

The Human Relationships from Conflict and Contradiction to Reconciliation and Harmony in Amy Tan's Novels

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Abstract – The conflict and ultimately reaching reconciliation between mother and daughter is one of the recurring themes in Amy Tan's novels. The sources of conflicts and confrontation between mother and daughter are mainly due to three sources, the cultural differences between mother and daughter, the influence of mother's original family as well as mother's traumatic experiences, and the influence of Orientalism in the mainstream society. Cultural differences will be analyzed from several aspects, such as ethnic values, language and communication context, living styles, Through the textual analysis of the four novels, this research shows the complex emotional entanglement between mother and daughter.

Keywords – Conflict And Contradiction; Reconciliation And Harmony; Cultural Differences; Traumatic Experiences; Chinese American Families; Mother-Daughter Relationships.

I. INTRODUCTION

The primary source of contradiction between mothers and daughters in Chinese American families is the rift of cultural differences, which leads to numerous quarrels and hostile attitudes towards each other on one end, and a sense of indifference and silence on the other. Mothers, as the first generation of Chinese American immigrants, are traditional Chinese women who crossed the sea to the United States in pursuit of a new life after enduring challenging circumstances in China. Despite having lived in the United States for many years, they fundamentally identify as Chinese and are unwilling to abandon their connection with Chinese traditional values. Conversely, daughters, born and raised in the United States, consider themselves entirely American. The substantial cultural differences between China and the United States serve as triggers for conflicts between mothers and daughters in Chinese American families.

We employ language and empathy, engage in collaborative efforts, and participate in inter-group competition. However, the norms and conventions governing these activities vary across different human groups. The term "culture" encompasses the unwritten rules that dictate how individuals can effectively integrate into their respective groups. In the context of cross-cultural psychology and communication, Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory serves as a fundamental framework and source of guidance. During an interview presentation,⁽¹⁾ Hofstede emphasizes the significance of adopting an international perspective to navigate successfully in a globalized world.

II. METHODS

Geert Hofstede is best known for developing one of the earliest and most popular frameworks for measuring cultural dimensions in a global perspective. "It shows the effects of a society's culture on the values of its members, and how these values

relate to behavior.”⁽²⁾ In 1980, based on a worldwide survey of employee values made by IBM, he proposed the original four dimensions theory along which cultural values can be analyzed: “individualism-collectivism; uncertainty avoidance; power distance (strength of social hierarchy) and masculinity-femininity (task-orientation versus person-orientation).” Later, taking Confucius teachings in the eastern countries and areas into account and based on independent research in Hong Kong, he added a fifth dimension, long-term orientation versus short-term orientation, to distinguish the difference in thinking between the East and West. In 2010, Hofstede added a sixth dimension: indulgence versus self-restraint. “*Self-restraint is an aspect of inhibitory control, is the ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behavior in the face of temptations and impulses.*”⁽³⁾ Here we will focus on the first cultural dimension and the fifth one: the individualism-collectivism and long-term orientation versus short-term orientation.

Collectivism emphasizes the interest of group and nation. They tend to put the interests of the family, organization, and country prior to those of individuals. People have obligations to collective organizations and rely on social relationship. However, individualism is individual-centered with the interest of the individual person being more important than the collective, leading individuals to often rely on themselves. “*Individualists promote realizing one's goals and desires, valuing independence and self-reliance, and advocating that the interests of the individual should gain precedence over the state or a social group, while opposing external interference upon one's own interests by society or institutions such as the government.*”⁽⁴⁾

In terms of collectivism and individualism, there is a prominent example between China and West. Firstly, in social life, it can be seen that many Western people have no permanent group when they join in a party while Chinese like to develop fixed social relationships. Second, Chinese students are used to follow what the school and parents arrange for them while in the west students have more flexibility in choosing what to learn. Third, Chinese often listen to others advice when they encounter important decisions. However, Westerners think it important to make independent decisions. Therefore, China is a typical collectivism while the United States represents individualism. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie compared her situation in old China with that of her daughter. “*It's not like here in the United States—freedom, independence, individual thinking, do what you want, disobey your mother.*” [Tan, 2013; 163]

