

# **THE JOY LUCK CLUB BY AMY TAN IN THE CONTEXT OF CHINESE AMERICAN LITERATURE**

**Fengshu Li**

*Belarusian State University, Minsk;  
50601686@qq.com;  
Supervisor – Hanna Butyrchyk, PhD., Associate Professor*

The objective of this article is to give the general introduction into the history of Chinese American literature and to analyze Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* within this context.

**Keywords:** Amy Tan; *The Joy Luck Club*; Chinese American; intercultural interactions; narrative structure; narrative perspective; autobiography.

Over the past few decades Chinese American literature became one of the most relevant branches of Asian American literature. As long as Chinese Americans are Americans of Chinese ancestry, Chinese American literature unites the group of literary works (both fiction and non-fiction) composed in the United States by the authors of Chinese descent (both in English and in Chinese). This kind of literature is also marked with the specific dominant theme of cultural interactions, and practically always discuss the issues of self-hand hybrid identity. Nevertheless, the most prominent writers of Asian American literature (as well as the representatives of other multicultural communities) do not approve their position within this narrow context, which suggests to examine their oeuvre as a depiction of cultural interactions and pays very little attention to style and narrative techniques. Amy Tan is not an exception. She constantly underlines that she is not a part of this literary ghetto and prefers to be called an American author of Chinese descent. Amy Tan is lucky enough to be included into the canon of contemporary American literature due to her striking popularity all over the world. But far not all of multicultural authors appear in outlines of contemporary literature(s) of the United States.

The history of Chinese American literature can be divided into three phases: the starting phase, the phase of rapid development, the phase of multi-elementary theoretical construction. The time from the end of XIXth century to 1960s can be regarded as the starting phase. The earliest American-Chinese literature can be traced back to the end of the XIXth century, when the Asian immigrants first arrived in the USA on a large scale and took upon many serving occupations such as gold-rushing, railway-repairing, fish-catching, textile and etc.

In the initial stage, there were only a few influential works, such as *My Life in China and America* by Yung Wing, *The Fragrance of Spring* by Sui Sin Far, etc. were handed down. This stage also includes *Father and Glorious Descendant* by Pardee Lowe, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* by Jade Snow Wong, and *Chinatown Family* by Lin Yutang. Autobiography was regarded as one of the writers' favourite styles often used to illustrate the Chinese experience in the United States. The purpose of these novels was to convey the message of correcting the image of China created by others and to build a bridge between Chinese and American cultures.

As the dominant American culture expanded throughout the world, a few people began to realize that the metaphor of “melting pot” could hardly represent their hope for the development of their own culture. Once dumped in the seemingly generous “melting pot”, ethnic minority cultures are either ignored, left on the edge, speechless, or melted into the pot, assimilated, and lose their national traditions. Therefore, with the active efforts of all minority representatives, American culture has undergone rapid changes, especially in the late 1970s and 1980s. It seems that all of a sudden, the concept of "multiculturalism" has become a topic in the literary, economic and political fields. No matter how much the expectation is achieved, this concept more or less expresses the hope for the complete and equal coexistence of diverse cultures. Multiculturalism as a background provided valuable opportunities for the rapid development and strengthening of minority cultures that have long been excluded and neglected. They demanded the recognition and evaluation they deserve, and demonstrated their unique charm while providing social opportunities. Thus, the era of expression and enlightenment by American-Chinese writers arrived.

The second stage started from 1970s and lasted until the end of 20th century. Due to the reform of the immigrant laws, the blacks' movement of civil rights and women's liberation movement American-Chinese literature developed rapidly. In 1974 the members of the Combined Asian American Resources Project (CARP) published representative selections from Chinese-, Japanese-, and Filipino-Americans from the past fifty years — an anthology *Aiiieeeee, An Anthology of Asian American writers*. This anthology combined the works of many almost forgotten authors and established Asian American literature as a separate branch of multicultural literatures. The anthology opened with a notable essay *Fifty Years of Our Whole Voice*, which laid out a list of concerns of Asian American writers – orientalism, monolingualism, ghettoed communities, and of Asian American women – double oppression for being a person of colour and for being a woman. This essay will later echo in Gaytri Spivak’s masterpiece *Can the subaltern speak?*

Unfortunately, nobody paid much attention to the female voices which sounded strong within this context. Maxine Hong Kingston broke up that silence when in 1976 she published her first autobiographical book *Woman Warrior: A Memoir of a Girlhood among Ghosts* which is considered to be milestone in Asian American literature. After that, she published *China Men* (1980), *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989) and *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003). The second stage is represented by many other famous American-Chinese writers, such as Gish Jen, Gus Lee, Mei Ng, Fae Myenne Ng. In order to reflect personal experience, memories and social observations Chinese American authors of this period continues to draw upon resources of autobiography, biography, his/her-story. A very special discourse of mother – daughter narrative was established as a productive way of storytelling. Mother – daughter narrative seen in within the Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976), Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989)), Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* (1993), and Gish Jen’s *Typical American* (1992), and *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996)). These books contributed to women activists’ movements within the late twentieth century.

