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**Searching for a Final Homecoming: Struggles to Assert
Chinese Ethnic Identity in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club***

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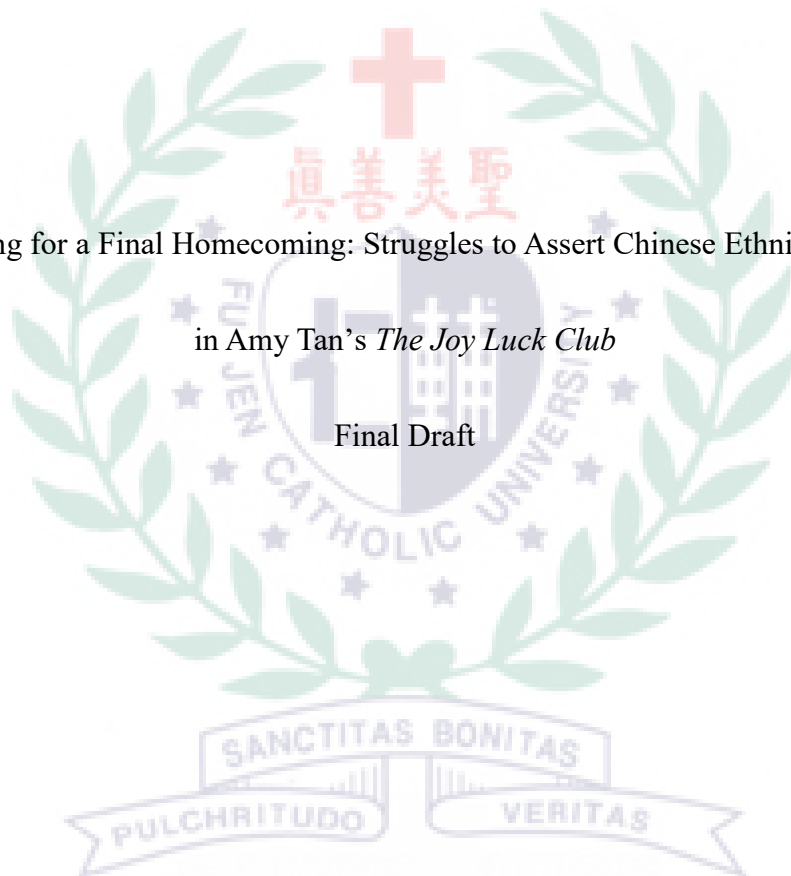
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in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

Final Draft



Lucy Liu

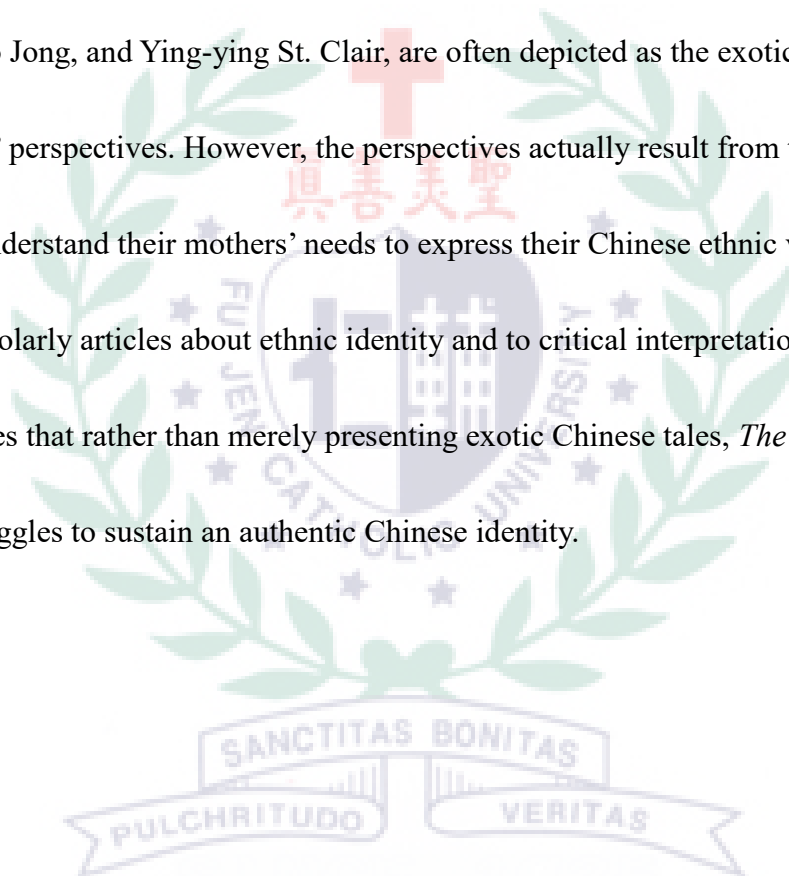
CCIII – Section D

Dr. John Basourakos

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Abstract

Explorations of ethnic identity are fundamental themes of Asian American literature. Amy Tan's 1989 novel *The Joy Luck Club* consists of four Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters, who recount stories about crises with cultural identity, about intercultural conflicts, and about their past lives in China. In these stories, the Joy Luck Club mothers, Anmei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair, are often depicted as the exotic "Other" from their daughters' perspectives. However, the perspectives actually result from the daughters' inabilities to understand their mothers' needs to express their Chinese ethnic voices. By referring to scholarly articles about ethnic identity and to critical interpretations of the novel, this paper argues that rather than merely presenting exotic Chinese tales, *The Joy Luck Club* depicts the struggles to sustain an authentic Chinese identity.