Long-term orientation emphasizes persistence, thrift, having a sense of shame and ordering relationships by status and observing this order. Short-term orientation attaches importance on personal steadiness and stability, protecting your ‘face’, respect or tradition and reciprocation of greetings, favors, and gifts. China is a society that exhibits a typical long-term orientation while the United States is rather short-term biased society. This long-term tendency is evident in various aspects of Chinese social life. For example, Chinese families often place more emphasis on their children's education than western families. Parents would rather work harder to ensure a better future for their children. There are many examples in Amy Tan's novels. Suyuan worked hard to provide her daughter with piano lessons, Little Yu's mother lived in a shabby flat while invested all her money in her daughter's tuition and dowry.

In societies with long-term tendencies, “relationships” are important. The essence of “relationship” is a subtle, mutually committed, and supportive connection. This reflects the long-term tendency in Chinese culture and is also a manifestation of the relationship between individuals and the collective in Chinese society. In Chinese society, relationships are seen as a future valuable social resource. Whether in work or life, Chinese people tend to establish long-term and stable cooperative relationships. In Amy Tan's novels, we can see that the Joy Luck Club lasts for several decades, and the relationship and companionship between Winnie (Weiwei) and Helen (Hulan) in *The Kitchen God's Wife* lasts for more than fifty years. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, the relationship between Kwan and Olivia transcends life and death, spanning several centuries.

Relationships and collective interests are important for Chinese, which take precedence over personal or individual interests and arrangements. People usually invest time in maintaining family groups or friendship circles. This can sometimes be perceived as burdensome or reluctant by Westerners. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Pearl's husband Philip also felt that way. When he heard they had to go to San Francisco for a relative's engagement, he at the thought of spending staying with the extended family for a weekend. He said to Pear, “*Sometimes I regret that I ever married into a Chinese family.*” [Tan, 2013; 14]

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Chinese culture places a strong emphasis on family obligations. Parents bear the responsibility of ensuring their children's healthy growth and maximizing their potential. Elder siblings are expected to take care of their younger siblings and serve as positive role models for them. Furthermore, children are expected to listen to and respect their parents and elders. However, these traditional Chinese values are not always embraced by the second generation of Chinese Americans. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Pearl is not willingly to attend the extended family's party and she even hates it. "*I'm not really sure why I still give in to my family obligations. I've come to resent the duty.*" [Tan, 2013; 16] Winne told her daughter that if her cousin Peanut did something wrong, she might be blamed. "*I was scared for her, for myself. I was one year older, and New Aunt might blame me for not guiding Peanut properly.*" [Tan, 2013; 119] In *The Joy Luck Club*, Rose didn't understand why her mother told her that she must take care of her younger brothers.

Indeed, Chinese traditional ethical values are rooted in Confucian culture, which places great emphasis on family values, respect for elders, and the importance of harmonious relationships within the family and society. On the other hand, Western ethical values, particularly in the United States, are predominantly influenced by Christian ethics, which often prioritize personal growth, individual rights, and autonomy. Chinese culture is generally characterized by collectivism, where the needs and goals of the group or family take precedence over individual desires. In contrast, American culture tends to lean towards individualism, where personal achievements, independence, and individual rights are highly valued. The mother and daughter grew up in totally different living environments and they accept different values, which leads to opposition and conflict between the mother and daughter.

