

## A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE IN COMMUNICATING LOVE IN AMY TAN'S THE JOY LUCK CLUB

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Amy Ruth Tan (1952- ), born in Oakland, was a daughter to Chinese immigrant parents. She was the co- screenwriter and co-producer for the 1993 film adaptation of her novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) that was directed by Wayne Wang.<sup>1</sup> Amy received several awards like the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award and the Commonwealth Gold Award for *The Joy Luck Club*. It was selected as the American Library Association's Best Book for Young Adults, and was selected for the National Endowment for the Arts' Big Read.<sup>2</sup> The novel is widely read in American high schools and is translated into more than thirty languages.<sup>3</sup>

Cross-cultural differences exist in communicating love. In line with an expected contrast between Asian and western cultural traditions regarding love, a study examines the cross-cultural differences in communicating love among young adults from the U.S. and Asian countries. The study finds out that love in marriage is seen as important and unconditional for Americans, while Asians are more likely to report caring as an important belief.<sup>4</sup> In other words, Chinese of both sexes are more friendship oriented in their love relationships than are respondents of

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<sup>1</sup>*The Literary Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Amy Tan," 17 Mar. 2001, <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=4311>, (accessed Oct.7, 2011).

<sup>2</sup>Sushil Mary Mathews, "Breaking the Good Mother Myths: A Study of the Novels of Amy Tan," *Language in India*, vol. 10 (April 2010):17, <http://www.languageinindia.com/april2010/sushilamytang1.html> (accessed Oct. 22, 2011).

<sup>3</sup>Camille-Yvette Welsch, "Amy Tan: A Look at the Critical Reception," *Critical Insights: The Joy Luck Club*, ed. Robert C. Evans, vol. 1 (California: University Montgomery, 2009), 20. And Shu-Ling Chen, "Exploring Between-world Situations in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Bonesetter's Daughters*" (MA. thesis: Dong Hwa University, 2003), 2.

Susan L. Kline , Brian Horton and Shuangyue Zhang, "Communicating love: Comparisons<sup>4</sup> between American and East Asian University Students" *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 32, No. 3(May 2008): 201

Anglo-Celtic or European ethnocultural backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> Sports and shopping are activities associated with expressing love for Americans, while talking and cooking food are activities for expressing love for Asians.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Waverly describes cooking as "how my mother expressed her love, her pride, her power, her proof that she knew more than Auntie Su." Similarly, Jing-mei says that Chinese mothers show their love "not through hugs and kisses but with stern offerings of steamed dumplings, duck's gizzards, and crab"(JLC, 202).

Food and communication are means to express love, hope, and happiness. Because it breaks with Chinese custom for a woman to initiate a marriage proposal, Lindo uses the fortune cookie to "ask" Tin to marry her. The English writing must be translated, because Tin does not know the meaning of "spouse." Lindo and Tin use written texts to facilitate their courtship. An-mei and Lindo plan to pass a "written note" to Tin. Because they work in a fortune cookie factory, the women decide to arrange a marriage proposal by putting the message in a cookie: "A house is not a home when a spouse is not at home" (JLC, 264). The use of an English text, allows Lindo to determine her future. Lindo's use of the fortune cookie is an example of how a person can find small, but important places where the tensions and misunderstandings between speakers must be alleviated through written texts.<sup>7</sup> Another man-woman love relationships are Lena and Rose who marry Americans or what their mother calls Waiguoren. In front of their American husbands, they have a sense of inferiority. In the first and second sections—"Rice: Lena St. Clair," in Book III, "American Translation," and "Ying-Ying St. Clair: Waiting between the Trees," in Book IV " Queen Mother of the Western Skies," respectively— Amy manipulates the myths of the Moon Lady and the Queen Mother to embody the cross-cultural struggle between Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters, and between Chinese and American cultures. They are

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<sup>5</sup> Kenneth L. Dion and [Karen K. Dion](#), "Gender and Ethnocultural Comparisons in Styles of Love," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* [17, No. 4](#) (28 July 2006): 463.

<sup>6</sup> Kline, Horton, and Zhang, 203.

