

Negotiating Identity through Superstition: Cultural Conflict in Amy Tan's *the Joy Luck Club*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersection of superstition, cultural conflict, and identity formation in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, focusing on how superstitious beliefs function as a site of negotiation between generations and cultures. In the novel, Tan presents a nuanced portrayal of Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters, who often struggle to reconcile inherited cultural values with their lived experiences in the United States. Superstition, deeply embedded in the mothers' understanding of fate, family, and morality, is frequently dismissed or misunderstood by their daughters, who are shaped by Western ideals of autonomy and rationality. However, these beliefs are not merely relics of an outdated worldview; rather, they serve as powerful symbols through which the characters navigate identity, memory, and belonging. Through close textual analysis, this paper argues that superstition acts as both a source of cultural continuity and a point of contention that exposes the deeper tensions of diasporic life. While some daughters resist these beliefs as irrational or oppressive, others come to reinterpret them as meaningful connections to their heritage and familial bonds. This dual role of superstition—both divisive and unifying—reveals the complex processes by which identity is negotiated across cultural and generational boundaries. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that Tan uses superstition not simply as a cultural detail but as a literary device that dramatizes the broader themes of assimilation, inter-generational understanding, and the formation of hybrid identities within the Asian American experience.

Key words: Superstitions, Cultural Conflict, Immigrants Sensibility, Hybrid Identity.

INTRODUCTION

Superstitious beliefs play a pivotal role in Chinese culture, intertwining deeply with historical traditions, societal norms, and spiritual practices. These beliefs, often rooted in ancient philosophies, provide an understanding of the world, guiding behavior and decision-making across generations. The cultural significance of superstitious beliefs in Chinese culture is profound, reflecting a rich tapestry of history, community, and identity. These beliefs not only serve as guidelines for personal conduct and communal rituals but also act as vital links connecting past and present.

Superstitious beliefs are often rooted in ancient Chinese philosophies, including Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. These systems emphasize harmony, balance, and the interconnectedness of all things. Superstitions reflect and reinforce these ideals, offering guidelines for living in alignment with one's environment and society.

Many superstitions are derived from Chinese mythology and folklore. Tales of heavenly beings, spirit animals, and ancestral deities provide a cultural backdrop that reinforces the importance of respecting tradition and the natural world.

Superstitions are intricately tied to rituals and festivals, such as the Lunar New Year. Practices like setting off firecrackers, hanging red decorations, and conducting rituals to honor ancestors are all influenced by superstitious beliefs that aim to bring good luck and ward off evil spirits. Everyday activities are often imbued with superstitions. For instance, practices such as avoiding certain numbers (like the number 4, which sounds like the word for "death") or observing auspicious dates for weddings, moving homes, or starting new businesses demonstrate the pervasive influence of these beliefs in daily life.

Superstitions maintain a strong connection to ancestry and familial ties. Rituals honoring ancestors not only reflect respect for lineage but also serve as a way to seek blessings for future generations. This practice reinforces familial bonds and cultural identity. Superstitions can be seen as a form of cultural resilience, preserving traditions that withstand societal changes. They provide a sense of belonging and continuity, especially for diaspora communities that seek to maintain their cultural heritage in a new environment. They often carry significant symbolic weight. For example, the color red symbolizes good fortune and happiness, while certain animals are seen as omens of fortune or misfortune. These symbols not only influence personal beliefs but also shape collective cultural narratives and values.

Many superstitions are tied to moral teachings or social norms. They often encapsulate wisdom regarding human behavior, promoting values such as filial piety, humility, and respect for nature. These beliefs act as social controls that advocate for desired behaviors in society.

As China modernizes and interacts with global influences, the role of superstitious beliefs is evolving. While some younger generations may view them as outdated, many still find value in these traditions as they navigate their identities. There is a growing discourse on integrating traditional beliefs with modern scientific understanding. Some superstitions are contested in light of education and rationality, yet they persist as key aspects of cultural expression.

Superstitions as a Cultural Anchor

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* intricately weaves together the lives of four Chinese-American immigrant families and their daughters, exploring themes of cultural identity, generational conflict, and the complexities of mother-daughter relationships. Superstitious beliefs, deeply rooted in Chinese culture, serve as a significant thematic element throughout the novel, symbolizing the intersection of traditional Chinese values and modern American sensibilities.

In Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* superstition plays a significant role in shaping the lives of the four Chinese-American mothers and their four American-born daughters. The mothers, who immigrated to the United States from China, bring with them a rich cultural heritage steeped in traditional Chinese superstitions. These beliefs, often rooted in folk tales, mythology, and Confucian values, influence the mothers' worldviews, shaping their perceptions of luck, fate, and identity.

Through the mothers' stories, Tan explores how superstition impacts their relationships with their daughters, who are increasingly assimilated into American culture. The daughters, who are often skeptical of their mothers' superstitious beliefs, struggle to reconcile their dual identities as Chinese-Americans. The tension between traditional Chinese values and modern American culture is palpable, as the mothers' superstitions are met with resistance and misunderstanding by their daughters.

Tan skillfully deals with the intricate narratives of the mothers and daughters, revealing how superstition serves as both a source of comfort and a point of contention. As the characters navigate their complex relationships, superstition emerges as a symbol of cultural heritage, tradition, and the immigrant experience. Through its exploration of superstition, *The Joy Luck Club* offers a poignant portrayal of the challenges and opportunities that arise when cultural identities intersect. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan delves into the complexities of Chinese-American identity while highlighting the importance of superstitious beliefs in shaping the characters' behaviors and worldviews. Superstitions, often dismissed as mere folklore in a contemporary context, are presented as vital cultural touchstones that connect the characters to their heritage and provide them with a framework for understanding the world.

The Influence of Traditional Chinese Beliefs

Superstitions in *The Joy Luck Club* are often derived from traditional Chinese cultural beliefs. For instance, the practice of feng shui, the significance of numbers, and the concept of luck are pervasive themes throughout the narrative. These beliefs serve as a way for characters to tackle their lives, providing comfort and a sense of control amidst the uncertainty of their immigrant experience. The mothers, particularly, embody these traditions, instilling superstitious values in their daughters as a way to maintain cultural continuity.

Feng Shui and Home Life: The careful arrangement of furniture and the significance of colors within the home environment serve as important elements for characters like Lindo Jong, who believes that her living space impacts her family's fortune. This practice illustrates the deep-rooted essence of feng shui and highlights the mothers' desire for stability in their children's lives.

Lena St.Clair's mother is not satisfied with the house they lived in. She felt, "When something goes against your nature you are not in balance. This house was built too steep, and a bad wind from the top blows all your strength back downhill. So you can never get ahead. You are always rolling backward." (TJLC 121). These words express the attitude of Lena which validates the importance given to traditional beliefs.

The characters often express concern over names and their associated meanings, reflecting the belief that a name can shape one's destiny. For example, Waverly Jong's name is associated with the "willow," which symbolizes strength and resilience, influencing her journey throughout the novel. Another example is Tyan – Yu, in which Tyan meant 'sky' and Yu 'leftovers'. Lindo's husband was named after his father who was sick as he was considered the leftover of his father's spirit.

Rituals and Omens: The characters frequently refer to rituals and omens, such as the practices surrounding death and fortune-telling. For instance, When An Mei's grandma fell sick, she saw her mother cut a piece of her flesh, add it to a soup and give it to her mother. It was a queer ritual practised to heal her. It seems unacceptable to An Mei. Another episode which explicates the strange rituals of the Chinese is shown in Lighting the Red candle during a marriage. It is a superstitious belief practised by the Chinese. They believe that both the lighted ends of the candle should be burning till morning. It is done during Lindo's marriage. "This candle burned continuously at both ends without going out. This is a marriage that can never be broke...the candle was a marriage bond that was worth more than a catholic promise not to divorce. It meant that the girl couldn't divorce or remarry even if her husband died." (TJLC 59). Here, Tan indicates that these rituals evince the subordination and lack of identity of women in the Chinese society.

