

“Aphasia” and Polyphony: Generational Conflict and Identity Construction in Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club

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Abstract. Amy Tan’s seminal work *The Joy Luck Club* employs the “four-player game” structure of a mahjong to depict the intricate narratives unfolding between four Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters. The novel vividly portrays the complex generational dynamics within Chinese-American families: Waverly’s struggle with her mother Lindo Jong over the “honour” of chess championship, and Rose’s complete “loss of voice” within an American marriage, only to find the courage for Chinese-style “voicing” through her mother An-Mei Hsu. This article therefore examines the “silence of the mother tongue” in *The Joy Luck Club*, employing Stuart Hall’s theory of cultural identity to explore the conflict and reconciliation between the mothers’ adherence to traditional cultural values and the daughters’ pursuit of independence within a cross-cultural context. Their unspoken mother tongue not only leads to misinterpretations of maternal affection and cognitive disorientation but also constitutes a primary source of communication difficulties between mothers and daughters. Efforts to bridge generational divides manifest through polyphony, ultimately facilitating cultural continuity and the reconstruction of identity for both parties. Furthermore, this article aims to illuminate the pervasive clash between old and new cultures within immigrant families across generations, thereby reflecting on ethnic identity anxieties and cultural belonging within the globalised context.

Keywords: Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*, cultural identity theory, generational conflict, cultural identity

1. Introduction

The Joy Luck Club, the debut novel by Chinese-American author Amy Tan, is hailed as a classic text in Asian American literature exploring generational conflict and cultural identity. Through linguistic dislocation, memory-based narration, and ritualistic scenes, the novel interweaves the “Chinese stories” and “American realities” of two generations of immigrants through the perspectives of four pairs of mothers and daughters. Suyuan Woo bore the heavy guilt of abandoning her twin daughters during wartime throughout her life. Her daughter, Jing-mei Woo, ultimately completed her mother’s unfinished journey of seeking roots by traveling to China to reunite with her sister, achieving intergenerational reconciliation. An-mei Hsu learned resilience from her mother’s tragic sacrifice for her daughter, while her daughter Rose Hsu Jordan repeated the pattern of self-loss in a failed marriage, ultimately rediscovering her voice through her mother’s strength. Lindo Jong used

astounding intelligence to break free from the shackles of a feudal marriage, applying this survival strategy in her power struggle with her daughter, Waverly, who consequently struggled for years under the shadow of control cast by her mother's love; Ying-ying's early psychological trauma left her in a state of prolonged mutism. Through a near-prophetic silence, she warned her daughter Lena to recognize the exploitative nature of a marriage that appeared fair on the surface.

Over the past three decades, Asian American literary studies have yielded abundant research both domestically and internationally, exploring themes such as cultural differences, identity formation, mother-daughter relationships, narrative strategies, and Chinese cultural influences. Scholarly analyses of the "aphasia" and "polyphony" between mothers and daughters in the work generally follow three pathways: the conflict between language and power within silence, the cross-cultural manifestation of intergenerational trauma, and identity negotiation through spatial narratives. Early critics, including two influential scholars in Asian American literary studies—Huang Xiuling [1] and Zhang Jingjue [2]—interpreted the "silence" in the novel as "strategic muteness" adopted by Asian women within the dual structures of race and patriarchy. They noted how the mother's Chinese language becomes "whispered speech" within English-dominated spaces. Similarly, Wang Huiya [3] identified patriarchal oppressive silence and its breaking as central themes in *The Joy Luck Club*. Meanwhile, intergenerational trauma has emerged as a recent research focus on the novel. For instance, Li Xin [4] and Yuan Dan [5] adopt a trauma-based approach, emphasizing the act of writing personal family memories and the process of recalling and healing past familial trauma. They explore the mechanisms of intergenerational trauma transmission and methods of healing within the novel to reveal the intergenerational trauma experienced by Chinese American women. Additionally, early critiques often oversimplified mother-daughter conflicts as a binary opposition between "traditional China/modern America." In the late 1990s, critics revised this model by incorporating Gloria Anzaldúa's "borderlands" and Bhabha's "third space." Marianne Hirsch's [6] "postmemory" theory provided a crucial framework for discussing the transmission of mother-daughter trauma. Dong Xiaoping [7], Chen Hongxia, Peng Yueping [8], and Li Chongfei [9] analyzed the relationship between differing values and mother-daughter conflicts arising from distinct developmental spaces—Chinese mothers and American daughters navigating parallel yet fractured historical-spatial contexts in China and the United States—from both geographical and textual perspectives.

