Contents List available at VOLKSON PRESS

Multidisciplinary Inclusive Education, Management and Legal Services (MIEMLS)

Journal Homepage: <https://topicsonsocialdevelop.com>

DOI: 10.26480/ismiemls.01.2018.54.56

ISBN : 978-1-948012-13-3

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE AND WESTERN ETHICS BASED ON THE *JOY LUCK CLUB*

Chen Xiangliu

College of Foreign Studies, Guilin University of Technology, Jiangan Road 12#, Guilin, P.R.China

Corresponding Author Email: chenxiangliu@glut.edu.cn

This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History:

Received 26 June 2018

Accepted 2 July 2018

Available online 1 August 2018

ABSTRACT

According to the value system of ethics, there are four basic differences between Chinese and Western ethics: the basis of ethics; the goal of ethics; the orientation of ethics; the realizing mechanism of ethics. These differences can be found in the works of literature, especially Chinese American literature. Take *The Joy Luck Club* as an example. It is written by Amy Tan, a Chinese American writer. In the book, there are four pairs of Chinese mothers and American-born daughters. The conflict of Chinese and Western ethics is harsh, and it is obvious to discover the differences between Chinese and Western ethics in their lives.

KEYWORDS

Chinese ethics, Western ethics, differences, *The Joy Luck Club*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethics is a code that points to the standards put forward by the society or the cultural group. Ethics are more a code of conduct set forward by the community. The conflict of Chinese and Western ethics is a major difference between Chinese and Western culture. According to the value system of ethics, there are four basic differences between Chinese and Western ethics: the basis of ethics; the goal of ethics; the orientation of ethics; the realizing mechanism of ethics [1,2].

The Joy Luck Club is one of the internationally bestselling novels, which has got a lot of praise from the media like *The Washington Post Book World*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The New Yorker*, etc.. In *The Joy Luck Club*, vignettes alternate back and forth between the lives of four Chinese women in pre-1949 China and the lives of their American-born daughters in California. Thus, the differences between Chinese and Western ethics can be found in *The Joy Luck Club*. This paper tries to analyze the differences between Chinese and Western ethics based on *The Joy Luck Club* [3].

2. THE BASIS OF ETHICS - MORALITY AND NATURALNESS

The Chinese traditional ethics uses the moral eyes to view the human nature. It is looking for the ethical foundation and ethical standards from human morality. However, the Western ethics originates from ancient Greek view of nature. Naturalism ethics is the archetype of Western ethics. The human basis of Western ethics is one's naturalness. How to judge human morality depends on how to realize human naturalness.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, the marriages of mothers and daughters expose the different bases of Chinese and American ethics. Lindo Jong was betrothed to Huang's son, a baby who was one year younger than her when she was just two years old. Because she was promised to the Huang's son for marriage, her own family began treating her as if she belonged to somebody else. Her mother always reminded her of that. In her eyes, her mother did not treat her that way because she didn't love her. She knew that she would have a bad husband, but she had no choice because that was how backward families in the country were. They followed the old-fashioned customs that mothers chose their daughters-in-law, ones who would raise proper sons, care for the old people, and faithfully sweep the family burial grounds long after the old ladies had gone to their graves.

Another story is about An-mei Hsu's mother's marriage. It was even more miserable. An-mei's mother had been sent her way by her own mother because she had dishonored her widowhood by becoming the third concubine to a rich man, Wu Tsing. Her brother slapped her for calling him Brother; his wife cursed her. They accused her, "She has thrown her face into the eastward-flowing stream. Her ancestral spirit is lost forever. The person you see is just decayed flesh, evil, rotted to the bone." It seemed that she was a licentious woman. Actually, the Second Wife of Wu Tsing conspired with him to lure her to his bed. And Second Wife complained to many people about the shameless widow who had enchanted Wu Tsing into bed. How could a worthless widow accuse a rich woman of lying? So, she had to be his third concubine. Her brother kicked her, and her own mother banned her from the family house forever, but she came back to cut a piece of meat from her arm to make medicine for her mother when her mother was dying. She followed the Chinese traditional ethics - filial duty, obedience, endurance and ritual. The most miserable was that she gave birth to a son, which Second Wife claimed as her own. Eventually, she committed suicide. Hence, her daughter, An-mei, learned from her story to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, and to eat her own bitterness. But she taught Rose, her daughter, the opposite because she learned to shout on the day her mother died.

