

Communication and Cultural Identity
in the Mother-Daughter Relationships in Amy Tan's
The Joy Luck Club

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Tutkielmassani käsittelen Amy Tanin romaania *The Joy Luck Club*. Osittain omaelämäkerrallinen, äiti-tytär suhteisiin keskittyvä vuonna 1989 ilmestynyt tarina kuvaa kiinalaisten siirtolaisnaisten ja heidän tyttärensä elämää Kaliforniassa. Teoksesta tekee osittain omaelämäkerrallisen se, että Tanin omat vanhemmat olivat siirtolaisia ja hän tuo joitakin omia kokemuksiaan teoksessa esiin; pääosin kirja on kuitenkin fiktiivinen. Romaani koostuu lyhyistä, erillisistä tarinoista, joissa äidit sekä tyttäret kertovat omista elämäkokemuksistaan: äitien tarinat kuvastavat niin menneisyyttä Kiinassa ennen siirtolaisuutta kuin heidän nykyistä elämäänsä Yhdysvalloissa, ja varsinkin heidän suhdettaan aikuisiin tyttäriinsä. Tytärten tarinat puolestaan keskittyvät pääosin kuvailemaan heidän kommunikaatio-ongelmiaan niin äitien kuin puolisoitten kanssa.

Tutkimukseni lähtökohtana on kommunikaatio ja kulttuuri-identiteetti äiti-tytär suhteissa. Aluksi käsittelen teoksen äitien kehittymistä kiinalaisista tytöistä/nuorista aikuisiksi siirtolaisnaisiksi. Tutkin minkälaiset nuoruustekijät ja –muistot kenties vaikuttavat naisten henkiseen kehitykseen ja miten ne ilmenevät myös aikuisiällä. Lisäksi käsittelen äitien ja tyttärien välistä suhdetta kommunikatiivisesta näkökulmasta; mitkä asiat vaikuttavat henkilöiden välisiin suhteisiin ja miten kulttuurierot kenties hankaloittavat äiti-tytär kommunikaatiota. Lisäksi tuon esille kiinalaiselle kommunikaatiolle ja kulttuurille tyypillisiä asioita, kuten feng shui sekä konfutselaiset elämänopeat.

Teoksessa tulevat keskeisesti esille kulttuurien vaikutus kommunikaatiossa. Kiinalaisten äitien tausta ja perinteinen kiinalainen kasvatustapa heijastuvat heidän tapansa kasvattaa omia jälkeläisiään. Vanhempien kunnioitus ja sanaton viestintä tulevat keskeisesti esiin konfutselaisesta ajattelutavasta. Amerikkalais-kiinalaisille tyttäriin on selvästi hankalaa hahmottaa äitiensä kasvatustapoja lähinnä kulttuurillisista syistä; heidän amerikkalainen ajatusmaailmansa ja elinympäristönsä painavat liiallisesti hankaloittaen kommunikaatiota.

Avainsanat: kommunikaatio, äiti-tytär suhteet, kulttuuri-identiteetti, siirtolaisuus

**Communication and Cultural Identity in the Mother-Daughter Relationships in Amy Tan's
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Table of contents

1. Introduction	2
1.1 <i>The Joy Luck Club</i> , Amy Tan and Asian American literature	3
1.2 American short story cycle and oral narratives	6
2. Cultural and historical background	9
2.1 Chinese immigration politics in the US	9
2.2 From Confucianism to Chinese Communism	11
2.3 Observations on Chinese customs, culture and communication	13
3. <i>The Joy Luck Club</i> : mother's past and present; inner development	18
3.1 Suyuan Woo	18
3.2 An-Mei Hsu	20
3.3 Lindo Jong	21
3.4 Ying-Ying St. Clair	24
4. Mother –daughter relationship	27
4.1 Ying-Ying and Lena St. Clair	27
4.2 Suyuan and Jing-Mei “June” Woo	29
4.3 Lindo and Waverly Jong	31
4.4 An-Mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan	34
5. Communication: the role of silence, talk stories and cultural background	37
6. Conclusion	44
References	48

1. Introduction

Asian American literature has become an important part of American literature since the 1960s. In particular, Asian American literature has been flourishing since opening the borders in the 1940s for Asian immigrant women. For the first and second generation immigrants, it has been important to understand their relationship to their origin, and especially the second generation Asian Americans have felt the need to understand their past. The gap between the original Asian culture and the dominant Western culture has often been wide. Thus it is also important to understand immigrant writing from the Western point of view. For many Asian American women, such as Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, writing has been a convenient tool to express their past and to give voice to Asian immigrant women, who traditionally were silenced by their culture. Oral narratives have dominated the childhood of many immigrant writers and are commonly used as a tool of writing in immigrant literature. The term American short story cycle was given to a number of authors, mainly women, who commonly used the short story, oral narrative format in their novels.

In this study, I intend to have a deeper look at Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) which is a semi-autobiography¹ of the author's life. In the novel, Tan introduces Chinese American families by writing about the first and second generation Chinese American mothers and daughters. The stories contain her own personal experiences as a second generation Chinese American. The novel also presents Chinese traditions and history of Chinese women relevant to understanding better Chinese immigrants. Growing up in two different cultures has an effect not only on the second generation immigrants but also on the first generation immigrants and naturally between the two generations. Asian immigrant literature has been a topic of interest in several studies in the past years, especially when the generation gap and cultural clashes are concerned. I hope to study the topic from a slightly different angle.

¹ A semi-autobiography is based on author's life but contains fictional elements

In this study, I will pay special interest to the following issues: I hope to analyse how the women, especially the mothers, develop in the novel. More precisely, I wish to see whether their past in China have left a permanent mark on them even in their adulthood in the USA. I am also interested in analysing the mother-daughter relationships and the communication between mothers and daughters. Finally, I want to point out what elements of Chinese traditions and history Tan represents in the novel.

I will start by writing shortly about Amy Tan and *The Joy Luck Club*, then putting the novel in a broader context by introducing the American short story cycle and an outline of Asian American literature. As for the theoretical background, I feel the need to explore in depth at some major factors in Chinese history as well as Asian immigration politics in the USA. Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts* (1996) as well as Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature. An Introduction to the Writings and their Social Context* (1982) give a thorough idea of Asian immigrant policy in the 20th century. For presenting Chinese history and women's position in China, I will use Julia Kristeva's *About Chinese Women* (1977) as well as Amy Ling's *Between worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (1990). I will also briefly introduce some basic differences of Asian and Western cultures by using concepts and ideas presented by Jia in *Chinese Communication Theory and Research* (2002), and by Huotari & Seppälä in *Kiinan kulttuuri* (1993).

1.1 *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan and Asian American literature

Amy Tan was born to Chinese immigrant parents in Oakland, California in 1952. As a teenager she lived in Europe with her widowed mother but later studied in San Jose University, California, and graduated with a Master's degree in Linguistics (Naapanki, 9). Amy Tan has published several novels, *The Kitchen God's wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1996), *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005) and children books (*The Moon Lady* (1992),

and *The Chinese Siamese Cat* (1999). *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) is her best-known novel, it has received several prizes (the national book award and the national book critics circle award and has been turned into a movie). Tan's work has been translated into more than thirty languages, including Chinese (Tan, 1989).

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* is a semi-autobiography (Adams, 31). Semi- autobiographies were very popular among ethnic authors in the US from the 1960s to the 1980s². In the novel, Chinese myths and fables that Tan learned from her mother (Snodgrass,157) are combined with stories based on Tan's own life. For example, Tan's mother escaped from her first Chinese husband, left behind her Chinese daughters, immigrated to the USA and remarried. Also some of the feelings presented in the mother-daughter relationships and the cross-cultural conflicts are very similar to what Amy Tan herself went through in her childhood (Adams, 29).

The Joy Luck Club has been written as a collection of interlinked short stories and mainly expresses mother-daughter relationships and explores the protagonists' cross-cultural identities. The novel is structured in a very balanced way: four mothers and four daughters; four parts which all contain four stories. The four Chinese mothers' stories mainly express their high expectations for their Amerasian daughters as well as some stories of hardship they went through in their own childhood in China. The daughters, while highly admiring their mothers' courageousness and earlier childhood hardships, are exasperated by their mothers' demands and resentful of their intrusions on their lives (Snodgrass, 157).

Asian American literature field is very versatile, rapidly growing field of ethnic American literature which is not very 'fixed' or ethnically bound category. It is a term used to refer to texts written by North American writers of Asian descent, gathering together writers of diverse national origins: Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, South Asians, Filipinos and Pacific Islanders (Grice, 133-134). The growth of Asian American literature has been wide since the 1960s, greatly due to the massive

² Other ethnic autobiographies; Maxine Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Audrie Lorde's *Zami*

expansion of the Asian immigration to the US, which increased Asian American cultural and social awareness (Grice, 133). The era of the Vietnam war and the civil rights movement in the US was an era of racial consciousness; an opportunity to clarify and establish their own ethnic American identity and to challenge old myths and stereotypes (Kim, 173).

Since Asian women could immigrate to the United States, Asian American literature has become dominated by women writers. Asian American novels since 1950 have focused on depicting the social struggles of the immigrants (Kim, 199) and challenging old myths and stereotypes (279). Many Asian American female writers such as Kingston and Tan address themselves directly to affirming both racial and gender identities (for example Kingston's *China Men*, 1977), which is not always the case with male writers who tend to concentrate in presenting themselves as more masculine, fighting against the common stereotypes. (Kim 252, Ching-Sledge 4). Male authors have not, according to Kim, shared sympathy and understanding towards female writers. They have concentrated in offering an improved image of Chinese men and tend to write about Chinese women only in stereotypical way: as women mentally suffocating their sons, women without understanding their husbands (Kim, 197-98, 252). Li calls this 'an ethnic gender war' (188).

