(Anthropologist Edward T. Hall introduced the terms High-context culture and Low-context culture in his 1976 book Beyond Culture. The following paper was written by Professor Melani, who teaches English at Brooklyn College)

High-context Cultures and Low-context Cultures

The Joy Luck Club explores the clash between Chinese culture and American culture. One way of understanding the difference is to look at communication in these cultures. Chinese culture can be classified as a high-context culture and American culture as a low-context culture. First I will define these terms, then explain the significance of these two categories, and finally apply them to The Joy Luck Club.

- **Culture** is the way of living, which a group of people has developed and transmits from one generation to the next. It includes concepts, skills, habits of thinking and acting, arts, institutions, ways of relating to the world, and agreement on what is significant and necessary to know. Race, ethnicity, class, and gender are cultural creations; they derive their meanings from the culture.

- **Context** is the whole situation, background, or environment connected to an event, a situation, or an individual.

- A **high-context culture** is a culture in which the individual has internalized meaning and information, so that little is explicitly stated in written or spoken messages. In conversation, the listener knows what is meant; because the speaker and listener share the same knowledge and assumptions, the listener can piece together the speaker's meaning. **China is a high-context culture.**

- A **low-context culture** is one in which information and meaning are explicitly stated in the message or communication. Individuals in a low-context culture expect explanations when statements or situations are unclear, as they often are. Information and meaning are not internalized by the individual but are derived from context, e.g., from the situation or an event. **The United States is a low-context culture.**

High-context Cultures

In a high-context culture, the individual acquires cultural information and meaning from obedience to authority, through observation and by imitation. To acquire knowledge in this way and to internalize it, children must be carefully trained. High-context cultures are highly stable and slow to change, for they are rooted in the past; one example is the Chinese practice of ancestor worship. They are also unified and cohesive cultures.

In such cultures, the individual must know what is meant at the covert or unexpressed level; the individual is supposed to know and to react appropriately. Others are expected to understand without explanation or specific details. Explanations are insulting, as if the speaker regards the listener as not knowledgeable or socialized enough to understand. To members of a low-context culture, speakers in a high-context culture seem to talk around a subject and never to get to the point.

The bonds among people are very strong in a high-context culture. People in authority are personally and literally responsible for the actions of subordinates, whether in government, in business, or in the family. (In the U.S., on the other hand, the general practice is to find a "fall guy" or scapegoat who takes the blame for those with more power and status.) In a high-context culture, the forms (conventional ways of behaving) are important; the individual who does not observe the forms is perceived negatively; the negative judgments for an individual's bad behavior may extend to the entire family.

In embarrassing or awkward situations, people act as though nothing happened. Individuality, minor disagreements, and personality clashes are ignored, so that no action has to be taken. Taking action tends to be taken seriously, because once started an action must generally be completed. Individuals can't stop an action because they change their minds, because they develop another interest, because unforeseen consequences arise, or because something better comes along. Consequently there is greater caution or even reluctance to initiate an undertaking or to give a promise. Chinese parents may overlook a child's behavior, because they expect that the strong family tradition, which is based on ancestors, will cause the child ultimately to behave properly.

The Clash of Low-context and High-context Cultures in The Joy Luck Club
In a low-context culture, as Edward T. Hall explains, "Most of the information must be in the transmitted message in order to make up for what is missing in the context (both internal and external)." In a low-context culture change is rapid and easy; bonds between people are looser; action is undertaken easily and can be changed or stopped once initiated.

The mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* expect their daughters to obey their elders and so learn by obedience, by observation and by imitation, as they did in China. Their elders did not explain. Because the mothers internalized values and knowledge, they seem to assume that knowledge is innate and that it is present in their daughters and only has to be brought out or activated. The internalization is so psychologically complete and so much a part of the mothers' identities that they speak of it as physical. Am-mei, for instance, sees in her mother "my own true nature. What was beneath my skin. Inside my bones" (40); to her, connection to her mother or filial respect is "so deep it is in your bones" (41).

But in this country, the mothers' warnings, instructions, and example are not supported by the context of American culture, and so their daughters do not understand. They resent and misinterpret their mothers' alien Chinese ways and beliefs. Similarly, the mothers do not understand why they do not have the kind of relationships with their daughters that they had with their mothers in China. The Joy Luck mothers were so close to their own mothers that they saw themselves as continuations of their mothers, like stairs.

The communication problems that arise when one speaker is from a high-context culture and the other is from a low-context culture can be seen in the conversations of June and Suyuen, "My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more" (27). June looks for meaning in what is stated and does not understand that her mother omits important information because she assumes her daughter knows it and can infer it; her mother, on the other hand, looks for meaning in what has not been stated and so adds to what has been stated explicitly and comes up with meanings that surprise her daughter.