In traditional Chinese culture, filial piety is a very important virtue, just like the Chinese saying, "filial piety comes first among all the virtues." In the story "Scar" in *The Joy Luck Club*, An-Mei's mother cut off a piece of meat from her arm to make soup for her mother, hoping to save her mother's life. An unfilial person will be considered a person of great rebellion and immorality. A daughter should obey her mother's words and strive to meet her mother's expectations. In traditional Chinese beliefs, children are born by their parents, so children should be grateful for the grace of birth and breeding of the parents, and be in a great debt to their parents. The parents always have high hopes and good intentions on their children. Chinese Confucianism is the foundation of traditional Chinese culture, teaching children to show filial obedience to their parent and respect to their elderly brothers and sisters. In contrary, Christianity is the cultural foundation of the West, advocating that all people are the children of God and come into the world through the bodied of their parents. All people are equal and independent individuals. Consequently, when mothers of Chinese American families uses Chinese standards to demand things from their daughters, daughter may rebel and feel aversion.

This cultural conflict is mainly manifested as the mother's excessive expectations and the daughter's aversion. In *The Joy Luck Club*, immigrant mothers hope that their daughters can embody both Chinese and Western qualities and achieve their ideal life design of becoming a "noble and beautiful swan"; while the daughters believe that they should be true to themselves and that their mothers should not impose their own ideals on them. Mothers hoped for their daughters to be obedient and live up to their expectations. Suyuan yelled at her daughter that "*'Only two kinds of daughters,' she shouted in Chinese. 'Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!'*" Jing-mei shouted that "*then I wish I wasn't your daughter. I wish you weren't my mother*" [Tan, 2019;164] and refused to play the piano. Similarly, Waverly hated her mother for showing her off so she refused to play chess said to her mother in a sarcastic tone "*Why do you have to use me to show off? If you want to show off, then why don't you learn to play chess.*" [Tan, 2019; 109]

In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, the conflict between Ruth and her mum LuLing is also very intense, as demonstrated in the diary episode. "*'I'm an American,' Ruth shouted. 'I have a right to privacy, to pursue my own happiness, not yours!' 'Leave me alone!'*" After her mother left the room, Ruth got up and slammed the door shut. she began to write in her diary, fully aware that her mother would read the words: "*I hate her! She's the worst mother a person could have. She doesn't love me. She doesn't listen to me. She doesn't understand anything about me. All she does is pick on me, get mad, and make me feel worse.*" [Tan, 2001; 158]

Mothers follow the traditional Chinese family education way and ethical values to discipline their daughters while daughters who have accepted American norms think their mothers' criticism and complaints are unbearable so they choose to rebel against and stay away from their mothers. Day by day during their growing up, they are unwillingly to know their mother's culture and past. Though Mothers have lived in the United States for many years, they have never regarded themselves as

Americans and have always taken Americans as foreigners. They are proud of their past and their culture. Daughters, on the other hand, consider themselves Americans.

In addition to different ethnic values, language is also big obstacle. Some mothers, as the first generation of Chinese immigrants, struggle with poor English language skills, which prevent them from effectively explaining the nuances of Chinese culture to their daughters who primarily speak fluent English but have limited knowledge of the Chinese language. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the mothers cannot speak fluent English while the daughters cannot speak Chinese except for several simple words, like “*sh-sh, houche, chrfan, and gwan deng shweijyau. (Pee-pee, choo-choo train, eat, close light sleep)*” [Tan, 2019; 308]. When the mothers want to express deep thoughts, strong emotions, or convey their love and good intentions, they often resort to speaking in Chinese. Their daughters could not understand them, so the mothers kept waiting for the day when they could speak English fluently and express their love, hope, and good intentions to their daughters. When the mothers talk in Chinese, daughters become impatient. Conversely, when the mothers try to explain things in broken English, the daughters perceive them as unintelligent. Lena said that when her mum spoke in Chinese, “*I could understand the words perfectly, but not the meanings.*” [Tan, 2019; 117]

Edward Twitchell Hall, Jr. developed the concept of “high context culture” and “low context culture”. They are “*ends of a continuum of how explicit the messages exchanged in a culture are and how important the context is in communication. High-context cultures often exhibit less-direct verbal and nonverbal communication, utilizing small communication gestures and reading more meaning into these less-direct messages. Low-context cultures do the opposite; direct verbal communication is needed to properly understand a message being communicated and relies heavily on explicit verbal skills.*”⁽⁵⁾ Generally speaking, in high culture, people place greater emphasis on interpersonal relationships, and “building trust” is the primary task of handling anything in this environment. People place more emphasis on collectivism, and think that organizational harmony is more important than personal achievements. We can see that China is with typical high context culture while the United States has low context culture.