A notable feature of contemporary Chinese American women's writing is the emphasis upon mother/daughter relationships or the tension between the Chinese expectations of filial respect and the American inability to meet the expectations: for example Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961)(Lowe, 78) . In comparison, this topic, the conflict between first- and second-generation Asian Americans was protected by strict family etiquette and a taboo subject still in the 1950s (Ching-Sledge, 2). The tone of Asian American writing has often been negative towards American culture (2) and also awareness of racism towards Asians has been a topic in Asian American fiction (Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 1945) (Grice, 137-138).

Li (185-186) divides contemporary Asian American literary criticism into three rough phases: “the ethnic nationalist phase” of the 1960s (coexisting with the civil right movements), the new immigration (mainly dominated by female authors and feminist literary criticism in the 1970s and 1980s) and the “heteroglossia” phase of today which is influenced by market multiculturalism and the professionalization of Asian American critics.

1.2 American short- story cycle and oral narratives

Amy Tan’s novel *The Joy Luck Club* represents the American short-story cycle, a literary genre which has rapidly become a popular form in American fiction over the past twenty years (Nagel, 493). The origins of the short-story cycle in America are very multi-cultural, as this genre has been very popular amongst the ethnic minority writers such as Maxine Kingston, Amy Tan, Jamaica Kincaid and Gloria Naylor. As the books of the short-story cycle are written from different ethnic perspectives, they often depict topics such as immigration, acculturation, language acquisition, identity formation, and integration of old world values with the new one. Very often the tone towards American values and individualism is critical, if not outright negative (Ching-Sledge, 2).

The emergence of ethnic writers, especially women, was very broad especially from the 1960s to 1980s. The group contained women of Asian, African and native American origins. The characteristics of these writers was the use of short story format, that is, their works often contain a collection of interlinked short stories, which makes them quite difficult to classify either as novels or story collections.

The use of the short story structure derives from ancient oral traditions, present in basically every society. The short story cycle has been a good way for these writers to connect their cultural traditions and values to the dominant culture. The short story cycle is often a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each story. The

stories can be read individually, but there is a tight interdependence between the stories as well.

Commonly the stories concentrate on a specific idea or theme. (Davis, 1)

Maxine Hong Kingston's (born in 1940) first book *The Woman Warrior* (1975) is undoubtedly the best known novel of the American short story cycle. It is also the first major Chinese American novel published in the United States. The novel depicts the experience of the contemporary American-born daughter of immigrant parents. The novel's protagonist goes through a struggle of self-definition, when she is in the process of finding out which part in her is Chinese and which American. Maxine Kingston's approach is very personal and the novel can also be considered as a semi-autobiography. Kingston uses oral narrative format and old Chinese heroic epics and includes real stories from her family history; by using old family stories Kingston took a deliberate risk in telling out loud stories that were considered taboos in her family and in Chinese traditions.

Both Tan and Kingston have received both positive and negative critiques. According to Snodgrass (17), the great female readership appreciates novels which depict mother-daughter relationships. On the other hand, both novels are accused of expressing stereotypes and luring Caucasian reading. According to Frank Chin, both novels falsify Chinese culture, history and folk stories and give a wrong image of Chinese masculinity (Snodgrass, 17; Adams, 31). Some critics, especially male, describe *the Joy Luck Club* as "fake, shallow, untruthful, describing "chineseness" with sceneries, costumes, mannerisms, verbalisms, acts of violence that have little to do with real China"(Adams, 152-153). Kingston's *Woman Warrior* has also been accused of being sexist and reinforcing negative stereotypes (Cheung, 238-239, Lowe 76).

Oral narratives, such as family anecdotes, testimonies, morality tales and fables, were a means of passing old narratives, advice, to others and very often from parents to children. The mission of the storyteller was to tell children what their elders knew, to make the children gain right ideas; they were thus used as a pedagogical tool, a fatherly/motherly lesson (Minh-Ha 124, Snodgrass 164). Storytelling is often referred to the term "talk-story" (Snodgrass, 164). As seen above, for the story-

cycle writers, the talk-story culture is used as a way to reclaim women's history in their countries of origine and in the US. The texts honour the story keepers who preserve past concealements, silencing of women, discounting their lives, sexuality and aspirations (Snodgrass, 164). Talk-story enables women (especially immigrant women), accustomed to silence by their society, to retell experiences in the form of a folk tale, functioning as a survival skill. This enables women to express themselves with a comfortable distance between the teller and the audience: they manage to maintain silence and speak up without exposing themselves to shame (Yi-Lin, 181-182).

2. Cultural and Historical Background

2.1 Chinese immigration politics in the US

Asians began to emigrate to the United States in larger numbers in 1849 when Chinese men, in order to escape the intense conflicts of British opium war in China, began to arrive in the US, mainly to California (Grice, 134). Due to the Chinese Exclusion Acts (in force between 1882-1943), especially the entry of Chinese women was banned from the US. Asian immigration, notably during the period from 1850 to the World War II, was heavily marked not only by exclusions but also by political disenfranchisement and labour exploitation (Lowe, 9). The Chinese and other Asian immigrants had no right to purchase land or property (Alien Land Laws of 1913, 1920 and 1923) or could not gain citizenship (13): the laws were to protect the USA from foreign racial “corruption” (12). The history of Asian immigration in relationship to US citizenship is different from the histories of other immigration groups (35). The persistence of racial inequality that still exists in the US derives from the continuation of a system that deeply profits from racialization (24).

In the 19th century, Chinese male immigrants mainly worked in gold mines, but after the gold mines dried, the immigrants earned their living from railroad construction: no immigration was permitted unless the immigrants agreed to work on railroads and plantations (Kim, 23). The cheap immigration labour was crucial to the United States’s developing capitalist economy (Lowe, 12). In the 20th century, once the railroads were completed, Chinese men mostly had to do low-paid service sector work in cities: laundry, manufacturing, agriculture. Most early immigrants were poorly educated peasants whose illiteracy rate was high; due to poor writing skills the Chinese American literary production was low during that period. (Grice, 134-135)

Chinese immigrant men formed communities known as Chinatowns. Before 1949, Chinatowns were bachelor societies as a result of the absence of women and children. Workdays were excessively long and the low-wages were sent home to China; some men hardly ever had the chance to meet their wives or children (Kim, 96-101). Immigration laws not only prevented Chinese

women from immigrating to the country, but they also prevented the formation of families and generations among Chinese immigrants in the US as they were not allowed to marry any female US citizens either: the women would have lost their citizenship as a result (Lowe, 11). The immigration period during the Chinese Exclusion Acts, and the male immigrants in ‘feminine’ jobs (laundry, restaurants, other service-sector jobs) resulted in feminised position of Chinese American men in relation to white male citizens (Lowe, 12-13). Elaine Kim calls it “the castration of Asian American males” (180). This has resulted in stereotypes of Chinese men as “pigtailed heathens in silk gowns and slippers, whispering Confucian aphorisms about filial piety” (Kim, 177). Chinese men were also considered to lack originality, aggressiveness and vitality. Immigration exclusion acts with the negative reputation towards Asians due to the Vietnam war, has resulted in discrimination towards Asian immigrants.

Important changes in immigration were made possible after the repeal acts of 1943-1952. This permitted Chinese women to immigrate into the United States turning the bachelor societies into normal family based societies (Lowe, 78). Only then could Asian American communities develop as there was more labour to establish their own businesses, and stability and better well-being reigned in the communities (Kim, 249). More low-paid labour was needed as The US was ever more important as the leader of global economic growth and colonialism (270). Chinese immigrant women mostly worked in garment industries and other low-paid jobs which consisted of exhausting long days and repetitive manual work (Lowe, 155). Asian American women were located at the cultural, racial and political boundaries of the nation (162). As Ling (1990, 15) points out, the Chinese American women are still vulnerable in three ways: they are Chinese in a European American dominated world, they are women in Chinese men’s world, and they are women in white men’s world. Old Chinese traditions reigned among the immigrants, often due to the feelings of alienation and homesickness.

Nowadays, Asian-Americans are considered a 'model' minority compared to other minority groups such as blacks and mexicans (Li, 10) as they are hard-working, honest and docile. They are responsible people who very seldom ask for social welfare or burden the society in any other way. Due to strong parental authority the rates of juvenile delinquency, for instance, are very low among the Asian immigrants (Gardner et al, 36). However , after the World War II and the cold war period, racial attitudes towards Asian immigrants persisted in a great extend (Lowe, 102).

2.2 From Confucianism to Chinese Communism

The traditional Chinese family model dominating China until Liberation of 1949 was the Confucian³ family model in which a contract between two families was made. The contract was about selling daughters as wives at a very early childhood (Kristeva 71, Huotari 105). Marriage was thus a matter of business to parents. The wife's position was low in both families: in her parents' eyes the girl was regarded as sold property until she left to join the future husband's family. For this same reason, educating daughters was regarded a useless waste of money as eventually they would belong to another family. An old Chinese proverb gives a good example: "It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters" (Ling, 1). In the husband's family her position was even lower: she was regarded as labour who worked under strick authority of the mother-in-law. The wife must not argue with her authorities, that is her husband and his family. Kristeva defines an ideal of a perfect Chinese woman as follows: "an average person who is not too intelligent, beautiful or talented, and is therefore easy to control" (Ling ,5). A Chinese woman lived as a stranger in her 'adopted' family until she gave birth to a son and the son reached maturity (Kristeva, 71). Divorce did not exist as an option.

In wealthy Confusian families, polygamy was common. The husband had one principal wife and the other wives lived as concubines; jealousy was not permitted. When one of the wives gave birth,

³ Confucius (551 BCE-479 BCE) Chinese philosopher who developed an ancient Chinese ethical and philosophical system which focuses on human morality and good deeds.

the only mother was the principal wife; the other wives were stripped of maternal power (Kristeva, 79).

