

Interpretation of the Mother-Daughter Relationship in *the Joy Luck Club* from the Perspective of Transitivity System

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Abstract

The Joy Luck Club written by Amy Tan depicts the lifestyle of foreign citizens of Chinese origin. It consists of many stories in which children born in the United States but educated in a Chinese way are destined to have some conflicts with their Chinese born parents due to different environments they were born in. This thesis, based on functional grammar put forward by Halliday, endeavors to focus on the analysis of the mother-daughter interaction in one of the four families—Jing-mei Woo's family from the perspective of transitivity system so as to shed light on the personalities of these characters. After carrying out the corresponding analysis, a conclusion can be made that the daughter is a person with her own mind and she pursues freedom and independence all her life, while her mother is a person attaching great importance to the obedience from her daughter.

Keywords: Transitivity system; *The joy luck club*; Process; Mother-daughter relationship.



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1. Introduction

The Joy Luck Club is the representative work of a well-known American writer of Chinese origin named Amy Tan. As a person born and nurtured in the United States, Amy Tan writes this book on the basis of the life experience of her mother, her grandmother and that of her own. The author unfolds the picture of the embarrassing situation of Chinese Americans who are marginalized in the United States in front of us from the angle of mothers and daughters in four families and explores into the possible emotional entanglements and psychological conflicts that may happen between Chinese family members in the form of “short story cycles” (Liu, 2003). The thinking styles of the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* are not in line with Western mainstream thinking, which make these mothers estranged by some other groups of people in the United States (Wang and Wang, 2007). Suyuan Woo, a mother who is not well integrated into the mainstream society, choose to hold a party like the Joy Luck Club for leisure and entertainment, which also frees herself and others from earthly troubles. However, this kind of life causes the dissatisfaction of her daughter Jing-mei Woo, and then the story begins.

The background of the selected material goes as follows: the mother Suyuan Woo has always had a prodigy dream for her daughter, and she wants to turn her into somebody. After appreciating the wonderful performance by a little girl on the Ed Sullivan Show on TV once, Suyuan Woo asks a neighbor to teach her daughter Jing-mei Woo to play the piano and in return she will do the house keeping for that neighbor. Having bragged about the excellent piano-playing performance after her daughter's months of “hard-work”, the mother decides to hold a talent show, yet Jing-mei Woo does badly in it. The daughter considers that she will be relieved from the torture of playing the piano after her bad show, still her mother urges her to do the practice. The two characters hence have a big fight. This thesis select the corresponding verbal conflict between them on the basis of the background introduced above as the object of the discussion in order to display the personalities of these two characters. Language, as the bridge of communication, is a special kind of symbol. Therefore, the way one talks to another in this book is worth paying attention to.

2. Data Collection

Amy Tan established her important position as a Chinese-American female writer because of her masterpiece *The Joy Luck Club*. The mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* were born in China and hence are inevitably influenced by Chinese cultural traditions all their life—being conservative, responsible and possessing some other characteristics, while the daughters in the book were born and raised in the United States, despite their parents' Chinese way of carrying out education, their thinking styles are inevitably influenced by the mainstream Western culture, highlighting freedom, equality and independence. The totally different ways of thinking between mothers and daughters are bound to bring about something different, which makes the analysis of some certain parts in *The Joy Luck Club* from the perspective of transitivity system worthwhile. According to Bloom (2009), “it is not a novel in the sense that it is a work of sixteen ‘her stories’”. Indeed, Stories in this book are told through the mouths of four Chinese mothers and their Chinese American daughters. The story of Jing-mei Woo and her mother is a representative of the four families. Therefore, this thesis will analyze the mother-daughter verbal conflict in the last

part entitled *Two Kinds*: Jing-Mei Woo in the second chapter the *Twenty-six Malignant Gates* Tan (1989) from the angle of transitivity system.

The selected material is divided into 72 smaller units, and the analyses of these units are carried out to dissect the states-of-mind of the two major characters. There are totally 427 words in the excerpt, 88 out of which are process verbs of various kinds. The analysis of these process verbs will be conducive to the research into the personalities and mental activities of the two important characters and the insight into the diction the author utilizes to design the plot of this book will make readers more aware of the embarrassing situation foreign citizens of Chinese origin are faced with.