In a society with high cultural context, people usually address others, especially someone with higher social status, with courtesy titles. In a society with low cultural context, people are used to greeting each other with name. In Amy Tan's novels, there are many titles expressed in Chinese words in the mothers' stories, such as “Taitai (Mrs.), Syaujye (Miss), Aiyi (auntie), Lau Tai Po (Old lady), Ha-bu (grandmother)”. These titles in Chinese with more respectful attitude, which cannot be replaced with corresponding English expressions of similar meaning. “*Your father called her Lau Tai Po, “Old Lady.” In China, if you called someone Old Lady, you were being respectful, very polite.*” [Tan, 2013; 366]

When individuals from high cultural backgrounds communicate with those from low cultural backgrounds, it is necessary for them to use more direct and clear language to fully express all aspects of their nuances and connotations of their language. On the contrary, when individuals accustomed to low cultural connotations communicate with those accustomed to high cultural connotations, they need to make more effort to understand some unspoken connotations that are commonly agreed upon. Otherwise, people would misunderstand each other or make excessive and insufficient interpretations. That is the situation between Jing-mei and her mother. Jing-mei reflected that “*My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more.*” [Tan, 2019; 31]

In terms of living style, daughters tend to find some of their mother's daily behaviors shameful and embarrassing. For example, when a man at a grocery store yelled at Ying Ying for opening up jars to smell the insides. Her daughter Lena felt so embarrassed that she told her mother that Chinese people were not allowed to shop there. When Lindo praised her daughter to others on the street, Waverly told her mother that it was too embarrassing and not to show off.

Regarding mothers, they are also not fond of some of their daughters' behavior and habits, either. For example, mothers required daughters to eat up and drink up their meals and drinks without wasting anything, but daughters always don't care about that. Lena always left pieces of rice in her bowl and Waverly threw her coffee in the sink. After dinner, Waverly paid for the bill with a ten and three ones. Her mother pulled back the dollar bills and counted out exact change, thirteen cents, and put that on the tray instead, explaining firmly: “*No tip!*” [Tan, 2019; 197] She tossed her head back with a triumphant smile. And while her mother was in the restroom, Waverly slipped the waiter a five-dollar bill.

In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, LuLing felt unsatisfied that Ruth always put work prior to mum and has no time to accompany her but with time to go out dinner and go to movie with friends. LuLing thinks that there is no secret between mum

and daughter, so it is a natural and careful behavior for a mum to read her daughter's diary. However, Roth thinks it forbidden to do that because diary is one's privacy.

In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie thought it strange and wasting money that her daughter's family planned to stay at a hotel rather than stay at home. In China, children and parents usually have a close relationship without mentioning privacy and trouble.

"Ai, too much money!" my mother concluded. "Why waste money that way? You can stay at my house, plenty of rooms."

And Phil had declined gracefully. "No, no, really. It's too much trouble. Really."

"Trouble for who?" my mother said. [Tan, 2013; 16]

The second important element affecting the relationship of mother and daughter is the influence of the mother's original family and her experiences. As the first generation immigrants, mothers suffered a lot before they came to America. These unfortunate experiences in their original family and first marriage directly imprint stamps in the normal establishment of their relationship with their daughters.

Mothers in *The Joy Luck Club*, despite being born and grown up in different places of China from Shanghai, Ningbo to Wuxi, Taiyuan, share similar unfortunate experiences and life perception including unhappy childhoods due to the absence of their mothers, being trapped in bad marriages, and facing other tragic fates in their youth. Lindo had been a child daughter-in-law since the age of two and had to be separated from her family at twelve; Ying Ying, although born into a wealthy family as the first wife's child, was accompanied by Aunty, and then was betrayed by her husband leading her to make the heartbreaking decision to terminate her pregnancy; Suyuan was forced to abandon her twin daughters on the road during the wartime, An-mei witnessed how her mother committed suicide to protect her.