Over the past three decades, scholarship on *The Joy Luck Club* has undergone a paradigm shift from "cultural clash" to "identity negotiation", driven by Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity. While cultural identity theory has been applied in domestic and international literature, it has overlooked the role of mother tongue as the most direct vehicle of cultural identity within the work, as well as its pivotal function in intergenerational transmission and rupture. Therefore, this paper adopts mother tongue as its entry point. By integrating Hall's cultural identity theory with a linguistic communication perspective, it offers a more precise interpretation of the themes of "loss of voice" and "polyphony" in *The Joy Luck Club* within the context of globalization.

Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity [10] serves as a core framework in contemporary cultural studies. Its theoretical construction integrates postcolonialism, postmodernism, and multiculturalism, offering new interpretations for identity issues among immigrant groups, marginalized populations, and within the globalization context. Identity is both a story told by others and an ongoing process of endless suturing. In *Encoding/Decoding*, Hall posits that all cultural texts require articulation to be transformed into meaning by diverse audiences [11]. The absence of the mother tongue upheld by the mothers in the four mother-daughter pairs leads to communication breakdowns between them. The daughters, however, frequently employ embedded expressions—

Chinese vocabulary embedded within English syntax—to trigger emotional tension. This practice facilitates emotional exchange between mothers and daughters through language and identity, thereby enabling identity negotiation and recognition, a phenomenon worthy of exploration.

2. The language of silence: the absence of mother tongue and cultural disruption

In Asian American literature, the mother tongue is often suppressed by the dominant Western culture, rendering it “unspoken” and ultimately silenced. In Chinese American works, the Chinese language—represented by mothers—serves not merely as a tool of communication but as a vessel for culture and emotion. Its loss in intergenerational transmission metaphorically signifies the rupture of identity bonds. This is illustrated in *The Joy Luck Club*: Ying-ying attempts to communicate with her daughter in Chinese during spare moments in an English-dominant environment, yet Lena, unable to understand, cannot receive the emotional messages, rendering the mother’s intended communication ineffective. Lindo views her daughter Waverly’s success as her own achievement and a source of pride. Waverly feels ashamed and chooses to withdraw, severing the shared sense of accomplishment between mother and daughter; Suyuan Woo writes letters in Chinese to share wartime experiences with Jing-mei, but Jing-mei’s inability to read Chinese prevents understanding. Family history thus remains untransmitted, with traumatic memories blocked at the linguistic level. These narratives reveal Chinese’s loss of functionality in cross-cultural intergenerational communication. The language mothers use fails to integrate into daughters’ cognitive frameworks, causing information transmission to break down. Culture and emotion become disconnected across generations, undermining the continuity of identity.

2.1. Chinese as an emotional code

Hall’s theory of “cultural representation” posits language as the core domain for meaning generation. He views “representation” as a dynamic process of constructing meaning through linguistic symbols, comprising two key systems: (1) Conceptualization System: Establishing networks of meaning by linking linguistic symbols to the objective world (people, objects, events). For instance, linguistic symbols transform abstract concepts into shared imagery through rhetorical devices like metaphor and metonymy [12]. (2) Linguistic Representation System: Organizing and arranging symbols (e.g., narratives, rituals) to form ideographic symbols of cultural meaning. For example, the image of China in Chinese American literature is reconstructed through linguistic symbols, simultaneously countering stereotypes and constructing cultural identity [13].

In her essay *Mother Tongue*, Amy Tan recounts her first realization that “my mother’s English held her entire history” [14]. This insight is transcribed into the collective predicament of the “unspoken mother tongue” in her novel *The Joy Luck Club*. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Lena recalls her mother Ying-ying speaking Chinese only when alone with her. Lena could understand the individual words but failed to grasp their combined meaning. Thus, to Lena, her mother uttered only disjointed thoughts. For Lena, her mother’s approach fostered not empathy but growing bewilderment and impatience. Poet Brecht once wrote: “Only then did I realize a nation remains silent in two languages.” [15] While the immigrant generation strives to master two languages, neither can truly convey their inner turmoil to the next generation or those around them. The gap between languages becomes an abyss of emotion.

When the signifier in Chinese loses its signified, cultural emotions fracture. The absence of the mother tongue prevents Lena from perceiving the imagery conveyed by linguistic symbols, directly shattering the “chain of meaning” between mother and daughter—much like Tan Enmei’s inability

as a youth to understand her mother's Chinese tales of "Grandmother". Here, essay and fiction resonate: Chinese, as an emotional code, once lost across generations, renders trauma indecipherable. It lingers only as a "dark, murky" emotional fog suspended within the daughter's being.