All in all, Chinese women were submitted to authorities through her whole life: her own parents, her husband's parents, her husband and her son (Kristeva, 71). Absolute piety and obedience was demanded of Confucian women; they were in the same class as slaves. Women were destined only for housework and reproduction (75).

Women's position in China started to improve in the twentieth century with the rise of the Communist ideology. The dethroning of the last emperor in 1911 began the change and the battle against Confucian ideology. However, women did not reach their demands of equal rights, monogamy, free marriages until the time of Mao Tse-Tung. Mao was more open to feminist movements and feminist rights as he saw it as a means to transform society radically (Kristeva, 106-107). A vast majority of women were sensitive to the Communist Party's ideology as it ment more freedom as far as family demands were regarded. The marriage law of April 1934 made marriage choice free and both marriages and divorces were declared before the authorities (Kristeva, 122).

The war against Japan and the civil war scattered families and destroyed the Chinese economic base: this also played a major role in the dissolution of the old family customs and thus helped to pass through political propaganda (Kristeva, 124). Although the Confucian hierarchy was abolished at the Revolution, the old gender and age roles and customs remained especially in the countryside. Moreover, even though the new reforms and laws are in favour of women's equal rights there is still a gap between the law and its enforcement (Ling 1990, 8, Huotari, 161).

Women have the right to choose their spouse, but even so, marriage continues to be a family affair in China. It appears that parents still have a great influence on their children's choice of spouses. In western societies, the parental influence on the choice of a spouse would be regarded offensive and oppressive but for many Chinese children it is regarded as a natural part of life (Bond, 61-62).

2.3 Observations on Chinese culture, customs and communication

As seen above, Confucianism had a great impact in Chinese society and the formation of families. Confucian thought was the basis for major Chinese customs and communication practices as well. I will start by introducing some essential elements of Confucian way of life.

Confucian thought is based on honesty and different levels of relationships: individuals stand in different degrees of relationships with different people, for example a child in relation to his/her parents and elders. Filial duty means that a child is considered to owe strong duties to his parents. At the same time, parents have duties of education to their children. Filial piety can be extended on other relationships as well: sovereign to subject, husband to wife, elder to younger sibling and friend to friend. (Huotari, 236)

Politeness is also an important part of Confucianism and a very culture-specific phenomenon among the Chinese. Politeness is present in different communicative situations to express respect for others. Apologizing is an important form of politeness: it is used, for example, when expressing gratitude and modesty (Jia, 25-28). The term “Junzi” (a nobleman) is an essential part of Confucianism: a perfect man is one who combines the qualities of saint, scholar and gentleman. Gentlemen were to show behavioral guidelines to others: cultivate themselves morally, show filial piety and cultivate humanity. Chinese methods for negative approach include distancing oneself from others, attacking, fabricating rumours, blaming heaven and fate, self-tormenting, seeking opportunities and becoming self-toxicated (Jia, 28).

Silence has many meanings in Chinese behaviour. It can be used for expressing discontent (28) but is also valued as a sign of deep thinking, again a Confucian characteristics. Chinese culture values silence before the use of language. When educating children, many things are transmitted silently by observation and by imitation (Bond 11, Isotalus 110-111). Embarrassing or controversial situations are often ignored, no action is taken because taking action is a sign of getting it completed, for example parents do not resort to action every time their children behave

badly because they are convinced the child will ultimately behave properly, as expected (Bond, 11). Silence can also be considered as a powerful means of unsaying, especially when Asian American women writers are concerned; in other words, silence is not the opposite of speech (Duncan, 225).

Hierarchy and parental power play a major part in conflicts and disagreements. The basic rule is to honor the hierarchy first; the child's vision of truth comes second (Bond, 83): one should not fight the opinions of the elders. Internalised behavior is part of traditional Confucian ideology; one should always think before acting. The fear of losing one's face is great. Non-verbal communication, for example facial expressions, tones of voice, gestures and eye contact, plays a major part in Chinese communication. Even the non-verbal communication is reserved and less expressive than in Western societies (Zhiling and Guanhui). Partly due to the polite, respectful behaviour of the Chinese, the following qualifiers in characterizing stereotypes are current: submissive, obedient, silent, hardworking, family oriented, passive (Kibria, 160-162).

Appearance is important: subtle, neutral colors should be worn because it is a sign of respect for others. Certain rules of behavior are also essential; the Chinese do not speak with their hands nor point when speaking and all personal contact should be avoided. Meals are an important part of Chinese life, thus meal etiquette is essential: business talks are to be avoided while eating, one should always taste all the dishes served (Williams). In communication, the Chinese value rank and titles: elders/ more highly ranked persons speak first. The Chinese are often superstitious and therefore important decisions will not be made before consulting the stars or a lucky day (Williams).

Feng shui⁴ is part of Chinese thought: harmony in life is valued. Feng shui is based on the binary opposition of Yin and Yang and on the five key elements of wood, fire, earth, metal and water (Blasingame and Goodson). Amy Tan makes reference to feng shui and the harmony of elements in many occasions. First of all, *The Joy Luck Club* is structured in a balanced way and the novel

⁴ feng shui= Chinese architectural, interior design ideology

contains several connotations to balance and imbalance. More examples will be given in the section five.

In order to understand better the differences between first generation Chinese mothers and the second generation Chinese-American daughters, a short presentation of the common differences in Asian and Western societies is needed.

Chinese society is strongly based on strict hierarchy, greatly due to the traditional Confucian family system (see above). The elders are highly respected by the younger generations, men are more important than women. Usually the father was the head of the family: he was the supporter and the pride of the family, therefore several things were expected of him: cultural preservation, maintenance of the family name, good manners and work ethics, and guardianship of younger family members (Huotari and Seppälä 1993, 105). Furthermore, the Communist China has often been characterised as a monolith, a country in which the government had a decisive role in the citizens' lives; it could decide where people lived or worked, who they married or where they bought their homes (Denliger). In comparison, modern Western societies are in theory if not in practice based on equality; every person is equal, regardless of his/her age, background or sex (Jia, 31).

Due to the importance of social hierarchy, blood relationships and mutual dependence are important in Chinese culture. Submission to the elders/parents/husbands is more relevant to the younger generation/women/daughters/wives than the search of own success or well-being. Chinese culture is based on collectivism; common interest comes before individual needs. The Chinese are known for their modesty, there is a tendency to play down one's own skills and to flatter others. Group accomplishments are more important than individual contributions (Bond, 53). In western societies, the weight is put on independence of human beings; everyone has rights and responsibilities. Instead of doing for others, the society is very self-oriented and the search of

personal progress and the pursuit of success in life are highly regarded. Western societies are based on individualism. (Jia, 27-31)

There are differences in basic core values of the Chinese and the Americans. According to Kibria, one major contrast is that the modern Americans lack core values and the society is undergoing moral decay and decline. Since the industrialization and urbanization of the 20th century, American families have become more work-oriented and less family-oriented (Harris, 52-53), which has resulted in the decline of family values. At the same time, Chinese society still greatly supports basic core values such as family, loyalty, honesty, discipline, hard work and education. (Jia, 165)

Culture is the way of living, concepts, skills, institutions, arts, and the way of thinking and acting, which a group of people has developed and transmits from one generation to another. When comparing American and Chinese cultures, one major difference is the way things are perceived and expressed. The terms “high-context” and “low-context” were popularised by Edward T. Hall⁵ (Beer). Chinese culture can be referred to as a high-context culture: it is culture in which individuals internalize meanings and information and less spoken language is needed. Things are known at a covert and unexpressed level. High-context cultures are very stable and changes appear slowly, bonds between people are strong and people in authority (family, state, business) are responsible for the actions of their subordinates (Bond, 49). According to some studies on infants, even the Chinese infants are clearly less vocal, less active and they stay closer to their mothers than the Western children (Bond, 11).

American culture is a low-context culture in which information is clearly stated in the message or communication; explanations are expected when situations or statements are unclear. Information is not internalised but rather context-bound. In low-context cultures change is easy and quick and inter-personal bonds are looser; actions can be started easily and interrupted. (Beer, Bond 51)

⁵ An American anthropologist (born in 1914), who is known, among other things, for his cultural studies and his book *Beyond Culture* (1976).

Chinese American immigrants value highly the unity of a family. Chinese immigrant couples do not divorce easily and it is common that Chinese immigrant families concentrate their money and energy on educating children (Gardner et al., 21). In return, children are expected to do well at school, and often children are under great parental pressure and support for success (Gardner et al. 26, Bond 13). Chinese immigrant families are often based on tight traditional hierarchical structure of obligations and responsibilities; children are to obey and respect their elders.

In Chinese American families parents often make sacrifices to help their children; for example they work hard in low-paid job, but in return, the offsprings are expected self-sacrifice in return (Wong 32, Bond 61). School is often the first place where Chinese American children become influenced by American culture, and may become less Chinese and more American. Very often, the dominant culture is seen more fashionable, which can result in cross-cultural conflicts at home and in more negative reactions towards the Chinese culture (Gardner et al, 38).

3. The Joy Luck Club: mothers' past and present; inner development

The Joy Luck Club is a club founded by Suyuan Woo, one of the immigrant mothers. The idea of the club is to organise a weekly meeting of four immigrant families in which the mothers play mah jong⁶, eat well and exchange ideas. It is a friendly reunion of people of similar background. Suyuan Woo "imported" the idea from China where she already had had a similar club during the war (in the 1930s and 1940s). Once immigrated to the USA, after the death of her first husband, she felt the need for a similar club in which she and her peers could share experiences. Originally the families had met at the bible study class and at work. The atmosphere in the weekly meetings was always joyful: it was a meeting point where each woman could proudly tell about their daughters' achievements or about their past experiences.