<sup>7</sup> Lisa M. S. Dunick, "The Silencing Effect of Canonicity: Authorship and the Written Word in Amy Tan's Novels," *MEWS* 31, No. 2 (Summer 2006): 7.

old Chinese mythological tales and deities. Amy deconstructs them, to show her rejection of American dominant culture and reconstructs them, because Asian American identity consists of being both Asian and American. She handles myths that incorporate ideas from both American and Asian cultures, creating new stories for displaced Asian mothers and their Asian American daughters.<sup>8</sup>

Ying-Ying St. Clair recounts the myth of the Moon Lady. In Chinese mythology, the Queen Mother, or Hsi Wang Mu, holds the power of immortality. She gives Yi the elixir to share with his wife, but she grows impatient and disobeys her husband's orders to wait. In her garden exists a peach tree that puts forth leaves once every three thousand years, and it requires three thousand years after that for the fruit to ripen. Her husband discovers what she has done and chases her to the moon. On the night of the Moon Festival, she grants secret wishes.<sup>9</sup>

As a child, Ying-Ying identifies herself with the Moon Lady; they are both displaced women in exile. They have lost her family and felt alone. As she walks closer to the woman, Ying-Ying's illusion of the beautiful Moon Lady deconstructs immediately and became a man. When Ying-Ying realizes that the character is really a man, all her hope in the Moon Lady vanishes. Ying-Ying exemplifies a persona defining the figure of the Great Mother. The Great Mother figure is also an Earth Mother symbol—the epitome of femininity and motherhood. Her role is to give birth and nurture children. The same figure is associated with the Virgin Mary in Western, Judeo-Christian mythology.<sup>10</sup> Patriarchal societies, including Chinese society, expect women to fulfill the role of the "good mother/good wife." Ying-Ying St. Clair seems to be the "good mother/good wife." She is subservient and fulfills the needs of her husband, faithfully taking care of their only son although her husband is unfaithful. However, when she can no longer remain in this abusive marriage, she decides to act against her role as the "good mother/good

<sup>8</sup> Tammy S. Conrad, "Creating an Asian-American Mythology: Storytelling in Amy Tan's Fiction" (MA. thesis: Texas Tech University 1998), 31.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 32, 42.

<sup>10</sup> Tammy S. Conrad, "Creating an Asian-American Mythology: Storytelling in Amy Tan's Fiction" (MA. thesis: Texas Tech University 1998), 34.

wife."<sup>11</sup> Repeatedly abused by her first husband, Ying-Ying rebels and kills his only son.

In the second marriage, Ying-Ying finds herself broken and unable to appreciate her kind husband. Although she remains physically with her husband, she has no real emotional connection to him. He does not know about her abusive first husband nor is he aware of the dead child. Additionally, she realizes that her acceptance of the subservient wife role has affected her daughter's self-image ruinously.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, Lena follows the subservient mother/wife model. She admires the Americans so much that she makes sacrifices for her American husband. Their marriage is based on a balance sheet rather than on love. Lena says, "We need to think about what our marriage ...not this, who owes who what"(JLC, 157). If the couple wants to buy personal commodities, they must pay for themselves. This is acceptable in western countries, but according to Chinese culture, it is unacceptable. A married Chinese couple cannot calculate the family financial expenditure; they must share the burden together.

To impart maternal love to her daughter, Ying-ying tries to save her daughter's marriage.<sup>13</sup> The mother shows her daughter the disastrous consequences that may happen if she continues to ignore the imbalance between her and her husband. By ignoring love, Harold, Lena's husband concentrates more on material possessions. He fights over materials, such as the payment for the exterminators and flees without realizing the importance of love. As Lena gets into the car, she touches his hand intimately and says, "Harold, I love you"(JLC, 160). His conscious mind is occupied by the car, which seems to be more important to him than his wife is. He looks in the rearview mirror, backing up the car, saying, and "I love you, too. Did you lock the door?" (JLC, 160).

Furthermore, gender and cultural differences influences a person's view of love. Women view love as more friendship oriented, more pragmatic, but less

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 36, 37.

<sup>13</sup> Esther Mikyung Ghymn, "Mothers and Daughters," in *Images of Asian American Women by Asian American Women Writers*, (1995): 11-36.