2.2. Power imbalances in linguistic contexts

Hall emphasized that the encoding process is influenced by ideology, with symbols serving not only as carriers of information but also as metaphors for power relations [11]. As Tan recalled in *Mother Tongue*, she accompanied her mother to the bank and witnessed her mother negotiating with a white manager using "broken, incomplete, even laughable English," yet ultimately winning an apology and compensation. Tan felt profound shame as a result [14]. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Ying-ying diligently studies English, supplementing her speech with emotion, gestures, expressions, and silences. Yet even when her English is halting, her husband interprets her words according to his own assumptions. This leaves her helpless and disheartened, venting her frustration in Chinese: "I can't—say—it." [16] In English-speaking countries, English becomes the symbol of mainstream culture, while Chinese is relegated to "whispered speech". The mother's Chinese-language thinking is forced into misinterpretation, devaluation, and rejection within the English language. Thus, the "mother tongue" becomes not just a tool for communication, but a ruler of power: measuring the status gap between "standard English" and "immigrant English", and gauging the width of the identity fissure in the heart of the second-generation immigrant daughter. Hall's "encoding/decoding" theory becomes unbalanced here: the mother's "encoded" affection is "decoded" by the daughter through mainstream standards as shame, severing the bonds of identity.

2.3. Intergenerational consequences of mother tongue loss

Suyuan Woo cannot fully recount her wartime experiences to Jing-mei Woo; Jing-mei can only hear fragments of each story. This "fragmentation" led Jing-mei to simplify her mother into a "nagging old woman", while the mother viewed her daughter as an "ungrateful American". The absence of Chinese deprived both of a shared narrative, fragmenting their sense of identity. Mothers attempted to bridge the gap through writing, yet language barriers often backfired. Lindo once "scribbled several Chinese characters on the back of an envelope, perhaps forgetting I couldn't read Chinese [16]." To her daughter, Waverley, those square characters resembled a cryptic code, transforming "family history" into an indecipherable "other's" narrative. This exemplified Hall's observation that "if identity cannot be narrated, it cannot be transmitted"—a rupture in transmission [10]. The Chinese stories of first-generation immigrant mothers—filled with war, abandoned infants, and the oppression of arranged marriages—remain inaccessible to second-generation daughters, who can only hear fragments through language barriers rather than empathize. Thus, the trauma cannot be fully received by the daughters. Instead, it manifests in somatized forms—Rose's insomnia, Jing-mei's migraines, Waverley's anorexia—forming a new cycle of trauma and becoming the physiological consequence of the "silence of the mother tongue". The absence of Chinese also severs the family narrative, fragments identity, and fractures intergenerational identity recognition.

3. The boundaries of discourse: conflict and crisis in mother-daughter communication

Homi Bhabha observes that colonial subjects often oscillate between "mimicry and ambivalence"[17]. In *Bumi Manusia*, female characters both mimic the "civilized" behaviors of

colonizers (such as wearing European clothing) and reconstruct indigenous cultural identity through traditional rituals (like “Wong Cilik”), revealing the dual contradictions of gender and colonization [18]. This concept equally applies to Chinese-American daughters: they must simultaneously mimic mainstream American discourse while resisting their mothers’ Chinese discourse, resulting in linguistic hybridity and misalignment.

3.1. Cultural linguistic displacement

When the young girl asks her mother what misfortunes are depicted in *Twenty-Six Gates of Evil*, the mother responds in Chinese: “That’s in Chinese; you won’t understand. So you must listen to me.”[16] Here, the mother employs the mother tongue as an authority code while simultaneously rejecting bilingual negotiation. Hall’s theory that identity is shaped by the stories told about us initially clashes with this phenomenon: the daughter is deprived of shared storytelling rights due to her inability to read Chinese, tilting the scales of identity narrative toward speechlessness from the outset.

This linguistic dislocation escalates into geopolitical misrecognition. Lindo Jong, a native of Taiyuan, proudly traces her family lineage:

“We are a smart people... You know Sun Yat-sen, right?” The daughter casually quipped: “You see it on everything. Made in Taiwan.” The mother cried loudly: “I’m not from Taiwan!”[16]

This English-language joke severed the fragile bond just formed between Lindo and Weaverly. When the daughter employed American mainstream discourse to interpret her mother’s Chinese national narrative through Americanism, it instead caused profound misunderstanding. The mother’s fury stemmed not from geographical inaccuracy, but from her daughter “translating” her into a different story through linguistic logic. The conflict born of linguistic dislocation was thus revealed.

