

**CHINESE MOTHERS AS OTHER BEFORE AMERICAN  
—BORN DAUGHTERS —ON THE CHINESE MOTHERS' COMMUNICATION IN  
*THE JOY LUCK CLUB* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF *ORIENTALISM***

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**ABSTRACT**

Among all the Chinese American writers, Amy Tan undoubtedly occupies a representative position. Her novel *The Joy Luck Club* wins several prestigious awards. Based on the concept of the Other encompassed in *Orientalism*, this paper makes an attempt at analyzing the Chinese mothers' communication before their American—born daughters. Under Confucianism, the Chinese mothers often see their American daughters as subordinates and expect absolute authority over them. And their style of communication is evasive enough to be misleading. In addition, they all speak their Chinese dialects and a kind of broken English. All of these mark them as the in assimilable other in the eyes of their American-born daughters.

These depictions of Chinese by Amy Tan participate in the dominant American discourse of Orientalizing Chinese. It is easy to see that her heavy painting on the above-mentioned aspects, to some extent, reinforces the Chinese mothers as the image of Other in the marginal culture.

**Key words:** other; communication; Orientalism; Chinese mother;

## 1 Introduction

*The Joy Luck Club* is structured around four central pairs of Chinese mothers and American daughters: Suyuan Woo and Jing-mei June Woo; An-mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan; Lindo Jong and Waverly Jong; and Ying-ying St. Clair and Lena St. Clair. In the novel, the stories of these four pairs are interwoven together with the mothers and daughters telling their stories as the case may be in life. These mother-daughter stories mirror the conflicts between the East and the West. Speaking specifically, the Joy Luck mothers are representatives of the Chinese. Although the Joy Luck mothers migrate to America for decades of years, they still remember traditional education in their childhood, and obey feudal patriarchal ideas. Their common ideal is to educate their daughters strictly so as to help them get rid of women's fate and be happy. However, with mothers' constraint, their daughters struggle with them in various ways. Even the mothers find themselves almost strangers to their American-born daughters. The two generations barely communicate and actually face each other across a barrier that not only divides generations but also separates the East and the West, the immigrant Chinese and the American-born. Their means of communication and ideals of communication are different, so are their styles of communication. All these differences mark the Chinese represented by the mothers as the Other in the eyes of their American-born daughters.

## 2 Said and Orientalism

To make a better understanding of this thesis, I shall introduce the theory I shall employ in analyzing Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*—Said's Orientalism.

Edward Said is an internationally renowned American literary and cultural critic, and his great work *Orientalism* has brought about a shocking great response all over the world. According to Said, Orientalism is "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based in the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (Said 1). So we can say that Orientalism is a manner of regularized writing, vision, and study dominated by Western ideological biases.

Orientalism in Said's view involves mainly three aspects. The first is that Orientalism, claiming to be an objective academic scholarship, is more associated with politics in that it provides assistance for European and American expansion and colonization. The second is that Orientalism is a style of thought that base upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and Occident. These two layers of meaning are related to the development of the institutional and administrative procedures of Western imperialism. The third is that Orientalism has produced a false description of the Orient because in the Orientalists' eyes the Orient is fixed, changeless, exotic, incapable of defining itself. This stereotyped view establishes a sense of cultural and intellectual superiority for the Westerners. In Western intellectual discourse, the Orient and the Oriental are constructed as Other, different from them, reduced to silence and demeaned as an image to be dominated. Constructed as an Other, the Oriental is deprived of sense of belonging and becomes a silent and fixed stereotype without resistance. The reason for this kind of construction of Other is that the Westerners want to interpret the Orient and Oriental in the light of the Western theory. The Orient is one of the West's "deepest and recurring images of the Other, the Orient has helped to define the West as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Said 2).