The novel presents four immigrant mothers, Suyuan Woo, An-Mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, Ying-Ying St. Clair and four American born daughters, Jing-Mei "June" Woo, Rose Hsu Jordan, Waverly Jong, Lena St. Clair in four separate sections. Each section starts with a Chinese fable which presents the theme of the section. The stories are told by the protagonists and they are very different in tone, from magical to very dark and horrifying. Suyuan Woo's stories are told by her daughter June as Suyuan Woo has recently passed away. The stories contain both talk-stories, tales from the mothers' past, as well as stories concentrating on mother-daughter relationships. Each story can be read separately as a short-story, but at the same time, the novel constructs a balanced, compound unity.

3.1 Suyuan Woo

Suyuan Woo is a strong, secretive woman who does everything for the success of her daughter June. As mentioned by Gardner (et al), she fits well the model of a typical Chinese American mother who sacrifices her life for the well-being of her offspring. The stories of Suyuan Woo are told by June

⁶ Mah jong is a traditional game with 136 different pieces. It is played by four players; very popular among Chinese women (Huotari, 441).

(Jing-Mei) Woo, the daughter, as Suyuan has just passed away. The novel's first story concentrates in telling how June Woo is invited to replace her late mother in the Mah Jong table. Suyuan thus passes on the matrilinear obligations to her daughter who will complete the mother's aspirations and fulfill her hidden hopes (Snodgrass, 181). During that evening, June learns some hidden truths of her mother's past: she learns that her mother's lost Chinese twin daughters are found. When escaping from the war-torn hometown Kweilin, Suyuan had to leave behind her twin daughters in order to save herself. She not only lost her daughter, she also lost her husband, a soldier killed in war. During her immigration life in the USA and her second marriage she had continued to look for the girls who are finally found when she dies. June is then responsible for travelling to China to meet the girls, to tell them about her late mother. When she is afraid of being unable to tell about her mother, the other women of the mah jong circle are shocked: "Not know your own mother? How can you say? Your mother is in your bones" (40).

Suyuan Woo never forgave herself for abandoning her twindaughters in China but with her positive attitude she managed to move on and never lost hope. She had high expectations for her "American" daughter June as traditionally Chinese parents did. She did everything for her daughter's success and expected hard work for it in return. She thought that June did not try hard enough. In a way, it was the "Americanised" daughter's way of choosing her own way. (Snodgrass, 142) As for Suyuan, she most likely was even more demanding and hopeful on June than Chinese parents traditionally were: she put all her efforts and hope on June in compensation of losing her two Chinese daughters.

America was 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. But she never looked back with regret. There were so many ways for things to get better. (132)

Regardless of Suyuan's hardships, she managed to keep up positive attitude throughout her life. For example, she found joy in the deepest misery by creating the Joy Luck Club in the war-torn Kweilin to forget the hardships. "We were the lucky ones. After sixteen rounds [of mah jong], we

would again feast, to celebrate our good fortune. It is not that we had no heart or eyes for pain. We were all afraid. But to despair was to wish back for something already lost” (24). Even though she mainly worked as a cleaning lady in private homes and constantly searched for her abandoned twin daughters in China, she seemed to be pleased with her life.

3.2 An-Mei Hsu

As was very common in Confucian society (Kristeva, 74), An-Mei Hsu was raised by her uncle’s family as she belonged to her father’s family after her mother became a widower. Her mother did not exist to the family, she was referred to as a ghost, a forbidden topic, as she had dishonored the family by becoming a concubine, the fourth wife of a rich man (compare Kristeva’s ideas on polygamous relationships). At her uncle’s house, An-mei was accustomed to hearing talk-stories she did not understand: they were mainly stories of warning which told what happened to children who disobeyed their elders. “When you lose your face, it is like dropping your necklace down a well. The only way you can get it back is to fall in after it” (44); the story referred to her own mother. Whenever An-Mei wanted to know about her mother, her grandmother, Popo, said: “Never say her name. To say her name is to spit on your father’s grave” (43). An-Mei loved her mother even though she did not know her personally, only some stories of her disgraceful past. “This is how a daughter honors her mother- It is in your bones “(48).

As earlier showed by Isotaulus and Bond, An-mei was clearly brought up in a traditional way, through silent obedience. “I was a child. I could only watch and listen. I could not cry if I was disappointed. I had to be silent and listen to my elders” (216-217). Later in her childhood, when her ‘ghost’ mother arrived at the uncle’s house, An-Mei immediately recognised her: “I knew she was my mother, because I could feel her pain” (216). An-Mei disobeyed her uncle’s family and left with her real mother. That is when she learned her mother had the worst position in life: she had to live

in a polygamous relationship. In the story *Magpies*⁷ An-Mei saw how much her mother hated her life. In order to keep her face, she had been forced to become the fourth wife of a rich man after he had raped her. As a result, she had to obey the other wives and give up her son to be raised by the first wife (see Kristeva). In the end she had committed suicide.

My mother, she suffered. She lost her face and tried to hide it. She found only greater misery and finally could not hide that. There is nothing more to understand. That was China. That was what people did back then. They had no choice. They could not speak up. They could not run away. That was their fate (241).

That is the point where An-Mei learned to shout and fight her way in the family: "On that day, I showed Second Wife the fake pearl necklace she had given me and crushed it under my foot. On that day, Second wife's hair began to turn white. On that day, I learned to shout" (240). She learned to disrespect traditional obedience rules of Confucian society (compare Huotari and Kristeva)

Later on An-mei immigrated to the USA with her husband George, had four sons (Matthew, Mark, Luke and Bing) and three daughters (Rose, Ruth and Janice). An-Mei was a typical immigrant woman who worked in a fortune cookie factory, a poorly paid job with long working hours (see Lowe). The family lead a very common American life attending the Chinese baptist church every Sunday. Misfortune stroke them as one of the sons was drowned one day the family was having a picnic on the beach. After that An-Mei lost her faith in God. She stopped attending the church and she placed the bible underneath one of the legs of an uneven table. Rose, who was responsible for looking after her little brother on the beach, never forgave herself for his death. She became a very undetermined teenager and adult, unable to make decisions.

3.3 Lindo Jong

Lindo Jong is the most manipulative and powerful woman of the four mothers. In the story *The Red Candle*, we learn that Lindo Yong was doomed to marriage at the age of two to Tyan-yu Taitai, as this Confucian tradition of arranged marriages still existed in the countyside (compare Kristeva).

⁷ Magpie= a bird of joy

Since then her own family started to treat her as belonging to somebody else. Her childhood was spent to raise her into an obedient, model wife. And she was an obedient child, but sometimes she showed a sour look on her face to which her mother would say:” Such an ugly face. The Huangs won’t want you and our whole family will be disgraced. We have made a contract. It cannot be broken” (52).

At the age of twelve her life finally changed as she had to move in with her future husband’s family. ”I once sacrificed my life to keep my parents’ promise” (49). Once she arrived to the Huang Taitai’s household, she immediately learned her place: not with the other children, but in the kitchen with the cooks and servants. “So I knew my standing” (55). She became a slave. As a brave girl she was determined to honour her parents’ wishes, she never disobeyed her mother-in-law nor her future husband even though they both were evil and complained about everything she did. As pointed out by both Huotari and Bond, family hierarchy and filial piety were predominant in Chinese culture. Thus, Lindo managed to respect her place in the family hierarchy. After a while, she hurt inside so much she did not feel any difference. She followed orders without question.

That is how I learned to be an obedient wife. I learned to cook so well that I could smell if the meat stuffing was too salty before I even tasted it. I could sew such small stitches it looked as if the embroidery had been painted on. What was happier than seeing everybody gobble down the shiny mushrooms and bambooshoots I had helped to prepare? What was more satisfying than having Huang Taitai nod and pat my head when I had finished combing her hair one hundred strokes? Can you see how the Huangs almost washed their thinking into my skin? I came to think of Tyan-yo as a god (56)

Once she turned sixteen on a lunar new year, the marriage date was set. She was horrified but knew she had no choice. In her wedding dress she made a promise to herself: she would always remember her parents’ wishes but she would never forget herself. She was strong and pure (58). The red wedding candle, with two ends for lighting, one for the bride the other for the groom, was a marriage bond which meant that the couple could not divorce nor remarry. As she accidentally made the husband’s end of the candle go out during the wedding night, she knew she was strong and powerful - like the wind (58). That was the turning point of her life. In her wedding bed she learned

that her husband was just as scared as she was: he refused to touch her, for her contentment. She soon learned not to be afraid. In her wisdom she managed to fake a prophetic nightmare on a propitious day on the Chinese calendar (compare Williams: Chinese superstitions). This made her family-in-law to believe the marriage was doomed. She managed to speak her way out of the marriage without dishonouring her parents and her family.

After she walked out of the marriage, she used the money given by her mother-in-law to travel to the US. She learned from an American raised Chinese girl how to lose Chinese face, how to think like an American. In her immigration papers, she thus invented a new identity and found the worst possible job in a fortune cookie factory (compare Lowe and immigrant work in the US). There she met An-Mei Hsu who introduced her to Tin Jong, with whom she got married. To Lindo, it was not the best option possible, but at least she had the choice. He was Cantonese, in China she never could have married a Cantonese⁸. And it was important for her to get married soon in order to stay in the country. Eventually they got married and had two sons, Winston and Vincent, and a daughter, Waverly. When naming her children, she believed in the power of names: She named her first son Winston as it sounded like “wins ton” and her second son as Vincent because it sounded like “win cent”. For her daughter she chose Waverly, the street name of their home, because she wanted her to get the best circumstances possible. She wanted Waverly to grow up with the feeling of belonging. (265)

All her life she continued to be ‘sneaky’, always prying on her daughter’s success. She was very demanding and controlling as a mother and continued to use her powers to her children even when they were adults. So an obedient, silenced Chinese girl developed into a manipulative, powerful woman. This had an influence on her daughter’s personality and their mother-daughter relationship.