3. Analytical Framework

Halliday's metafunction consists of three types, namely, ideational function, interpersonal function as well as textual function (Thompson, 2008). Among them, ideational function can be further categorized as experiential function and logical function. Experiential function refers to the fact that language can embody all kinds of experiences human beings have in the real world or in their inner mind and this function can be realized through the utilization of the transitivity system (Hu *et al.*, 2005).

Table-1. Transitivity System and Its Elements

Process	Participant
material process	Actor-goal
mental process	Senser-phenomenon
relational process	Attributive: carrier-attribute Identifying: identified- identifier
behavioral process	Behaver
verbal process	Sayer-berbiage- receiver
existential process	Existent

Based on the definition of the transitivity system and the classification of the corresponding elements (Hu *et al.*, 2005), this table clearly lists several processes in the transitivity system and their respective participants.

As a semantic system, what transitivity needs to do is to divide people's actions into several kinds of "processes". That is to say, to "categorize actions through grammar" (Hu *et al.*, 2005). Besides, participants and circumstantial elements are also involved in this part. According to Halliday, the system of transitivity can divide human activities into six processes, namely, material process, mental process, relational process, behavioral process, verbal process and existential process (Halliday, 2000). Different participants are included in different processes such as the "actor" and the "goal" in the material process (Hu *et al.*, 2005), the "senser" and "phenomenon" in the mental process (Hu *et al.*, 2005), the "carrier" and "attribute" or the "identified" and "identifier" in the relational process (Hu *et al.*, 2005), the "beholder" in the behavioral process (Hu *et al.*, 2005) the "sayer", "berbiage" and "receiver" in the verbal process (Hu *et al.*, 2005), as well as the "existent" in the existential process (Hu *et al.*, 2005). As far as the circumstantial element is concerned, time, space, mode, degree, comparison, concomitant, causal, identity as well as some other categories are touched upon (Hu *et al.*, 2005). Since circumstantial elements can hardly be found in the excerpt, the analysis of them will be dropped.

4. Findings

Table-2. The Number of Process Verbs and Corresponding Percentage

process	number	percentage
Material process	32	≈36%
Mental process	14	≈16%
Relational process	22	25%
Verbal process	14	≈16%
Behavioral process	6	≈7%
Existential process	0	0
sum	88	≈100%

In the system of transitivity, a meaningful unit is a clause, which represents the process of something. As Halliday (1967), transitivity is a property of clauses instead of verbs. Dividing sentences into different smaller parts, this thesis endeavors to make an analysis of the interaction of Jing-mei Woo and her mother from the angle of transitivity system. The selected material is divided into 72 clauses with a total number of 88 verbs and five out of six processes arise in this material. It can be easily discerned that the number of verbs in the material process is the largest, reaching 32, accounting for approximately 36% of the total, while the number of verbs in the relational process ranks second, amounting to 22 and accounting for 25%. The number of verbal and mental process verbs is the same, 14, amounting to 16%. There are 6 behavioral process verbs, accounting for 7% of the total and there is no existential process verb in the material.

Verbs in different processes possess various characteristics. The material process is marked by dynamic verbs, indicating the process of doing something. It can either be verb phrases with abstract meaning such as "go through" or vivid verbs "wedge". Phrases symbolizing concrete actions such as "come out from" or "walk over" also belong

to this category. This kind of process verbs are able to make some actions clearer and enable readers to understand better how the selected material is organized.

Mental process verbs emphasize the depiction of various mental activities of people. Words such as “decide”, “feel”, “sense” as well as “want” and “wish” in the material show up so as to vividly present the psychological activities of Jing-mei Woo’s when she is having verbal conflicts with her mother. When Jing-mei Woo decides to do what she would like to do, and ignores what her mother says, the conflict between them seems to be unavoidable. Later on, though Jing-mei has sensed and felt the anger in her mom, she continues to upset her so as to offset the mental pain she has been suffering from. Her speaking out her wishes to be like her mother’s other two daughters even causes her mother to be tortured by endless sorrow.

The relational process verbs often reflect the corresponding relationship between certain parts, and the be verbs indicating the relationship between things appear frequently in the material. Readers can figure out the way the character positions herself through appreciating these verbs. Her current status influences the way she acts so that she can refuse to be someone she is not.

