

Adornment and Cultural Identity Construction in The Joy Luck Club: A Comparative Analysis of Mother-Daughter Relationships

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Abstract: Adornment plays a critical role in developing cultural identity, particularly among immigrant groups. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan investigates the generational and cultural clashes between Chinese immigrant moms and their American-born daughters. However, as a visual sign that conveys social and cultural meanings, adornment serves as both a marker of cultural difference and a medium of identity construction. Based on cultural identity theories and semiotics, this study analyzes how adornment reflects the characters' cultural identities and generational tensions. Through textual analysis, it compares the adornment choices of Lindo and Waverly, as well as Suyuan and Jing-mei, to explore how different characters construct their identities. The analysis reveals that first-generation immigrants use adornment to reinforce their heritage, while their daughters initially reject these traditions in favor of Western aesthetics. Over time, however, Waverly fully embraces Americanization through fashion, whereas Jing-mei undergoes a transformation, ultimately reconstructing her Chinese identity. This paper highlights the complexities of identity construction within immigrant families and suggests that adornment is a key, yet often overlooked, semiotic tool in shaping cultural identity.

Keywords: *The Joy Luck Club*, Adornment, Identity Construction, Mother-Daughter Relationships, Semiotics

1. Introduction

Amy Tan's debut novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, is a seminal piece of Asian American literature, chronicling the complex connections between four Chinese immigrant moms and their American-born kids. The work has been widely examined, particularly in terms of mother-daughter relationships and cultural identity. Heung explores how maternal language preserves cultural identity in an immigrant context. She argues that, for Chinese-American mothers, language serves as "a form of self-inscription in an alien culture, a way of preserving significance in the new reality of America" [1]. This study paved the way for further research on how language choices in the novel shape cultural identity. In China, scholars such as He have examined *The Joy Luck Club* from a linguistic perspective, analyzing code-switching as a means through which mothers construct cultural identities [2]. Following this, numerous studies have applied sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and pragmatics to explore the impact of bilingualism on identity formation [3, 4].

Beyond language, scholars have also analyzed Chinese cultural elements in the novel [5]. However, while these studies have enriched discussions on identity, little attention has been given to adornment as a medium of cultural expression. Only recently did Setefanus Suprajitno explore fashion as an essential element in identity construction [6]. While this study contributed valuable insights, it offered only a broad discussion of selected elements rather than a detailed analysis based on individual character traits.

This study examines adornment's role in cultural identity construction in *The Joy Luck Club*. By applying semiotic theory, the research offers fresh insights into how first-generation immigrants use adornment as a semiotic tool in identity construction and cultural heritage preservation, while their American-born daughters reinterpret or reject these symbols in their identity negotiations.

The findings contribute to Asian American literature and immigration studies by demonstrating how material expressions reflect assimilation pressures and generational tensions. Additionally, the comparative analysis of two mother-daughter pairs reveals both their similarities and differences and considers how these material expressions reflect their cultural identity and generational tensions. Beyond the academic significance, this study has practical implications for helping educators and social workers better assist immigrant populations from diverse backgrounds in adapting to their new society and culture.

2. Theoretical framework

Fashion is inherently complex and transcends superficial aesthetics [7]. Saucier posits that fashion functions as a fundamental symbol in the formation and reformation of identity, with decoration playing a crucial role in converting the clothed and embellished body into a vehicle for articulating and preserving racial and ethnic identity [8].

Barthes states that fashion functions as a visual language that can be analyzed to uncover the hidden meanings embedded within it [9]. As a system of nonverbal signs, adornment conveys cultural affiliations, social status, and personal identity beyond its practical function. The function of the sign is to communicate a message, and in purposive communication [10]. Adornment serves as a means through which individuals express their belonging, societal roles, and values.

In the novel, adornment is more than a superficial display of fashion preferences; it is a tool for self-expression. Characters negotiate their hybrid identities through sartorial semiotics, such as clothing and jewelry, which reflect both their self-perception and how they are perceived by others.

3. Lindo and Waverly's choices of adornment

Lindo, now a typical Chinese mother, was once a dutiful daughter. She followed her parents' wishes and became a child bride in the wealthy Huang family. The only valuable possession they left her was the chang, a red jade necklace [11]. In Chinese culture, jade represents good fortune, but Lindo initially failed to grasp its significance. Struggling in the Huang household, she gradually developed self-awareness, recognized her worth, and fought for freedom, successfully leaving the family. This marked her first step in constructing her identity.