These rituals serve as a bridge between the past and present, linking the mothers' experiences in China with their daughters' lives in America. Lindo's mother-in-law believed that the presence of enough elements was the reason for her not becoming pregnant. She says, "A woman can have sons only if she is deficient in one of the elements. Your daughter –in-law was born with enough wood, fire, water and earth and she was deficient in metal. But when she was married, you loaded her down with gold bracelets and decorations and now she has all the elements including metal. She is too balanced to have babies." (TJLC 64)

Intergenerational Conflict and Superstitions

Clash of Cultures

The relationship between the mothers and daughters often embodies a clash between traditional Chinese superstitions and Western rationality. While the mothers stress the importance of these beliefs, the daughters frequently express skepticism, viewing them as outdated or irrelevant. This conflict is particularly evident in Waverly Jong, who struggles between her desire for autonomy and the weight of her mother's expectations rooted in superstition. The daughters often grapple with their cultural heritage as a result of their mothers' superstitions. For instance, characters like June Woo confront a constant struggle between their American upbringing and their Chinese roots. This conflict leads them to question their identity and forces them to reflect on what parts of their cultural inheritance they wish to accept or reject. The daughters' exposure to their mothers' beliefs fosters a deeper understanding of their cultural heritage, albeit often through a lens of skepticism. This duality creates tension: while they may dismiss the superstitions as irrational, they also

acknowledge their importance in shaping their mothers' lives and experiences.

Interpersonal Relationships

The superstitions often translate into specific expectations placed upon the daughters. For example, Suyuan Woo's belief in fate leads her to have high expectations for June, believing she should excel both academically and personally because of her mother's aspirations. This expectation can create a sense of failure and disappointment for June, catalyzing her character development as she struggles to meet these set goals. On the other hand, the rituals and narratives surrounding superstitions can serve as bonding experiences. The daughters sometimes find moments of connection and understanding with their mothers through shared beliefs, revealing a nuanced relationship shaped by both affection and friction. These encounters contribute to their emotional development and understanding of familial love.

Many daughters, such as Waverly Jong, directly confront and sometimes reject the superstitions of their mothers. Waverly's initial attempts to defy her mother's beliefs—such as when she becomes a chess champion—showcase a rebellion against traditional constraints. This conflict serves as a critical part of her character arc, as she learns to establish her identity through a blend of respect for her heritage and a desire for independence. As the daughters evolve throughout the narrative, they often come to terms with their mothers' superstitions, understanding them as expressions of love, care, and historical context. This journey toward acceptance allows them to reconcile their identities, ultimately leading to personal growth.

The superstitions reflect the struggles and traumas experienced by the mothers, and this is often thrust upon their daughters. For instance, the story of the red thread (a symbol of fate) can influence how daughters interpret love, relationships, and destiny, leading them to develop their own coping mechanisms as they lead their lives. As they learn more about their mothers' backgrounds and the reasons behind their beliefs, the daughters tend to cultivate empathy. Understanding the historical hardships their mothers faced creates emotional depth and complexity in their characters, allowing them to appreciate their mothers' struggles.

Ultimately, some daughters find ways to integrate their mothers' superstitions into their own worldviews. Characters like June begin to see the value in the narratives and rituals they had previously dismissed and learn to honor their mothers' traditions in their new contexts. This integration marks a significant development as they carve out spaces for both their American experiences and their Chinese heritage. The daughters confront the notion of breaking cycles of hardship and misunderstanding shaped by these beliefs. By choosing which aspects of their heritage to embrace or set aside, they become agents of change in their family narratives, reflecting a dynamic interplay between traditional customs and contemporary realities.

For the daughters, the rejection or acceptance of superstitions becomes a metaphor for their negotiation of cultural identity in the context of an immigrant experience. The struggle to find a balance between honoring their mothers' beliefs and carving out their own identities illustrates the broader theme of cultural assimilation and the complexities of balancing their dual identities.

Freudian theory postulates that Superstition can be understood as a neurotic symptom or a defense mechanism against unconscious conflict or anxiety. In literature, superstitious behavior often emerges when characters face guilt, fear of punishment, or ambivalence toward authority.

According to Lacanian theory, Identity is not stable but fragmented, formed through language and shaped by the unconscious. Superstition can function as a symbolic structure that the characters use to stabilize their identity in the face of the Real—that which cannot be symbolized or fully understood.

Psychoanalytic perspectives on Identity and superstitious beliefs

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* offers a rich terrain for psychoanalytic exploration, particularly in its portrayal of how superstition functions as a mediating force in the negotiation of identity amid cultural conflict. Rooted in the diasporic experience of Chinese-American families, the novel illustrates how superstition operates not

merely as cultural residue but as a psychological strategy to cope with loss, displacement, and intergenerational trauma.