The depiction of Chinese lifestyle and customs in the mentioned works is often under the severe criticism mainly from Chinese reviewers. They state that Chinese culture in the books by Asian American writers is nothing but their own vision of the issue. Although these authors have inherited some Chinese experience from their parents, Chinese culture as it shown in their works is not the original one. We have to take into consideration that Chinese theme in the novels is almost always a contribution to portrayal of the one side of dual character's identity.

The third stage in the development of Chinese American literature begins from the end of 20th century and lasts up to today. In this stage, Chinese American literature enters a new phase. It becomes a part of American mainstream literature and some works are included into the canon of US literatures. Many scholars, from their researching field, construct the theory of Chinese American literature. Sau-ling Cynthis Wong, Amy Ling, Shirley Goek-Lin Lim and Elaine Kim make their contributions to the theoretical construction.

After numerous questions about the need to preserve traditions, immigrants eventually choose to use their special status between the two worlds to mediate conflicts and maintain balance. Regaining ethnic identity will allow them to find the cause of all the doubts they feel, which will suddenly become an advantage to help them in the new world. Their conclusions will restore their responsibilities to activate Chinese American culture and earn the dignity of being Chinese Americans.

To regard Asian American literature as a whole, it is not difficult to find specific inter-cultural, intra-cultural and cross-cultural conflicts throughout the works, and through which to show the norms of Chinese culture. These conflicts include sociocultural conflicts, intergenerational conflicts, language conflicts, ethnic conflicts and gender conflicts. Within these conflicts we can also trace the specific generation gap, conflicts between mothers who represent the Chinese traditions and daughters who were brought up in the Chinese families but due to their education and social activities in multicultural community represent American lifestyle. Each of these generation has its specific voice and mode of expression, their own narrative to tell their story.

In the past two to three decades, Chinese American writers have gained recognition and widespread attention in American literature. Among them, Amy Tan is one of the most popular representatives. Her first novel *The Joy Luck Club* was published in 1989 and has been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for nearly a year. It won the National Fiction Award, the Commonwealth Club Gold Award and the Bay Area Book Critics Award.

Amy Tan's mother's life-story served as a background at least for four of her novels: *Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001). The major conflict in these novels is the same: the relationship between Chinese mothers, who often left behind in China their first families and came to the United States in search for better life, and their daughters, who were born in America. This conflict upriser such important issues as cultural interactions, hybrid/dual identity, confrontation of different lifestyles and mentality. The writer's purpose is to rethink her mother's Chinese past

in the autobiographical narrative, to combine memory and imagination, to create female images which have prototypes in her mother's story.

Hindsight and its assessment are possible only if and on the basis of transferring the information from person to person and from generation to generation. Self-reflection is impossible without the functioning of such information. Each of Amy Tan's heroines tries to recollect something painful in her past and overcome it through storytelling. Creativity becomes a way of experiencing the past, a means of organizing and generalizing of personal experience. First person narrative contains especially more meaningful information than other types of discourse, and has a greater potential for revealing the emotional state. The writer constantly emphasizes that in autobiographical works she is guided not by a photographic but by an emotional memory when assumed images are filled with once actually experienced feelings.

Another interesting thing about Amy Tan are her reflection on her own and others creative work and her self-definition as a contemporary author in comparison to contemporary writer. Contemporary author, according to Amy Tan, is always in the state of formation.

The narrative study of Amy Tan and her works mainly focuses on "storytelling" narrative strategies, ghost narrative strategies, and feminist narrative strategies. Others also include structure, narrative perspective, narrative time and Narrative space, etc.

Amy Tan follows the tradition of distinguished multicultural authors Maxine Hong Kingston and Louise Erdrich. The symbolic image of woman warrior is applicable to Amy Tan's heroines, who search for their own voices and possibility to express themselves. The writer employs narrative techniques that are widely used by multicultural authors, such as autobiographical first-person narrative and memoirs. Amy Tan states the influence of Louise Erdrich *Love Medicine* on the structure of *The Joy Luck Club*. The novel which consists of independent stories (so-called chapter novel) also relates to traditional Mah-jong game, which implies four players. So, the characters in the novel are organised in two groups with four women in each. Chinese mothers play Mah-jong, recollect their painful Chinese past and speak of their relationship with their Americanized daughters. Two opposite groups set the main conflicts in the novel: generation gap and Chinese and American cultural differences. The relevant features of hybrid identity are also examined by the author in this novel. Jing-mei Woo serves as a mediator between mothers and daughters as long as she took mother's place at Mah-jong table after her death and has to tell both mother's and her own stories.

Amy Tan inspected intercultural conflicts on the following levels: religion and beliefs (Christianity vs traditional Chinese religions), social customs and traditions (food, dressing, etiquette), family concepts.

The main components of the Amy Tan's artistic world are an autobiographical nature, a combination of the Chinese parables and the American narrative, Chinese (associative) and American (rational) components of mentality as an evidence of hybrid identity; a composition patchwork, the idea of continuity, the universalization of style through the deliberately simplified language, the search for own writer's

voice which is reflected in the narrative strategy of the subjective mother-daughter narrative close to diary writing. As an expert of storytelling, in *The Joy Luck Club* Amy Tan uses several of narrative methods such as Multi-level and Embedded Narratives.

The further research perspectives of Amy Tan's oeuvre include cultural research, ethnic identity research, narrative research, postcolonial theory and comparative study.