Outline

I. Introduction

A. Introductory paragraph

1. Hook: “Feathers from a Thousand Li Away”
2. Thesis statement: In Amy Tan’s novel *The Joy Luck Club*, the struggles to ensure Chinese ethnic identity are manifested through cultural identity crises, through intercultural conflicts, and through cultural memories experienced by the Joy Luck Club mothers –An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair.

B. Research paper summary

1. This research paper offers a textual analysis of *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan through ethnic criticism.
2. Research questions
 - a. How are crises experienced with maintaining one’s Chinese cultural identity portrayed through the characters of the Joy Luck Club mothers?
 - b. How do the Joy Luck Club mothers’ relationships with their daughters reflect their desires to ensure Chinese ethnic identity?
 - c. In what ways are the Joy Luck Club mothers’ cultural memories important to their Chinese ethnic identities?
3. Research methodology

- a. The textual analysis relies on secondary sources that I have consulted.
- b. Quotes and paraphrased texts from the novel support my claims.

II. Textual analysis

A. The struggles to ensure Chinese ethnic identity as manifested in *The Joy Luck Club*

1. *The Joy Luck Club* is more than just a collection of exotic Chinese tales, but a work that represents Chinese ethnic voices in the real world.
 - a. *The Joy Luck Club* lends itself to the interpretation of Asian American Literature as a literature concerned with searching for a final 'homecoming'.
 - b. Brief summary of *The Joy Luck Club*
2. An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair seek for their psychic home in the ethnic identities of their own and of their daughters'.
 - In trying to ensure Chinese ethnic identity, the Joy Luck Club mothers have to deal with cultural identity crises, with intercultural conflicts, and with cultural memories.

B. Cultural identity crises

1. The beginning of *The Joy Luck Club* draws the reader's attention to the Joy Luck Club mothers' cultural identity crises.
 - a. The remaining Joy Luck Club mothers see their own daughters in Jing-

mei Woo, just as ignorant of all the truths and hopes they have brought from China.

- b. The narrative structure of *The Joy Luck Club* manifests individual cultural identity crisis, being caught up in the history of Chinese immigration to America (Davis 10).

2. In ensuring Chinese ethnic identity, the Joy Luck Club mothers struggle with identity crises that break out from their American-born daughters' stereotypical judgements.

- a. The daughters attribute negative aspects of their family lives to Chinese culture and traditions, which to them, is embodied in the characters of their mothers (Davis 12).

- b. Each mother wrestles with what to tell her daughter amid the false images that obscure her real personal story as a Chinese American woman (Ho 142).

C. Intercultural conflicts

1. Each mother wants her daughter to know the power and advantage of joining the strengths of two cultures instead of embracing only one – the American (Mistri 46).
2. A parable in *The Joy Luck Club* suggests the relation between ensuring

Chinese ethnic identity and intercultural conflicts.

- a. The mothers' confidence in the superiority of Chinese ways and the superficiality of American ones causes them to impose, to demand, and to criticize (Davis 11).
- b. To feel distanced from their daughters because of cultural gaps is much more disturbing to the mothers than their daughters' failures.
- c. The daughters fail to see their mothers' desires to see American success coupled with Chinese wisdom.