But An-mei still told Rose to save her marriage when Rose decided to divorce. What Rose learned is that Chinese people had Chinese opinions; American people had American opinions. And in almost every case, the American version was much better. Rose finally made the decision as an American did that she tried to catch what belonged to her, not just followed her husband like her grandmother.

Lena, the daughter of Ying-ying, had to share everything with her husband. They made it very clear who would pay the bill. Facing mother's confusing, Lena explained with the words she and her husband had used with each other: "So we can eliminate false dependencies... be equals ... love without obligation ..." Actually, in her deep heart, Lena wanted to protest. She didn't like this way about money. When the marble end table which refers to the weird family rule collapsed, Lena would stop it as her mother told her to do.

In mothers' marriages, they had to obey the old-fashioned morality no matter how stupid it was. So, Lindo escaped her marriage and An-mei's mother committed suicide. Filial duty, obedience, endurance and ritual are

Chinese traditional ethics, but they were used wrongly. On the other hand, daughters could deal with their lives when they were not satisfied with their marriages.

3. THE GOAL OF ETHICS - RIGHTEOUSNESS AND HAPPINESS

The general goal of Western ethics is looking for happiness on the basis of naturalism human nature. Nevertheless, the Chinese traditional ethics is pursuing the supreme morality. In Chinese tradition, the counterparts of Western morality and happiness are the righteousness and benefit. The traditional Chinese ethics places the emphasis on the righteousness [4].

Mother wanted to teach daughter about Chinese character, how to obey parents and listen to your mother's mind, how not to show your own thoughts, to put your feelings behind your face so you can take advantage of hidden opportunities, Why easy things not worth pursuing, how to know your own worth and polish it, never flashing it around like a cheap ring, and why Chinese thinking is best. But this kind of thinking didn't stick to daughter. She thought mother was old-fashioned. Consider the case of Jing-mei, for having started half a degree in biology, then half a degree in art, and then finishing neither when she went off to work for a small ad agency as a secretary, later becoming a copywriter [5]. But her mother was always having the argument with her about her being a failure, a college drop-off, about her going back to finish. Her mother even told others that she was going back to school to finish the degree.

What daughter learned is about American circumstance. If you are born poor here, it's no lasting shame. You are first in line for a scholarship. If the roof crashes on your head, no need to cry over this bad luck. You can sue anybody, make the landlord fix it. In America, nobody says you have to keep the circumstances somebody else gives you.

When she planned to get married, Waverly, the daughter of Lindo, had been worried whether her mother permitted her to marry Rich, an American man. To Rich, it was very simple, just to say "Mom, Dad, I'm getting married". But it was a big problem for Waverly, because she thought her mother "never thinks anyone is good enough for anything." Her mother always criticized everything. In fact, her mother wanted her children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character.

4. THE ORIENTATION OF ETHICS - COLLECTIVISM AND INDIVIDUALISM

The orientation of Chinese traditional ethics is collectivism. The social group is the principal part of value in Chinese traditional ethics. Conversely, the individual value depends on the group. Based on a study, one cannot gain one's value until the group's need is met and the group's benefit is achieved [6]. The orientation of Western ethics is individualism. Individualism is the basis of Western ethics, and the happiness for Westerners refers to the individual happiness. Ego is the core of value in Western culture.

In Chinese mothers' eyes, children are not only children themselves, but the part of the family, the honor of the family, even part of mothers themselves. Children's success means mothers' success, children's failure means mothers' failure. Lindo and Suyuan were both best friends and arch enemies who spent a lifetime comparing their children. Jing-mei, Suyuan's daughter, was one month older than Waverly, Lindo's daughter. From the time they were babies, their mothers compared the creases in their belly buttons, how shapely their earlobes were, how fast they healed when they scraped their knees, how thick and dark their hair, how many shoes they wore out in one year, and later, how smart Waverly was at playing chess, how many trophies she had won, how many newspapers had printed her name, how many cities she had visited. Therefore, Jing-mei's mother tried to cultivate some hidden genius in Jing-mei. She did housework for an old retired piano teacher who gave Jing-mei lessons and free use of a piano to practice on in exchange.

Lindo loved to show off her daughter, like one of the trophies she polished. She would show off her daughter's victory to the family friends who visited. In Saturday market, she even said to whoever looked her way, "This my daughter Wave-ly Jong." Waverly hated the way her mother tried to take all the credit. She told her she didn't know anything, so she shouldn't show off. She should shut up. Thereafter, her mother changed. She no longer hovered over her as Waverly practiced different chess games. She did not polish her daughter's trophies every day. She did not

cut out the small newspaper item that mentioned Waverly's name. It was as if she had erected an invisible wall. Then, Waverly lost the games. When she refused her mother, she lost the gift of chess and turned into someone quite ordinary.

