Interpretation of Cultural Conflict in The Joy Luck Club from Perspective of High-context and Low-context Cultures

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Abstract: *The Joy Luck Club*, a masterpiece by Amy Tan, tells the story of the mother-daughter conflicts, focusing on the differences between Chinese culture and American culture. According to the theory of high-context and low-context cultures put forward by Edward T. Hall, Chinese culture can be classified as a high-context culture, while American culture is classified as a low-context culture. In light of high-context and low-context cultures theory, this paper deeply analyzes mother-daughter conflicts in *The Joy Luck Club*, aiming to provide reference for exploring the right way to resolve cultural conflict. In this paper, the author introduces the main differences of high and low-context cultures, on the basis of which the cultural conflict between Chinese and American reflected in *The Joy Luck Club* were summarized and analyzed. The conflicts can be divided into three aspects: different ways of language expression, different understandings of the relationship between parents and children and different ways of emotional expression.

1 Introduction

Different places have different geography and social forms, which create diverse cultures in the world. Cultural differences can be reflected in cultural exchanges, and those differences often lead to conflicts between cultures.

As a large country of immigrants, American society gathers immigrants from different countries, and various cultures brought by immigrants from their home countries exchange and collide in America. Since the 20th century, especially since the latter half of 20th century, with the increase of the number of ethnic Chinese and the improvement of their social status, cultural conflicts have become increasingly prominent in many kinds of cultural conflicts. At the same time, cultural conflict has become one of the hot issues concerned by Chinese and American literary circles[1]. Ethnic Chinese writers are a special group in American society, who have dual cultural identities. One the one hand, they can feel Chinese culture from the actions and words of their Chinese parents. On the other hand, they are deeply influenced by American culture from their daily lives there. This also means they can have intuitive feelings and experience of cultural shock, which is able to provide an important source for their thinking and writing.

Amy Tan, an ethnic Chinese writer, is one of the representatives of contemporary ethnic Chinese writers, whose maiden work *The Joy Luck Club* fully presents the conflict and integration of Chinese and American cultures. This book, which gained enthusiastic reviews soon after its publication, consists of 16 interwoven stories, and those stories are focused on the conflicts of four Chinese American women and their daughters born and raised in America. These conflicts are not only intergenerational, but also reflect the difference between Chinese culture and American culture. One approach to understand the difference is to look at communication in these cultures. According to the high-context and low-context cultures theory which is put forward by an anthropologist named Edward T. Hall in his book Beyond Culture, China is a high-context culture, while America is a low-context. The communication between a person from high-context culture and another person from low-context culture tends to be full of obstacles. For instance, the straightforward American way of speaking may cannot be accepted by Chinese. In contrast, Chinese people prefer the roundabout way of speaking [2].

With the acceleration of globalization, the exchanges between Chinese and Americans have become more and more frequent, and the study of intercultural communication between China and America has become an essential issue. This paper will start from high-context and low-context cultures theory of Hall, and then analyses the conflicts concerning high and low-context cultures, aiming to promote the integration of two culture.

2 High-context and Low-context Cultures Theory

In the book Beyond Culture published in 1976, Hall pointed out that, culture has contextual correlates, culture can be divided into high-context culture and
low-context culture, depending on the degree to which meaning comes from the setting or form the words being exchanged. Hall hold the view that: A high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message [3]. A low-context communication or message, in contrast, is one in which the mass of information is vested in the explicit code [2]. After reading relevant books and articles and thinking independently, the author believes that there are three main differences between high- and low-context cultures as follows:

2.1 Depending on shared context versus depending on language information

Communicators in a high-context culture share the same background of history, local customs, traditions and so on. As a consequence, lots of information can be hidden in the common external linguistic environment and do not be shown in words. Members in high-context culture tends to have a tacit understanding and believe that others can hear his or her voice beyond words. Additionally, they think that it is an impolite behavior to say the invisible information directly, which is considered as a question of the listener’s comprehension. Totally different from high-context culture, communicators in a high-context culture rely on language. Namely, people tend to express their thoughts with word directly, avoiding ambiguity and uncertainty in language as much as possible. This style of expression habit can be partly attributed to the fact there many communicators from various cultural backgrounds in a low-context culture. For example, as an immigrant country with a short history, America society consists of people from different home countries and different cultural backgrounds, who have no choice but to make the best use of language to achieve communication. And to some extent, it leads to the tradition of low-context communication in American.