permissive than do men. Asian women express a more altruistic view of love than do Anglo-Celtic women.<sup>14</sup> Lena questions the nature of love: "Isn't hate merely the result of wounded love?" (*JLC*, 154). A common mistake is that people usually think of love as the opposite of hate. Nevertheless, these deep emotions are not as such. True lovers do not hate but may become indifferent. To care about someone who is truly close to heart and soul does not leave a spot to hatred. While Lena's love to her husband is unconditional or altruistic", [It] is a feeling of surrendering everything to him, with abandon, without caring what I got in return"(*JLC*, 160), Harold lacks love for himself as an individual. Self-love is a prerequisite for the love of others. At the beginning of their marriage, Harold pretends to value their love relationship too much, and never wants to contaminate it with money. "As long as we keep the money thing separate, we'll always be sure of our love for each other"(*JLC*, 157). Crisis exists in Rose's marriage. "[Magpies](#): Rose Hsu Jordan," in Book IV, "Queen Mother of Westren Sky," manifests how An-mei tries to save her daughter's marriage by teaching her not to be negatively submissive. Rose does not make any decision and lets her husband decide, because she believes her husband's decision is better. Gradually Ted Jordan begins to believe that she is shouldering off responsibility. He even proposes a divorce. In an attempt to raise her daughter's spirit up, An-mei says, "[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" (*JLC*, 191). Rose realizes that she is living in her husband's shadow, unable to make decisions for herself. Only after her mother asks her why she does not stand up for herself, Rose realizes that her husband wants to cut her from his life disrespectfully. Ceasing to take love for granted does occur later on when the couple feel their life is meaningless and uncomfortable without love. By not taking love for granted and realizing "there's absolutely nothing left to save" in her marriage, Rose Hsu Jordan recognizes that she must divorce her husband. An-mei encourages Rose to speak up. When Rose takes her mother's advice and does speak up, she not only astounds her arrogant husband, but also saves her marriage. However, from the assistance that their mothers provide them, Lena and Rose feel

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth and [Karen Dion](#), 473.

the deep love as well as the powerful strength of their Chinese mothers. Love makes people more comfortable with themselves and makes them feel important, needed, and loved. Rose compares love to a hill and heaven. The hill symbolizes the steps that she must take to attain love and enter heaven—her comparison to happiness. Love is hard to attain, but Lindo Jong learns how to embrace it. In collective societies, where collectivism predominates and patriarchal authority still exists, arranged marriage is widely popular though love match becomes popular nowadays under the influences of western culture. By contrast, in the U.S., where individual culture encourages people to be independent and autonomous, love match prevails as a method of mate selection.<sup>15</sup> “The Red Candle: Lindo Jong,” written in the form of monologue, reveals how a little girl is forced to marry Huang Taitai’s son—called Tyan-yu, the leftover of his father's spirit. The matchmaker brags about Lindo as if she were a transaction for buying and selling. The girl is attractive, beautiful, and has a white skin. Although Lindo does not love him, she has no choice. She belongs to a backward family, the last to give up old-fashioned customs. “The Red Candle” sheds light on practical (pragma) love, which seems to be a sort of contract or transaction. In China, women are victims to oppression and patricidal system. When a girl is married, she has to move to the groom's house. If poverty attacks a family, because of floods, famines, or locust invasions, the peasants will abandon their female babies. However, this happens only in some areas where people are very poor.<sup>16</sup>

Hence, marriages that are arranged in childhood are accepted in Chinese culture. A good girl is supposed to be submissive and obedient. She is expected to obey her parents blindly. Even if she is tired or ill, she has to depress her feelings and pretends to be cheerful. Lindo suffers through an arranged marriage. She leaves her family at age 12 to live with her future husband’s family after the summer heavy rain destroys the wheat her family plant. A flood causes her family

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<sup>15</sup>Chiharu Kawai, "For Whom the Wedding Bells Toll: Methods of Mate Selection and Attitudes Toward Marriage among College Females in Japan and the United States

<sup>16</sup> Small-World Ezine,” Culture Shock's Edition, Feb. 24, 2004 <http://www.netfirms.com/> (accessed Nov. 14, 2011).

to abandon her, moving to the south near Shanghai after arranging marriage for Lindo and leaving her behind to a family that do not want her.<sup>17</sup> Because she is promised to the Huangs' son for marriage, her family treats her as if she were a commodity. Her mother constantly reminds her of the family she is to marry into and refers to her as the mother-in-law's daughter, but Lindo says, "My mother did not treat me this way because she didn't love me. She would say this biting back her tongue, so she wouldn't wish for something that was no longer hers" (*JLC*, 51). Lindo does not have instant love for her future husband; therefore, she tries to uglify her face in an attempt to break the marriage contract, but her mother says, "It's no use. We have made a contract. It cannot be broken" (*JLC*, 52).

Before the wedding day, Lindo realizes the message of her mother's advice about the invisible power of the wind. "I couldn't see the wind itself, but I could see it carried the water that filled the rivers and shaped the countryside. It caused men to yelp and dance" (*JLC*, 58). She realizes that a person can change her/his destiny in the same way a river changes its color but still be the same thing. When she looks in the mirror, what she sees she sees more valuable than physical beauty:

I was strong. I was pure. I had genuine thoughts inside that no one could see, that no one could ever take away from me. I was like the wind. I threw my head back and smiled proudly to myself. ... I still knew who I was. I made a promise to myself: I would always remember my parents' wishes, but I would never forget myself.