⁸ Cantonese; people originating from present-day Guangdong province in southern China. Cantonese is also a major division of spoken Chinese. There are several ethnic groups and multiple dialects of Chinese. Different ethnic groups rarely socialised with one another. (See also above Denlinger).

3.4 Ying-Ying St.Clair

Ying-Ying St.Clair came from a wealthy family and used to be a wild and stubborn girl: “I wore a smirk on my face. Too good to listen. I was small and pretty. I had tiny feet which made me very vain. If a pair of silk slippers became dusty, I threw them away” (243). Even though Ying-ying was a rather disobedient child, she was raised in a traditional way that girls should follow orders quietly (compare Bond): “A boy can run. A girl should stand still” (72). “Haven’t I thought you- that it is wrong to think of your own needs? A girl can never ask, only listen” (70). As a result of her wild, disobedient manners, she put herself in a very scary situation, which changed her life. In a Moon festival⁹ at the age of four, she run off from her parents, fell in the water getting her white fancy clothes dirty. She was found by fishermen who considered her as a poor child. As a result of being afraid of not finding her family again, she started to foretell things. Ever since she could see things, for instance she could predict her own marriage to a man she disliked. She also predicted the death of her second child and problems in her daughter’s marriage (more in chapter 4.1).

Her first husband, Lin Xiao, was a vulgar man who left her and lived with other women. “I became stranger to myself. I did everything to please him. I was pretty for him. It is because I had so much joy then that I came to have so much hate” (247). Being dumped by her husband made her stronger, ‘a Tiger’¹⁰. She managed to keep her face and felt proud by aborting their son as a sign of disobedience to her husband. Compared to traditional, obedient Chinese women/wives (compare Kristeva and Bond), Ying-Ying became a more strong-willed, rebellious woman.

I became abandoned goods. At eighteen the prettiness drained from my cheeks. I thought of throwing myself in the lake like the other ladies of shame. I took the baby from my woom before it could be born. When the nurses asked what they should do with the lifeless baby, I hurled a newspaper at them and said to wrap it like a fish and throw it in the lake (248).

⁹ A Moon festival was held in the autumn, the fifteenth day of the eight moon. People celebrated and ate well. (Tan, 68-70)

¹⁰ A tiger is a Chinese astrological sign. A person born on the year of a tiger is honest and prone to deep thinking. They are compassionate, suspicious and powerful (Huotari, 429).

After ten years spent at a cousin's house recovering from the shock Ying-ying moved to a city to work as a shopgirl. She was good because she knew what the clients wanted to hear. She knew how to flatter: "A tiger can make a soft prrrn-prrn noise deep within its chest and make even rabbits feel safe and content" (249). With time she managed to overcome her grief. Once Lin Xiao was dead (as noted earlier by Kristeva, divorce did not exist), she was free to immigrate to the USA, where she accepted a marriage proposal of an American Clifford St-Clair, with English-Irish origins.

So I decided to let Saint marry me. So easy for me. I was the daughter of my father's wife. I spoke in a trembly voice. I became pale, ill, more thin. I let myself to become a wounded animal. I let the hunter come to me and turn me into a tiger ghost. I willingly gave up my *chi*, the spirit that caused me so much pain. I became an unseen spirit (251).

But she was no longer able to feel passion nor joy in life: she had lost herself (83). The only feelings she felt were the feelings of a ghost. In the immigration papers, she had a changed identity; her name was no longer Gu Ying-Ying but Betty St. Clair, also the birth year was wrong, 1916 instead of 1914 thus making her a Dragon¹¹ instead of a Tiger.

I learned the Western ways. I wore large American clothes. I did servant's tasks. I tried to speak with a thick tongue. I raised a daughter, watching from another shore. I accepted her American ways. With all these things, I did not care. I had no spirit (251).

Especially when Ying-Ying's second child died at birth, she was devastated and broke down. She felt guilty of causing the child's death and became a living ghost. Ying-Ying felt there was something wrong with the baby as she saw imbalance in everything; the furniture in their apartment, cans in cupboards. She kept on bumping into things in the apartment. This had an influence on her daughter Lena St.Clair who felt her mother's instability and grew up as a very undetermined, anxious woman. She became afraid for herself and for her mother. Lena did not know about her mother's first husband nor about her wealthy childhood. "When my daughter looks at me, she sees a small old lady. That is because she sees only with her outside eyes. She has no *chuming*, no inside knowing of things" (p.248). Ying-Ying felt she was a tiger - a survivor.

¹¹ Chinese astrological sign: a dragon person is energetic and stubborn, honest and sensitive. They are considered selfish (Huotari, 430).

Based on what was told about the mothers, we could see that each mother went through a different path in their childhood. What was common to them was that their past experiences left a permanent mark on their personality. Suyuan Woo remained the most positive one of all, regardless of the fact she lost her first husband and daughters at war. She was also the most typical Chinese mother, sacrificing herself for the well-being of her daughter June. Lindo Jong was the most powerful of the mothers: she had discovered her manipulative powers during her first arranged marriage: she managed to escape the marriage and continued to use her strong powers on her children through out her life. An-Mei Hsu witnessed her mother's submissive and unhappy marriage, which made her a fighter herself: she refused to obey her elders and the hierarchical obligations. Later she was devastated by her son's death and lost some of her faith in God and in good fortune. Ying-Ying St.Clair, a stubborn child, became the weakest of the mothers through her failed first marriage. Her husband left her and humiliated her: she had an abortion as a rebellious gesture. She was hurt deep inside and could never fully recover; she became a ghost, regardless of her second marriage and her daughter Lena. All the mothers had relatively similar lives in the US; they were very typical immigrant women working in low-paid jobs, living in Chinatown with their Chinese immigrant husbands. Only Ying-Ying was married to a Caucasian immigrant man and ended up living outside Chinatown.

4. Mother-Daughter relationship

4.1 Ying-Ying and Lena St. Clair

“I raised a daughter, watching her from a different shore. I accepted her American ways. I did not care. I had no spirit” (251). She loved her husband and daughter, but it was the love of a ghost.

“When she [Lena] was born, she sprang from me like a slippery fish, and has been swimming away ever since” (242).

Ying-Ying never talked about her life in China to Lena. She thought that her father had saved Ying-Ying from a terrible life even though the truth was quite the contrary; Ying-Ying was a daughter of a very wealthy family and used to live in a big house. Ying-Ying told June untrue stories to warn her, to make her “avoid unknown danger” (105). Ying-Ying saw danger in everything, even in Chinese people. When together, Ying-Ying often spoke to Lena in Chinese, telling her frightening things. Lena could understand the words but not the meanings. The following is a good example of Minh-Ha and Snodgrass’s comments on how Chinese children should not question their parents’ decisions or the silently transmitted information:

You must not walk in any direction but to school and back home.

Why?

You can’t understand these things.

Why not?

Because I haven’t put it in your mind yet.

Why not?

Aii-ya! Such questions! Because it is too terrible to consider.

I knew this was not a true answer. But I also made up lies to prevent bad things from happening in the future. I often lied when I had to translate for her. (106)

When The St. Clair family moved to another neighbourhood and the family was expecting another baby, Ying-Ying became more troubled and protective of Lena. “While riding on the bus, my mother trembled. She clutched my hand so tightly it hurt” (108). Lena also experienced her mother’s risky behaviour while being pregnant: “My mother began to bump into things, into table edges as if she forgot her stomach contained a baby. She talked about the heaviness around her. She did not speak of the joys of having a new baby. So I worried about that baby” (109). Lena started

seeing nightmares. The baby died soon after birth and Ying-Ying fell apart. Ying-Ying became numb, her eyes expressed empty looks. “My mother had become a living ghost” (113). Partly because of that, Lena felt uncertain of herself and of her own thoughts. At certain point her mother stopped taking care of her, becoming the nurtured herself. “She sees only bad things that affect our family. And she knows what causes them. But now she laments that she never did anything to stop them” (149). When Lena decided to marry Harold, Ying-Ying looked in Lena’s rice bowl and told her that she was going to marry a bad man. Lena was annoyed that her mother perceived the future only in a negative light (151).

Lena did not see her own value, she let her husband shine at work, using Lena’s ideas. She silently accepted her role in the shadow. Lena and Harold worked in their own architectural firm, Harold being a partner and Lena the associate. Lena had the great ideas, but Harold took the merits. If Ying-Ying and Lena had communication problems before, it was Lena’s marital problems that brought them closer. Ying-Ying said: “I will use my sharp pain to penetrate my daughter’s tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose. I will win and give her my spirit, because this is the way a mother loves her daughter” (252). And Lena becomes a more strong-willed person, she begins to fight for her rights. Before Lena was a very obedient wife who let her husband Harold decide everything (compare Kristeva and Ling: Chinese women’s position). He is the boss at work and treats every one else equally except his wife. He decides how the house looks like. Still all the costs are divided on a balance sheet even though Ted earns seven times more and consumes more. Lena fails to speak up and tell about her dissatisfaction, developing an eating disorder instead. During her visit to Lena’s house, Ying-Ying instantly notices Lena’s eating disorder and problems in the marriage. She feels the need to help.

This is my greatest shame. She [Lena] has no *chi*. She is the daughter of a ghost. How can I leave this world without leaving her my spirit. This is what I will do. I will gather together my past and look. I will see a thing that has already happened. The pain that cut my spirit loose. I will hold that pain in my hand until it becomes hard and shiny, more clear. And then my fierceness can come back, my golden side, my black

side. I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter's tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose (252).

As a mother she takes the responsibility and talks on the behalf of Lena to her husband. "She like a ghost, disappear" (163). She makes Lena realise how ridiculous it is for a couple to share all costs on a balance sheet. " 'Why you do this?' My mother has a wounded sound in her voice, as if I had put the list up to hurt her" (162). But the mother's encouragement helps Lena to confront Harold: "I am so tired of adding things up, subtracting, making it come out even. I'm sick of it. I just think we have to change things" (164). In a crisis situation, mother manages to help her daughter to see the problems in her marriage and confront them; at the same, she helps herself to confront her own painful past. In a way, Lena becomes more American in her manners; she speaks up for herself. Earlier, she behaved more like a traditional Chinese wife who did not question her husband's decisions (compare Bond).