3.2. Silence as a power strategy

Postcolonial feminist scholar Spivak noted that marginalized groups are often “heard by being unheard”[19]. Ying-ying, conditioned since childhood to guard her tongue, descends into prolonged silence—so profound that her daughter Lena scarcely hears her speak. Later, when Ying-ying visits Lena and Harold’s home, she spends most of her time silently scrutinizing notes and furnishings. Lena interprets this “prophetic silence” as her mother’s “unspoken consent.” Only after a quarrel between Lena and Harold did Ying-ying’s silence shatter when she knocked over the already precarious coffee table, shattering a vase and erupting in a loud crash that broke the silence. In that instant, silence transformed into authority, compelling Lena to reexamine her marriage. Only then did Lena understand: silence was a form of resistance, a refusal to be co-opted by mainstream discourse [20]. Ying-ying’s silence wasn’t a lack of linguistic ability, but a strategic withdrawal. Lena’s initial misreading of her mother’s pauses as “indifference” precisely demonstrated how mainstream discourse frameworks failed to interpret the deeper meaning of silence. Through her pauses, the mother created space for her daughter’s reflection while simultaneously attempting to establish her own authority within an English-dominated linguistic landscape. She sought to carve out a prophetic voice amidst the hegemony of English. Marginalized groups sometimes resist mainstream discourse by “refusing to speak”, demonstrating the agency of silence in attempting to resolve conflict.

3.3. The tension of “embedded” English

Huang Xiuling and Zhang Jingjue characterize their mothers’ Chinese as “private speech”[1,2], as it loses its public nature within the hegemonic space of English. Just as the bank manager sneered in *Mother Tongue*, Lena recalls in *The Joy Luck Club*:

Shea yisz? -That meaning? she asked me when a man at a grocery store yelled at her for opening up jars to smell the insides. I was so embarrassed I told her that Chinese people were not allowed to shop there [16].

As the mother retreats into “whispered speech”, the daughter is thrust into the “public” foreground, creating a Bakhtinian “polyphonic polyglot” that breaks through the monologue of singular perspective. Through equal dialogue among multiple voices, it reveals the diversity of social reality. Thus, a dual-layered discourse emerged between mother and daughter: one layer of English dialogue on the surface, and another layer of private Chinese narration unheard by others. Simultaneously, the daughters embedded sparse Chinese vocabulary within English syntax. This linguistic hybridity not only exemplifies how polyphonic speech disrupts linguistic uniformity and enhances a text’s reflection of social reality through “social polyphony”, but also embodies the nascent form of what Hall termed the “third space.” It simultaneously mimics and resists the mother’s culture, forming polyphonic speech. Yet it also exposes an awkward tension: while the mother understands the daughters’ literal words, she remains oblivious to the underlying American psychological context, leaving the conflict unresolved.

At the conclusion of *Mother Tongue*, Tan writes a check in “perfect English” only to discover she remains defined by her mother’s “limited English.” Neither can they fully embrace the mainstream nor return to their mother tongue. This paradox is amplified in the novel as a challenge faced by four pairs of mothers and daughters: they must narrate a past that only Chinese can fully contain using English, or their identities will forever remain incomplete. Thus, only by acknowledging the existence of “multiple Englishes” and allowing “embedded Chinese” into English syntax, as Tan does, can the linguistic rift between mothers and daughters be mended, and the gap of linguistic dislocation bridged.

4. Reclaiming the right to speak: identity reconstruction after silence

Building further on Hall’s “cultural identity fluidity theory,” the escape from “speechlessness” by two generations of mothers and daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* can be deconstructed as a progressive cycle of symbol-practice. In the novel, both mothers and daughters strive to understand each other while seeking their own identity. The communication barrier between them stems not only from linguistic differences but more profoundly from a misalignment of cultural identity. The love and expectations mothers express in Chinese are often misinterpreted by daughters as control; conversely, the independence daughters pursue through English is perceived by mothers as estrangement. As the story unfolds, both sides gradually break the silence through daily interactions. Mothers convey emotions through cooking and storytelling, while daughters reinterpret their mothers through translation and recollection. Ultimately, they cease fixating on “being American” or “being Chinese”, instead finding their place between two cultures. This process demonstrates that identity is not a fixed label but an outcome of continuous adjustment through communication. The mother-daughter narrative in *The Joy Luck Club* transcends individual psychological healing; it becomes an ongoing reproduction of Asian American cultural identity through everyday skills, bilingual fissures, and collective rituals. It offers a practical symbolic-practical pathway for reflecting on the “loss of voice” dilemma within immigrant communities.

