



An Analysis of Intercultural Communication Conflicts and Coping Strategies in *The Joy Luck Club* Based on Hall's High-context and Low-context Culture Theory

Yaoguang Chen

School of Foreign Languages, Northwest Minzu University, Lanzhou 730000, Gansu, China.

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***Corresponding author:** Yaoguang Chen, School of Foreign Languages, Northwest Minzu University, Lanzhou 730000, Gansu, China.

Abstract

The Joy Luck Club is a novel by Amy Tan, published in 1989. It tells the story of four pairs of Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters, exploring the complex relationships and cultural conflicts between them. It delves into the generational and cultural gaps as the daughters struggle to understand their mothers' traditional Chinese values while navigating their own identities in American society. The mother-daughter relationship and female growth have always been the focus of research on *The Joy Luck Club* in recent years. However, the cultural conflicts between different cultures reflected in the novel also deserve our attention. From the perspective of high-context and low-context cultures proposed by the famous American anthropologist Hall, this paper will analyze the intercultural conflicts manifested in the work, and on this basis, solutions to the conflicts will be given in this paper as well, with a view to better realizing intercultural communication activities in life.

Keywords

Hall; High and Low Context Culture; Intercultural Communication; *The Joy Luck Club*

1. Introduction

The Joy Luck Club was published in 1989 and was written by the famous Chinese-American female writer Amy Tan. The novel focuses on four Chinese women who immigrated to the United States. Through the perspectives of four pairs of mothers and daughters, it vividly presents the generation gap and cultural conflicts between first-generation immigrant mothers and their daughters growing up in the United States. The mothers, though living in a foreign land, still adhere to their Chinese values; the daughters, on the other hand, grew up in the American cultural environment and have formed values and worldviews that are vastly different from their mothers. This encounter of different cultures and values not only complicates the mother-daughter relationship but also highlights the significant differences between Chinese and American cultures. Even though thirty-five years have passed since the publication of the novel, the cultural differences and conflicts between China and the United States reflected in the novel are still relevant to the study and research of cross-cultural communication between China and the United States.

This paper will adopt the high-context and low-context culture theory proposed by Edward T. Hall in 1976 as an analytical tool. Hall pointed out that Any transaction can be characterized as high-, low-, or middle-context. HC transactions feature preprogrammed information that is in the receiver and in the setting, with only minimal

information in the transmitted message. LC transactions are the reverse. Most of the information must be in the transmitted message in order to make up for what is missing in the context (both internal and external). In general, HC communication, in contrast to LC, is economical, fast, efficient, and satisfying; however, time must be devoted to programming. If this programming does not take place, the communication is incomplete (Hall, 1976). As a typical high-context culture, China's communication style tends to be implicit and emphasizes relationship networks, while the United States, as a representative of low-context culture, has a communication style that is more inclined to be direct and explicit (Jia Yuxin, 1997). When these two cultures meet, the differences between them will become an important factor of conflict, which is especially obvious in the novel *The Joy Luck Club*, and it is worthwhile to pay attention to and explore how to solve the resulting conflicts.

2. Manifestation of High-context and Low-context Cultural Conflicts in *The Joy Luck Club*

2.1 Symbolism

Chinese culture has typical high-context characteristics, and symbols are often used to convey information. There are many idioms in Chinese, such as Wang Zi Cheng Long (hope one's children will have a bright future), Yi Ming Jing Ren (to make a great coup), and Pao Zhuan Yin Yu (a modest spur to induce others to come forward with valuable contribution), etc. The symbols such as "dragon", "cicada", "brick" and "jade" are used to convey messages. At the beginning of the novel, the old lady who had lived in the high-context culture in China for half her life bought a "swan" that was originally a duck before traveling across the ocean. The change in identity from a duck to a swan is due to the duck's own efforts, which symbolizes the old lady's hope to achieve a transformation of her individual identity through her own efforts in life on the other side of the planet and the old lady's pursuit of a higher social status. At the same time, the swan is also the old lady's expectation that her daughter can live a carefree life in the United States, free from traditional constraints, and be able to freely express her own ideas.

The difference in the understanding of the symbolic meaning of the swan is an important reason for the conflict between the mother and daughter. The mother waited all her life to be able to tell her daughter the story of the swan fluently in American English and convey her feelings. However, the daughter grew up in America where the culture tends to be low-context, and she always employed a direct way of communication. She was confused by her mother's implicit way of expressing emotions. The mother's love and expectations were symbolized by the swan and the feathers in the high-context culture, but in the low-context cultural background, the daughter had difficulty understanding the deep emotions behind them, resulting in a communication barrier between the mother and daughter. The mother's feelings could not be understood by the daughter in time, and the daughter was confused about her mother's words, thus leading to contradictions.