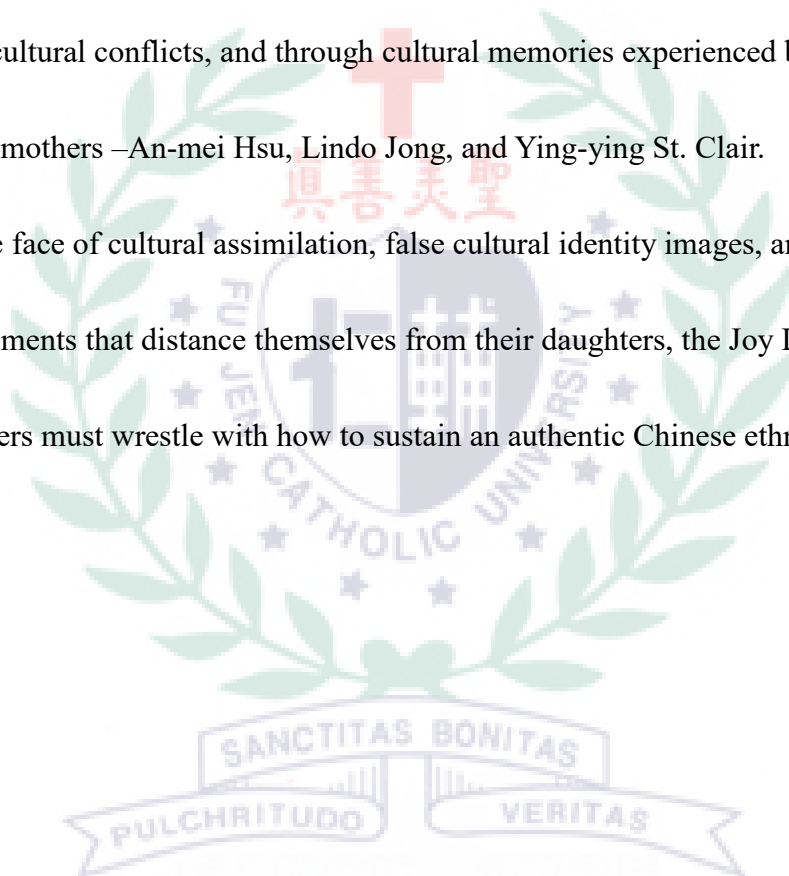
D. Cultural memories

1. In order to survive the drastic changes in their lives, the Chinese mothers need a psychological continuity of self that can only be ensured through cultural memories.
 - a. To the mothers, the reason why their daughters fail is that they do not share the same Chinese cultural memories as themselves.
2. When the daughters interpret several qualities as inherent "Chinese" attributes, they are showing a blindness to the qualities' special relations with a particular kind of ethnic memory (Xu 48).
 - a. Jing-mei Woo dismissed her mother's criticism as Chinese superstitions.
 - b. Suyuan Woo was not seeking for approval on her daughter's personality,

but for the conviction that her daughter possesses the values she had learned from her Chinese cultural memories.

III. Conclusion

- A. Thesis statement: In Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club*, the struggles to ensure Chinese ethnic identity are manifested through cultural identity crises, through intercultural conflicts, and through cultural memories experienced by the Joy Luck Club mothers –An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair.
- B. In the face of cultural assimilation, false cultural identity images, and stereotypical judgements that distance themselves from their daughters, the Joy Luck Club mothers must wrestle with how to sustain an authentic Chinese ethnic identity.

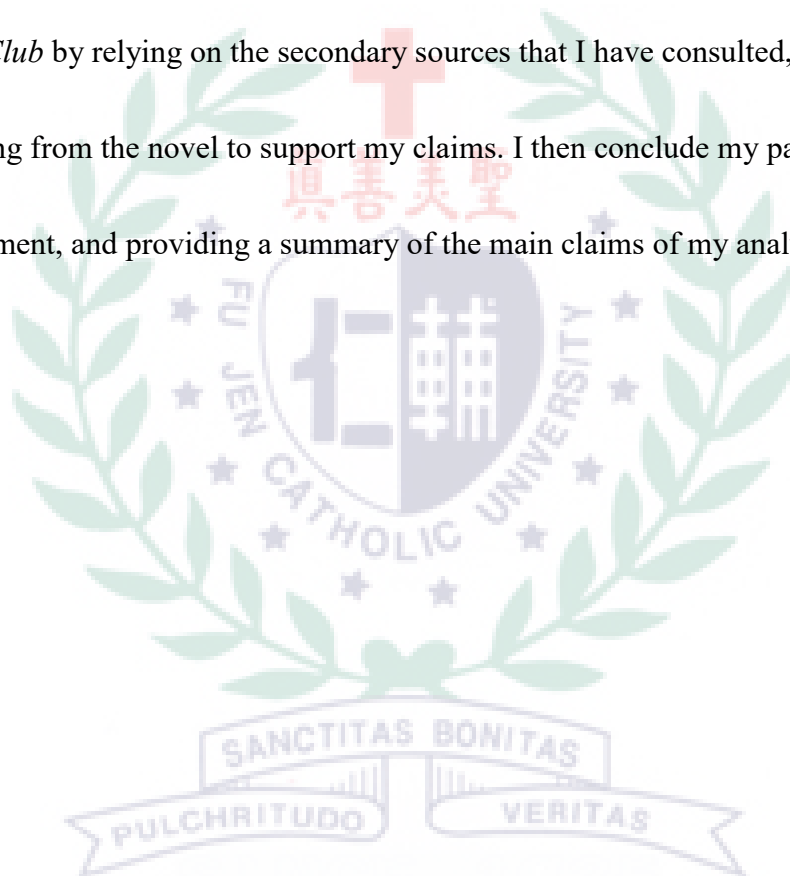


1. Introduction

Amy Tan begins her 1989 novel *The Joy Luck Club* with a parable called “Feathers from a Thousand Li Away.” In the parable, a Chinese mother sailed across the ocean to America with a swan she brought from Shanghai. Unable to ignore her own excitement for raising a daughter in America, the mother says to her swan, “Over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow! She will know my meaning, because I will give her this swan—a creature that became more than what was hoped for” (Tan 17). However, as she arrives in America, the swan is taken away, leaving only a few feathers in her hands. Then her daughter grows up swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow (Tan 17). For a long time, the mother has been wanting to give her daughter the feathers and to tell her, “This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions” (Tan 17).