In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie endures a terrible marriage and is haunted by her fear of her ex-husband until his death. In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, LuLing's stubbornness and ignorance contribute to Precious Auntie's suicide, leaving LuLing obsessed with her debt to Precious Auntie and fearful of her curse throughout her life. These experiences of hardship have made them a distinct group within the American environment.

In many of Amy Tan's novels, the mothers have experienced varying degrees of a lack of maternal love during their own upbringing. As a result, they place great importance on providing love and being actively involved in the lives of their daughters, including their education, work, and marriage.

In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie attributes her unhappy experience to the absence of her mother since she was quite little and she had to live with her uncle's family, where she never felt a sense of belonging. At the age of six, her mother disappeared from home, and she began to wait and expect her mother's appearance year by year from then on. Her father refused to see her in case remind him her mother's disgrace. She did not see her father until she was going to get marriage at eighteen years old.

In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, the potential and lasting influence of original family is portrayed vividly. Precious Auntie took care of LuLing as a babysitter and committed suicide for protecting LuLing. Precious Auntie's suicide deeply affected LuLing and became a lingering nightmare in LuLing's heart: *"I refused to believe it. I thought hard to make Precious Auntie appear, to hear her footsteps, see her face. And when I did see her face, it was in dreams and she was angry. She said that a curse now followed me and I would never find peace. I was doomed to be unhappy."*[Tan, 2001; 244] Even after immigrating to America, LuLing still cannot rid herself of the curse deeply embedded in her heart. The car accident deepened her fear of the curse. So, LuLing anxiously waited for misfortune to come while simultaneously striving to protect her daughter from the curse. This psychological state of fear, anxiety, and anxiety affected her normal communication with her daughter.

In addition to cultural and personal elements, another significant aspect is the social element, namely, the influence of Orientalism on mainstream social consciousness. The works of Chinese American writers, including Amy Tan, are more or less influenced by the Orientalist ideas in American mainstream society. Orientalism refers to a general patronizing Western attitude towards Middle Eastern, Asian, and North African societies. *"In Said's analysis, the West essentializes these societies as static and undeveloped—thereby fabricating a view of Oriental culture that can be studied, depicted, and reproduced in the service of imperial power. Implicit in this fabrication, writes Said, is the idea that Western society is developed, rational, flexible, and*

superior.”[Mamdani, 2004; 32] In simple words, orientalists tend to look down upon countries they perceive as undeveloped, including those in the Middle East, Asia, and North Africa.

In another way, Orientalism involves viewing the East from a Western perspective, often associating it with backwardness and considering it a symbol of stupidity and barbarism.. “*This allows Western imagination to see ‘Eastern’ cultures and people as both alluring and a threat to Western civilization.*”⁽⁶⁾ As a Chinese American woman, Amy Tan has an inseparable Eastern identity, which leads her to portray the contradiction between her mother's lineage identity and mainstream ideology. On one hand, the influence of Orientalism in the social mainstream may impact her and lead her to deny her roots, as the fate of women represented by her mother is considered backward; On the other hand, her inherent connection to her roots compels her to seek them out, driven by an inherent need.

For daughters who embrace the American culture, many of their mother's ideas are simply unreasonable, ridiculous, and superstitious. Every time their mothers give them some advice or warnings, they tend to turn a deaf ear to them and even take them as nonsense. For example, in the parable story “American Translation”, When the mother saw the mirrored armoire in the master suite of her daughter's new condominium. She said “*You cannot put mirrors at the foot of the bed. All your marriage happiness will bounce back and turn the opposite way.*” but the daughter replied “*Well, that's the only place it fits, so that's where it stays.*”[Tan, 2019; 171] The daughter even felt irritated that her mother saw bad omens in everything and that she had heard enough these warnings all her life.