Orientalism reveals that the West posts its hegemony over the East through placing the East as an inferior Other and strengthening the West self-image of superiority. The Westerners view their groups and country as the best. They judge Orient from the Occidental perspective instead of the Oriental one in spite of different ideologies, traditions and values. Judging an Oriental behavior from the Western standard results in antagonism and incommensurability. Furthermore, the Oriental behavior represented to the European

readers has been orientalized, far from its original. Thus the Orient has been defined as queer, irrational, backward, silent, etc. while the West is organic, democratic and reasonable. Located in such a situation—outside the Orient and inside the Occidental cultural hegemony—the Orient becomes a field that provides the Western writers with a good chance to exert their imagination, to invent something based on their imagination. As the product of their imagination and fantasy, the representation is distant from the real Orient because it is a misrepresentation.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan writes the Chinese and Chinese culture as the Other in the form of exoticism. When she writes about how the Chinese mother are inassimilable in terms of communication, Tan is just reinforcing the negative stereotype of the Chinese in her version of Orientalism, and all of her depictions participate in the dominant American discourse of Orientalizing Chinese.

### 3. Discussion

#### *3.1 Mothers' Means of Communication as Other*

As a primary means of communication, language is the essential carrier of culture. To speak different languages is to bear different culture background and to pass on different information. With immigration following world social changes, linguistic clashes also stand out as a prominent phenomenon. The people moving into a new country have to face the anxiety and alienation from changes in their living style and expression of their thoughts that have long been solidly established by their mother tongue. Furthermore, most of minority ethnic language are also excluded and discriminated in the white mainstream society.

In the aforesaid background, the *Joy Luck* mothers and their language, Chinese, meet with the same circumstances in America. Lacking a shared language and a common tongue, the mothers find themselves overwhelmed by the powerful force of English discourse; as a result, it is difficult for them to communicate even with their daughters. Mothers and daughters are in a bilingual world. For mothers, despite their insistence on speaking Chinese in most cases, their lovely familiar Chinese language is already too far away from them now. They can only speak and express in “fragile English” (Tan 6). For daughters, they have become unsympathetic strangers who do not even speak their mothers’ language. For instance, as Jing-mei points out, she and her mother do not communicate in the same language. Jing-mei speaks to her mother in English, and Suyuan invariably responds in Chinese. Also, Lena narrates: “When we were alone, my mother would speak in Chinese, saying things my father could not possibly imagine. I could understand the words perfectly, but not the meaning. One thought led to another without connection” (Tan 109).

Even so, the *Joy Luck* mothers still stick to speaking Chinese, because their “mother tongue was a tool for resistance to a hegemonic culture” (Heung 604). For example, Suyuan Woo can resume her Chinese centripetal pride in the Chinese language when telling her daughter the following: “My table was from my family and was of a very fragrant red wood, not what you call rosewood, but ‘hong mu’, which is so fine there’s no English word for it” (Tan 11). Her emphasis upon English’s imperfectness for lacking the “signified” of the signifier “hong mu” reveals with faith her identity as a Chinese. Her irony with stubbornness acts as a sound resistance against the powerful exclusion by the extensive usage of English, which looms as a dominant threat to Chinese and drives it to the margin. Her clear distinction between “you” and “me” draws our attention to the two worlds to which she and her daughter respectively belong. When she retreats to her world of China and Chinese, she naturally pushes her daughter out to the world of the white and English. The mother tongue easily takes the lead of the mother’s linguistic loyalty and dignity when she breaks the silence and cries out her seldom-told thoughts.

Though they are definitely aware that power and position in American culture lie, to a great extent, in their ability to speak correct English with the approved accents, the mothers create their own private hierarchy within their circle, privileging the Chinese language. The mothers use Chinese to articulate their most important thoughts, to exclude those whom they wish to ignore, and to speak in their own authentic voices.