With just a few words, the parable reflects the desires shared by all the Chinese mothers in *The Joy Luck Club*, for helping the next generation understand the meaning of the swan—which comes from afar and represents their Chinese ethnic identity. Nevertheless, they lost the swan on their way to America, and all they have left is a feather, making it a struggle for them to ensure a Chinese ethnic identity. In Amy Tan’s novel *The Joy Luck Club*, the struggles to ensure an authentic Chinese ethnic identity are manifested through cultural identity crises, through intercultural conflicts, and through cultural memories experienced by the Joy Luck Club mothers—An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair.

This research paper offers a textual analysis of *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan through ethnic criticism. The paper is divided into the following sections: the introduction, the literature review, the analysis of the novel, and the conclusion. In the first part of the paper, I provide an introduction with a focused thesis statement that will lead my discussion into answering my four research questions. The following section consists of a critical analysis of *The Joy Luck Club* by relying on the secondary sources that I have consulted, and by quoting and paraphrasing from the novel to support my claims. I then conclude my paper by restating my thesis statement, and providing a summary of the main claims of my analysis.



2. Literature Review

In the article, “Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture” by Joane Nagel, the construction of one’s ethnic identity is referred to as a process of labeling engaged in by oneself and by others. This perspective supports my claim about how in *The Joy Luck Club*, the Chinese mothers’ ethnic identities are often destabilized by both internal identity crises and external cultural conflicts with their daughters. Moreover, Nagel avers that for most ethnic groups, the past is a resource to collect meaning for community. This corresponds to my argument of how the Joy Luck Club mothers use their memories in China as a means to ensure and to sustain a Chinese ethnic identity.

In “Ethnic Voices of Asian American Women with Special Reference to Amy Tan,” Somdatta Mandal claims that Chinese American women novelists are asserting that their Asian origin is so deeply imbedded in their social and cultural lives, that it is impossible for even a second generation to sever mental or moral ties with his or her roots. This supports my argument that, instead of simply forming exotic Chinese tales, *The Joy Luck Club* reflects internal tensions between generations that belong to two different cultural backgrounds. In addition, Mandal claims that Asian American literature is often considered as literature that often depicts a search for a final homecoming. In *The Joy Luck Club*, each Chinese mother acts upon their longing for their psychic home.

In “Identity in Community in Ethnic Short Story Cycles: Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck*

Club, Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*,"

Rocio G. Davis avers that the narrative structure of *The Joy Luck Club* manifests the individual cultural identity crisis that each of the Chinese mother experiences. In fact, according to Davis, Tan depicts the mothers as students, learning about the cultural realities around them and using their experience to identify and develop character strengths and to understand weaknesses. Therefore, this article answers my question: How are crises experienced with maintaining one's Chinese ethnic identity portrayed through the characters of An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair in *The Joy Luck Club*?

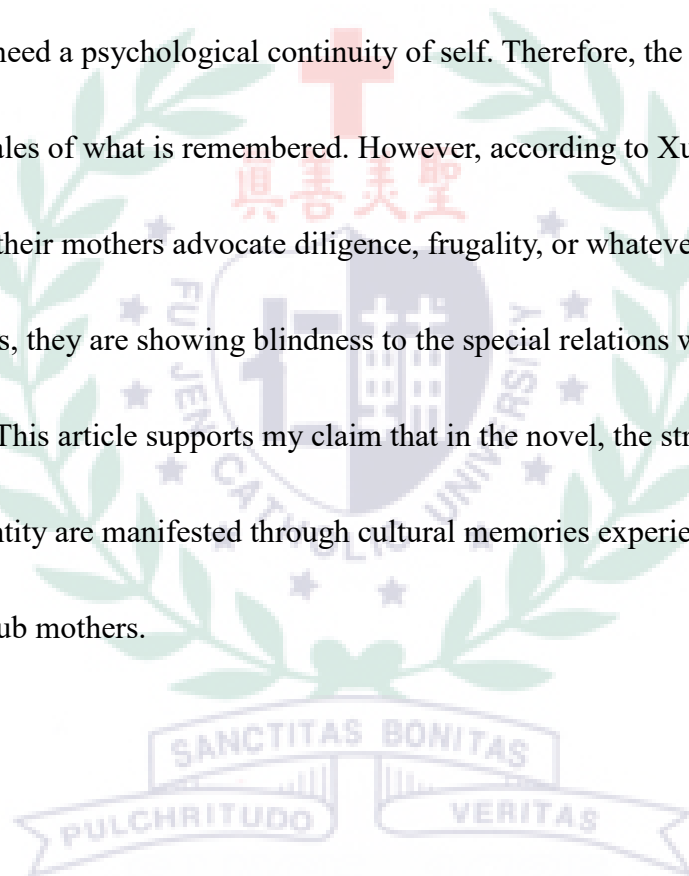
In "Discovering the Ethnic Name and the Genealogical Tie in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," Zenobia Mistri argues that the theme of *The Joy Luck Club* revolves around with each mother's pain as it expands with each daughter's fear of disappointing her mother.