2.2 Collectivism versus individualism

The dependence on context makes high-context culture a collectivist oriented culture, and people in this culture pursue overall harmony and try hard to avoid conflict and opposition [4]. Interests of the whole is emphasized by the collectivist society, where the relationships among people is close, and the success or failure of individuals will influence the whole community. However, people belong to low-context culture advocate individualism, which means independent consciousness as well as struggle by themselves. It also brings about the loose connections among members of that society.

2.3 Spiral thinking versus linear thinking

The differences of high- and low-context cultures contain different ways of thinking. In a high-context culture, members adopt “spiral thinking” or “stepping stone thinking”. In order to express their real intentions, people would like to say a number of foreshadowing or insinuating words, and they do not even say the key points until the end of the conversation [5]. In contrast, low-context culture is “linear thinking” or “straight bridge thinking”. In a low-context culture, members prefer to state the key points firstly, which are followed by interpretive discourse. Too much pleasantry or extraneous remarks fail to get the preference of them. These two completely different ways of thinking cause countless obstacles in cross-cultural communication.

3 Conflicts concerning High-context and Low-context Cultures in The Joy Luck Club

The influence of culture on people is profound and lasting. Although mothers in The Joy Luck Club immigrated to the America, them still retain and cherish the influence of Chinese culture, so they embody the high-context culture of China. Their daughters were born and raised in the U.S, thus these girls embody the low-context culture of America. This chapter will analyze context conflicts reflected in the novel The Joy Luck Club from the following aspects:

3.1 Conflict in the way of language expression

As mentioned above, communications in high-context culture dependent on shared context and they are indirect, while communication in low-context culture dependent on language information and they are direct. In the movie adapted from the novel, when Jing-Mei Woo replaced her mother to play mah jong with her mother’s friend, aunt Ying-Ying found that the peanuts on the mahjong table are ate up. Instead of directly asking Jing-Mei to get more peanuts, she said to Jing-Mei that: “There are no peanuts left.” Jing-Mei was confused on hearing these words, and it took a few seconds before she realized the true intention of Aunt Ying-Ying and left the seat to get the peanuts. As we can see from this example, the conversation of high-context culture is not limited to language. Sometimes, word are just a way of euphemistic expression, and listeners are required to get the information beyond words according to the background of communication, traditional customs and so on.

Compared to Chinese, American way of language expressing is more direct. In American culture, conflict between people is intense and superficial, with no regard for the opinions and ideas of other [6]. When four families gathered to celebrate the Chinese lunar New Year, Linda’s daughter Waverly said to Jing-Mei (June) directly that her company will not adopt the advertising slogan written by Jing-Mei because it is not sophisticated and refused to give Jing-Mei the chance to rewrite it. The following is the conversation between the two girls:

“Just tell me what they want changed. I’ll call you next week so we can go over it, line by
line.

"June—I can't," Waverly said with cool finality. "It's just not…sophisticated. I'm sure what you write for your other clients is wonderful. But we're a big firm. We need somebody who understands that…our style." She said this touching her hand to her chest, as if she were referring to her style.

Then she laughed in a light-hearted way. "I mean, really, June."[7]

What is worth mentioning is that, in the movie version of *The Joy Luck Club*, seeing the quarrel of two girls, Lindo tried to urge reconciliation, and even said the Chinese words such as “Suan le”, “hao le” when she was at a loss. It can be seen that mothers adhere to the idea that harmony is the most valuable thing” in traditional Chinese culture and refuse to have verbal conflicts. Their daughters follow the American habit of communicating frankly and are not afraid of verbal friction. This difference can explain the reason why in mother-daughter communication, the daughters, who are used to speaking frankly, sometimes can't get the true meaning of their mother's words. In the lives of Jing-Mei and her mother Suyuan, Jing-Mei has complained that, “My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other’s meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more”.

3.2 Conflict in the way of family education

As a high-context culture, Chinese culture emphasizes collectivism, and family is the smallest group, in which parents are expected to take the task of educating their children and planning the life direction of their children. But in American low-context culture, everyone is an independent individual and his or her life can’t be interfered or planned by others, including his or her parents. In Western thinking, one's success is a reflection of one's ability, rather than the cultivation of one's "family" [8]. Therefore, this difference leads daughters' incomprehension and resistance to their mother's parenting style. Suyuan really hope that her daughter Jing-Mei will be a brilliant person when she grew up, so after discovering Jing-Mei's piano talent, she fully supported her in learning to play the piano. However, Jing-Mei was deeply hurt by the failure of a piano performance and decided to never play the piano. When Jing-Mei was watching the TV, Suyuan took a firm attitude and asked Jing-Mei to continue the piano playing. Jing-Mei replied that she is not the slave of Suyuan, but in vain. Suyuan ignored her daughter’s resistance and said only the obedient kind of daughter can stay in home. Suyuan’s style of education is a typical Chinese style, which is out of the responsibility for her daughter, but it deviates from the opinion of free development in American culture and is hard to be accepted by her daughter. As a result, Jing-Mei no longer liked piano and gave up it early.

