

# A Brief Analysis of Cultural Identities of Chinese Americans in The Joy Luck Club from the Perspective of Socio-constructivism

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## Abstract

The novel *The Joy Luck Club* has been widely discussed in terms of the searching of cultural identity. The purpose of this paper is to reexamine the struggle and perplexation of the Chinese Americans from the perspective of socio-constructivism, a sociological theory arguing that knowledge is constructed by the interactions within in groups. Based on the foundation of socio-constructivism, with a particular focus on Vygotsky's developmental arguments, I will analyze the construction of cultural identities of the mothers and daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* by applying an intercultural perspective, consisting of three parts, namely, the identity crisis, struggling and negotiation and the spiritual return.

## Keywords

Cultural identity; Intercultural communication; Chinese Americans; socio-constructivism; Social constructivism; The Joy Luck Club.

## 1. Introduction

As the culturally-diverse societies are established and communications among different cultural groups have prevailed in the contemporary world, the self-perceptions of the individuals are accumulated and composed in the intercultural contexts, where the inevitable cultural conflicts take place as a motivator to self-recognition and self-improvement. People tend to feel comfortable in in-group communication, while usually confused and disoriented in an unfamiliar cultural context. Conflicts emerge when strangeness in a foreign culture confronts with the inner knowledge of one's domestic culture, which usually potentially determines one's language habits, living routines and thinking pattern.

Eager to be recognized by the unfamiliar society, the immigrants are struggling to orient themselves and searching their identities in both interpersonal and intrapersonal planes. The dynamic process of social construction in the formation of identity has been vivified in the literary works whose authors actually are the composites of different cultures and whose themes are biographical searching for identities in intercultural environments, among which *The Joy Luck Club*, focusing on the lives of 4 groups of immigrant mothers and daughters, is a typical representation of the inner voices of the Chinese Americans.

## 2. An Overview of Socio-Constructivism

### 2.1. Theoretical Background

Constructivism considers learning as a construction of meaning. Originated from the time of Socrates when learning is believed as a process of constructing knowledge when enquiring and being enquired, constructivism is a term derived from multiple psychological and philosophical studies in the 20th century, among which the developmental perspective of Jean Piaget (1969) and the emergence of cognitive psychology under the guidance of figures like Jerome Bruner

(1966) are considered as pioneers of this theory. (Perkins 45-55) Constructivism is an aggregational theoretical form of both behaviorist and cognitive views. Basically, the “constructivist stance maintains that learning is a process of constructing meaning; it is how people make sense of their experience” (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999, p. 260). In summary, constructivism views the way people learn as a constructing process, during which they understand the existing objects and events that occur.

Three strands of constructivism are recognized, among which 2 major ones have aroused the most heated discussion, (a) cognitive perspective by Jean Piaget and (b) social-cultural perspective (or Socio-constructivist perspective) by Lev Vygotsky. Despite they both propose that learning is an internalized constructive process of a person, when Piaget focuses on the cognitive process of children themselves, Vygotsky puts it further into the society and emphasizes the social environment as a mediator in the learner’s negotiation of knowledge.

In constructivism, learning is considered as a personal interpretation of the reality, a self-constructive process where the person experiences the real world and confronts the new elements with the current knowledge as an active negotiation. Firstly, the person constructs new understanding based on the former knowledge. Secondly, instead of viewing learning as a passive reception of the environment, constructivist learning is an active process of negotiating where the subjectivity of the person is highlighted as the master that manipulates the mind and the internalization.

Vygotsky’s social constructivism could be dated back to John Dewey’s “My Pedagogical Creed”, in which he states that “educational process has two sides-one psychological and one sociological” and they are “organically related”. (Dewey 77-80) According to Piaget, understanding is built up step by step through active participation and involvement, however, Bruner (1973) states that learning is a social process, whereby students construct new concepts and knowledge based on their current knowledge.

## 2.2. Theoretical Framework

Social constructivism extends constructivism by incorporating the role of other factors and culture in development. It is a sociological theory that considers humans are socially developed and knowledge is constructed jointly in the social interactions with other human-beings. This theory assumes that the understanding and perceptions are constructed through the coordination among humans and individual’s communication with the social environment. The most significant assumptions of this theory are, one the one hand, human beings rationalize their experience by creating a model of the social world and the way that it functions and, one the other hand, language functions as the most essential mechanism that guides the construction of human reality. (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009)

In the second tenet of sociocultural theory (SCT), Vygotsky makes his claim that the higher mental functions of human, originate from social activities. He argues that, according to general genetic law of cultural development, human’s higher mental functions generate from the social plane, where the interpersonal communication is involved, and are further developed in the psychological plane, where the intrapersonal communication take place in the mind and is heard in inner speech of the person. While participating in the social activities, the person consciously or unconsciously internalizes the social perceptions and the patterns of the social activities. This process of internalization is a gradual movement and has three different stages: firstly, the object-regulated stage, at which the individual is completely determined by the environment; next, the other-regulated stage, where the individual’s mental function relies on the assistance of the tutor or instructor; finally, the self-regulated stage, where the individual is able to take control of his or her higher mental processes.