Meanwhile, each of the daughters regards her mother's behavior as if from another continent and is ashamed of her 'strange' ways. In "Swan-Feather Mothers and Coca-Cola Daughters: Teaching Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," Wendy Ho discusses how internal tensions

between the mothers and daughters are generated by external pressures. According to Ho, both generations of women in the novel find a compelling need to reveal details about their lives in China and in America to each other, but it is difficult for them to express their honest intentions. These two articles support my claim that cultural divide builds the walls between the two generations of women, and answers my question: How do the Joy Luck Club

mothers' relationships with their daughters reflect their desires to ensure Chinese ethnic identity in *The Joy Luck Club*?

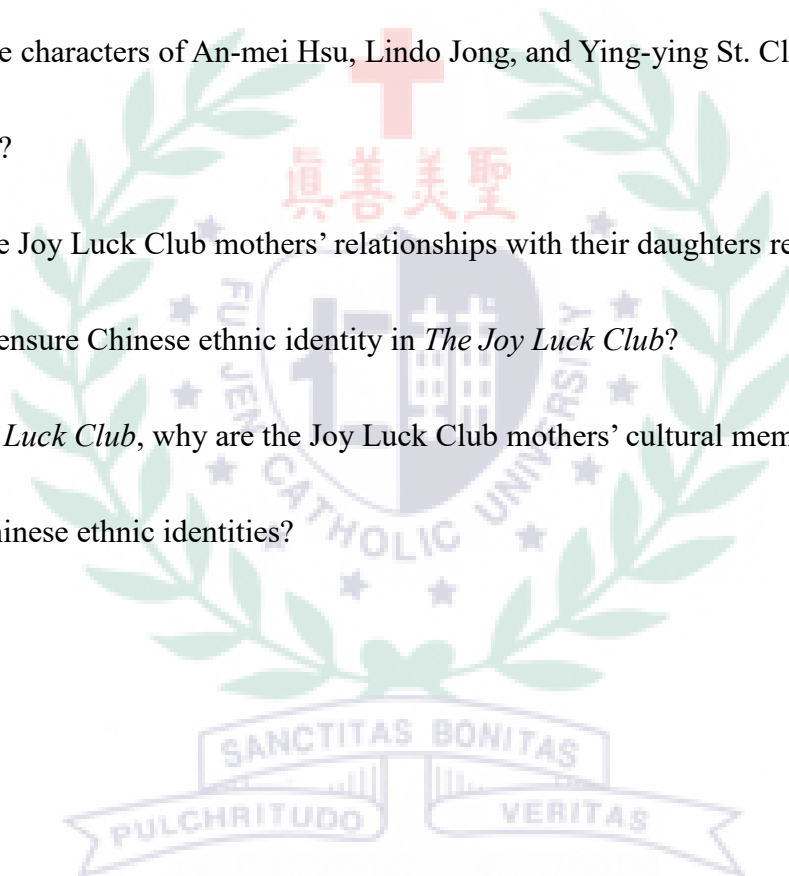
In "Memory and the Ethnic Self: Reading Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," Ben Xu argues that all the Joy Luck Club mothers have undergone two extreme situations – broken family in China and cultural alienation in America. As a result, to survive such drastic crises in their lives, they need a psychological continuity of self. Therefore, the mothers recollect their past and tell tales of what is remembered. However, according to Xu, when the daughters listen to their mothers advocate diligence, frugality, or whatever are inherent "Chinese" attributes, they are showing blindness to the special relations with a particular kind of ethnic memory. This article supports my claim that in the novel, the struggles to ensure Chinese ethnic identity are manifested through cultural memories experienced and recounted by the Joy Luck Club mothers.



3. Research Questions

This paper aims to address the following research questions:

- 1) In what ways does *The Joy Luck Club* represent Chinese ethnic voices in the real world, rather than a collection of fictional Chinese tales?
- 2) How are crises experienced with maintaining one's Chinese ethnic identity portrayed through the characters of An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair in *The Joy Luck Club*?
- 3) How do the Joy Luck Club mothers' relationships with their daughters reflect their desires to ensure Chinese ethnic identity in *The Joy Luck Club*?
- 4) In *The Joy Luck Club*, why are the Joy Luck Club mothers' cultural memories important to their Chinese ethnic identities?



4. Methodology

This research paper is based on Amy Tan's 1989 novel *The Joy Luck Club*. The textual analysis will be executed through ethnic criticism and is based on one scholarly article about ethnic identity, and five critical interpretations of the novel written by literary critics to enlarge one's understanding of the role of Chinese ethnic identity in the novel. Tan depicts desires and attempts to ensure Chinese ethnic identity through individual cultural identity crises, intercultural relationships, and significant cultural memories. The first part of this paper identifies the role of Chinese ethnic identity in Asian American literature and in *The Joy Luck Club*. The second part of this paper analyzes the role of Chinese ethnic identity in the individual identity crises, in the mother-daughter relationships, and in the memories from China experienced by four women characters – Suyuan Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair. The third part of this paper concludes that in *The Joy Luck Club*, the struggles to ensure Chinese ethnic identity are manifested through cultural identity crises, through inter-cultural conflicts, and through cultural memories experienced by the Chinese mother characters.