At the same time, the Joy Luck mothers, living in a cultural enclave of their own, have created their own speech, a patois of Chinese and English that often puzzles their daughters. After a careful studies of her aunties, June situating as an outsider, tells the reader, "The Joy Luck aunties begin to make small talk, not really listening to each other. They speak in their special language, half in broken English, half in their own Chinese dialects" (Tan 23-24). In fact, the hybrid tongue for the mothers is a form of self-identification, a means of inscribing their unique existence on a culture that continues to exclude them, a strategy for preserving their heritage even as they embrace a new life. However, the daughters thus determine not to identify themselves with their parents and view their parents as the Other when they hear this special language.

In Tan's writing, she treats the Chinese and English languages as barometers of polarized identities. To be Chinese means speaking Chinese and broken English and to be American means speaking fluent English. By this token, the Joy Luck mothers are portrayed in further opposition to their American-born daughters.

The American-born daughters in this novel are constructed as lacking sufficient knowledge of Chinese, which makes lots of misunderstanding between mothers and daughters. June in the novel makes a disparaging comment about her mother's Chinese expression "chabudwo," saying that, "It was one of those Chinese expressions that means the better half of mixed intentions. I can never remember things I don't understand in first place" (Tan 6). In a conversation between Waverly Jong and her mother Lindo Jong, Lindo is proudly speaking to her daughter about Sun, her ancestor. But the daughter "didn't know where this conversation was going" (Tan 202). And the mother talks about Taiyuan, her hometown, but the daughter mistakes Taiyuan for Taiwan and is subsequently visibly irritated when her mother loudly corrects her. The daughter's unintentional mistake, combined with the mother's anger, destroys their attempt to communicate. Mothers and daughters' different attitudes towards the Joy Luck Club are quite illustrative. "The Joy Luck Club" for mothers is a symbol of their determination of never giving up hopes in face of difficulties and the courage to seek for "joy" and "luck" in face of tribulations. In contrast, the existence of "the Joy Luck Club" perplexes and embarrasses their daughters. Jing-mei points out that as a child she considers the club to be some of shameful Chinese secret society, just like the ku klux klan. In the daughters' minds, "joy luck" is not a word, and it does not exist. Devoid of a similar cultural background and a shared life experience between them, the mothers and daughters can only watch each other across the ocean, thus a gap appearing between them.

None of the daughters feel guilty of the fact they know little of their mothers' language. On the contrary, they try to situate themselves outside of the Chinese-speaking world; they reject the Chinese language; they repudiate their Chinese mothers' broken English. In their eyes, mothers' language is alienate from their fluent English and cannot be accepted. Tan has done a good job in the mothers' incapacities in language so as to portray them as the Other. In her novel, Tan describes the Chinese mothers' inability to pronounce multisyllabic English words properly, reinforcing the stereotype of comic Chinese. One of the immigrant Chinese mothers, An-mei, does not understand why Rose goes to see a psychiatrist for a broken marriage rather than talk to her own mother, Tan shows that An-mei cannot articulate the word "psychiatrist" and refers to it as "psyche-atricks." Another Chinese mother, Ying-ying is shown to have the same problem. In her narrative, Ying-ying tells the reader that her American daughter Lena is an "arty-techy," supposedly for architect, and she pronounces social security as "so-so security." On the other hand, as a Master in

Linguistics, Tan is very sensitive to such language disabilities. She successfully separates the American-born daughters from the Chinese mothers through her presentation of their language capabilities. She puts the Chinese mothers in the “Other” place once more. When Waverly is getting married for a second time, she asks her mother, Lindo, to go to her beauty Parlor. Lindo is acutely aware that Waverly does so because her daughter is ashamed for her mother and worries about what her American husband’s parents will think of “this backward old Chinese woman” (Tan 290). Waverly keeps telling the hairdresser, “She wants a soft wave. She doesn’t want it to look kinky or weird” (Tan 291). She speaks for her mother and translates English for her mother as though Lindo does not understand English. Obviously, the American-born daughter is indicating that her mother, a real Chinese, has difficulty communicating with real Americans, which is what the Americans generally think of the Chinese. Besides, the American-born daughter consciously uses the fluent English, thus resisting the mother’s language.

