

Feminine Initiative in *The Joy Luck Club*

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. Introduction

The Joy Luck Club is a novel of women's stories. The content is about four pairs of mother and daughter. All the mothers once had lost themselves and had sad experiences in China that made them begin to think about the value of women in society. They took efforts to look for self-worth and change the plight they were in after obeying the traditional rules of the Chinese society. In order to forget the sad memories in China and began new lives without social stereotypes, they left their nations and became immigrants to San Francisco. United by shared loss and hope, they called themselves the Joy Luck Club. Living in the new country, they faced the conflicts between cultures and the generation gaps between mother and daughter. However, they still stayed with each other. When becoming adults, their daughters also encountered the problems that made them unable to face their real emotions. Out of mother love, the four mothers encouraged their daughters to realize what their real thoughts were by telling them their experiences in China. In this book, we see four mothers changing their lives by themselves and passing on their ideals to their daughters.

Since we are also both Chinese and females, we find we can greatly identify with many characters in these stories. Nowadays, many women in Chinese society are still faced with the same problems as those women in Joy Luck Club. Therefore, we think it meaningful to do some research about female problems in these stories and hopefully find some good solutions to these problems for all women. Among the 8 main characters in this book, we choose two women, Lindo and Ying-ying, as our objects of study because they both defied traditional concepts and successfully changed their own life and discovered their own potential. We think they are good examples of the idea of female initiative, which is an important part of feminism. In this thesis, we would analyze the stories of the two women from the angle of female initiative.

. Thesis

Why do we think Lindo's and Ying-ying's stories have a lot to do with feminine initiative? According to Wang in a book about feminism, feminine initiative is the awakening moments when women start to see themselves as people with the right to develop their full potential and refuse to accept the limits on women built by men.¹ This is exactly what happened to Lindo and Ying-ying. In order to analyze the stories of the two women more thoroughly and explain what motivated their feminine initiative, we divide their lives into three stages, including the background, the turning

point, and what happened after initiative. Then we discuss the different images of women represented in each stage.

1. The story of Lindo

1.1 The background

When Lindo was two years old, her parents promised Huang Taitai to marry her to her son, Tyan-yu Huang. Her mother taught her to be obedient to the Huang's and treated her as Huang's family member. When Lindo was twelve, the rain destroyed their little house; the whole family was forced to move except for her because she was going to stay with the Huang's. After Lindo was sent to the Huang's house, she began to do a lot of housework like cooking, cleaning and serving. Huang Taitai couldn't wait to have a grandson, so she demanded Lindo to get pregnant. Lindo also had to endure the criticism from the Huang's. She lost herself in the tyranny practiced in Huang's house.

From what is mentioned above, we discover Lindo was faced with several misconceptions.

a. The society expects differently of men and women.

In the process of a female's life, the society expects her to be sweet, considerate, and thoughtful. On the contrary, men should be aggressive and brave. That is why Joy Magezis, the author of *Teach Yourself Women's Studies*, said that men have more rights than women in the real world² and also why Lindo's mother told her to be always obedient while Huang Taitai taught her son Tyan-yu to order other people.

b. It is all women's fault. Men don't make mistakes.

Phyllis Chesler, who wrote *Letters to a Young Feminist*, considered that many mothers teach their daughters that whenever something bad happens, they should blame it on women instead of men. No matter what situation they're in, they should trust men, especially when they are fathers, brothers, husbands, or sons.³ Similarly, we can find out that Lindo's mother made her believe in the absolute power of Tyan-yu Huang, her future husband.

c. Women are only a tool for men to get sex and offspring.

There are many similar instances of women being forced to get pregnant in the Chinese society. The system of an extended family is to ensure that the blood relationship of the paternal line is pure. Women's bodies are regarded as things to supply men's sexual desire and procreation. This theory is based on the book, *Feminism*, which analyzes different kinds of feminism edited by Gu.⁴ The rights of women seems to become fewer after she get married just as Lindo had been treated like a servant since she married Tyan-yu.

d. Women should always accept men's ideas.

As Gu said, women are always controlled by men. They should agree to men's ideas and respect patriarchy.⁵ Just like what Lindo said, "*Can you see how the Huang's almost washed their thinking into my skin? I came to think Tyan-yu as a god, someone whose opinions were worth much more than my own life. I came to think of Huang Taitai as my real mother, someone I want to please, someone I should follow and obey without question.*"⁶

e. Women are men's property.

According to Gu, the allotment between husband and wife isn't mutually beneficial. Wife's manpower is dominated by husband. Girls are viewed as males' private property.⁷ Magezis said that under the patriarchy society, men exploit wives' manpower.⁸ As a result, Lindo was ordered by Tyan-yu to do house chores, but she couldn't complain or express her exhaustion.