In the article, "Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture" Nagel, ethnic identity is defined in terms of internal identification, external shaping, and a connection made to the past memories of ethnic groups. "Ethnic Voices of Asian American Women with Special Reference to Amy Tan" by Mandal discusses ethnic voices

are presented in Asian American literature through the author's analysis of *The Joy Luck Club*. In "Identity in Community in Ethnic Short Story Cycles: Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*," Davis discusses Chinese ethnic identity through the scope of individual identity crisis the novel depicts. In "Discovering the Ethnic Name and the Genealogical Tie in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," Mistri offers an analysis of the cultural divide between the two generations of women in the novel. In "Swan-Feather Mothers and Coca-Cola Daughters: Teaching Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," Ho discusses how internal tensions between the two generations of women in the novel are created by external pressures. In "Memory and the Ethnic Self: Reading Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," Xu discusses the significance of memory to the Joy Luck Club mothers' sense of ethnic self.

This research paper is based on the above six sources to use ethnic criticism to analyze the characters of Suyuan Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair in *The Joy Luck Club*. The analysis is based on Nagel's definition of ethnic identity, and how Chinese ethnic identity is presented in the novel is further discussed through Mandal's interpretation of the novel. Davis's article helps to support my claim about the struggles to ensure Chinese ethnic identity being manifested through cultural identity crises. Mistri's and Ho's articles offer me evidence about how the mother-daughter relationships in the novel reflect desires to ensure Chinese ethnic identity. Finally, Xu's

article discusses the significance of cultural memories to *The Joy Luck Club* characters'

Chinese ethnic identities.



5. Textual Analysis of *The Joy Luck Club*

“To my mother, and the memory of her mother. You asked me once, what I would remember. This, and much more” (Tan 8). In the dedication of her novel Amy Tan reveals that *The Joy Luck Club* is more than just a collection of exotic Chinese tales, but a work that represents Chinese ethnic voices in the real world. According to Mandal, Asian American literature is often considered as “a literature of protest and exile, a literature about place and displacement, a literature concerned with psychic and physical ‘home’—searching for and claiming a ‘home’ or longing for a final ‘homecoming’” (177). *The Joy Luck Club* lends itself to such interpretations. During what was called the “Chinese diaspora,” four Chinese women, Suyuan Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair arrived in America in search of better lives. Brought together by the shadow of their pasts, the four women formed the Joy Luck Club. In their new home, each Joy Luck mother experiences similar cultural tensions with her own American-born daughter. These tensions become more intensified when one of the mothers, Suyuan Woo, passes away and reveals her secret past in China – the twin babies she gave up when she was running away from war. The revelation results in a desire for a final “homecoming” among An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair.

For An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair, to ensure an authentic Chinese ethnic identity is the only way to claim their psychic home. According to Nagel’s article, “ethnic identity results both from the choices of individual and from the ascriptions of others,

ethnic boundaries and meaning are also constructed from within and from without, propped up by internal and external pressures” (154). *The Joy Luck Club* is a novel about how the Joy Luck Club mothers deal with internal and external pressures –cultural identity crises, intercultural conflicts, and cultural memories –as they struggle to ensure a Chinese ethnic identity.

“Not know your own mother? How can you say? Your mother is in your bones!” (Tan 40) An-mei Hsu cries in disbelief, when Suyuan Woo’s American-born daughter expresses her worries for meeting her mother’s secret twin daughters in China. “What can I tell them about my mother? I don’t know anything. She was my mother” (Tan 40), says Jing-mei Woo. At a glance, the beginning of *The Joy Luck Club* seems like the start of Jing-mei Woo’s adventure to China. However, Jing-mei Woo draws the reader’s attention back to the Joy Luck Club mothers’ cultural identity crises in the following passage:

In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English. They see that joy and luck do not mean the same thing to their daughters (Tan 41).

“The revelation of Suyuan Woo’s secret unleashes an urgent need among the women to reach back and remember” (Mandal 178-179). An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair in

turns tell the stories of their own pasts. Davis points out that “each person’s story demonstrates how her past constantly acts upon the present, modifying her world-view and cultural sensibility” (10).

This narrative structure manifests the individual cultural identity crisis, being caught up in the history of Chinese immigration to America (Davis 10). Interestingly, however, one can easily be convinced that the feeling of being straddled between two worlds is not exclusive to the Joy Luck Club mothers, but shared by everyone experiencing the struggle to ensure Chinese ethnic identity. Heung asserts that, “Tan attempts to undermine the independence of individual narrative units, to the point that even the chapter titles, by connecting motifs between disparate stories, seem interchangeable” (qtd. in Davis 10). More than recounting personal, fictional tragedies, *The Joy Luck Club* manifests the struggle to find ethnic worth through cultural identity crises experienced by An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair.