Jing-mei was bored with her mother's criticism, said that “*I used to dismiss her criticisms as just more of her Chinese superstitions, beliefs that conveniently fit the circumstances.*”[Tan, 2019; 23] Rose also thought her mother had superstitions. “*My mother had a superstition, in fact, that children were predisposed to certain dangers on certain days, all depending on their Chinese birthdate.*” [Tan, 2019; 141] When Lindo told her daughter to finish her coffee and not to throw her blessings away, Waverly told her mother that “*‘Don't be so old-fashioned, Ma,’ she told me, finishing her coffee down the sink. ‘I'm my own person.’*”[Tan, 2019; 309] Rose admitted that Ted was more attractive than her brothers and other Chinese boys that she had dated in lots of aspects, among them “the fact that his parents immigrated from Tarrytown, New York, not Tientsin, China.”

In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, LuLing holds the belief Ruth could communicate with dead persons so she asked Ruth to communicate with Precious Auntie through a sand table. The conversations between LuLing and Precious Auntie often make Ruth's hair stand on end. “*Her mother took Ruth's television-watching as a sign that she had nothing better to do. And sometimes she would see this as a good opportunity for a talk. She would take down the sand tray from the top of the refrigerator and set it on the kitchen table. Ruth's throat would grow tight. Not this again.*”[Tan, 2001; 123]

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Olivia often dislikes Kwan and dislikes Kwan's stories about ghosts and memories of past lives. Olivia even said bad words about Kwan that Kwan was sent to a mental hospital. The daughters feel that their mother's or sister's ideology is backward, and they even draw boundaries and prove that they do not belong to the backward faction. This is especially evident in Olivia, who often gets angry at the psychological and behavioral characteristics of the Chinese people displayed in Kwan when she was ridiculed by children.

The Chinese daughters were born, raised, and educated in the United States, thus, they have been unconsciously affected by the Orientalist ideas in the mainstream society, which directly influenced their attitudes towards their mothers directly. It is also this consciousness that makes them subconsciously reject their Chinese ancestry and pretend to be Americans. Some researchers have pointed out that the daughters in Amy Tan's novels even reject their mothers as despicable elements that influence the formation of their American identity. The novels show us the influence of mainstream social consciousness on human nature, which can even mislead people in heterogeneous environments about their self-awareness.

In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Ruth invited friends and relatives to have a big mid-autumn meal. People quickly divided into two sections at two separate tables, the Chinese section and the non-Chinese section. LuLing and other Chinese usually consider jellyfish a delicious dish while non-Chinese people even don't know what it is. When Boomer asked what's that, Dory teased him to try some worms. Then Boomer screamed to ask others to take it away. “*Dory was hysterical with laughter. Art passed along the entire table's worth of jellyfish to Ruth, and Ruth felt her stomach begin to ache.*”[Tan, 2001; 98] From this paragraph, we see that Ruth was separated from American group and put into Chinese group. Art's behavior showed the attitude of American majority towards Chinese American. We also see Rose's longing for be part of the American group and her embarrassment at joining the Chinese group. Ruth's performance revealed her inner longing for the American community, and this hidden

contradictory mentality directly affects her understanding of the marginalized Chinese American community in mainstream society and her perception on her mother.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, through different approaches to the sources of the contradiction between mother and daughter, the novel opens a door for readers to know about the living background of Chinese Americans and the various experiences they have encountered comprehensively. Furthermore, the novel provides us with valuable insights into the mother-daughter relationships in Chinese American families and even our own families. In exploring the root causes, the author also illustrates the process of self-recognition. The process of understanding one's mother is intertwined with a daughter's self-awareness. In the era of globalization, cultures are gradually becoming more diverse and inclusive. Cultural conflicts are no longer only a problem faced by Chinese American families, but also the reshaping of human souls, which has become a focus of social attention. In this sense, Amy Tan's exploration of mother-daughter relationships is somewhat enlightening.

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