Above all, the daughters’ language attitudes to resist the awkward English spoken by their powerless mothers and their difficulty in understanding Chinese have both push their mothers into the Other situations.

### *3.2 Mothers’ Ideals of Communication as Other*

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan portrays an emotional “tug-of-war” in the daughters between love and hate, between the awe and the fear they feel for their mothers as they seek to gain a degree of autonomy for themselves (Ho 327). Actually the “War” between mothers and daughters is caused by the conflicts between two kinds of different cultural values of the East and the West, that is ideals of communication.

Confucianism continues to be the fundamental source for the Chinese way of life for over two thousand years. It plays a big role in the families and societies as well. Under Confucianism, a person’s place is defined in relation primarily to other members of the family and then to those in the society. As to the parent-child relationship, “Filial piety is the basis of virtue, and the origin of culture” (Lin 176). The immigrant mothers, brought up in a culture deeply grounded in such Confucianism, are greatly influenced by the cultural value. In Chinese traditional society, the parents have the absolute authority over their children in the family. The mothers have the duty of taking care of their daughters and the right to arrange their daughters’ lives and expect unconditional obedience from them. On the other hand, The American-born daughters embrace the American ideal of individualism and separate themselves from their mothers’ domination and seek their own independence, expecting to be treated as equal individuals. Thus, the conflicts between mothers and daughters are fierce and frequent. And the daughters have sufficient reasons to feel uncomfortable with their parents and to view them as the Other.

Suyuan Woo expects her daughter June to be a prodigy and best, without considering of June as an individual but simply a Chinese daughter. After the failure of that attempt, Suyuan searches for stories about remarkable children, taking examples from them to test June. Since Suyuan is only making all those efforts single-handedly without deep communication with June to understand her real interest or potential, June often fails the tests and thus disappoints her mother at times. As a result, June develops her antagonism and hates her mother’s expectation of her as well as the tests. In spite of all that, Suyuan Woo is undaunted in her pursuit. She discovers a new option and makes June play the piano. Suyuan is willing to trade house-cleaning services for weekly piano for her daughter to practice every day. While doing all these, she never considers of June’s aspiration and feeling. Whereas June believes that it is not equal and she has the right not to play the piano to please her mother and not to realize her mother’s dream, though she likes playing the piano. June refuses to be raised as a submissive Chinese daughter. So she launches a battle against Suyuan’s domination and asserts her individuality by sabotaging her mother’s every effort to bring out a genius in her against her own will. She pretends to be bored with the tests given by her mother, deliberately plays the

wrong notes during her piano lessons and fails the “talent-show” piano concert planned by her mother. However, Suyuan is not “defeated” and she still forces her daughter to practice it. Similarly, June does not yield a step, “I am not your slave, this is not China” (Tan 152). But the dominant mother still insists on her thought:

She yanked me by the arm, pulled me off the door, snapped off the TV. She was frighteningly strong, half pulling, half carrying me toward the piano as I kicked rugs under my feet. She lifted me up and onto the hard bench (Tan 153).

When June says she can never be the kind of daughter the mother wants her to be, Suyuan shouts in Chinese, “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!” (Tan 153)