Upon relocating to America, Lindo encountered a renewed state of inferiority. To assimilate into society, she adhered to its norms and created a "American persona" while establishing a family. However, when she acclimated, her children completely embraced their American identity. Notwithstanding her endeavors to maintain her Chinese identity and impart traditional values to her daughter, she encountered opposition. She refused to buy fourteen-carat gold and insisted on twenty-four-carat purity as a symbol of authenticity. In Chinese culture, gold represents purity, wealth, and authenticity. Twenty-four-carat gold, with its high purity, is considered the true gold, while fourteen-carat gold, which is alloyed with other metals, is traditionally viewed as "impure". In

American society, immigrants often face a dilemma between cultural integration and identity preservation. By insisting on purchasing twenty-four-carat gold, Lindo attempts to maintain an uncompromising sense of “cultural authenticity” in a foreign land.

She also gave her daughter the chang, hoping to pass down luck and cultural values, but her daughter dismissed it as superstition, deepening Lindo’s disorientation. Although she had mastered the ability to switch between her “American face” and her “Chinese face,” she understood that “if you show one, you must always sacrifice the other” [11]. The two could not fully coexist. While she desperately clung to her Chinese heritage, American culture was becoming increasingly ingrained in her, leaving her caught between two worlds [12].

Waverly, born and raised in America, viewed Chinese culture with shame and saw her mother as an embarrassment. She rejected her heritage, asserting independence by choosing her own stylist and cutting her hair into “an asymmetrical blunt-line fringe that was shorter on the left side” [11]. She even imposed her aesthetic views on her mother, insisting, “She needs a cut and a perm” [11]. She treasured the mink jacket from her boyfriend despite her mother’s disapproval. We can thus see that her fashion taste and choice of clothing all reflected American influences, shaping her identity through Western aesthetics.

As a result, Lindo and Waverly exemplify contrasting cultural identities. Lindo, as a first-generation immigrant, clings to Chinese adornment to reinforce her heritage but remains trapped between two worlds: the traditional Chinese values she wishes to uphold and the American society that demands assimilation and adaptation. Waverly fully embraces an American identity, rejecting Chinese traditions and constructing her identity through Western fashion.

4. Suyuan and Jing-mei’s choices of adornment

Suyuan is a unique presence in *The Joy Luck Club*. She passes away at the beginning of the novel and has no chance to express herself. Consequently, the majority of her information is derived from Jing-mei’s memories and other characters. Prior to emigrating to America, Suyuan had two kids; but, due to the war, she was compelled to abandon them and commence a new life independently. Subsequently, she encountered her second spouse and ultimately relocated to the United States with him. There is no doubt that Suyuan took immense pride in her cultural identity. Before immigrating, despite the urgency of their departure, she prioritized packing “fancy silk dresses” over other necessities [11]. From her husband’s perspective, this was not a practical decision, and in reality, she had to hide these elegant garments upon arriving in America, replacing them with ill-fitting second-hand clothes. For Suyuan, these fancy dresses were a cultural symbol, representing her attempt to protect Chinese culture. However, her husband’s criticism revealed that such symbolic actions could not truly help them adapt to life in America. This also reflects the hardships faced by first-generation immigrants, who often find themselves caught between cultural identity and the practical realities of survival in a foreign country. Traditional cultural symbols can sometimes become burdens rather than provide the support they were intended to offer.

However, these challenges did not break her spirit. After having another daughter, she raised her using Chinese parenting methods while also dressing her as a “Chinese Shirley Temple” [11]. Suyuan hoped Jing-mei would combine the best of both Chinese and Western cultures, which means she should look as all-American as Shirley Temple outside, yet keep Chinese values within. In this way, Jing-mei could not only blend seamlessly into American society but also carry forward the essence of her Chinese heritage. Reality, however, was not as ideal. Her daughter, overwhelmed by her strict discipline, frequently clashed with her and rejected her Chinese identity. As Chinese American children, they often fail to perceive the deep love behind their mothers’ strictness. This misunderstood love further distances them from their mothers’ Chinese cultural experiences, making them unwilling to explore or embrace their heritage [13]. Yet, Suyuan never gave up. She continued

to educate her daughter in her own way, hoping to instill a sense of cultural belonging. As Jing-mei grew older, Suyuan gave her the “life’s importance,” a jade pendant on a gold chain, hoping she would one day understand her mother’s intentions and reclaim her cultural heritage [11].