According to Joane Nagle, “one’s ethnic identity is a composite of the view one has of oneself as well as the views held by others about one’s ethnic identity” (154). In ensuring their Chinese ethnic identity, the Joy Luck Club mothers struggle with identity crises that erupt from their American-born daughters’ stereotypical judgements. As pointed out by Wendy Ho, “the daughters tend to stereotype their mothers –to freeze them in time as old-fashioned ladies; they do not often give their mothers the space to particularize themselves or

to cross over into their lives (Ho 143).” When growing up, An-mei Hsu’s daughter, Rose Hsu Jordan, deliberately blamed disagreements with her mother for the flaws in Chinese culture:

I still listened to my mother, but I also learned how to let her words blow through me. And sometimes I filled my mind with other people’s thoughts –all in English –so that when she looked at me inside out, she would be confused by what she saw. Over the years, I learned to choose from the best opinions. Chinese people had Chinese opinions. American people had American opinions. And in almost every case, the American version was much better (Tan 191).

The daughters attribute negative aspects of their family lives to Chinese culture and traditions, which to them, is embodied in the characters of their mothers (Davis 12).

As a result, each Joy Luck mother must wrestle with what to tell her daughter amid the false images that obscure her real personal story as a Chinese American woman (Ho 142). As the last mother to tell her story in *The Joy Luck Club*, Lindo Jong concludes, “I think about our two faces. I think about my intentions. Which one is American? Which one is Chinese? Which one is better? If you show one, you must always sacrifice the other” (Tan 266). In the novel, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair strive to self-identify as Chinese, and dealing with cultural identity crises is one important part of the process.

Aside from reflecting the fact that each Chinese woman in the novel is facing cultural identity crisis, Lindo’s conclusion, “If you show one, you must always sacrifice the other”

(Tan 266), also shows how the Joy Luck Club mothers believe that it is too much of a sacrifice to choose between being an American or being a Chinese. For them, it is crucial to try and be both. In fact, they are eager to see their next generation realize this wish. Mistri argues that “each mother wants her daughter to know the power and advantage of joining the strengths of two cultures instead of embracing only one –the American” (46). Consequently, this desire shared by An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair accounts for intercultural conflicts between them and their daughters. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan offers her reader a parable before each story part to introduce the upcoming story’s theme, and one of which implies the relation between ensuring Chinese ethnic identity and intercultural conflicts between the mothers and daughters. In the parable, a Chinese mother tells her young American-born daughter to obey her rules. One can infer from this parable, that cultural divide causes walls between the two generations:

“Do not ride your bicycle around the corner,” the mother had told the daughter when she was seven. “Why not!” protested the girl. “Because then I cannot see you and you will fall down and cry and I will not hear you.” “How do you know I’ll fall?” whined the girl. “It is in a book, *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates*, all the bad things that can happen to you outside the protection of this house.” “I don’t believe you. Let me see the book.” “It is written in Chinese. You cannot understand it. That is why you must listen to me” (Tan 87).

According to Davis, “the mothers’ confidence in the superiority of Chinese ways and the superficiality of American ones causes them to impose, to demand, and to criticize, because they fear their daughters are moving farther and farther away” (11). In other words, the Joy Luck Club mothers do not hold strict attitudes toward their next generation because they truly feel disappointed in the daughters. Instead, they act in such a way in order to ensure Chinese ethnic identity. The fact that struggles to ensure Chinese ethnic identity are manifested through intercultural conflicts experienced by the Joy Luck Club mothers is also reflected in the following passage in Lindo Jong’s story:

But I couldn’t teach her about Chinese character...No, this kind of thinking didn’t stick to her. She was too busy chewing gum, blowing bubbles bigger than her cheeks. Only that kind of thinking stuck. “Finish your coffee,” I told her yesterday. “Don’t throw your blessings away.” “Don’t be so old-fashioned, Ma,” she told me, finishing her coffee down the sink. “I’m my own person.” And I think, How can she be her own person? When did I give her up (Tan 254)?

By asking the question, “How can she be her own person? When did I give her up?” (Tan 254) Lindo Jong reveals each Joy Luck mother’s unwillingness to feel distanced from their daughters because of their Chinese ethnic identities, which is much more disturbing to them than their daughters’ failures.

Nagel avers that, “ethnicity is created and recreated as various groups and interests put

forth competing visions of the ethnic composition of society and argue over which rewards or sanctions should be attached to which ethnicities” (154). In *The Joy Luck Club*, both generations find a need to set the records straight about their lives in China and in America to each other, but it is difficult for them to accurately say their honest intentions (Ho 142). After her mother’s death, Jing-mei Woo thinks to herself, “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 37). The American-born daughters fail to see their mothers’ genuine wish – seeing American success coupled with Chinese wisdom (Mistri 47). The mothers cannot help but see the daughters’ protests to them as protests to Chinese ethnicity.