1.2 The turning point inducing Lindo's self-discovery

On the night Lindo got married to Tyan-yu, Lindo felt the wind blowing. With all the memories of Huang's unreasonable treatment, she suddenly realized that she could be like that wind, which was invisible but strong and existed everywhere. She promised herself that she would never forget what her mother taught her, but she wouldn't disappoint herself either. She cut short the candle which symbolized the life of Tyan-yu and her marriage as the first thing she did with her new self-consciousness. Then she made up a story about Huang's ancestors disapproving this marriage. If she and Tyan-yu kept on being husband and wife, Tyan-yu's life would be in great danger. Because of the superstition, Huang Taitai expelled Lindo with a lot of money. As a result, she was able to get rid of the marriage and go to America to find a brand new

life.

1.3 What happened after initiative

Lindo found a small apartment to live and a job to do after she reached America. She met An-mei at the cookie factory. They teased about the fortune cookies they made and became friends. That was when Lindo met Mr. Jong, introduced by An-mei. Lindo and Mr. Jong studied English together; then they decided to get married. Waverly was the third child they had. Though Lindo found her self-consciousness, she couldn't help but put pressure on Waverly because she didn't want her to have a pathetic childhood and repeat the same history of her life.

From the above description, we find there are two important ideas which helped Lindo start a new life.

a. Women do not belong to men. They can decide their own life.

Gu said that most feminists advocate that the society should abolish the old property and family system, which stands for free love and breaking down the division of labor between male and female.⁹ Lindo achieved most of the goals. When she arrived in America, she did everything by herself. She chose to fall in love with Mr. Jones instead of being chosen by men. Lindo knew how to control her own life.

b. Women should have their own career to live an independent life.

According to Chesler's idea, the first step of a woman turning independent is that she needs her own career, for which she can be proud of herself because she's good at it. Through the career, she gets her financial support.¹⁰ She no longer needs men to provide supply as Lindo used to. Fortunately, in the end, Lindo successfully got rid of the old dependent attitude, and turned into a person capable of supporting herself.

2. The story of Ying-ying

2.1 The background

Ying-ying was a girl brought up in a rich and big family. When Ying-ying was four, her whole families went to Tai Lake on the Mid-autumn Festival. Before setting off for Tai Lake, her nursemaid asked her to behave like a girl so that the Moon Lady

would make her dreams come true. When it was dark, she was playing with her shadow on the water; suddenly, she fell into the lake. However, no one found she was missing. Feeling cold and lonely, she was saved to the shore but she didn't see her families. Wandering on the street, she heard someone telling the story about Moon Lady. Even though Ying-ying didn't understand the Moon lady's entire story, she could understand her grief because they both lost the world, and there was no way to get it back. From then on, Ying-ying wished to be found. Finally, Ying-ying was found but she was not the same person as she used to be. Later, Ying-ying met a man at her aunt's wedding at sixteen. Always listening to omens and signs, she got married to the man, because she thought it was her fate. After getting pregnant, she learned that her husband left her to live with another woman.

From Ying-ying's story so far, we can discover the following points.

a. Chinese and Westerners used to share the same thoughts about the stereotype of men and women's quality.

The Moon Lady in the story said: "*For woman is Yin, the darkness within, where untempered passions lie. And man is yang, bright truth lighting our minds.*"¹¹ This represents Chinese thinking that women should be soft and gentle while men should be reasonable and smart. Similarly, the western feminists considered that women were ruled by the conception of Eternal Feminine, which means women are passive and have to listen to men.¹² We think Ying-ying was in that passive situation because she wanted to be found instead of finding by herself. For example, when she fell into the lake and was separated from her family, she didn't try to find them actively; also, she accepted the arranged marriage after she grew up.

b. Chinese women were taught to be tender and obedient to their husband.

According to the traditional Chinese culture, women should forgive whatever their husband did and shouldn't have their own lovers. All they had to do was keep silence. This is the situation described by Chesler.¹³ Ying-ying's husband didn't treat her as a wife. For instance, he ignored her by not talking to her and had extramarital relations during the time she was pregnant; furthermore, he dated several girlfriends. Even though Ying-ying knew about that, she still did nothing but wait for her husband to come back.

2.2 The turning point inducing her self-discovery

Meeting a man in her aunt's wedding, Ying-ying knew that this man would become her husband in the future because she had the ability to know things before they took place. When Ying-ying started to love her husband after she got married to him, she did everything for him. Learning that she had a baby boy, Ying-ying was so happy because she could pass on the generation for her husband. However, this happiness didn't last long. Her husband had more and more business in the north of China. Waiting for her husband with patience and loneliness, she heard that he had new lovers and wanted to abandon her. Ying-ying felt sad and turned her joy into hatred gradually. Then, she killed her baby before he was born, because it was the only part of her husband that she could destroy. Losing her baby, she left with grief.