2.2 Language Expression

The contradictions brought about by the differences in language expression in high-context and low-context cultures are common in the novel. In the telling of the story of Waverly Jong and her mother, we can clearly see the disharmony caused by the differences in language expression.

Cultural differences can be seen when Waverly Jong is having dinner with her mother in a restaurant. The novel goes: "‘Not too many good things, this menu.’ Then she tapped the waiter’s arm, wiped the length of her chopsticks with her finger, and sniffed: ‘This greasy thing, do you expect me to eat with it?’ She made a show of washing out her rice bowl with hot tea and then warned other restaurant patrons seated near us to do the same. She told the waiter to make sure the soup was very hot, and of course, it was by her tongue’s expert estimate ‘not even lukewarm.’" (Tan Amy, 1989) Through these picky behaviors and words, the mother conveyed her dissatisfaction with the restaurant environment and service. In Chinese culture, on the one hand, this may be an implicit way to express dissatisfaction with the restaurant's hygiene and service, but on the other hand, it may also contain hints to the people dining together, hoping that the other can understand his or her feelings about other things. In the novel, the mother intended to show her dissatisfaction with her daughter's marriage and lifestyle in this way. However, Waverly, with her direct perception, thought that her mother's behavior was impolite and confusing. She was more inclined to directly put forward reasonable suggestions for improvement to the waiter, such as asking for clean chopsticks or adjusting the temperature of the soup. In the low-context culture of the United States, people pay more attention to directly expressing problems and solving them and believe that direct communication is the most effective way. Her mother's implicit complaining way made her feel embarrassed and difficult to understand. This difference led to the communication between the mother and daughter in the restaurant full of contradictions, destroying the originally harmonious dining

atmosphere, and further deepening the conflict between the mother and daughter, which makes the differences in language expression and behavior between the two sides more and more obvious.

When Waverly's boyfriend visits her parents, the mother's remarks about her cooking follow the principle of modesty in Chinese high-context culture. In Chinese culture, modesty is a highly regarded virtue, and people often express politeness by being self-deprecating, also expecting others to understand the true intentions behind this modesty, which is to receive praise and affirmation. The mother says that the "Ai! This dish not salty enough, no flavor. It is too bad to eat.", which is not a denial of her cooking skills but an implicit expression under a cultural tradition. In a family gathering like this, such self-deprecating expressions are a common social strategy, aiming to create a harmonious atmosphere and also testing the family members' and the guests' ability to understand and respond to such hints. Rich, not understanding the implication in Chinese high-context culture, interprets the mother's words according to his own direct language understanding in low-context culture, and take the mother's words as a real need for improvement in the dish (Ding Tanying, 2024). He later, as described in the novel, "said, 'You know, all it needs is a little soy sauce.' And he proceeded to pour a riverful of the salty black stuff on the platter, right before my mother's horrified eyes." In his culture, language expression is usually more direct and explicit, and people tend to understand others' words literally. Therefore, he directly proposed the suggestion of adding soy sauce and put it into action. This misinterpretation of the mother's words completely violated the mother's expectations and left the mother astonished. The originally harmonious interaction was broken, bringing a serious failure of cross-cultural communication and further deepening the misunderstanding and estrangement between the two sides. This plot, once again, highlighted the huge conflict in language expression and understanding in high and low context cultures.

2.3 Family Values

The differences in family values between high and low cultural contexts are particularly evident in the novel. In my opinion, the most common and obvious differences in family values shown by different families in the novels are manifested in the two aspects of marriage and education.

In terms of marriage values, Rose's mother, influenced by traditional Chinese high-context culture, believes that marriage is a commitment and responsibility, and a marriage should be maintained with all efforts. Therefore, when Rose proposed divorce, her mother firmly opposed it, emphasizing that "you must save it". This behavior or this thought stems from the traditional values that family stability and the durability of marriage are of great significance in Chinese culture. The mother's opposition contains her adherence to traditional family values and her expectation for the long-term happiness of her daughter's marriage (Yang Yunlan, 2023). However, Rose, influenced by American low-context culture, pays more attention to her personal feelings and happiness in marriage. When she feels that the marriage cannot continue, she believes that divorce is the most reasonable choice. She is confused and feel helpless about her mother's opposition because she is used to the way of directly expressing personal feelings and independently deciding whether to maintain the marriage by herself in her culture. This difference in marriage values has led to intense conflicts between the mother and daughter on Rose's marriage issue, reflecting the huge contrast in marriage values in high-context and low-context cultures.