For fear that their daughters are moving farther and farther away from them, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair feel the need to ensure ethnic continuity. In the novel, all the Joy Luck Club mothers have experienced two extreme situations – broken families in China and cultural alienation in America (Xu 46). As a result, “to survive the drastic changes in their lives, they need a psychological continuity of self” (Xu 46).

The past is a resource used by ethnic groups to collect meaning and community (Nagel 154). In Xu’s article about memory and ethnicity, he argues that “the only means available for mothers to ensure ethnic continuity is to recollect the past and tell tales of what is remembered” (43). Ying-ying St. Clair reflects that assertion in the following passage where

she refers to her daughter. “All her life, I have watched her as though from another shore.

And now I must tell her everything about my past. It is the only way to penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved” (Tan 242).

This passage expresses each Joy Luck mother’s attempt to use Chinese cultural memory as a means to ensure Chinese ethnic identity. In Ying-ying St. Clair’s eyes, the reason that her daughter cannot pull herself together and face her failing marriage is because she is unfamiliar with the “Chinese way of thinking” (Xu 43). The other Joy Luck Club mothers feel the same, that their daughters do not have the same Chinese cultural memory as them, and therefore the daughters do not know who they are and how they should face other people. The following passage from the novel defines what “Chinese way of thinking” is to the mother characters, and how they feel frustrated about not being able to show their daughters the value of it at the same time:

I couldn’t teach her about Chinese character. How to obey parents and listen to your mother’s mind. How not the show your own thoughts, to put your feelings behind your face so you can take advantage of hidden opportunities. Why easy things are not worth pursuing. How to know your own worth and polish it, never flashing it around like a cheap ring. Why Chinese thinking is the best (Tan 254).

“Why are you attracted to Chinese nonsense? You must understand my real circumstances, how I arrived, how I married, how I lost my Chinese face, why you are the

way you are” (Tan 259). Lindo Jong says this after knowing that her daughter always tells others how Lindo came from China on a slow boat, which is far from the truth and close to an exotic fairy tale. It is easy for the daughters to advance diligence, frugality, or whatever as Chinese ethnic qualities (Xu 48). However, when they interpret these qualities as inherent “Chinese” attributes, the American-born daughters are showing a blindness to the qualities’ special relations with a particular kind of ethnic memory (Xu 48). As a Chinese immigrant and a survivor of war, Suyuan Woo naturally valued hard work and persistence more than any other virtue while she was alive. In fact, she insisted on telling the other Joy Luck Club mothers that her daughter, Jing-mei Woo, was getting a Ph.D. after she had decided to drop out of college. Nevertheless, Jing-mei failed to understand the reason that her mother refused to see her give up on something, is that in her mother’s Chinese cultural memory, to survive meant to persist. Instead, Jing-mei Woo dismissed her mother’s criticism as “just more of her Chinese superstitions” (Tan 31). When criticizing her mother, Jing-mei Woo says:

“There’s a school of thought,” I said. “Parents shouldn’t criticize children. They should encourage instead. You know, people rise to other people’s expectations.

And when you criticize, it just means you’re expecting failure.” “That’s the trouble,” my mother said. “You never rise. Lazy to get up. Lazy to rise to expectations” (Tan 31).

While the daughters often think of the Joy Luck Club mothers’ diligence quality as an

inherent Chinese attribute, this kind of quality is actually an important expression of the mothers' cultural memories, in which they had become survivors. According to Xu, "What the mother seeks from her friends and neighbors is not the kind of approval that applauds her daughter's personal qualities, but the conviction for herself that her daughter possesses the attributes of a survivor" (48). This is how *The Joy Luck Club* manifests the struggles to ensure one's Chinese ethnic identity through cultural memories.



6. Conclusion

Often categorized as Asian American literature, Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* is usually read as a collection of exotic Chinese tales. Nevertheless, *The Joy Luck Club* represents real Chinese ethnic voices, by depicting struggles to ensure Chinese ethnic identities as manifested through cultural identity crises, through intercultural conflicts, and through cultural memories and experienced by the Joy Luck Club mothers – Suyuan Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair. Each mother's individual cultural identity crisis erupts from her American-born daughter's stereotypical judgements of her being an old-fashioned lady. The intercultural conflicts between mothers and daughters reflect desires to ensure a Chinese ethnic identity. The mothers' past cultural memories in China serve as an important means for them to ensure a Chinese ethnic identity.

Arriving in America as members of the Chinese Diaspora community, the mothers are regarded as outcasts by American society and even by their own American-born daughters. When faced by cultural assimilation, by false cultural identity images, and by stereotypical judgements that distance themselves from their daughters, the Joy Luck Club mothers must wrestle with how to sustain an authentic Chinese ethnic identity. As Ho states in her article, "it is important to read these women's stories as the complicated physical, psychological, cultural, and sociohistorical positionings for personal and communal survival and resistance in the Chinese diaspora communities of the United States" (143). Rather than recounting

fictional voyages of Chinese heroines, *The Joy Luck Club* depicts a self-discovery journey, a journey in search of a final “homecoming” shared by Suyuan Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, Ying-ying St. Clair, and all those who have a Chinese ethnic voice.



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