Ying-ying's heart was hurt a lot by her husband. She hated him so much that she wanted to destroy him to forget the pain that her husband brought to her by treating her as a tool for him to have children; however, she was under the shadow of her husband because of their baby boy that wasn't born. In some ways, Ying-ying's life and her true self was confined by pregnancy. According to Gu, if a woman wants to control her own future instead of being controlled, she should have the right to decide whether she wants to have a baby or not, because in the past, women's bodies were treated as implements to satisfy men's desire and to reproduce the next generations.¹⁴ Once they are able to make the decision, they can play the role of both a wife and a career women or live the life they are looking forward to.

2.3 What happened after initiative

Ying-ying was a person born in the year of tiger, which was said to have the personality of power and hidden potential. There was a transient period when she lost these two qualities after killing her baby because she felt so sad. During that time, she tried hard to forget her grief and find herself again. She was tired of doing nothing, and she started to work as a shop girl. Then she met an American named Clifford who loved her. He waited patiently for Ying-ying to allow him to marry her until her first husband died. They built a family in America, and Ying-ying gave birth to a girl named Lena. Ying-ying joined the Joy Luck Club and made friends with other members there. They usually offered each other a hand and comfort when necessary. In the progress of Lena's growth, Ying-ying kept silent to avoid confrontation with a painful past. Lena grew up and got married but she was not happy. Seeing her daughter in an unhappy marriage, she urged her to take control of her own life and told her daughter her own experiences, hoping that she might learn from her own

failure to take initiative and learn to express her own thoughts and feelings. Because Lena was also born in the year of tiger, Ying-ying hoped that Lena could live out the true personalities they both had.

From the last part of Ying-ying's story, we discover the following points.

a. Being a wife and a mother should not be the only roles a woman plays in the world.

Ying-ying used to stay at home without contacting the outside world. All her focus of life was on her family, but after immigrating to America, she joined a club after settling down. She had her own life and job and wanted to have interaction with others. Gu promotes in her book that nowadays women should view their own existence as more important than their roles of wives and mothers.¹⁵ It means that women can play other roles besides being wives.

b. Women contribute a lot to a family. They deserve recognition.

Ying-ying used to follow the order from her husband and live a passive life, but after she moved to U.S.A. and saw her daughter suffer for an unhappy marriage, she played an active role by sharing her painful past with her daughter to save her from being blind to herself. She understood that she had a power to guide her daughter and protect her from sadness; her daughter needed her as well. Magezis said that because women have the sense of existence, some feminists consider that they could receive positive identification in their own house.¹⁶ It means that women are the most influential persons in a family.

c. Women should make decisions on their own future and life by themselves.

Ying-ying found a job of being a shop girl and built her second marriage which was much happier than the first one because Ying-ying had the decision-making power like choosing her second husband instead of being chosen. She also became braver to face her sorrowful past by telling her daughter about it. According to Wang's idea, it was a revolutionary transition that women had lives dominated by themselves, turning from passive to active, and stopping being delicate.¹⁷

. Conclusion:

The book *The Joy Luck Club* encourages women to bravely fight against irrational traditions. Most of the female characters in the stories broke the myth of the inhuman traditional limitation on women in ancient Chinese culture. Ancient Chinese culture believed in patriarchy and strict ethics, which made women have no opportunities to elevate their status. Women in this environment not only were treated as slaves but easily forgot themselves. But some women awoke like Lindo, who decided to leave when she found she herself couldn't be controlled by the Huang's any longer. Thanks to many Chinese women like Lindo who resisted the shabby culture, modern females don't need to suffer the oppressive rules any more.

In addition, the book changes the way women view themselves. Women were regarded as "incomplete men" in the ancient society. They existed for the convenience of men. Even in the Bible, there is a passage like this: "*To the woman He said, "I will greatly multiply Your pain in childbirth, In pain you will bring forth children; Yet your desire will be for your husband, And he will rule over you."*"¹⁸ Therefore, the first step toward self-discovery is that women must treat themselves as "independent individuals" just like Ying-ying, who always wished to be found by someone but then realized that she was the only one who could make herself intact. Luckily, most of the modern women don't need to go through the hardships Ying-ying experienced. Now the equality for both men and women is practiced in most parts of the world, and women can even beat men in many fields of careers.

For generations, women were regarded as obedient, sweet, timid and humble. Finally, modern women are able to show their own thoughts, independence and creativity. We should appreciate the efforts the women before us made and keep working on liberating females from social pressure and prejudice.

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