are right. An Mei’s instinct about Ted’ affair was again right and finally Jing Mei who tried not be a Chinese and fight hard to be so in the end wants to be like a Chinese as her mother once told *“Once you are born Chinese, you cannot help but feel and think Chinese”* (306)

At the beginning embarrassed with their mothers and worried of not knowing them, the daughters realize the resemblance they once ignored. Jing Mei, resists playing piano just because her mother wants her to play. After years when Suyuan died, plays the same song

again. However, this time she realizes the songs which she taught irrelevant are actually the halves of the same song. This is the metaphor of her relationship with Suyuan. Although she thought that she was so apart from her mother, they were actually the halves of each other, supporting each other. The physical similarities between their faces and behavior are actually the legacy between them, the shared joy, sorrows, pain and happiness they experienced. The mother daughter relationship which was thought to be departed at the beginning of the novel, finds its connection that a daughter is actually the reflection of her mother. *“I was like her. That’s way she named me Ying-Ying. Clear reflection.”* (276)

HOPE

Through immigration to a new culture, life, identity the emphasis is not what is left behind, the things that are lost with the war; instead, what remains today and what will be inherited to the future is the key of what brings hope. Daughters bring their mothers' memory, identity to life and carry their mothers hope to the future. Even in the hardest time the spirit has to be strong enough in order to swallow its own tears and move on.

The Chinese mothers who left everything behind even her daughters and came to America, their daughters and America is where all their hopes for today and the future lays. At the beginning of the novel from "Feathers From a Thousand Li Away", the woman buys a swan for her daughter to show that the bird once a duck expand all of its hopes to become a goose and turn out to be a swan. It is the metaphor of the woman wants her daughter to expand her hopes for the future and never give up. However, the officers in the immigration office do not accept the swan and only a feather remains from it. Although it seems as the edifices are broken, it is the heritage that matters. Not what is lost like the swan, like the lost daughters of Suyuan, all of her belongings left in China will bring hope but what remains, that feather, the only silk dress and Jing Mei, her American daughter is what is hope for Suyuan. She imagines that her daughter will expand her hopes and resemble her, carry the heritage and her mother's story with herself to the next generations. But only waits for the day she could explain this to her daughter with English, the way she can understand. *"Hopes they couldn't begin to express in their fragile English"*(6)

"America is where all my mother's hopes lay. She had come here in 1949 after losing everything in China: her mother and father, her family home, her first husband, and two

daughters, twin baby girls. But she never looked back with regret. There were so many ways for things to get better.”(141) Jing Mei is all she has, her reflection and youth that will implement the things she couldn't do, the hopes she has. This is why she is so ambitious to make her perfect; she often criticizes her because of not using her own abilities. Their mother daughter relationship is based on the inheritance of hopes to the future. Their “*nengkan*”(128), the ability to do what is in their minds is the faith and hope to change their fate.

The title of the book which unites all the stories throughout the novel, the main metaphor is The Joy Luck Club. The book in four sections resembles the mahjong game they play in the club. They need chance to win the game and the club brings them chance and hope in that overwhelming atmosphere of war and losses. Although some people criticize them of being insensitive, the emphasis is on what is left behind versus what lays ahead. They were all afraid but having a strong spirit is not grieving for what is already lost. “*What was worse, we asked among ourselves, to sit and wait for our own deaths... Or to choose our own happiness?* “ (12) Joy Luck Club is the metaphor of hope for the future, hope for their inheritance to pass on the next generations, the bridge between old and new away from war and its destruction. “*And each week, we could hope to be lucky. That hope was our only joy. And that's how we came to call our little parties Joy Luck.*” (12) At the end Jing Mei attending the club to fulfill her mother's place, she carries her mother inheritance with her and carries her hope to the future.

CONCLUSION

Through identity confusion in cultural translation, in the novel “Joy Luck Club” the conflicts between Chinese mothers and their American daughters and the hope of a mother to pass on her story, wisdom, knowledge, experiences and the ancestry heritage to her reflection, daughter are envisioned.

Language which is identity and the obvious reflection of culture presented as one of the significant barriers between the mothers and daughters. The mothers wait for the day they could explain their hopes and pass on their spirit to their daughters with a perfect English. However, the translation of language was not a solid enough bridge for them. Mothers learning English won't make them Americans whereas the girls cannot be as much as Chinese like their mothers. The language of the novel, which is simple and tangible is not coincidental. Amy Tan depicts the cultural translation and language confusion through the usage of easy English vocabulary with additions of Chinese vocabulary.

The cultural conflicts, the perceptions that the children grow with and the traditions that shape one's point of view to life are what make them adverse. The confusion between Chinese and American culture influences the metaphors, similes and literary devices used from the nature. “Magpies”, personification of turtles, the metaphor of hope with duck turning to a swan, elemental nature of a person are all related with nature and depicts the Chinese tradition.

The confusion of searching identity and preserving one, translation of culture is presented in the mother daughter relationships. Through the novel an obvious transition is dominant. Jing Mei is the obvious example of transition. At the beginning, the daughter worries about not knowing her own mother, how apart she is from her. “*You don't even know little percent of*

me! How can you be me?’ And she’s right. How can I be my mother at Joy Luck?’ (15)

Whereas in the end, she discovered the resemblance they shared, the reflection of her mother on her when she finds the lost twins. “*And although we don’t speak, I know we all see it: Together we look like our mother.*”(332) At the end, the barrier of language which seemed to be the wall between two cultures are broken with the shared experiences, joy and unity.

Jing Mei serving as a bridge between old and new, past and future, China and America, realized that the distinction they once thought about their ancestors was their unity. The real challenge was not finding the lost sisters, but her Chinese identity that she once denied. Lost sisters are hope and the bridge of the past and future of Suyuan and Jing Mei. Jing Mei finding her mother’s halves also brings her mother’s hope to the life. After the destruction of war and immigration, the mothers’ only hope was their daughters and America. The wish, hope and faith to pass on their story, spirit and heritage to their daughters is implemented by Jing Mei. She becomes the hope of other mothers and daughters to discover their unity.

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