Revolutionary as SCT is, Vygotsky undermined Piaget’s claim that higher mental functions progress independent of social contexts and they are not influenced by external processes,

which Vygotsky refers to a variety of social, cultural, and institutional settings. Quite on the contrary, higher mental functions develop by means of internalization of many patterns observed on the social plane. With the environment being transformed by different individuals, the internalization processes reflect but are not identical to the external factors.

In order to understand higher mental functions, the sociocultural contexts to which the individual has been exposed in the course of his or her life are to be further analyzed. To explain the relation between the interpersonal and the intrapersonal plane, Vygotsky developed the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which he defined as the distance between the actual developmental level and the level of potential development, or between the independent level and the assumed level of performance under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. Vygotsky claims that an essential feature of learning is that it awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that only operate in human interactions, which makes learning a necessary aspect of developing culturally organized, specifically human, psychological functions. (Vygotsky, 90)

In addition, the abstract concept identity can be partly concluded as a socially-constructed interpretation of oneself and the real world and the construction is multi-dimensional and dynamic. Being exposed to a milieu consists of political, social, religious and cultural aspects, it is through the dynamic negotiation with others that individuals form their own perceptions of the self and the other, establishing their own identities in the society. This dynamic characteristic of identity is presented most vividly in intercultural communication, when different cultural backgrounds intersect and conflict with each other. Just as Ting-Toomey's declaration that "individuals acquire and develop their identities through interactions with others in their cultural group", different cultural identities confront with each other and negotiate, when conflicts generate and force the individuals to alter their behaviour out of politeness or even safety concerns. Despite improving the communication skills, individuals also abandon the previous identities and reconstruct new cultural identities in a new social environment, where struggle between the old and new identities are observed.

### **3. Cultural Identities of Chinese Americans in Joy Luck Club**

Joy Luck Club, a novel written by an influential Chinese American writer Amy Tan, is a bildungsroman of four Chinese American daughters and their relationships with their Chinese immigrant mothers. The three phases of their construction of cultural identities set the typical example interpreting Vygotsky's three stages of internalization mentioned earlier.

#### **3.1. The Survival Crisis of the Chinese Americans**

Just as Kobena Mercer points out that "identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis; when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of uncertainty" (Mercer 43), the cause of Chinese Americans' survival crisis lies in the inevitable uncertainty of their beliefs when faced with various cultural conflicts, during which they experience their first stage of internalization completely controlled by the environment, object-regulated stage.

The crisis of the mother generation, instead of beginning in the new American culture, is actually generated from their old Chinese lives, where they already suffer from the miserable and unlucky experiences of hopeless marriages, war, life pressures, etc. The traumatic hearts feel puzzled when the reality fails to meet their expectations in the cultural conflicts. That is, the solidified traditional Chinese perceptions of women, parenting and other values has rooted in every aspect of their thoughts, namely, the cultural identity of a Chinese contrasts with that of an American; the imagined democracy, freedom turn to dust in the face of language barrier, American's prejudices towards Chinese and inequality received in the society. Furthermore,

when the mother generation involves in various social roles as a Chinese wife in America, a mother of a Chinese American child, they are bewildered by the unbearable pressure from all aspects of life, which makes them doubt if they have made the right choice to live in America. Therefore, their cultural identities are challenged not only by the changes of social roles in the new social environment, but also by the distrust of themselves in choosing to live like an American.

On the contrary, the daughters experience survival crisis as indigenous Americans with Chinese roots, emerges from the blindly acceptance of American values and the ignorance or even biases of Chinese culture. And this crisis also can be observed in both family life with mothers and the social relationships with their partners or spouses. They receive American education in schools and accept American pursuit of freedom and independence that penetrates in every corner of social life, which includes the potential prejudices towards Chinese “uncivilized” culture. Therefore, they always find themselves at lost when they couldn’t understand their mother’s intentions through their “broken English” and silence. Besides, they excessively admire the American white men and are willing to unquestioningly follow their partners’ will, which makes them feel less-powered and subordinate in the romantic relationships and lose the subjective voice in the communication. As a result, the contradictory view towards Chinese and American culture, namely, the contempt for Chinese principles of obedience with a strong sense of pride being an American, and obsession with American freedom and independence while lost in self-abasement for the Chinese root inside, has greatly influenced and motivated them to question their cultural identities in both communications with their Chinese mothers and the American partners.