That's why Waverly needed her mother's permission for her marriage. Her American friend couldn't understand why she was so nervous. It was just getting married. The friend advised her to tell her mother to shut up. Waverly said, you can't ever tell a Chinese mother to shut up. You could be charged as an accessory to your own murder.

Almost all the mothers hadn't had a satisfactory marriage, and their lives had not been happy, so they sailed to America. They wished they would have a daughter. Nobody would say her worth was measured by the loudness of her husband's blech. Nobody would look down on her. She would always be too full to swallow any sorrow. Anyway, their daughter would have a totally different life.

5. THE REALIZING MECHANISM OF ETHICS - EMOTIONALISM AND RATIONALISM

The basic social element in China is family. According to research, Chinese ethics has been given the family emotions. Western society is based on individual [7]. The Western culture believes in a materialistic approach and has a pragmatic attitude. In the realizing mechanism of morality, Western ethics resort to "intellect" while Chinese ethics resort to "emotions".

Mothers were raised the Chinese way. They were taught to be quiet, to listen and watch, as if your life were a dream. You could close your eyes when you no longer wanted to watch. Waverly's mother taught her the art of invisible strength. It was a strategy for winning arguments, respect from others. However, the daughters didn't think so. To Jing-mei, her mother always criticized. It seemed that her mother was always displeased with all her friends, with her, and even with her father. When she was taking Introduction to Psychology, she tried to tell her mother why she shouldn't criticize so much, why it didn't lead to a healthy learning environment. She told her mother that parents shouldn't criticize children. They should encourage instead. People rise to another people's expectation. And when you criticize, it just means you're expecting failure. But her mother continued to criticize.

When she got trouble in her marriage, Rose would rather talk to her psychiatrist than to her mother. Her mother didn't understand why she could talk with a psychiatrist but not with mother. She thought a mother was the best. A mother knew what was inside a daughter. Mothers felt that there was a river between them and their daughters. They were watching their daughters from another shore and accepted their American ways. They saw daughters who grew impatient when their mothers talked in Chinese, who thought they were stupid when they explained things in fractured English. They saw that joy and luck did not mean the same to their daughters, while to these closed American-born minds "joy luck" was not a word, and it didn't exist. They wished their daughters would not swallow sorrow, while the daughters swallowed Coca-cola. They visited their daughters by unannounced, but daughters suggested they should call ahead of time.

Chinese mothers and American-born daughters lived different lives. They followed their rules. Mothers wished their daughters to be real Americans, to speak perfect English. But they still taught them in Chinese way and instilled in them Chinese thoughts. The daughters were raised in America, they looked like Chinese, but they have never really known what it means to be Chinese. Yet, as Jing-mei's mother told her, "Someday you will see, it is in your blood, waiting to be let go." When Jing-mei meets her sisters in China, she feels what part of her is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is her family. It is in her blood. After all these years, it can finally be let go.

6. CONCLUSIONS

There are differences between Chinese and Western ethics, but neither superior nor inferior to each other. The world is a global village. Different peoples live in it with different cultures. It will help people to communicate to learn different cultures. If a country wants to build up a good relationship with others, people should respect each other's culture. *The Joy Luck Club* is such a book that opens a door to both Chinese people and American people. In the book, readers can see the conflicts between mother generation and daughter generation, Chinese culture and

American culture, Chinese ethics and American ethics. At the end of the novel, when Jing-mei, the American-born daughter hugs her Chinese sisters, the two different cultures accept each other. They do not collide but exist in the world together.

REFERENCES

- [1] Chen, C. 2007. A Study of Differences and Integration between Chinese and Western Ethics.
- [2] Chen, Z.Y. 2006. On Main Differences between Chinese and Western Ethics Value Tianjin Social Science, (1), 26-29
- [3] Tan, A. 1989. The Joy Luck Club. New York, Penguin Books.
- [4] Wang, Z.Y. 2012. Ethics. Beijing Normal University Publishing Group.
- [5] Zhang, Z.L., Yan, L.F. 2009. Intellectual Ethics to Family-Based Ethics - A Comparison of Chinese and Western Traditional Ethics Journal of Hangzhou Normal University, Social Science Edition 1, 9, 68-74
- [6] <http://www.differencebetween.net/business/difference-between-ethics-and-morals/>
- [7] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics>