AMY TAN’S HIGH-CONTEXT AND LOW-CONTEXT CULTURES

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ABSTRACT

Culture is the way of living which a group of people has developed and transmits from one generation to the next. It includes concepts, skills, habits of thinking and acting, arts, institutions, ways of relating to the world, and agreement on what is significant and necessary to know. Race, ethnicity, class, and gender are cultural creations; they derive their meanings from the culture. Context is the whole situation, background, or environment connected to an event, a situation, or an individual.

A high-context culture is a culture in which the individual has internalized meaning and information, so that little is explicitly stated in written or spoken messages. In conversation, the listener knows what is meant; because the speaker and listener share the same knowledge and assumptions, the listener can piece together the speaker’s meaning. China is a high-context culture.

A low-context culture is one in which information and meaning are explicitly stated in the message or communication. Individuals in a low-context culture expect explanations when statements or situations are unclear, as they often are. Information and meaning are not internalized by the individual but are derived from context, e.g., from the situation or an event. The United States is a low-context culture.
High-context Cultures

In a high-context culture, the individual acquires cultural information and meaning from obedience to authority, through observation and by imitation. To acquire knowledge in this way and to internalize it, children must be carefully trained. High-context cultures are highly stable and slow to change, for they are rooted in the past; one example is the Chinese practice of ancestor worship. They are also unified and cohesive cultures.

In such cultures, the individual must know what is meant at the covert or unexpressed level; the individual is supposed to know and to react appropriately. Others are expected to understand without explanation or specific details. Explanations are insulting, as if the speaker regards the listener as not knowledgeable or socialized enough to understand. To members of a low-context culture, speakers in a high-context culture seem to talk around a subject and never to get to the point.

The bonds among people are very strong in a high-context culture. People in authority are personally and literally responsible for the actions of subordinates, whether in government, in business, or in the family. (In the U.S., on the other hand, the general practice is to find a "fall guy" or scapegoat who takes the blame for those with more power and status.) In a high-context culture, the forms (conventional ways of behaving) are important; the individual who does not observe the forms is perceived negatively; the negative judgments for an individual's bad behavior may extend to the entire family.

In embarrassing or awkward situations, people act as though nothing happened. Individuality, minor disagreements, and personality clashes are ignored, so that no action has to be taken. Taking action tends to be taken seriously, because once started an action must generally be completed. Individuals can't stop an action because they change their minds, because they develop another interest, because unforeseen consequences arise, or because something better comes along. Consequently there is greater caution or even reluctance to initiate an undertaking or to give a promise. Chinese parents may overlook a child's behavior, because they expect that the strong family tradition, which is based on ancestors, will cause the child ultimately to behave properly.

The Clash of Low-context and High-context Cultures in The Joy Luck Club

In a low-context culture, as Edward T. Hall explains, "Most of the information must be in the transmitted message in order to make up for what is missing in the context (both internal and external)." In a low-context culture change is rapid and easy; bonds between people are looser; action is undertaken easily and can be changed or stopped once initiated.

The mothers in The Joy Luck Club expect their daughters to obey their elders and so learn by obedience, by observation and by imitation, as they did in China. Their elders did not explain. Because the mothers internalized values and knowledge, they seem to assume that knowledge is innate and that it is present in their daughters and only has to be brought out or activated. The internalization is so psychologically complete and so much a part of the mothers' identities that they speak of it as physical. Am-mei, for instance, sees in her mother "my own true nature." What was beneath my skin. Inside my bones" (p. 40); to her, connection to her mother or filial respect is "so deep it is in your bones" (p. 41).

But in this country, the mothers' warnings, instructions, and example are not supported by the context of American culture, and so their daughters do not understand. They resent and misinterpret their mothers' alien Chinese ways and beliefs. Similarly, the mothers do not understand why they do not have the kind of
relationships with their daughters that they had with their mothers in China. The Joy Luck mothers were so close to their own mothers that they saw themselves as continuations of their mothers, like stairs.

The communication problems that arise when one speaker is from a high-context culture and the other is from a low-context culture can be seen in the conversations of June and Suyuen, "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" (p. 27). June looks for meaning in what is stated and does not understand that her mother omits important information because she assumes her daughter knows it and can infer it; her mother, on the other hand, looks for meaning in what has not been stated and so adds to what has been stated explicitly and comes up with meanings that surprise her daughter.

The difficulties of growing up in a family from a high-context culture and living in a low-context culture appear in other Asian-American writers. The narrator of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* is unable to decide whether figures she sees are real persons or ghosts, whether stories she is told are true or fiction, what the meaning of those stories is, why she is told the stories, and whether an event really happens or is imagined.

**Modern Chinese History**

China's history is both rich and turbulent. This is especially true in the twentieth century, a time marked by violent social, political, and economic upheaval in China. During the first decade of the century, Chinese students, merchants, and others who were dissatisfied with Manchu rule began to rebel. On February 12, 1912, the arch revolutionist Sun Yat-sen, who had been ruling as president from his quarters in Nanking, stepped down, and, two days later, General Yuan Shih-k'ai was elected the first president of the Republic of China. In April, the government was transferred to Peking.

The Chinese Republic maintained a fragile hold on the country until 1949. Yuan died in 1916, and the provincial warlords governed the country for more than a decade, ever changing the political map of the country. During World War I, when Europe was absorbed with its own troubles, Japan sought to conquer China; in 1915, it issued the so-called "Twenty-one Demands," which would have reduced China to a Japanese protectorate. China agreed to many of the demands, including the transfer of some land to Japan. China's belated entry into the war in 1917 was an attempt to check Japan's encroachment. Leaders fully expected America to support China against Japan, but they were mistaken. At Versailles, President Woodrow Wilson withheld America's support for China's restoration of autonomy because of 1917 agreements between Japan and the European allies and because Japan withdrew its demands for a racial-equality clause in the League of Nations. Chinese intellectuals were shocked by what they judged to be Wilson's betrayal. Increasingly, they turned to the ideals of the former Soviet Union and communism—despite the fact that China was granted membership in the League of Nations.

The Chinese Communist Party was formed in 1921. Among its original members was Mao Zedong. Two years later, the Communists helped Sun Yat-sen reorganize the crumbling Kuomintang. In 1926, the strengthened Kuomintang, under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, tried to unify China under Kuomintang rule and rid the country of warlords and imperialists. Chiang purged the Communists and relied increasingly on foreign intervention. In 1928, he established a new government, but his rule was unstable. He failed to unify the country, and the Communists soon began to marshal the opposition. Mao Zedong rallied the peasants and set up opposition governments. Increasing Japanese aggression chipped away from the North and Manchuria.

On September 18, 1931, the Japanese exerted their control throughout Manchuria. The following spring, they set up the puppet government of Manchukuo and installed Henry Pu-yi, the last of the Manchu dynasty, as its puppet
ruler. The Communists continued to fight their way across the country on the so-called "Long March," and by 1936, they had established a strong base in the northwest. In 1937, the Kuomintang formed a united front with the Communists against the Japanese.

In 1937, Japan and China plunged into war. The following year, Japan seized control of most of northeast China, as far inland as Hankou, and the area around Canton on the southeast coast. World War II saw a serious erosion of power for the Kuomintang, while the Communists expanded their membership, military force, and territory. The Kuomintang was split into factions. Severe inflation, official corruption, and loss of morale further weakened the government. Meanwhile, the Communists continued to build strength.

On August 8, 1945, the former USSR declared war on Japan and armed the Chinese communists. In 1945, shortly after Japan surrendered, tension between the Communists and Kuomintang erupted over Manchuria. The U.S. tried to mediate but failed. In 1949, the Communists seized control and established the People's Republic of China. Mao Zedong became the head of state and Chou En-Lai (Zhou Enlai) seized the legislature. In 1954, Communism became law, and China began the transformation to a socialist society. Through extensive Marxist-Leninist propaganda, people were reeducated. Concubinage, polygamy, sale of children, and interference with the remarriage of widows was banned. Women were assured equal rights with respect to employment, property ownership, and divorce. Religion was controlled; missionaries were expelled. These changes were achieved through terror; between 1949 and 1952, more than two million "counterrevolutionaries" were executed.

Private industry was abolished and land reforms followed. Under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, the island of Taiwan off China's coast resisted Communist control and set up a rival government. In 1965, Chou En-Lai declared his intention to liberate Taiwan. The Communists sought to achieve their goal through air and naval raids but proved unsuccessful due largely to American intervention. Until the early 1970s, the U.S. supported the Nationalist government. In 1979, however, the U.S. began formal diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, ending its ties with Taiwan.

**Tans women in the joy luck club**

The novel traces the fate of four mothers — Suyuan Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-yung St. Clair — and their four daughters — Jing-mei "June" Woo, Rose Hsu Jordan, Waverly Jong, and Lena St. Clair. All four mothers fled China in the 1940s and retain much of their heritage. All four daughters are very Americanized. As Tan remarked, the club's four older women represent "different aspects of my mother, but the book could be about any culture or generation and what is lost between them."

The four older women have experienced almost inconceivable horrors early in their lives. Suyuan Woo was forced to abandon her infant daughters in order to survive in a war-torn land; An-mei Hsu sees her mother commit suicide in order to enable her daughter to have a future. Lindo Jong is married at twelve to a child to whom she was betrothed in infancy; Ying-yung St. Clair was abandoned by her husband, had an abortion, and lived in great poverty for a decade. She then married a man whom she did not love, a man she could barely communicate with despite their years together.