In terms of education values, in traditional Chinese high-context culture, influenced by idioms or conventions that it is the parents' fault if the son is not taught, parents expect their children to become talents and will spare no effort to do the things that they think are good for cultivating their children. However, the Chinese parents often do not express their intentions directly to their children. Instead, they adopt a "roundabout way" to impose what their thoughts on their children (Zhou Qionghong, 2022). For example, Suyuan Woo made a genius training plan for her daughter June Woo and even worked as a cleaner for the piano teacher for free in exchange for her daughter's opportunity to learn the piano, but she did not tell her daughter her good intentions, hoping that her daughter could understand by herself. In American low-context culture, parents usually tell their children their ideas directly and respect their decisions. Therefore, in June's growth, she always felt confused or even desperate about her mother's thought. This difference has led to conflicts between the mother and daughter. June Woo, who grew up in the United States, longs for a Western free lifestyle and just wants to be an ordinary person. She feels that her mother's compulsory intervention limits her development and is a disrespect and infringement of her rights, while the mother thinks that her daughter does not understand her pains (Chen Cong & Wu Jianyun, 2023).

3. Conflict Analysis and Resolution

The root of the conflict between the mothers and daughters in the novel lies in the significant differences between high-context and low-context cultures, which are manifested in aspects such as symbols, language expression, and

family values, leading to frequent misunderstandings and tense relationships between the mothers and daughters. To resolve these conflicts and achieve effective cross-cultural communication, the following aspects can be considered.

3.1 Enhancing Cultural Awareness

Both the mother and daughter should actively and in-depth study the cultural characteristics of each other, including cultural background, values, and communication patterns. Through this, the mother can understand American culture by reading relevant books and watching American film and television works, while the daughter can explore the connotations of traditional Chinese culture in depth. Through learning, they can better understand the cultural logic behind each other's behaviors and words and reduce misunderstandings caused by cultural differences.

3.2 Cultivating Communication Skills

Appropriate communication skills are crucial in cross-cultural communication. Both sides should learn to express their thoughts and feelings clearly and accurately and actively listen to the other's view (Huang Shaowen, 2023). When expressing expectations and opinions, the mother can adopt a more direct way appropriately and avoid being overly implicit; when communicating with the mother, the daughter should be more patient and carefully understand the implied meaning in the mother's words.

3.3 Strengthening Perspective Taking

Perspective-taking is the key to enhancing understanding and resolving conflicts (Li Yan & Cai Zhongyuan, 2010). Both the mother and daughter should try to view problems from the other's cultural perspective and understand the other's motives for behavior. The mother should put herself in the daughter's shoes and consider the daughter's growth experience and the pressure she faces in the American cultural environment and respect the daughter's personal choices; the daughter should also consider the mother's concepts and expectations formed under the influence of traditional Chinese culture and be grateful for the mother's efforts.

3.4 Building Cultural Bridges

Families and society can work together to create a favorable environment for cross-cultural communication. Within the family, cultural exchange activities can be carried out, such as sharing stories and customs in each other's cultures. Schools and communities can organize multicultural exchange programs to enhance the interaction and understanding between people from different cultural backgrounds. Such an environment helps both the mother and daughter to examine their relationship from a broader cultural perspective and promotes cultural integration.

4. Conclusion

In the deep development of globalization, intercultural communication is becoming more frequent. *The Joy Luck Club* vividly presents the conflicts between mothers and daughters caused by high-context and low-context culture differences, providing a typical example for intercultural studies. Analysis using Hall's theory shows that the differences in symbols, language expression, and family concepts between Chinese and American cultures lead to frequent conflicts between mothers and daughters. These conflicts highlight the challenges of intercultural communication. Therefore, we propose strategies such as enhancing cultural awareness, cultivating communication skills, strengthening perspective-taking, and building cultural bridges. Enhancing cultural awareness helps both parties understand cultural logic; communication skills ensure accurate expression and understanding; perspective-taking enhances mutual understanding, and cultural bridges create a communication environment. Intercultural communication is influenced by many factors and is challenging in practice. However, *The Joy Luck Club* reminds us to pay attention to cultural differences, and we should face them with a positive attitude, and strive to promote cultural understanding, respect, and integration, so as to build an inclusive and harmonious global society, which is not only our research goal, but also our personal responsibility.

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