During her visit to Lena's house, Ying-Ying can predict problems in the marriage. She is put in a small guest room, which in Chinese ways of thinking should have been the best room of the house. Ying-Ying sees signs all over the house; things are unstable – the marriage is unstable.

Her wisdom is like a bottomless pond. You throw stones in and they sink into the darkness and dissolve. Her eyes looking back do not reflect anything. I think this to myself even though I love my daughter. She and I shared the same body. My daughter looks but does not see. (242)

4.2 Suyuan and June Woo

Suyuan Woo had high expectations on June and was, as presented by Gardner (et al), a typical Chinese mother. June was filled with a sense that "she would soon become perfect" (133). She had to take part in different competitions for bright children, she was made to look and dance like Shirley Temple. And when she failed, Suyuan said "Not the best. Because you not trying" (136). When June protested "Why don't you like me the way I am? I'm not a genius!" the mother slapped her saying "Who asks you be genius? Only ask you be your best. For your sake. So ungrateful!" (136)

Once June started playing the piano, all the hopes were again put on her. She was given piano lessons but June was determined not to practice hard enough. She was freed from all household duties to be able to practice. When she finally played in a talent show, she failed. She could feel her parents' shame; her mother's expression was devastating: "a quiet, blank look that said she had lost everything" (140). Her parents did not accuse her or shout at her, but she never had to play again (compare Bond and Jia: silence as disapproval). June was ashamed of failing but still her strong will to disobey her mother's wishes continued.

And then I decided. I didn't have to do what my mother said anymore. I wasn't her slave. This wasn't China.

June: You want me to be someone that I'm not. I'll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be

Suyuan: Only two kinds of daughters. Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind. Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!

June: Then I wish I'd never been born. I wish I were dead. Like them. (142)

Again June managed to leave her mother stunned, wordless; making a comment on the lost twin daughters was the most cruel comment possible from a daughter to a mother.

June continued to fail her mother's expectations as if showing she had her own will: she did not get into the right college, she did not finish her studies. June did not believe in herself; she did not believe she could be anything she wanted to be. Even though the mother and the daughter constantly failed to understand each other, June felt they had "an unspoken understanding about things: that she didn't really mean I was a failure, and I really meant I would respect her opinions more. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more" (37). June frequently felt she and her mother spoke different languages as the mother expected her to understand things with little explanations: "These kind of explanations made me feel my mother and I spoke two different languages, which we did. I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese" (33-34). That was a good example of an American daughter, used to low-context cultural environment, who was unable to interpret her mother's high-context, unspoken communication (see Beer).

After Suyuan's death, June felt lost and suffered from deep grief. While thinking about her life's importance, she started wearing a jade pendant her mother had given her a few months before her death. She did not like the pendant as it was not her style but it felt important, as if her mother wanted it to help with the grief. Since Suyuan's death June not only replaced her in the mah jong table, she was also responsible for flying to China to meet her sisters and tell them about their mother's death. Meeting her Chinese sisters was the moment when June learns her true self; through her twin sisters, she feels the presence of her mother – the closest she has ever been to her. "Although we don't speak, I know we all see it: Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish" (288). At last June was able to complete her mother's expectations by reuniting the family.

4.3 Lindo and Waverly Jong

Lindo Jong is also a very typical, proud mother who wants to show off her daughter, whether it is for her talent in playing chess in her childhood or her successful career as a law-attorney. Waverly becomes a strong-willed American woman and a single parent to Shoshana but when she is with her mother, she feels she fails her.

You don't know my mother, she never thinks anybody is good enough for anything. She is a Horse, born in 1918, destined to be obstinate and frank to the point of tactlessness. She and I make a bad combination, because I'm a Rabbit, born in 1951, supposedly sensitive, with tendencies toward being thin-skinned and skittery at the first sign of criticism. (167)

Mother did not accept her divorce from her first husband. Mother does not accept her new fiancé: whenever Waverly tries to talk about Rich, Lindo changes the subject. She does not want to notice they were living together: "How could my mother not notice that we are living together, that this was serious and would not go away even if she didn't talk about it?" (169). Lindo considered his gifts with amusement, thus hurting Waverly's feelings. "My mother knew how to hit the nerve. And the pain I feel is worse than any other kind of misery. Because what she does always comes as a

shock, like an electric jolt, that grounds itself permanently in my memory ” (170). Partly Lindo seems to practice the traditional Chinese custom, as presented earlier by Bond, which gives parents’ the rights to choose their children’s spouses.

Waverly was a good chess player in her childhood and Lindo was very proud of her. Waverly hated the way her mother tried to take all the credit of her daughter’s victories. Once Waverly did not want to please her mother and refused to participate in a tournament. The mother was offended and stopped encouraging the daughter’s chess playing, she said: “You think it is so easy. One day quit, next day play. Everything for you is this way. So smart, so easy, so fast” (171). Once Waverly wanted to play again, Lindo said “No. It is not so easy anymore” (172). And it was not: since then, Waverly stopped winning.

Waverly was afraid of confronting her mother even in her adult life. “You can’t ever tell a Chinese mother to shut up. You could be charged as an accessory to your own murder” (173). During her first marriage, Lindo used to drop by uninvited. When Waverly asked her to phone in advance, she was offended and never visited her again without official invitation.

Furthermore, Waverly was afraid for her fiancé Rich, because she knew her mother criticized him easily: he had freckles, he did not know how to behave in a Chinese dinner table (compare Williams), he did not know how to speak politely to Chinese elders: he called them by their first names. She knew that her mother’s criticism could easily influence her feelings towards him. Deep inside, whether she wanted or not, she still felt like an obedient girl wanting to respect her mother’s wishes. She felt her mother had poisoned her first marriage, she knew Lindo could do it again (174). Once Waverly and Rich were invited to have dinner, Lindo continuously made disparaging remarks about her own cooking, as is the Chinese custom (compare Bond: playing down one’s skills). That is a moment when everybody should praise the food but Rich made the mistake of commenting it negatively. He did not understand the Chinese custom of purposely speaking down on one’s skills (179). Waverly felt ashamed: “My mother was doing it again, making me see black

where I once saw white. In her hands, I always became the pawn. I could only run away.” When Waverly comments her mother’s behaviour towards Rich and her new happiness, she plays the role of an offended. Lindo does not approve of the fact that her daughter criticises her; as shown by Bond earlier, Chinese children should always respect their elders’ opinions:

Ai-ya, why do you think these bad things about me? So you think your mother is bad. You think I have a secker meaning. But it is you who has this meaning. Ai-ya! She thinks I am this bad! “

Her eyes were sparkling with angry tears. Oh, her strength! Her weakness!- both pulling me apart. My mind was flying one way, my heart another. (181)

Lindo even manages to make Waverly postpone her wedding because she thinks July is a bad time to go to China for a honeymoon (184). She also speaks her way to go along to China on the honeymoon; Waverly hates the idea, but at the same time sees it as an opportunity to leave their differences behind : “I know what she means. She would love to go to China with us. And I would hate it. Yet part of me also thinks the whole idea makes perfect sense. The three of us, leaving our differences behind” (184).

Another good example of mother–daughter misunderstanding happens at the beauty parlour. Daughter wants to treat her mother with a new haircut for the wedding, but the mother feels she is ashamed of her wanting to change her looks.

Then my daughter criticizes me as if I were not there (Waverly gives orders to the hairdresser about how to cut mother’s hair).”How does she want it?” He thinks I do not understand English. I Smile. I use my American face. But inside I am becoming ashamed. I am ashamed she is ashamed. Because she is my daughter and I am proud of her, and I am her mother but she is not proud of me. (255)

At the same time, Lindo knows she has made her daughter American. It is her fault as she wanted her children to have the best combination possible: American circumstances of free choice and Chinese, obedient, humble character. “How could I know these two things do not mix?” (254)

Lindo comments on another occasion she has been embarrassed by Waverly’s behaviour. Waverly used to tell her friends lies about Lindo’s arrival at the US. She liked saying that Lindo had been so poor that she had arrived on a slow boat to the US and had married a waiter at a

Chinese restaurant after having read a fortune cookie message that promised her a handsome stranger. To Lindo this forged history was like a joke which made fun of her. “Why do you make this joke? This is not sincere. This was not True!” (259). She was not poor when arriving to the US on a plane and she did not meet her husband in a Chinese restaurant. She had to work hard in a cookie factory to earn her living in the beginning. Lindo was disappointed at Waverly for liking only false Chinese nonsense and Chinese things which were fashionable.

4.4 An-Mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan

Rose was an obedient child that became a submissive adult. “I used to believe everything my mother said. The power of her words was that strong. More than thirty years later, my mother was still trying to make me listen (187).” An-mei taught Rose that if she listened to her, she would later know what the mother knew.

The turning point in Rose’s childhood was the death of her little brother Bing. One day the whole family was spending time on the beach, Rose was given the responsibility for looking after her little brother.

“Take care of them”, said mother.

Why?

“Yiding.”

I must. Because they are my brothers. How else could I learn responsibility? How else could I appreciate what my parents had done for me? (123)

While she was inattentive, Bing went into the water and got drowned. The shock devastated everybody, and the guilt of causing Bing’s death made Rose very vulnerable and indecisive. She had failed to follow her mother’s wishes. She no longer managed to take responsibility for anything. Rose thought that “it was because she was raised with Chinese humility, because she was Chinese, you’re supposed to accept everything” (156). She accepted a submissive role in her relationships. An-mei tried to explain Rose why she was always so confused. She said Rose was without wood; being born without wood meant one listens to too many people (see also Blasingame and Goodson).