By comparison, the four daughters have led relatively blessed lives, cosseted by their doting — if assertive — mothers. Ironically, each of the daughters has great difficulty achieving happiness. Waverly Jong divorces her first husband, and both Lena St. Clair and Rose Hsu Jordan are on the verge of splitting with their husbands. Lena is wretchedly unhappy and considering divorce; Rose's husband, Ted, has already served the divorce papers. Jing-mei has never married nor has she a lover. Furthermore, none of the daughters is entirely comfortable when
dealing with the events of her life. Although she has achieved great economic success as a tax accountant, Waverly is afraid to tell her mother that she plans to remarry. Lena has a serious eating disorder, and she bitterly resents the way that she and her husband, Harold, split their finances, and how her career has suffered in order to advance his. Rose suffers a breakdown when her husband moves out. She lacks self-esteem, and her mother cannot understand why she sobs to a psychiatrist rather than asserting herself. Jing-mei is easily intimidated, especially by her childhood friend Waverly. She is not satisfied with her job as an advertising copywriter, and, like Rose, she lacks self-esteem. Through the love of their mothers, each of these young women learns about her heritage and so is able to deal more effectively with her life.

About the joy luck club
It was not until the 1976 publication of Maxine Hong Kingston's mystical memoir of her San Francisco childhood, The Woman Warrior, that Asian-American writers broke into mainstream American literature. Even so, ten more years had to pass until another Asian-American writer achieved fame and fortune. The Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan's first novel, sold an astonishing 275,000 hard-cover copies upon its 1989 publication. The success of Tan's book increased publishers' willingness to gamble on first books by Asian-American writers. Two years later, at least four other Chinese-American writers had brisk-selling books. Gus Lee's China Boy, for example, had an initial print run of 75,000, huge for a first-time author. His advance was nearly $100,000. The Literary Guild purchased the rights to the book; Random House did an audio version with M. Butterfly's B. D. Hong as the reader. Two publishers fought for the right to publish David Wong Louie's Pang of Love, a collection of short stories. Gish Jen's Typical American is an equally big hit.

At the same time, Japanese-American writers are flourishing. Perhaps not since the literary community "discovered" Jewish-American writers in the 1950s have we experienced such a concentrated ethnic wave. In part, this interest in Asian-American literature can be attributed to the near doubling of America's Asian-American population, from 3.5 million to 6.9 million in the past ten years. The fact remains, however, that more Asian-Americans are writing, and their books have a fresh and original voice.

The Joy Luck Club describes the lives of four Asian women who fled China in the 1940s and their four very Americanized daughters. The novel focuses on Jing-mei "June" Woo, a thirty-six-year-old daughter, who, after her mother's death, takes her place at the meetings of a social group called the Joy Luck Club. As its members play mahjong and feast on Chinese delicacies, the older women spin stories about the past and lament the barriers that exist between their daughters and themselves. Through their stories, Jing-mei comes to appreciate the richness of her heritage.

Suyuan Woo, the founder of the Joy Luck Club, barely escaped war-torn China with her life and was forced to leave her twin infant daughters behind. Her American-born daughter, Jing-mei "June" Woo, works as a copywriter for a small advertising firm. She lacks her mother's drive and self-confidence but finds her identity after her mother's death when she meets her twin half-sisters in China.

An-mei Hsu grew up in the home of the wealthy merchant Wu Tsing. She was without status because her mother was only the third wife. After her mother's suicide, An-mei came to America, married, and had seven children. Like Jing-mei Woo, An-mei's daughter Rose is unsure of herself. She is nearly prostrate with grief when her husband, Ted, demands a divorce. After a breakdown, she finds her identity and learns to assert herself.

Lindo Jong was betrothed at infancy to another baby, Tyan-yu. They married as preteens and lived in Tyan-yu's home. There, Lindo was treated like a servant. She cleverly tricked the family, however, and gained her freedom.
She came to America, got a job in a fortune cookie factory, met and married Tin Jong. Her daughter, Waverly, was a chess prodigy who became a successful tax accountant.

Ying-ying St. Clair grew up a wild, rebellious girl in a wealthy family. After she married, her husband deserted her, and Ying-ying had an abortion and lived in poverty for a decade. Then she married Clifford St. Clair and emigrated to America. Her daughter, Lena, is on the verge of a divorce from her architect husband, Harold Livotny. She established him in business and resents their unequal division of finances.

