

# An Intercultural Interpretation of The Film The Joy Luck Club

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## Abstract

**As a representative and excellent film reflecting two generations of Chinese immigrants' lives in America, The Joy Luck Club reveals the strong contrasts between traditional Chinese culture and American culture. Therefore, this essay will select three representative stories in the film, analyze the reasons behind them from the following three perspectives, and propose relevant coping strategies in terms of cross-cultural communication.**

## Keywords

**Intercultural Communication, The Joy Luck Club, Cultural Integration.**

## 1. Introduction

The Hollywood film *The Joy Luck Club* is based on the critically acclaimed novel *The Joy Luck Club*, published in 1987 by ethnic Chinese American writer Amy Tan, who was born in California in 1952 and is a typical descendant of Chinese immigrants. "The Joy luck club" is both the name of the film and the name of the mahjong club in the film. The film mainly depicts four mothers who, after experiencing various hardships during China's war against Japan, eventually embark on a journey to the United States to avoid another disaster. While living in America, the four mothers get together and one of them, Suyun Wu, proposes and organizes a mahjong club, naming it "the joy luck club". The auspicious name represents the four mothers' hope for a better life. The daughters in the film were born and raised in the United States, they regard themselves as authentic Americans, speak fluent American English, and are immersed in the concept of freedom in the American culture. The daughters struggle to find their ways of life in the integration and cultural conflicts between Chinese culture and American culture. The generation gap between mothers and daughters gradually deepens and eventually communication barriers emerge, causing the relationship between mothers and daughters to gradually deteriorate and even clash, before finally reaching a reconciliation after a long period. Through the stories of conflicts and clashes between four pairs of immigrant mothers and daughters in their daily lives, it tells the story of the differences in cultural values behind the great cultural differences between China and America.

## 2. Collectivism and Individualism

China is a collectivist society, in contrast, America is an individualist society. The conflicts between collectivism and individualism are strongly expressed in the film. The traditional Chinese culture advocates that everyone is a member of society, and everyone should be obedient to the group. Each family is like a small group, every member of the family is interdependent. In other words, one's failure or success is closely linked to another. In the film, the mothers imposed their expectations on their daughters and hoped that their daughters could develop into the kind of people they want them to become. For example, the topic of the meeting between the two mothers, Suyun and Lindo, is each showing off their daughters, June and Waverly. From the two Chinese mothers' perspectives, their daughters' success is also

theirs. On the contrary, American culture emphasizes individuality and self-awareness, where each person is an independent being. In the film, mothers are deeply influenced by traditional Chinese culture and tend to be more collectivist. The American-born-Chinese daughters are under the deep influence of American culture and tend to be more individualist. As a result, there is a great difference between the daughters and their mothers.

The core of the constitution of America is to recognize and guarantee the sacrosanct rights of each person. In terms of family relations, some behaviors of the Chinese mothers are violating the principles of freedom and equality as in American culture. For example, Lindo took a magazine in which her daughter Waverly won the Chinatown's chess champion was reported and showed it around to every friend she met on the street. Waverly was extremely embarrassed and asked her mother not to brag about it. However, Lindo ignored Waverly's words and kept bragging about Waverly's success. In the end, Waverly couldn't tolerate her mother anymore and shouted to her mother, "If you want to show off, then why don't you learn to play chess? " These words made Lindo, a Chinese mother who grew up in a traditional Chinese culture, shocked and puzzled. It is easy to see from this that the two cultures have very different family values. The Chinese family culture emphasizes collectivism and filial piety, where individual interests are less important than collective interests. This is why Lindo and Suyun arranged everything for their daughters and rightfully demanded that their daughters grow up the way they were arranged and become the people they wanted them to be. But they forgot that their daughters grew up in an environment that was extremely liberal, egalitarian, and democratic, and that they had a strong sense of individuality and did not easily accept the arrangements made for them by their mothers.