The difficulties of growing up in a family from a high-context culture and living in a low-context culture appear in other Asian-American writers. The narrator of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* is unable to decide whether figures she sees are real persons or ghosts, whether stories she is told are true or fiction, what the meaning of those stories is, why she is told the stories, and whether an event really happens or is imagined.

**The Talk Story**

One way of maintaining and instructing children in traditional ways which Chinese immigrants adopted is the traditional Chinese talk story. According to Linda Ching Sledge, the talk story "served to redefine an embattled immigrant culture by providing its members immediate, ceremonial access to ancient lore"; it also "retained the structure of Chinese oral wisdom (parables, proverbs, formulaic description, heroic biography, casuistical dialogue)." In the talk-story the narrator expects the listener to grasp the point, which is often not stated (unlike the Western *Aesop's Fables*). Tan adopts the Chinese talk story in the mothers' warning stories to their daughters. The talk story serves another function in this novel; E.D. Huntley explains,

> Talk story enables women who have been socialized into silence for most of their lives--the *Joy Luck* mothers, for instance--to reconfigure the events of those lives into acceptable public utterances: painful experiences are recast in the language of folk tale; cautionary reminders become gnomic phrases; real life takes on the contours of myth. More significantly, the act of performing talk story allows the storyteller to retain a comfortable distance between herself and her audience. Thus, the storyteller manages in some fashion to maintain the silence to which she is accustomed, as well as to speak out and share with others the important stories that have shaped her into the person that she is.

An issue for both mothers and daughters is finding a voice, that is, finding a way to express the essential
Amy Tan

Amy Tan does not see herself as primarily a Chinese-American writer focusing on the immigrant experience. She objects to being limited because of her heritage. Placing on writers the responsibility to represent a culture is an onerous burden. Someone who writes fiction is not necessarily writing a depiction of any generalized group, they are writing a very specific story. There's also a danger in balkanizing literature, as if it should be read as sociology, or politics, or that it should answer questions like "What does The Hundred Secret Senses have to teach us about Chinese culture?" As opposed to treating it as literature—as a story, language, memory.

Even though the main characters in all three of her novels are Chinese or Chinese-American, she sees her writing as having larger concerns, "What my books are about is relationships and family. I've had women come up to me and say they've felt the same way about their mothers, and they weren't immigrants." She sees the writer as "storyteller, teacher, and enchanter." And she believes the reason we read and write is "to feel more deeply, to see more clearly, to know what questions to ask, and to formulate what we believe."

The Joy Luck Club

The Joy Luck Club was a critical and a popular success. Over 2,000,000 copies were sold, Tan received $1.23 million for the paperback rights, and it has been translated into seventeen languages—including Chinese.

It was originally intended as a collection of short stories, an origin which is still apparent. "The Red Candle" could stand alone, even though it is an integral part of the novel. The novel successfully combines numerous kinds of writing; Tan draws on the biography, the autobiography, the memoir, history, mythology, the folk tale, and the talk story.

The novel has a balanced structure; this is appropriate because the Chinese value balance and harmony. There are four sections, and there are four tales within each section. Because Suyuen Woo died before the novel opens, her daughter June speaks for both of them; this structural device expresses the harmony or understanding that the mothers and daughters finally arrive at. Because June speaks for herself and her mother, her narrative bridges two cultures and the two lives of mother and daughter.

The four sections and tales parallel the four directions, which have symbolic value for the Chinese. It is not chance that in the mahjong games, Suyuen's corner was east, for "The East is where everything begins" (22). Suyuan founded the Joy Luck Club, and China (the East) is where the mothers begin and where the daughters' identities also begin. It is where the novel ends, with Jing-mei finding her full identity.

The short tales that precede each section introduce the theme of that section.

- "Feathers from a thousand Li Away" has the feel of a fairy tale. It is about the mothers' hopes for their daughters and about transformation, "the swan that becomes more than was hoped for" (3). Although communication is impossible because of the language difference, the mother in the tale waits patiently to communicate with her daughter. The feather is the mothers' Chinese heritage, which they want to pass on to their daughters. This section gives us the mother's stories in China.
- "The Twenty-Six malignant Gates" introduces the mothers' protectiveness, which is expressed in warnings. The daughters ignore the warnings, to their own harm. This section presents the daughters' childhood traumas and development and their lack of communication with their mothers.
- "American Translation" refers to the American daughters as the reflections or duplicates of their Chinese mothers; hence, they are translations. The daughters, now adults, discover that their mothers' warnings and advice were valid.
- "Queen Mother of the Western Skies" states the theme explicitly, "How to lose your innocence but not your hope" (239). The mothers are the Queen Mother, whose wisdom the daughters should listen to. The mothers, who lose their innocence through their terrible sufferings, never lose hope for their daughters. The
living mothers and daughters come to an understanding, and there is hope for the daughters and their relationship with their mothers; June/Jing-mei completes her relationship with her dead mother and experiences her Chinese identity.