A girl is like a young tree. You must stand tall and listen to your mother standing next to you. That is the only way to grow strong and straight. But if you bend to listen to other people, you will grow crooked and weak (191).

Mother never accepted Rose's husband Ted. She was a typical Chinese American woman who thought that Chinese should not mix with Americans. When Rose started dating in college, An-Mei said: "He is American, a *waigoren*." "I'm American, too", protested Rose. The couple, however, got married and over the years Ted made all the decisions; what to buy, where to go on a holiday. Ted was 'the protective veil' over Rose (compare Bond: women's position). But things changed, Ted no longer accepted Rose's indecisiveness and their marriage broke. Rose collapses mentally, stops eating and consults a therapist.

The divorce is a turning point in the mother-daughter relationship. Even though she did not accept Ted in the beginning, she does not want Rose to give up. "This cannot be. Then you must save it" (116) (compare Gardner (et al): Chinese Americans do not divorce easily). An-Mei thought that marriage bonds were sacred and should not be broken easily. But the marriage was over. An-Mei helps Rose to see the real state of the marriage; Ted is cheating on her. " 'Why does he send you a check? He is doing monkey business with someone else?' Back home I thought about what she said. And it was true "(188). Ted wants to buy Rose out of the house with a cheque. An-Mei helps Rose to fight the divorce and the depression due to it. "You are getting too thin. You must eat more" (187). She does not understand why Rose does not open up to her but to a psychiatrist. "Why can you talk about this with a psyche-atric and not with mother? A mother is best. A mother knows what is inside you" (188). Like a Chinese adage puts it, An-Mei thought that "problems within the family should not be discussed outside the family" (Bond, 91). An-Mei does not accept Rose's inability to fight for what is hers in the divorce. "I am not telling you to save your marriage, I only say you should speak up" (193). And Rose did; she took her mother's advice and managed to confront Ted, she was filled with 'wood': " 'I'm staying here. You can't just pull me out of your life and throw me away ' . I saw what I wanted: his eyes, confused, then scared. He was *hulihudu*.

The power of my words was that strong (196).” A crisis situation brought mother and daughter closer to one another.

Each daughter, as seen above, had a very different relationship with their mothers. June Woo was the most Americanised one: she repeatedly and intentionally rebelled against her mother’s wishes and expectations, she preferred to be a failure rather than believing in herself. Waverly Jong, on the other hand, was succesful and powerful in her career, but was afraid of confronting her mother even in her adulthood. Rose Hsu Jordan and Lena St. Clair were both very submissive women in their marriages and their personalities seemed vulnerable. This was partly due to their childhood experiences; Rose felt guilty about her brother’s death, and Lena was raised by a mentally fragile, depressed mother. Both women, however, became stronger with their mother’s help when they needed help in their troubled marriages.

5. Communication; the role of silence, talk stories and cultural background

Silence as a means of communication plays an important part in *The Joy Luck Club*. Being an essential part of Chinese communication system and the role of Chinese women (see Isotaulus, Bond and Zhiling-Guanhui), we have seen that the Chinese mothers, especially An-Mei Hsu, Lindo Jong and Ying-Ying St. Clair, were accustomed to their role of silenced daughters and wives during their life in China. The transformation of the women was evident: The silenced Chinese daughters and wives became powerful and vocal Chinese-American mothers.

An-Mei Hsu was raised by her uncle's family. She learned to obey her elders and she was taught to avoid taboo subjects, such as her mother who had dishonored the family by becoming the fourth wife of a rich Chinese man. Once she decided to disobey her uncle and left to live with her mother, she experienced what her mother's life as a concubine was like: she was silenced not only by her husband but also by the other wives. An-Mei witnessed her mother's suicide, the result of intolerable shame. As An-Mei could feel her mother's pain, she became a stronger fighter herself. She did not accept her role of a submissive daughter, but learned to fight her way first with the other wives, and later in the US. For example she helped her friend Lindo find a husband in the US and supported her daughter Rose to become a stronger person in her divorce.

Lindo Jong was the strongest and the most manipulative of the mothers. She was forced to marry a neighbor's son at a very early age by an arranged marriage (compare Kristeva). Through out her childhood she was raised to become an obedient wife and daughter-in-law, and learned to swallow her bitterness and unhappiness silently. But she never lost herself in the process and as she managed to talk her way out of the marriage without causing shame to her family, she discovered the tiger in herself. Later in the US, she continued to be a tiger, a strong-minded woman and a dominant mother.

Ying-Ying St.Clair's past was the opposite. A daughter of a rich Chinese family, she was a rather disobedient and stubborn child. With the failure of her first marriage she lost herself and the joy of life. She had to experience the shame of an unfaithful husband. She resorted to extreme

measures and expressed her hatred towards her husband by aborting their son. She never recovered; she remained a ghost even during her second marriage and in the relation to her daughter Lena. The death of her second child paralysed her even more. But we could see that Ying-ying managed to break her silence when she realised that her daughter Lena needed help to break her silenced role in her marriage. “We are lost she and I, unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others”. “Because I remained quiet for so long now my daughter does not hear me” (67).

As for the daughters, a different path can be detected. Normally American and Western women are used to independence and equality and Western women can express themselves more easily than traditional Chinese women. Still, especially in Rose and Lena’s cases, a certain submissive, silenced role in their marriages, more common to Chinese women, is adopted. Most likely this is due to their childhood experiences: Rose never recovered from Bing’s death and Lena became vulnerable as her mother was incapable of helping her to become a balanced adult. Both women are unable to express themselves: Lena is unable to tell her husband she is not content with the balance sheet system or her role in their firm. Rose’s marriage is about to break, due to her incapability to make decisions. She is too submissive a woman to her husband’s taste. “Ted started pushing me to make decisions. And it was as if something snapped at him. ‘How the hell did we get married? Did you just say I do because the minister said repeat after me?’ (120)” Rose seemed the most confused of the daughters by the cross cultural influence.

American people had American opinions. Chinese people had Chinese opinions. And in almost every case, the American version was much better. It was only later that I discovered there was a serious flaw with the American version. There were too many choices, so it was easy to get confused and pick the wrong thing (191).

An-Mei is annoyed by Rose’s incapability to speak up or act in order to work the marriage out. She hoped Rose would have reacted in an American way, openly expressing her (see Beer).

She cried ‘No choice! No choice!’ She doesn’t know. If she doesn’t speak, she is making a choice. If she doesn’t try, she can lose her chance forever. I know this because I was raised the Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people’s misery, to eat my own bitterness. And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she came out the same way! (215)

According to Bond, daughters are taught to obey their elders in Chinese culture. The same can be seen in the novel, mothers expected their daughters' obedience with more or less success. Mothers were raised by Chinese tradition of absolute obedience (see Ling and Kristeva), and when raising their own children the mothers expected the same, but partly failed as the environment was different. The major reason for failure to obey the mothers was the American influence on daughters. Waverly Jong and Rose Hsu Jordan were more submissive daughters/women and, even in their adulthood, they were afraid of confronting their mothers. As seen earlier, Waverly confronted her mother once in her childhood by refusing to participate in a chess tournament. Lindo was angry with her and did not forgive her for the childish behaviour. Almost like a punishment for disobedience, Waverly never played well again. Even with her boy friends she felt the need for motherly approval. "I was worried for Rich. Because I knew my feelings for him were vulnerable to being felled by my mother's suspicions, passing remarks, and innuendos" (175).

Rose was a vulnerable woman who did not dare to talk to her mother about her problems and consulted a psychologist instead. Her mother was offended by the fact Rose did not trust her with her problems. She thought that "A mother is best. A mother knows what is inside you" (188).

June Woo was the most rebellious daughter. Suyuan Woo wanted the best for her daughter, she believed June was capable of anything but every time June failed her she started hating the expectations and failed in purpose: she refused to play the piano well, she dropped out of college. June was a rebellious Americanised daughter.

After seeing my mother's disappointed face once again, something inside of me began to die. I hated the tests, the raised hopes and failed expectations. I had new thoughts, willful thoughts, or rather thoughts filled with lots of won'ts. I won't let her change me, I promised myself. (134)

Ying-Ying St.Clair felt she did not have enough power on her daughter Lena. "All her life I have watched her as though from a different shore. When she was a child I should have slapped her more often for disrespect. But now it is too late" (242-243). "If she had *chuming*, she would see a tiger

lady. And she would have careful fear”(248). She realises that she has to break the silence and tell about her hidden past in China to Lena. That is the only way she can help Lena to give her the nature of a tiger. “I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter’s tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose. I will win and give her my spirit, because this is the way a mother loves her daughter” (252).

According to both Snodgrass and Minh-Ha, talk stories are used for educational purposes in ethnic women’s writings and, notably in *The Joy Luck Club*: especially the mothers’ childhood memories are connected to these orally transmitted narratives. When An-Mei was living in her uncle’s family, Popo, her grand-mother used to tell her scary stories as warning stories of what would happen to disobedient children. An example was a story of a girl who did not listen to her elders.” One day this bad girl shook her head so vigorously to refuse her auntie’s simple request that a little white ball fell from her ear and out poured all her brains” (43). Ying-Ying also heard stories of how a girl should behave: “ If you [a girl] are still for a very long time, a dragonfly will no longer see you. Then it will come to you and hide in the comfort of your shadow” (72).

Talk stories were also the way for the mothers to tell about their past experiences at the mah jong table without losing faces (compare Yi-Lin). “Each week we could forget past wrongs done to us. We weren’t allowed to think a bad thought. We feasted, we laughed, we told the best stories” (25).

