

Spatial Narrative in the Joy Luck Club

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ABSTRACT. *This article explores the relationship between spatial narrative and the identity construction of Chinese-American daughters in the Joy Luck Club. Based on theories of Zoran and Lefebvre, it finds out that those daughters construct their identity by a process from refusing to accept Chinese culture in topological space, making efforts to be integrated into American society but failing in social space, to accepting Chinese cultures in textual space at last. This article hopes to provide a new perspective for interpreting the Joy Luck Club of identity construction of Chinese-Americans.*

KEYWORDS: *Spatial narrative; Identity construction; The joy luck club*

1. Introduction

Since the growth of Pan Asian Movement in the late 1960s, Asian American literature grabs great attention and becomes one of dominant forces in American literature. As a branch of Asian American literature, Chinese American literature blooms. Amy Tan, the Chinese American writer, wins the national Book Award, Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for Fiction and the Commonwealth Club Gold Award, for her masterpiece published in 1989, *The Joy Luck Club* in which cultural clash between China and America, generation gap between mothers and daughters, and identity construction of Chinese Americans are widely discussed. In the article, spatial narrative is employed to explore identity construction of Chinese Americans. With regard to three spaces, topographical space, social space and textual space separately, this article attempts to explore the process of identity construction of Chinese American daughters from refusing to accept or ignoring Chinese culture to acknowledging or accepting it. The article tries to provide a new perspective for the identity construction of Chinese-Americans.

2. Spatial Narrative

Time and space are two crucial dimensions of work. In 18th century, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing distinguished time from space in *The Laocoon*. According to Lessing, the movement of Pandarus archery in Iliad could be seen one by one in

linear order, while the imitated object of painting and sculptures only can be grouped in space without the influence of time (Lessing, 2006:90). It shows that literature is temporary art, whereas painting and sculptures are spatial art. Since then, novels are written and studied in chronological order. In the beginning of 20th century, novels featured by stream of consciousness subvert the linear order of narration. More specifically, in 1945, Joseph Frank first puts forward the notion “spatial form” in analyzing works of Joes and Proust for juxtaposing space to interrupt chronological narration, which start the era of spatial narrative. In the second half of 20th century, *the Production of Space* by Henri Lefebvre in 1974 declares the “space turn” in literature. According to Lefebvre[3], there are three spaces, spatial practice, representation of space, and representational space. And representational space is also called social space, which is the production of society. The stories of daughters of Chinese Americans happen in American society, so the domestic space of those daughters will be discussed. Michel Foucault put forwards that power is executed on the basis of space in his work, *Space, Knowledge and Power*. As minority in American society, Chinese Americans are also under American power system in which these daughters try to find their identity. Gabriel Zoran raises three levels of space, topological space, chronological space and textual space respectively. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the topological distance between China and America shows reluctance of daughters to find their Chinese identity. In textual space, the writer narrates the story of China first and ends up with the story happened in China, which indicates that those daughters find their Chinese identity at last.

In term of the research on *The Joy Luck Club* at home, Cheng & Shao studies the narrative strategies in novel, like autobiography, storytelling in order to find the exchanging and blending of two cultures. Tan holds that individual narration and collective narration are adopted here which reflects the situation of Chinese Americans and their traditional culture. Dong explores spatial narrative in novel from three aspects, namely, topographical space, chronotopic space and textual space to make an attempt to solve the conflicts between mothers and daughters. Zhang discusses Amy Tan’s narrative patterns in *The Joy Luck Club*, like the narrative space, discourse power theory, to analyze the conflicts between mothers and daughters. Yu also does research on geographical space as narrative patterns. Literature displayed above focuses on narrative skills in solving cultural conflicts between mothers and daughters in *the Joy Luck Club*. Fang talks about the relationship between spatial arrangement and the identity construction of Chinese American. But he just explores topological space, that is, old China and Chinatown. In brief, although many scholars studies narrative skills in *the Joy Luck Club*, a few discuss the identity construction of daughters of Chinese American from spatial narrative perspective, such as topographical space, social space and textual space.

3. Spatial Narrative for Identity Construction

In this section, concerning spatial narrative, three spaces, namely topographical space, social space and textual space, are employed to explore the process of identity construction of Chinese-American daughters from resisting to accept Chinese

culture, trying to be assimilated as Americans but being refused, to accepting Chinese culture.

3.1 Topographical Space

In this part, some physical objects are discussed to show daughters attitudes toward Chinese cultures.

3.1.1 The Mahjong Table

In Kweilin of China, Jing-Mei's mother formed the Joy Luck club for hoping to be lucky and joyful each week in wartime. And in America, Jing-Mei also organizes the club with three Chinese-Americans, An-Mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair. However, at the beginning, Jing-Mei does not accept this entertainment, "I imagined Joy Club was a shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war." [1]. "Ku Klux Klux" and "tom-tom dances" shows Jing-Mei's reluctance to accept Chinese cultures.