(*JLC*, 58) What Lindo realizes when she looks in the mirror is that the intellectual beauty of the mind is more important than the physical beauty of the face. If intellectual beauty meets with the physical and emotional beauty, it would embody the perfect kind beauty. Lindo marries in the mid-August. For the Chinese this is the best time for marriage, when the moon is perfectly round and bigger than any other time of the year. On the day of the wedding ceremony, red banners embroider the house to congratulate the bride on her new life. The bride rides a red palanquin, with a red scarf over her face. Part of the Chinese wedding ceremony is that a candle has to continue flaming until it becomes ashes. The remaining black ash will be pouring onto the bride's red cloth. The candle has two ends for lighting. One length carves gold characters with Tyan-yu's name, the other with Lindo Jong's. If neither end of the candle is to

<sup>17</sup>Wikipedia, s.v. "Chinese Ideals of Female Beauty."

extinguish before the next day the wedding will be happy. For the Chinese, candle is a marriage bond more important than a Catholic promise not to divorce or remarry even if the husband dies. After the wedding day, the new couples lie as a brother and sister on the bed. When Lindo does not get pregnant after several months, Huang Tait brings the matchmaker who concludes, "A woman can have sons only if she is deficient in one of the elements" (*JLC*, 63). According to Chinese traditions, there are five elements,<sup>18</sup> from which the cosmos is created, fire, water, earth, wood, and metal. A woman will not be fertile if she possesses all these elements:

Your daughter-in-law was born with enough wood, fire, water, and earth, and she was deficient in metal... . Nevertheless, when she was married, you loaded her down with gold bracelets and ... now she has all the elements, including metal. She's too balanced to have babies.

(*JLC*, 63)Therefore, Huang Taitai reclaims all gold and jewelry she offers to her daughter-in-law bride to help her become fertile. To escape her marriage, without dishonoring her family, Lindo takes advantage of the Chinese superstition of the candle to convince her mother-in-law to annul the wedding. The night after the servant designates to watch the candle runs away, out of fear of the Japanese, Lindo runs into the room and "[her] throat filled with so much hope that it finally burst and blew out [her] husband's end of the candle" (*JLC*, 60 ). Blowing the candle out symbolizes Lindo taking control of her life. Although the servant relights the candle, Lindo exposes to her mother-in-law that the flame dies in the night.<sup>19</sup>

Lindo Jong makes use of the Chinese belief in superstition and ancestral heritage, in order to make the Huangs get rid of her, and to be the ones to say the marriage contract is not valid. She makes use of her invisible power as she pretends to dream of her ancestors on the third day of the Festival of Pure Brightness when everyone visits the family graves. In the dream, ancestors warn her that the matchmaker is a liar that marriage is doomed when a big wind comes and blows the candle out, and that Tyan-yu will die if he stays in this marriage. Otherwise, ancestors will begin the cycle of destruction. They will show signs to prove Tyan-yu's marriage is rotten.

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<sup>18</sup> See Table 4. The Five Elements of Chinese Philosophy, 45.

<sup>19</sup>Coursework. Info, "Symbolism in *The Joy Luck Club*" 12 Nov 2008, [http://www.coursework.info/AS\\_and\\_A\\_Level/English\\_Literature/Criticism\\_Comparison/Other\\_Criticism\\_Comparison/Symbolism\\_in\\_The\\_Joy\\_Luck\\_Club\\_L842672.html](http://www.coursework.info/AS_and_A_Level/English_Literature/Criticism_Comparison/Other_Criticism_Comparison/Symbolism_in_The_Joy_Luck_Club_L842672.html) (accessed Nov. 14, 2011).



Lindo Jong pretends to dream of Tyan-yu's grandfather, a man with a beard and a mole on his cheek, who says that the black mole on Tyan-yu's back will grow and eat away his flesh. The second sign is that Lindo Jong's teeth will fall out one by one. In the back of her mouth, a rotted tooth has fallen out four years ago. The third sign is that Tyan-yu's plants a seed in the maidservant's womb, who only pretends to come from a bad family, but she is really from imperial blood. That girl has to be Tyan-yu's true spiritual wife, and the seed grandfather has planted will grow into Tyan-yu's child.

## NOTES