Ying-Ying St. Clair used stories when educating Lena to respect food. If she did not finish her meal, she would say:”Aii, Lena, your future husband have one pock mark for every rice you not finish. I once knew a pock-mark man. Mean man, bad man” (151). Ying-Ying also made stories of homeless people to warn Lena about lazyness. Once they saw a homeless woman sitting on the sidewalk Ying-Ying said:”Don’t look at her. She met a bad man. She had a baby she didn’t want” (105). Lena knew that was not true. “I knew my mother made up anything to warn me, to help me avoid unknown danger” (105). Being a sensible girl, Lena got scared by the stories, which made her see nightmares. When Ying-Ying barricaded the basement door of their house, she explained Lena

that a bad man was living there, and if Lena would go in, the evil man would plant five babies in her and would eat the whole family, tossing their bones on the floor (103). Once the family moved to a new neighbourhood, she said the apartment was on such a steep hill, that the baby would fall off the womb, and it did.

Suyuan Woo also used to tell a story to June, often it was connected to her past in Kweilin. June thought it was a Chinese fairy tale, which always grew and the ending changed. In the end she realised Suyuan was telling her own story and finally the story had a truthful ending about the loss of twin daughters. Every time the ending was closer and closer to the truth – it was Suyuan’s way of gaining courage to tell the truth (compare Yi-Lin).

Rose used to hear stories of Old Mr. Chou. According her mother, Old Mr. Chou was the guardian of a door that opened into dreams. Rose was afraid of Mr. Chou because, in the end he appeared in her dreams and he took her to bad places. She saw nightmares even in her adult life: "That night I dreamt I was wandering through the garden. The trees and bushes were covered with mist. And then I spotted Old Mr. Chou and my mother off in the distance, their busy movements swirling the fog around them. There she is! Cried my mother. Old Mr. Chou smiled at me and waved" (196).

Chinese traditions and superstitions are found in several occasions in *The Joy Luck Club*. An-Mei Hsu had a superstition that children were predisposed to certain dangers on certain days, depending on their Chinese birthday. Everything was explained in a little Chinese book called *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates*. An-Mei believed that following certain precautions, she could prevent all danger. When Bing accidentally drowned, An-Mei believed it was because her ancestor’s had done wrong by stealing water from a sacred well. By killing Bing, the water tried to steal back. She went through rituals of throwing sweetened tea and a ring to the water, hoping to gain back Bing’s body. (129)

Feng shui and balance (see Blasingame and Goodson) in life also play a major role in the women's life. Ying-Ying was troubled by the imbalance in their apartment while pregnant with their second child. She desperately tried to change furniture around:

As if something were not quite right, she removed the cans from one shelf and switched them with the cans on another. Next she walked briskly into the living room and a large round mirror from the wall facing the front door to a wall by the sofa. 'What are you doing?' I asked. She whispered something in Chinese about things not being balanced. 'When something goes against your nature, you are not in balance. This house was built too steep, and a bad wind from the top blows all your strength back down the hill. So you can never get ahead. You are always rolling backward (108-109).

Ying-Ying could feel there was something wrong with the unborn baby who died soon after birth. Ying-Ying feels the same imbalance in Lena's house. "All around this house I see signs. My daughter looks but does not see. This is a house that will break into pieces" (243). In the guest room there is a heavy marble table with skinny legs, if the table is shaken it will fall apart. Another sign of imbalance in Lena's household was the balance sheet in which she and Harold divided all the expenses according to who spend what, which was out of balance. Ying-Ying could immediately see that the list was not correct, she was spending money on things she did not use. Above all, Harold earned seven times more. Ying-Ying made Lena realise how ridiculous the whole list was and made her correct the situation.

The imbalance in Ted and Rose's marriage ended the marriage. Rose had always been too submissive and it was not until Ted wanted the house in the divorce that, with An-Mei's help, Rose learned to fight for what was hers. As seen earlier, feng shui is based on five key elements of wood, fire, earth, metal and water. An-Mei thought that Rose was without wood; that caused the imbalance in her. She was too weak to confront others. Suyuan also makes reference to the key elements: according to her a person should have a balanced mixture of key elements in order to be a good person. Too much fire meant bad temper, too little wood meant weakness in decision making, and

too much water meant the person was flowing into too many directions and was thus unable to finish anything properly – just like June. (31)

Suyuan Woo's life was also ruled by imbalance due to her separation from the twins. She tried to correct the situation all her life, unsuccessfully. It was June's task to bring back the balance by meeting the half-sisters and uniting the family. In the same way, June finally discovers her true self in China when she is united with her sisters; she knows what in her is Chinese, what is American. "And now I also see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood. After all these years, it can finally be let go" (288). Together they are one, united and balanced

After Suyuan Woo's death, the mah jong circle was out of balance; the game needed one player in each cardinal point. Suyuan's place was the East as that is where everything begins, that's where the sun rises and the wind blows from. June corrected the imbalance and replaced Suyuan's place in the east corner.

6. Conclusion

In this study I have tried to show that all the mothers of *The Joy Luck Club* have gone through a process of certain inner development in the novel, very much depending on their childhood experiences in China. All the mothers were raised in China and we could see that they were raised with Chinese authority and according to Confucian hierarchy: Chinese girls knew their standing and place in the society. Elders and husbands were to be respected and obeyed. Through different hardships and childhood experiences the women, An-Mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, Ying-Ying St. Clair and Suyuan Woo, left China and immigrated in the US where they were able to adopt a totally different life. For the first time in life they gained a voice and transformed into independent women. They could get married of their own will and they could have a job. The silenced Chinese girls became voiced, strong Chinese-American women.

I also wished to show what the mother-daughter relationship was like. The mothers wanted to cultivate their daughters with Chinese traditions and values, the way they themselves were raised; the daughters were to learn the respect for their elders and the importance of hard work. The daughters also were encouraged to use the opportunities America offered for success; parents worked hard for the well-being of their children and expected self-sacrifice and success in life in return. We could perceive that the American environment partly unabled the mothers to raise their daughters the Chinese way. The daughters, especially June Woo and Waverly Jong, had trouble understanding their mother's educational methods and expectations. Daughters accustomed to American culture did not understand the Chinese unspoken methods of communication. Still, regardless of the freedom the American culture offered, the Chinese-American daughters seemed less certain of themselves than their Chinese mothers; they had become successful American women with careers and families but, however, felt insecure as wives, partners or daughters . This was mainly due to their trouble understanding their own roots; the daughters did not completely understand what part in them was American and what Chinese, they had not gained a clear cultural

identity. This confused them and made it more difficult for them to find their own inner voice. Especially June Woo had trouble identifying herself, understanding her origins and knowing what she wanted from life. Rose and Lena had become submissive Chinese-American women in their troubled marriages, Waverly, regardless of being a successful lawyer and a mother, still felt uncertain in relation to her mother. Communication was not easy as many misunderstandings occurred due to cross-cultural differences. But it seemed that hardships brought the mothers and daughters closer to one another: marital problems in Lena and Rose's cases, mother's death in June's case, and divorce and new marriage in Waverly's case. Lena and Rose were forced to face themselves and their mothers when they tried to struggle in order to save their own marriages and, at the same time, their own value. Both An-Mei and Ying-Ying questioned their daughter's submissiveness and helped them open their eyes to reality; both daughters became more independent and stronger-willed in the process. As for Waverly Jong, she forgave her mother for the excessive involvement in her private life and was willing to make sacrifices in order to accept her mother's Chinese manners. June Woo grew into a balanced woman once she met her Chinese sisters; only then could she understand her Chinese roots and her late mother's expectations.

I also wanted to point out the several roles of silence in the novel. Chinese women and girls were educated to become obedient, silenced daughters and wives. In a high-context society such as China, many things are left unspoken and should be learned by observation. The mothers were raised this way and they tried to raise their own daughters the same way, which left several issues unclear to their Americanised daughters. The daughters were raised in the US, a low-context culture, and were thus accustomed by the surrounding society to have things verbally explained. They were unable to speak the 'same language' with their mothers, which often created cross-cultural conflicts and misunderstandings. Furthermore, the daughters failed to understand the traditional Chinese hierarchical system; they questioned openly their mother's decisions when they should have obeyed

silently. This again was considered as bad behaviour on their mother's behalf who expected filial piety.

Finally, I wished to show some of the interesting insights to Chinese traditions and history presented in *The Joy Luck Club*. The role of women and girls in Confucian society was introduced in The Cultural and Historical Background –section by telling about arranged and polygamous marriages and about the Confucian educational methods. These elements were presented in the novel as well, as Lindo Jong was destined to an arranged marriage in her early childhood and An-Mei Hsu had to witness her mother's bad situation as a shameful concubine in a polygamous relationship. We also had an insight to the Chinese immigration politics in the US in the 20th century, at the time when the borders were opened to Chinese women. In general, Chinese immigrants mainly worked in low-paid, manual jobs with poor working conditions, and so did the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club*: Suyuan Woo worked as a cleaning lady, Ying-Ying did servant's tasks and An-Mei Hsu and Lindo Jong worked long hours at a cookie factory.

Elements of feng shui, the importance of balanced life, Chinese feasts and superstitions were present in several stories. We could see that imbalance was an undesired, negative state, which had to be corrected; Suyuan Woo's imbalance in life was due to the loss of her twin daughters, Ying-Ying St.Clair was mentally vulnerable and 'imbalanced' as a result of her superstitions and past disappointments: she had one abortion and lost another child at birth, making her a living 'ghost' and unable to fully concentrate on her role as a wife and a mother. Both Rose and Lena lived in imbalanced marriages which caused them anxiety. Feng shui and harmony were regained in the end; Suyuan's daughters were found and reunited, Rose and Lena found strength to fight in their marriages, and Ying-Ying became a more balanced person and mother when she was focusing more on helping Lena than on her own personal problems.

The use of oral narratives, the talk-stories, was an important part of the novel. The mothers used to hear talk-stories from their elders in their own childhood and continued telling them to their own

children; they were a common way of educating and warning children but also a way for the mothers to speak up about their past difficulties without losing their dignity and self-worth.

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