From a Freudian perspective, the mothers' adherence to traditional Chinese superstitions—omens, signs, and rituals—can be read as expressions of repressed anxieties. Having endured war, migration, and personal loss, these women externalize their fears into symbolic structures that promise meaning and control. For example, the story of Ying-Ying St. Clair is steeped in ghostly imagery and omens that reflect her fractured sense of self and suppressed trauma. Her superstition is not irrationality but a symptom of the return of the repressed—a way for the unconscious to speak when the trauma cannot be directly acknowledged. In raising her daughter, she unconsciously transmits these fears through symbolic language, attempting to bridge a cultural and psychic gap.

Lacanian theory further illuminates the daughters' struggles with identity. Having been raised in an American context, the daughters often reject or mock their mothers' superstitions, seeing them as outdated or irrational. Yet their disavowal often masks a deeper psychic conflict. They occupy what Lacan might call a space between two symbolic orders—the Chinese cultural unconscious and the dominant American ideological framework. This liminal identity fosters a sense of lack, which some daughters unconsciously attempt to resolve by revisiting or reinterpreting the superstitions of their mothers. Jing-mei Woo's eventual embrace of her mother's story and legacy is a powerful example of how superstition becomes a symbolic vehicle through which fragmented identity can be partially reconciled.

Moreover, Jungian archetypes surface in the shared symbols and myths that span generations in the novel. The motifs of fate, ghosts, and ancestral curses are not just culturally specific superstitions but manifestations of collective archetypes—structures of the collective unconscious that bind these women across time and space. In recognizing and internalizing these symbols, the daughters begin to recover a more integrated self, one that acknowledges rather than represses their cultural inheritance.

CONCLUSION

Superstitions can serve as coping mechanisms for individuals facing uncertainty or anxiety. In a fast-changing, often tumultuous world, embracing superstitious beliefs can provide comfort, control, and a sense of predictability. Engaging in superstitious practices often fosters community bonding. Shared beliefs and rituals create a collective identity, allowing individuals to feel connected to their cultural roots.

In *The Joy Luck Club* superstitious beliefs play a crucial role in shaping the characters' lives and their relationships. Through the lens of superstition, Tan highlights the profound connections between culture, identity, and intergenerational conflict. As the characters grapple with their heritage and the pressures of assimilation, the significance of these beliefs becomes a means of understanding themselves and their place in the world. Ultimately, Amy Tan's exploration of superstition offers valuable insights into the ways cultural heritage influences personal identity, bridging the past and present. Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* superstitious beliefs are woven intricately into the fabric of each character's life, revealing the profound connection between culture and personal identity. The characters often find themselves at a crossroads between adhering to traditional beliefs passed down through generations and carving out their own identities in a modern American context.

The mothers in the novel, representing a traditional Chinese worldview, cling to superstitions as a way to sustain their lives and impart wisdom to their daughters. These beliefs act as narratives that encapsulate cultural history and familial legacies, with superstitions reflecting both hope and anxiety about the future.

In contrast, the younger generation, raised in an American society, often grapples with their mothers' beliefs, viewing them through a lens of skepticism. June Woo's rejection of her mother's superstitions underscores a broader theme of generational conflict, emphasizing the tension that often arises from differing cultural perspectives.

Ultimately, Tan's portrayal of superstition transcends mere ritual; it becomes a means of connection between characters, a way of understanding their pasts, and a method of reconciliation with their identities. Through

this interplay of belief and identity, *The Joy Luck Club* invites readers to appreciate the complexity of cultural narratives and to consider how tradition shapes individual experiences in both cultural and personal contexts.

Moreover in *The Joy Luck Club*, superstition operates on multiple psychoanalytic levels: as a defense mechanism, a symbolic order, and a bridge between unconscious worlds. It mediates the transmission of trauma, encodes cultural memory, and offers a language for fostering hybrid identities. In a landscape marked by cultural dissonance and generational silence, superstition becomes a psychic tool—misunderstood on the surface but deeply meaningful in the internal drama of identity formation.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, the superstitious beliefs of the mothers serve as crucial catalysts for their daughters' character development. These beliefs create a complex relational dynamic that fosters identity exploration, interpersonal challenges, and emotional growth. As the daughters navigate their cultural inheritance, they learn valuable lessons about love, acceptance, and resilience, ultimately shaping their identities in profound ways. Through these experiences, Amy Tan sheds light on the broader themes of cultural conflict, generational differences, and the enduring bonds of family.

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