### 3.2. Struggles and Negotiation between the Cultures

The confrontation between Chinese and American cultures are embodied in the quarrels between the mothers and daughters, which externalize the negotiation between different lifestyles and between the different thinking patterns, during which communication and mutual understanding are occurred and established. This phase has come to the second stage of social internalization, other-regulated stage.

The four mothers in the story are Chinese immigrants coming to America in the earlier time of the 20th century, when China was suffering from Anti-Japanese War and establishing a new national image in waves of the world. Feudal inequality, the cultural reformation and war has made the mothers struggle to live as themselves in the Chinese society and carry their miserable memories wishing to pursue a new life in America, a more developed and modernized society. However, from the daughters’ perspective, they are raised up in American culture and keep criticizing their mothers’ behaviour according to American standards. Their preconceptions towards their mothers prevail in almost every part of life, for instance, “In those days, before my mother told me her Kweilin story, I imagined Joy Luck was a shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war.” (Tan 15)

Due to the vast difference between the social experience of the two generations, there are numerous conflicts occur in terms of education and learning, communication styles, etc. For example, Lindo makes Waverly learn playing chess while Suyuan makes June learn playing piano, with good intentions of wishing their daughters to be successful in certain fields, neglect the daughters’ will of learning. Obedient as Chinese children are supposed to be, the mothers think it unnecessary to consider a child’s will for their lack of experience and knowledge, whereas the daughters have grown up to build up their self-awareness and decide to dominate their own life instead of blindly following their mothers. What’s worse, mothers from Chinese high-context culture are familiar with nonverbal codes requiring decoding from the contexts, while daughters in low-context American culture are accustomed to express their feelings with

direct words; not to mention the language barrier between the mothers and daughters impairs the mother's articulation of feelings and emotions through the English language; as a result, silence replaces the important part of communication, which deepens the misunderstandings in the relationships.

Realizing the conflicts have grown more and more intense that begins to harm the kinship between the mothers and daughters, in special circumstances, they attempt to conduct real communications and negotiate with each other, especially when the daughters have troubles when choosing and coordinating with the partner in romantic relationships.

For instance, when Rose's marriage with her beloved husband Ted meets unexpected crisis of divorce, for which is her overly obedient attitude to Ted has made Ted lose the interests and pleasure as they communicate before marriage, it occurs to her that her mother An-Mei once told her that if you always listen to others without questioning, "you will fall to the ground with the first strong wind. And then you will be like a weed, growing wild in any direction, running along the ground until someone pulls you out and throws you away". (Tan 159) Now the strong wind has come as the force of divorce, Rose decides to open her heart to accept mother's concerns and quit being compliant to Ted. Consequently, as she begins to show her independent thinking, she rescues her marriage from separation.

### 3.3. Homeland as the Spiritual Return

Disorientation is a natural experience for everyone in a different cultural environment, while the result of negotiation and adjustment may differ. Some may choose to abandon the old self to embrace the new self as being recognized in the new society, others may choose to return to the old self as they couldn't bear the pressure being marginalized in a new environment. The mothers and daughters in the Joy Luck Club tend to find themselves in between these two kinds, by which they spiritually return to the Chinese root of their cultural identities while still embracing the American features in the American society. In this sense, they are capable of determining their own cultural identities in the intercultural environment, entering into the third stage of social construction, self-regulated stage.

Reconsidering the memories of their mothers, the daughters gradually regard their cultural identities in a more holistic view, that is, learning to accept their internalized Chinese values and externalized Chinese appearances and eager to return to the homeland in the future. Just as June Woo's inner speech when on the train back to China shows, "I feel different. I can feel the skin on my forehead tingling, my blood rushing through a new course, my bones aching with a familiar old pain. And I think, my mother was right. I am becoming Chinese." (Tan 226)

## 4. Conclusion

Searching one's cultural identity in intercultural environments has always been a realistic concern in the contemporary society. Providing the sources of interpersonal communication, social environment motivates the developmental process of humans' cognition and constructs their perceptions towards life and self. The cultural conflicts occur in social interactions set the stage where different values confront and negotiate with each other, during which the individuals' participation and adjustment subjectively construct cultural identities by presenting their own culture and observing others.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, the mothers who establish their own cultural identities in Chinese social environment and the daughters who gradually forming theirs in American society, confront and communicate, construct their cultural identities in the intercultural society. The story of the four mothers and their daughters' negotiation and their returns to the Chinese root, not only provokes our deep thoughts of the construction of our own cultural identities, but also offers a new perspective of viewing marginalized people in diversified culture groups.

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