Like Suyuan, Lindo Jong also seems to be possessive and dominating. Her daughter, Waverly relates a story of how she shocks her mother to show that she is her own person and has her separate existence. A national chess champion at the age of nine, Waverly is considered a prodigy. Her photo appears on the cover of the life magazine. She enjoys all the possible privileges at home. Her brothers have to do all her chores; she has her own bedroom, driving her brothers to sleep in the living room; she can leave half-finished rice bowls on the table once she claims that a full stomach is bad for the brain. However, there is one thing she is not exempt from, that is, accompanying her mother to the market, where Lindo proudly introduces her celebrity daughter to everybody. Lindo talks to people as if she devised all the strategies and tries to take all the credits for Waverly’s victories. She polishes Waverly’s trophies several times a day to satisfy her own sense of pride in being the mother of a prodigy. While Lindo sees Waverly’s honor as her own just as a traditional Chinese mother regards her daughter as one of her possessions, Waverly sees herself as a separate individual. Therefore, Waverly grows increasingly annoyed by her mother’s behaviors, and she tells her mother to “shut up.” When the mother proudly walks with her daughter on the street and says to whoever looks her way: “This is my daughter Waverly Jong” (Tan 101), the conflict between mother and daughter reaches a boiling point with Waverly shouting at her mother, “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 101)

The tensions between the two pairs of mothers and daughter — Suyuan and June, Lindo and Waverly, are far more intense than the usual conflicts between mother and daughter. The roots of such tensions are entangled with different ideals about being a parent or a child. As we know, Chinese mothers expect their children to bring them honor. Suyuan Woo and Lindo Jong are created to represent such stereotypes. Both mothers use their daughters to advance their own interests. In fact, the two characters have virtually identical personalities. Waverly pointedly characterizes her relationship with Lindo as follows: “In her hands, I always became the pawn. I could only run away. And she was the queen, able to move in all directions, relentless in her pursuits, always able to find my weakest spots” (Tan 199), which sums up the relationship between Suyuan and June as well. In Chinese culture, it is very natural for a mother to help her daughter succeed and share her daughter’s happiness and success; but in the United States, people attach importance to self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Thus mothers’ good intention is often misunderstood by their daughters, and the conflict arises.

### *3.3 Mothers’ Communicative Styles as Other*

Chinese communication is notably evasive, indirect, and misleading to some persons from a different culture. According to a questionnaire survey conducted at the start of China’s Open Door Policy, communication breakdowns, among the factors that had contributed to the failure of the Sino—American business negotiations, comprise nearly forty percent.

Amy Tan presents two perfect examples of Chinese evasiveness in *The Joy Luck Club*. The American-born June has some Jewish friends in college and she has played Jewish and Chinese mahjong with them several times. Curious about the differences between Jewish and Chinese mahjong, June turns to her mother, who plays the game at the Joy Luck Club, for an explanation. Upon hearing the question, Suyuan says immediately that the Jewish and Chinese ways of playing mahjong are entirely different, “Jewish mahjong, they watch only for their own tile, play only with their eyes” (Tan 20). Suyuan explains in her broken English and then switches to Chinese:

Chinese mahjong, you must play using your head, very tricky. You must watch what everybody else throws away and keep that in your head as well. And if nobody plays well, then the game becomes like Jewish mahjong. Why play? There’s no strategy. You are just watching people make mistakes (Tan 22-23).

June selects this incident to stress the cross-purpose communication between her mother and herself. Addressing the reader, June says, “These kinds of explanations made me feel my mother and I spoke two different languages, which we did” (Tan 23). Suyuan mostly speaks Chinese and talks in her evasive way in answer to June’s question. While June’s language—her English and her way of expression—is clear, her mother’s is elusive. June still remains confused about the differences between the two games.

Sometimes the cross-purpose communication between June and Suyuan is reflected in the process of interpretation. June complains about her failure to communicate properly with Suyuan: “My mother and I never fully understood one another. We translated each other’s meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, which my mother heard more” (Tan 27). June hears what is said, but Suyuan elicits meaning between the lines, which explains why she usually hears more than what is said.