4.1. Body techniques and the recoding of taste symbols

Hall emphasized that cultural identity is not an essentialist given, but rather is continually “temporarily fixed” in concrete practices. The two events—An-mei’s nighttime drive and steaming dumplings—demonstrate how “American rules” are translated into repeatable bodily skills: mastery of steering wheel control allows Asian middle-aged women to possess the symbol of freedom for the first time; gustatory language deftly circumvents gaps in English syntax, compressing maternal care into chewable dumplings to achieve an emotionally resonant reconstruction of the mother tongue. Through passenger-seat observation and taste experience, daughter Rose recognizes her mother’s role can shift with context, granting fluidity to identity labels. This process validates the principle of identity construction—first acquiring local skills, then updating self-narratives—laying cognitive groundwork for the daughter’s later rejection of the “submissive wife” role.

4.2. Bilingual juxtaposition and the opening of a “third space”

Hall notes that identity renewal often relies on the public restatement of “key symbols.” Lindo Jong’s wedding toast and Jing-mei’s cry of “Sister” demonstrate that when Chinese phrases like “百年好合” (happily ever after) and “姐姐” (sister) coexist with English equivalents in the same space-time, the semantic fissure creates what Bhabha termed the “third space”. The daughter, as translator, occupies this fissure and commands discursive dominance: Weaverly employs “simultaneous translation” to present comprehensible Chinese identity to white guests while declaring to her mother that tradition is negotiable and fused; Jing-mei’s intonation-shifted “jiějie” still elicits her sister’s warm embrace and enthusiastic response, proving that blood ties become valid upon mutual acknowledgment. Translation ceases to be equivalent replication and becomes power generation. The daughter transforms from an “explained other” into an “explaining subject”, accomplishing an intergenerational reversal of identity hierarchy.

4.3. Music and mahjong as ritual anchors for identity circulation

Hall posits that identity requires “repeatable rituals” for sustained reproduction. The piano tuning and mahjong scenes respectively activate auditory, tactile, and vocal modalities, achieving cross-contextual suturing of traumatic memory. After her mother’s death, Jing-mei Woo achieves self-reconciliation by resuming piano practice, arranging for tuning, and performing childhood pieces. She synthesizes her mother’s directives with English rhythms into a “Chinese-American chord,” demonstrating that identity reconstruction requires drawing resources from old symbolic systems. The concluding mahjong session employs “碰/Pung” creates a collective rhythm through bilingual homophonic overlap, translating the mother’s Chinese heritage and language into symbols of immigrant identity within a multilingual environment. Both examples reveal that cultural identity ultimately solidifies not within the individual psyche but through collective enactment. Only when the daughter publicly translates her mother’s story and the mother hears her native dialect resonate within English syntax is the dual identity fully sutured—returning to its origin and beginning anew.

5. Conclusion

The “loss of speech” in *The Joy Luck Club* is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a symptom of fractured cultural identity; “revoicing” represents the process through which mother and daughter re-sew their selves via negotiation, translation, and ritual. This empirical analysis further reveals that this process is not unidirectional but involves back-and-forth movement between different symbolic

systems. The paper successively demonstrates how Chinese emotional codes are fragmented and filled by various symbols, ultimately revealing observable patterns in the mother-daughter dialogue that embody Hall's concept of the never-ending suturing.

The study's three-tiered conclusions correspond to the "aphasia-polyphony" logic while supplementing its mechanisms. First, the disintegration of meaning chains caused by the absence of the mother tongue primarily triggers somatization and shame, not direct silence. Second, the daughter seizes narrative power through "embedded Chinese" and bilingual juxtaposition, demonstrating that polyphony requires power shifts rather than simple language switching. Third, the piano and mahjong narratives demonstrate that identity ultimately requires grounding in collectively repeatable public performances to achieve cultural continuity and identity reconstruction.

This study illuminates, through Hall's theoretical framework, the pervasive mother-tongue anxiety within globalized families while witnessing how marginalized subjects cultivate new blossoms within linguistic fissures. Simultaneously, it offers immigrant families a "multimodal translation" approach: allowing adolescents to experiment with role-switching through embodied practice, reducing the cognitive cost of choosing sides, and permitting non-verbal channels like tone, taste profiles, and rhythms to enter official narratives. This transforms Hall's theory into an operational social technology, providing replicable cultural hybridity templates for other diaspora communities. This writing itself constitutes a small act of "polyphony"—a search for an academic voice between Chinese thought and English terminology.

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