3.1.2 Chessboard

Waverly Jong has showed great talent in playing chess. "I won all games, in all divisions" [1]. But her success is closely associated with the unseen strongest wind told by her mother. "This American rules...they not telling you why so you can use their way go forward. They say, Don't know why, you find out yourself. But they knowing all the time. Better you take it, find out why yourself." [1]. So, the mother tells Waverly the magic Chinese strategy of playing chess. But later Waverly refuses to accept the mother's more guidance, and she lost many games. "Ma, I can't practice when you stand there like that" [1]; "Next time win more, loss less...Better to lose less, see if you really need. [1] "At my next tournament, while I had done well overall, in the end the points were not enough. I lost" [1]. So, ignoring her mother's advice on "Better to lose less", the traditional Chinese culture, Waverly fails to count up scores. In all, to some extent, Waverly refuses to accept the Chinese way of playing chess of "better off than loss".

3.1.3 Language

In novel, the four mothers come from China, and can speak a little English, while their daughters are born in America and can only speak English. "She spoke in moods and gestures, looks and silences, and sometimes a combination of English Punctuated by hesitations and Chinese Frustration: "Shwo buhculai" [1]. It reveals that the mother has difficulty speaking English. "But with me, when we were alone, my mother would speak in Chinese...I could understand the words perfectly, but not the meanings." [1] Actually, there are communication barriers between the mother and the daughter. "All those years I tried to teach her. She followed my Chinese ways only until she learned how to walk out the door by herself...So now the only Chinese words she can say are *sh-sh, houche, chrfan and gwan deng shweijyan.*" [1]

It indicates that the daughter, Waverly, is unwilling to learn about the traditional Chinese character.

3.2 Social Space

In this part, domestic space of those Chinese-Americans are explored to assume that those daughters desire to be assimilated or integrated to American mainstream society but fails.

As for Rose Hsu Jordan, she longs for integrating herself into American society by marrying an American guy. "I have to admit that what I found attractive in Ted were...made him different from my brothers and the Chinese boys I had dated: his brashness; his opinionated manner; his angular face and lanky body; the thickness of his arms; the fact that his parents immigrated from Tarrytown, New York, not Tientsin, China." [1] Compared with Chinese guys, Rose prefers the American guy, Ted. However, it is hard for Rose to be accepted by the American society. "She squeezed my palm warmly but never seemed to look at me...And then she spoke quietly about Ted's future, and his need to concentrate on his medical studies...But Ted was going to be in one of those professions where he would be judged by a different standard, by patients and other doctors who might not be as understanding as the Jordans were. She said...how unpopular the Vietnam War was " [1] In fact, Ted's mother regards Rose as Vietnamese and has some kind of discrimination against Rose whose ethnic identity might hinder the prosperity of Ted's medical career. At this time, Rose states her standpoint, "Mrs. Jordan, I am not Vietnamese...And I have no intention of marrying your son." [1]. Rose decides not to marry Ted. But they finally get married, "We were married in the Episcopal church." [1] Regardless of Mrs. Jordan's discrimination, Rose marries Ted at last. Rose makes effort to be integrated into American society.

Americans have a deep faith that in some fundamental way, all people are of equal value, that no one is born superior to anyone else. As to Lena St. Clair, she tries to sustain equal status with Harold in marriage. "We're equals, except that Harold makes about seven times more than what I make. He knows this, too, because he signs my monthly check, and then I deposit it into my separate checking account." [1] Thus, economic equality is employed by Lena in marriage life. But later, she feels tired of it. "I just think we have to change things...We need to think about what our marriage is really based on...not on this balance sheet, who owes who what." [1] Since Lena tries her best to align her thought of equality with practice in marriage in order to be assimilated into American society, but fails to be a true member of American society.

3.3 Textual Space

According to Zoran, "the structure which is imposed on space should be emphasized on the organization of the reconstructed world...the structure itself is imposed on the by the linguistic nature of the text.[2] Thus, the organization of

linguistic text has been discussed to explore identity construction of Chinese-American daughters for accepting Chinese cultures.

Actually, the novel is marked by the circle narrative because it begins with the narration of Jing-Mei and ends with the narration of Jing-Mei as well. At the beginning, Kweilin and Chungking appears. and in the end, Jing-Mei has realizes that she spells those wrong in Chinese. "It seems all the cities I have heard of, except Shanghai, have changed their spellings...Chungking is Chongqing. And Kweilin is Guilin." [1] Spelling Chinese locations right shows Jing-Mei's awareness of accepting Chinese Culture. Besides, the novel is composed of four parts: the first and the fourth section are narrated by the mothers, while part two and part three by the daughters. Since mothers are representatives of Chinese cultures, the layout may manifest that Chinese-American daughters accept Chinese cultures presented by their mothers.

4. Conclusions

This paper explores spatial narratiin *the Joy Luck Club* from three spaces, topographical space, social space and textual space. It discusses the relationships between spatial narrative and the identity construction of Chinese American daughters form refusing to accept Chinese cultures, trying to be integrated into American society, to accepting Chinese cultures. As for topographical space, the Mahjong table, chessboard and language are analyzed to show that Chinese-American daughters refuse to accept Chinese cultures; In social space, daughters, like Lena and Rose, try their best to be integrated into American society but fail at last; in textual space, the circle narrative is adopted to indicate that those daughters might accept Chinese cultures from heart. A good way of solving identity crisis of minorities might be accepting both own cultural gene and exotic culture. This article hopes to provide a new perspective for interpreting *the Joy Luck Club* of identity construction of Chinese-Americans.

References

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