**Themes in The Joy Luck Club**

**Identity**

The stories tell of events which shape the identities of the mothers and daughters and give direction to their lives. Though David Denby is speaking of the movie, his description applies equally well to the novel, "each story centers on a moment of creation or self-destruction in a woman's life, the moment when her identity becomes fixed forever." The mothers do not question their identities, having come from a stable culture into which their families were integrated. Their daughters, however, are confused about their identities.

**Communication between American daughters and Chinese mothers.** The mothers see their duty as encouraging and, if necessary, pushing their daughters to succeed; therefore, they feel they have a right to share in their success (the Chinese view). The daughters see the mothers as trying to live through them and thereby preventing them from developing as separate individuals and from leading independent lives (the American view).

**The link of the Chinese mothers and Chinese daughters.** The Chinese mothers form a continuity with their mothers in China, a connection which they want to establish with their American daughters.

**Love, loss, and redemption.** Throughout, there exists what David Gates calls a "ferocious love between mother and daughter" both in China and in this country. But the women also suffer loss, which ranges from separation to abandonment to rejection, in the mother-daughter relationship and in the male-female relationship. Sometimes the loss is overcome and the love re-established.

**Connection of the past and the present.** The mothers' past lives in China affect their daughters' lives in this country, just as the daughters' childhood experiences affect their identities and adult lives.

**Power of language.** Without proficiency in a common language, the Chinese mothers and American daughters cannot communicate. St. Clair cannot communicate with his wife, and so he changes her name and her birth date, taking away her identity as a tiger. Lena St. Clair mistranslates for her father and for her mother. Also, words have great power.

**Expectation and reality.** The mothers have great hopes for their daughters; their expectations for their daughters include not just success but also freedom. They do not want their daughters' lives to be determined by a rigid society and convention, as in an arranged marriage, and made unhappy as theirs were. The American reality fulfilled their expectations in unanticipated and unacceptable ways. Another way of expressing this theme is The American Dream and its fulfillment.

**Chinese culture versus American culture.** This conflict appears throughout the novel, from the struggles of the mothers and daughters to Lena St. Clair's Chinese eyes and American appearance and Lindo Jong's Chinese face and her American face.

**Imagery**

**Food.** Food expresses love. June cooks a dish her father likes after her mother's death to comfort him. It also shows relationships, like the competition in cooking among the mothers. Waverly uses this competition to manipulate her mother into inviting Rich to dinner; she arranges to eat at Auntie Suyuan's house. Food also reveals character. Waverly selfishly takes the best crabs for her daughter, Rich, and herself; June considerably takes the worst crab so her mother won't get it. Food makes cultural statements; the first meal Jing-mei has in China with her relatives is American fast food. Food also affirms life, as the Joy Luck meals at Kweilin. And it marks significant events--Lindo meets her husband at New Year when fish are being caught and cooked, and afterward she sees him at red egg ceremonies. When she arrives at her future husband's home, she is sent to the kitchen, a mark of her low status; another mark of her subordination is her cooking to please her husband and mother-in-law. An-mei almost dies after boiling soup spills on her neck.

**Clothing.** Clothing expresses cultural identity and clashes as well as hides identity. Suyuan brings expensive silk dresses from China, then has to wear hand-me-down Western clothes which are too big. As an old lady, she dresses strangely and wears colors which clash. In a photograph taken when Ying-yi ning arrives in this country, she is wearing a Chinese dress with a Western jacket which is too big. On the boat to Tientsin, An-mei is surprised at her mother's sudden appearance in Western dress and is thrilled at her own new dress; the change to Western clothing represents both the start of a new life and estrangement from Chinese tradition.

**Dreams.** Dreams allow us to move between the conscious level and the unconscious level, to express hidden feelings. June dreams of telling her sisters of her mother's death and being rejected. A dream brings
release in another sense; Lindo makes up a dream to escape her marriage without dishonoring her family. **Wind and directions.** Waverly thinks of wind in her relationship with her mother and in her chess playing. Because "the north wind had blown luck and my husband my way," Ying-ying keeps the window open to blow "the spirit and heart" of her womanizing husband back; instead the north wind blows him "past my bedroom and out the back door" (281).

(http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/tan.html)