June’s friend Waverly has the same dilemma with her mother Lindo Jong in their communication. Hearing somebody in her class talking about Chinese torture, Waverly goes home and asks her mother Lindo about it. First astonished upon hearing the question, Lindo recovers and summons up her pride, saying, “Chinese people do many things .... Chinese people do business, do medicine, do paining. Not lazy like American people. We do torture. Best torture” (Tan 92). Lindo talks around Waverly’s question rather than answer it, which leaves Waverly still in puzzle. Waverly gives another example to show her mother indirect and misleading manner of expression. One day inviting Waverly and her American fiancé Rich for dinner, Lindo makes her famous pork with preserved vegetables. Upon putting the dish on the table, Lindo starts making disparaging remarks about it. After tasting a small bite, she complains, “Ai! This dish not salty enough, no flavor ... It is too bad to eat” (Tan 97). In fact, Lindo does not mean directly what she said. The complaint is supposed to be taken as a cue for the family to eat some and proclaim the supreme taste of dish. Waverly grows up with her mother, thus knowing (also resenting) the Chinese custom. But her fiancé Rich does not know the implication and takes Lindo’s remarks as the face value. In response to Lindo’s complaint, Rich promptly pours some soy sauce on the platter as an attempt to help. Waverly describes her mother’s horrified eyes and Rich’s naïve complacency. Waverly forecasts her fear of her mother for Rich’s sake even before the meeting. She is worried about Rich’s vulnerability in front of her mother’s “passing remarks” and “innuendoes.” Her worries prove to be not without ground. As a result of Rich’s lack of understanding of the Chinese way of communication, he fails miserably in her future mother-in-law’s eyes. Waverly relates resentfully this anecdote to show mother’s misleading way of communication.

Addressing the differences between Chinese and Western cultural dispositions as related to communication, Linda Young points out, “For one thing, the bonds between Chinese writer-reader or speaker-listener imply a deep and dynamic mutuality between participants that reflects belief in the interconnectedness and interdependence of existence. Chinese put ideas together to draw others into a collaborative effort to make

people partners in mutual meaning-making” (Young 106). Both Suyuan and Lindo are typical Chinese speakers and listeners. Their discourse reflects the dynamics of mutual meaning-making between speakers and listeners. Suyuan especially cherishes the Chinese emphasis on “meaning beyond words.” However, June thinks, “It was one of those Chinese expressions that means the better half of mixed intentions. I can never remember things I didn’t understand in the first place” (Tan 6). The difficulty of communication naturally leads to the growing alienation of American daughters from their Chinese mothers and mothers’ culture.

In contrast to the Chinese way of communication which is exasperating to the American-born daughters, the American style is sympathetically shown to be clear, simple and direct. Observing American straightforwardness, Waverly tells her mother to call her ahead of time instead of dropping by her apartment without forewarning. Lindo, however, senses rejection and offence in Waverly’s American-style request. There are communicative as well as culture differences involved here. Culturally, a Chinese mother can visit her daughter at any time. The main reason for that is the granted intimacy between a Chinese mother and daughter. Communication wise, the daughter, no matter how much she dislikes it, seldom tells her mother not to visit unless pre-notified. Any attempt of suggestion or rejection would be done in a much more roundabout way. Chinese communicative style bears the profound impact of Confucianism, which envisions a society of people in hierarchical relationships and mutual obligations. People live a life of respect and are willing to participate in the making of communal harmony. Waverly’s simple, straightforward suggestion sounds inevitably too thorny and alienating to Lindo, who, in consequence of the event, refuses to visit Waverly unless formally invited. In Waverly’s narrative she is using this as an example to illustrate her mother’s image of being hard to communicate with. So the Other is produced.

#### **4. Conclusion**

There are issues of cultural assumptions and perceptions involved in a certain discourse style. The lack of understanding of those issues has directly shaped the image of the inscrutable Chinese. Growing up within immigrant Chinese communities, Tan dedicates to dissecting the different cultural value lying behind the mothers and the daughters, that is, the contrast between Confucianism and individualism. And, she exposes the predicament of the mothers while interacting with their daughters, leaving the misunderstanding intact. Eventually, the mothers are portrayed as strange and stubborn Other in the eyes of the American-born daughters.

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