The Joy Luck Club- Analysis of Culture

"Before I wrote The Joy Luck Club," Tan said in an interview, "my mother told me, 'I might die soon. And if I die, what will you remember?" Tan's answer appears on the book's dedication page, emphasizing the novel's adherence to truth. How much of the story is real? "All the daughters are fractured bits of me," Tan said in a Cosmopolitan interview. Further, Tan has said that the members of the club represent "different aspects of my mother."

When the novel opens, a mother, Suyuan Woo, has died of a cerebral aneurysm, and her husband has asked their thirty-six-year-old daughter, Jing-mei ("June"), to assume her mother's role and take her seat at the next meeting of the Joy Luck Club. Suyuaninnovated this particular version of the club long ago — in 1949, the year she arrived in San Francisco from China. At the First Chinese Baptist Church, she met the Hsus, the Jongs, and the St. Clairs, and soon she enticed the wives to join with her and form a Joy Luck Club.

In a flashback, we hear Suyuan telling her daughter about the origins of the very first Joy Luck Club, as well as stories from her past. Her first husband, an officer with the Kuomintang, feared an imminent Japanese invasion, so he took her and their two small babies to Kweilin. There, Suyuan created the Joy Luck Club in order to cope with the horrors of war. Each week, four young women met to play mahjong, share a few meager luxuries, and talk about happier times. Because Suyuan's stories about that first Joy Luck Club — especially the endings — change each time she tells them, June discounts them as little more than embroidered, restyled, improvised memories.

One day, however, Suyuan tells her daughter an entirely new story: An army officer arrived at their house in Kweilin and urged Suyuan to escape to Chungking as quickly as possible. The exodus was so effected suddenly and was so grueling that, along the way, she was forced to abandon all her possessions, one by one. Finally, she had to abandon her most precious possessions of all: her two baby daughters. June is stunned. She has two sisters, about whom she knew nothing — until now.

This central episode in this section of the novel is based on truth. In 1967, Tan, her mother Daisy, and her brother John left California for Switzerland. On the eve of their departure, Daisy revealed that somewhere in China, she had three daughters from an earlier marriage — daughters lost to her when political ties were severed between the U.S. and China in 1949. In the novel, Suyuan loses two daughters and does not live long enough to be reunited with them. In real life, however, Tan's mother, Daisy, was reunited with two of her daughters in 1978. Thus, Tan interweaves fact and fiction in the novel, taking truth from her mother's stories while creating a larger canvas for her novel, focusing on two cultures and two generations and the chasm between them. The transformation of truth into dramatic fiction parallels the transformation within each of the four mothers — from being young girls to being old women. The novel also focuses on the transformation of the Chinese daughters into full-fledged Americans. And, of course, Tan's emphasis on communication — and particularly the lack of communication — between the two generations is always present.
The novel, in fact, opens with the concept of communication: Mr. Woo, June's father, believes that his wife died because she could not express herself. Unvoiced ideas, he says, can literally cause death. A few paragraphs farther on, June alludes to the problems that she and her mother had communicating: "I can never remember things I didn't understand in the first place."

In "Mother Tongue," an essay in The Threepenny Review, Fall 1990, Tan commented on her problems communicating with her mother: "I think my mother's English almost had an effect on limiting my possibilities in life. . . . While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be my strong suit . . . for me, at least, the answers on English tests were always a judgment call, a matter of opinion and personal experience."

Tan is too modest. Her novel is rich — especially in figurative language, words and phrases that convey ideas beyond their literal meaning. Tan's most common figures of speech are similes, metaphors, personification, and hyperbole. Many critics have compared her narrative style and her unique voice to the Native American writer Louise Erdrich. Tan recalls reading Erdrich's Love Medicine in 1985 and being "so amazed by her voice. It was different and yet it seemed I could identify with the powerful images, the beautiful language and such moving stories." Tan's images are equally powerful. Her metaphor "the peaks looked like giant fried fish trying to jump out of a vat of oil," for example, uses a common food item eaten regularly within a terrifying context in order to convey the horrors of war and to foreshadow the unbearable events that will befall the mother who is forced to abandon her babies by the side of the road.

This section also introduces the theme of identity and heritage. June is ashamed of her heritage, symbolized by the strange clothes that the mothers wear to the Joy Luck Club; June is uncomfortable looking at the "funny Chinese dresses with stiff stand-up collars and blooming branches of embroidered silk sewn over their breasts." She imagines that the Joy Luck Club is a "shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war." However, when June accepts the Joy Luck Club's gift of $1200, she takes a first step toward fully discovering, accepting, and appreciating her Oriental heritage.

Interestingly, Tan herself and her friends have formed their own version of the Joy Luck Club. They call it "A Fool and His Money" and use the club as a forum where they can exchange investment tips.

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