"Turn off TV," she called from the kitchen five minutes later.

I didn't budge. And then I decided. I didn't have to do what my mother said anymore. I wasn't her slave. This wasn't China. I had listened to her before and look what happened. She was the stupid one.[7]

In Chinese families, family members are closely connected. Parents and children depend on each other, thus the success of a family member does not represent himself exactly, but the whole value of the family to which he belongs [4]. For instance, when Waverly won the champion of a chess tournament, her mother went ground bragging to everybody she met that the chess champion was her daughter’s achievement, which cause disgust of Waverly. The girl held the view that gaining the chess champion is the outcome of her hard work, not her mother’s, so she said to her mother that: “Why do you have to use me to show off? If you want to show off, the why don’t you learn to play chess?” Waverly’s words left her mother speechless, and this collision deserves readers’ careful consideration about the different relationship of parents and their kids between high-context culture and low-context culture.

3.3 Conflict in the way of emotion expression

Chinese low-context and American low-context culture differ when it comes to the way of expressing love and other emotions. The love of Chinese mother’s love is not direct. Instead of praise, they make use of harsh criticism more to show concern and love for their girls and boys. In *The Joy Luck Club*, although Lindon was satisfied with Waverly's new boyfriend, she didn't say this to Wavely and only emphasized the drawbacks of Wavely's boyfriend. Failing to acquire the approval and blessing from her own mother, Waverly was really upset and in great sorrow. It was not until in the barber shop that the mother and daughter opened their hearts. Lindo finally admitted her satisfaction to her daughter's boyfriend, and after that, they laughed loudly and happily. The same situation also appeared to Suyuan and Jing-Mei. Having heard the quarrel of Jing-Mei and Weavely, Suyuan criticized Joan's immature style since she was a child, which made Jing-Mei feel extremely ashamed. After the meal, when there was only Suyuan and Jing-Mei left, Jing-Mei cried in front of her mother. Suyuan finally knew the grievance and misunderstanding of Jing-Mei, she told to Jing-Mei that she always knew that Joan likes to pick the worst crab when having the meal, since she wanted to leave the good ones to others. Suyuan praised Jing-Mei for her kindness and explained that a warm heart is Jing-Mei's real style.

Jing-Mei: “What if someone else had picked that crab?" 

My mother looked at me and smiled. "Only you pick that crab. Nobody else take it. I already know this. Everybody else want best quality. You thinking different."[7]

Actually, although mothers do not like expression, they have always been loving their daughters in their
own way. Without receiving verbal encouragement and praise form their mother, daughters who are influenced by high-context culture think that their mother is always dissatisfied with themselves, so they formed a deep sense of inferiority and anxiety. However, if mother and daughter can start to open their hearts, trying to understand each other's cultures and listen to each other's inner voice, they will find that they have always been loving each other. If there is anything that can cross the cultural barriers, it must be love and understanding. It is love and understanding that enable them to cross the gap of different expression customs and understand each other's real thoughts. At the end of the novel, effective communication and emotional concern resolved the cultural conflicts between the four mothers and daughters as well as the conflicts between high-context and low-context cultures, and they have a happy ending.

4. Conclusion

Analyzing the mother-daughter conflicts in The Joy Luck Club from the perspective of high-context and low-context cultures can let us see the deep-seated cultural causes through the appearance of life, so as to better resolve the conflicts and promote harmony. Chinese culture belongs to high-context culture and American culture belongs to low-context culture. The former relies on shared context and expresses indirectly and implicitly, while the latter relies on verbal information and expresses directly and frankly. These differences frequently lead to mother-daughter conflicts in The Joy Luck Club. This paper combines relevant theories with specific examples in the novel and the movie, and introduces the conflicts in language expression, family education and emotion expression caused by the cultural differences in detail.

At the same time, we also note that at the end of the novel, these conflicts have been resolved with the joint efforts of the mothers and daughters. There will inevitably be conflicts and collisions between Chinese and American cultures which have different characteristics, but cultures in the world also have universal characteristics. The common love and understanding of mankind can resolve cultural conflicts and ultimately achieve cultural coexistence and interpretation.

To sum up, a culture possesses the characteristic of differing from another culture, which means that we should find differences in cross-cultural communication and grasp the characteristics of different cultures. Only in that way, can different cultures understand each other, seek common ground while reserving differences, and finally realize the coexistence of cultures.

References