### 3. High-context Culture and Low-context Culture

American anthropologist Edward·T·Hall divided culture contexts into the high-context culture and the low-context culture, which follow different rules of language expression. According to Hall's analysis, China is a typical high-context culture country, while America is a typical low-context culture country. High-context cultures often exhibit less-direct verbal and non-verbal communication, utilizing small communication gestures and reading more meaning into these less-direct messages. People in high-context cultures focus on "context" more than "content" in their interactions, and they communicate implicitly with each other. The ability to understand such implicit messages seems to be inherent in individuals living in such contexts. Low-context cultures do the opposite. Direct verbal communications are needed to properly understand a message being communicated and rely heavily on explicit verbal skills. In low context cultures, the meaning of the message can be expressed very clearly through language, and it is rarely necessary for people to speculate the exact meaning of the words according to the context, so people in low-context cultures are used to expressing their thoughts and opinions directly and frankly, and are not good at speculating about each others' thoughts according to the language context.

When two people living in different contexts and cultures come together, misunderstandings in communication are to be expected. Waverly took her American boyfriend Rich home to meet her parents for dinner, and Lindo made her best dish herself, but out of Chinese high-context culture, she described her dish this way, "This dish is not salty enough. It's too bad to eat." At this point, Waverly understood her mother's connotation, which was "to proclaim it the best she'd ever made." However, Rich, an American living in a typical low-context culture, did not understand Lindo's meaning, and after taking a bite of the dish, he said, "All this need is a little soy sauce" and then picked up a bottle of soy sauce and drizzled it on the dish. This action shocked all the Chinese people present at the dinner. As a Chinese growing up in the high-context culture, Lindo's language was so implicit that when she humbled herself by saying that

the dish was not perfect, she was actually hoping to receive praise from others, but Rich in the low context culture could not understand the connotation and could not understand the real meaning and purpose behind the words. Inevitably, there will be some misunderstandings and even conflicts.

#### 4. Large Power Distance and Small Power Distance

Dutch Psychologist Hofstede defined the power distance as the degree to which less powerful members of institutions and organizations in a country expect and accept unequal distribution of power. According to Hofstede, Power distance refers to dependence relationships between subordinates and superiors in a country. In small power distance countries, subordinates are less dependent on their superiors, and they can negotiate with superiors. While in large power distance countries, subordinates are very dependent on superiors. According to Hofstader's findings on relevant statistics, we know that China is a typical country with a large power distance and America is a typical country with a small power distance. Large power distance requires individuals to adapt to changes in the society and to constantly adjust their behavioral and emotional states according to the specific needs of the society. For example, in China, children should respect the opinions of their parents and act as their parents have instructed. In contrast, in small distance power countries like America, the relationship between parents and children is equal.

The mothers in the film *The Joy Luck Club* grew up in a typical large power distance country, China. They were educated to be obedient to their parents and shouldn't do anything against their parents' will. For example, Waverly's mother Lindo was forced to marry a wealthy man at the age of five. Even though Lindo was unwilling to marry a strange man she had never met, she couldn't do anything but obey her mother's will. Therefore, in the film, we can see the four mothers emphasizing obedience in the education of their daughters, and strongly confirming that their daughters should listen to them unconditionally. However, as daughters who grew up in the American culture, they were deeply influenced by the small power distance cultural framework, which caused them "disobedient". For instance, June didn't interested in playing the piano, but her Chinese mother, Suyun, wanted her to be an excellent pianist, so she forced June to practice the piano every day. As a result, June shouted to her mother, "I'm not going to play anymore. Why should I? I'm not your slave. This isn't China. You can't make me." June's words, which seems unbelievable to her mother Suyun, is understandable when comprehended in the context of the conflict between large power distance and small power distance.

#### 5. Conclusion

At the end of the film *The Joy Luck Club*, as time goes by, the American-born-Chinese daughters gradually become mature and finally understand their Chinese mothers. This has largely prevented the deterioration of the mother-daughter relationship and is a fundamental condition for the establishment of a harmonious mother-daughter relationship. The film *The Joy Luck Club* shows the cultural conflicts and differences between China and America among two generations of immigrants, as well as the collision and integration between Chinese culture and American culture. Just like the reconciliation between mother and daughter at the end of the film, we see the possibility and inevitability of the integration of Chinese and American cultures.

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