Initially, Jing-mei perceives herself as American, having been born and reared in the United States. Following her mother's unexpected demise, during a meeting where her mother's acquaintances recounted anecdotes about Suyuan's history, Jing-mei starts to gain insight into her mother's life in China. Previously, Jing-mei had been indifferent to these stories, firmly embracing her American identity and dismissing her Chinese heritage. This indifference reflects a symbolic disconnection from her cultural roots, a common theme in intergenerational trauma. As Jing-mei listens, she undergoes an internal transformation. On the one hand, she felt that she was American, but her Chinese identity flowed within her blood [14]. Her attitude toward the jade pendant also shifts. Initially, she dismisses it as “too large, too green, too garishly ornate”, leaving it forgotten in her jewelry box [11]. Over time, she starts wearing it daily, seeking to understand its significance. Influenced by her mother, she begins to exhibit “the Chinese obsession for blood relatives”, which ultimately leads her to travel to China in search of her lost sisters [15].

When Jing-mei finally sets foot in China and reunites with her sisters, she still looks outwardly American. Her makeup, including false eyelashes, eye shadow, and lip liner, with cheeks hollowed out by bronze blusher, visibly reflects Western beauty standards, and her height makes her stand out among those around her [11]. Yet, in the shared features she sees between herself, her sisters, and her late mother, she discovers her true identity. This cultural heritage, deeply embedded in her bloodline, cannot be easily erased.

Ultimately, for Suyuan and Jing-mei, the jade pendant serves as a tangible link between mother and daughter. Through her choice of adornment, Suyuan provides guidance that helps her American-born daughter reconstruct her cultural identity [11].

5. Comparative analysis

Adornment is a form of self-expression, and the two mother-daughter pairs vividly illustrate the different cultural inclinations within immigrant communities. As first-generation immigrants, the two mothers share striking similarities. They use adornment to distinguish themselves from others, wearing jade pendants and traditional Chinese clothing to construct their identities. However, they are also influenced by their social and cultural surroundings, leading to internal confusion about their own identities. This contradiction is reflected in their parenting as well. While they encourage their daughters to integrate into American society, they also want them to understand Chinese culture and stay connected to their heritage. Yet, these efforts result in two very different outcomes.

Initially, Jing-mei and Waverly exhibit notable similarities. Both are subjected to their mothers' stringent expectations, laden with lofty aspirations, and imbued with traditional Chinese values. They lack autonomy in their personal adornment, as their mothers dictate their attire, reflecting their own aspirations. Consequently, both engage in acts of rebellion, albeit in differing magnitudes. Waverly's defiance is markedly more conspicuous; she overtly repudiates her mother's influence through audacious choices in adornment, such as adopting an asymmetrical blunt fringe, insisting on a Western perm for her mother, and ostentatiously donning a mink jacket despite Lindo's disapproval. Through these deliberate fashion statements, Waverly uses adornment as a semiotic tool to separate herself from her mother's beliefs, views Chinese culture from an American perspective, and then solidify her American identity.

Jing-mei, on the other hand, is different. She has a gentler personality. Though she also fails to understand Chinese culture and, to some extent, looks down on it, she undergoes a transformation following her mother's death. She begins to explore Chinese traditions, making conscious efforts to reflect this shift in her adornment choices. This is exemplified when she appears with a plain face,

unadorned except for a thin mist of shiny sweat, abandoning her previous Western makeup styles[11]. Ultimately, when she returns to China and reunites with her blood relatives, she reconstructs her cultural identity.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates the critical role of adornment in cultural identity construction, particularly within immigrant communities. Through the analysis of Lindo and Waverly, as well as Suyuan and Jing-mei, it is evident that first-generation immigrants use adornment to reinforce their cultural heritage, while their American-born daughters initially reject these traditions in favor of Western aesthetics. Lindo and Suyuan attempt to maintain their Chinese identities by wearing jade pendants and adhering to traditional dress and values. These adornments function as visual signs that communicate their cultural affiliations and personal histories, serving as a means of preserving their heritage in a foreign land. However, their daughters, shaped by American culture, perceive these adornments as outdated and resist their mothers' expectations. As time progresses, Waverly remains entirely engaged with her American identity, whereas Jing-mei has a change, progressively accepting her origins. Her evolving perspective on the jade pendant signifies this transformation, as the pendant transitions from a disregarded item to a potent semiotic instrument that connects her American present with her Chinese heritage. This underscores the intricacies of cultural negotiation and the function of decoration as a vehicle for identity rebuilding. Despite these findings, this study has some limitations. The analysis centers on only two mother-daughter pairs, and future research could expand to other characters or compare similar themes in different Asian American literary works.

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