Behavioral process verbs refer to some verbs that can represent the physiological activities of the people. In the material, sob, cry, smile and other behavioral verbs showcase the physiological activities of the conflict between the characters, making the atmosphere between characters even more intense and real. All those behavioral process verbs play a role in shaping the personality of the characters. When the daughter cries or sobs, the side of fragility appears. The smile of the mother signifies the superior status she has.

Verbal process verbs are verbs that often convey and exchange information. The word “say” appears several times, leading to what the characters want to say. Words like “scream” and “shout” are rich in expressing the attitude of the characters during the process of interaction while at the same time introducing some certain topics. The existential process verbs often refer to verbs that emphasize the existence of something. This kind of existential process verbs often begin with a sentence structure “There be...” Since no existential process verbs can be found in this material, the analysis of this kind of verb will be skipped.

5. Discussion

Mo and Singh (2008), consider that parental involvement includes three components, including parent-child relationship, parental involvement in school, and parents’ educational aspirations for their children. After browsing the selected materials, the corresponding reader may find it easy to figure out the fact that this material is something about the interaction between the mother and the daughter as well as the psychological activities of the daughter Jing-mei Woo. Suyuan Woo’s involvement in her daughter’s life and her holding aspirations for Jing-mei Woo can manifest the existence of a kind of involvement. All kinds of process verbs come into play accordingly and a considerable number of sentences begin with I (daughter’s self-mention) and she (Jing-mei Woo’s appellation for her mother).

5.1. Material Process

The material process verb is generally used to emphasize the process of the actor's doing something. During the process of action, the “actor” and the “goal” of the action are often served by nouns or pronouns.

Example 1: She yanked me by the arm,... (Tan, 1989)

The actor of this clause “she” and the goal of the action “me” are pronouns. The verb “yank” here is a material process verb, which reflects the decisive behavior of the mother after finding her daughter’s resisting playing the piano.

Example 2: I kicked the throw rugs under my feet (Tan, 1989).

The actor in this sentence is “I”, the goal of the action is “throw rugs”, and the corresponding material process verb is “kick”. The picture of “I kick the small blanket” appears in front of us, highlighting the daughter’s rebellious attitude towards playing the piano.

5.2. Mental Process

The mental process is the process of expressing mental activities such as perception, feeling, and desire. There are two participants in the mental process: “senser” and “phenomenon”. The “phenomena” in the psychological process can be specific people, things, or abstract things.

Example 1: And I could sense her anger... (Tan, 1989).

In this clause, the senser is “I”, the phenomenon is the abstract thing-“anger”, and the corresponding mental process verb is “sense”. This verb reflects the mental activities of the daughter Jing-mei Woo when she has a conflict with her mother.

Example 2: I wish I were dead! Like them! (Tan, 1989).

There are two kinds of verbs in this sentence. Firstly, “wish” is a mental process verb, indicating the strong desire of the daughter to be dead like her two sisters. This kind of supposition arouses further conflict between Jing-mei Woo and her mother, pushing her mother into a more desperate state. Secondly, “were” is a relational verb. The past tense of be verb indicates that this kind of expression is just a subjunctive mood, and it can’t be true. Yet, this kind of way of talking may hurt her mother deeply.

5.3. Relational Process

The relational process refers to the process of describing the relationship between things, and generally includes two types of processes: the attributive one and the identifying one. The participants involved in the attributive process are “carrier” and “attribute”, while the identifying one consists of the “identifier” and the “identified”.

Example 1: I wasn't her slave (Tan, 1989).

This sentence appears in Jing-mei Woo's mind when the mother reminds her of the time and urges her to play the piano. The daughter uses this sentence to position herself and she was determined to ignore some of her mother's words after she had figured out her position, which shows that she is a person with her own state-of-mind. All of these elements pave the way for the following plot.

Example 2: ..., I got scared (Tan, 1989).

In this short part, the simple word “get” is well-used to show the unexpected fear the daughter gets when she speaks out her mind. The adoption of this relational process verb makes this conversation even more complete.

5.4. Behavioral Process

The behavioral process refers to the physiological activity process including activities such as “cry” and “smile”. The participants in this process are often “behavers”. The number of behavioral verbs appearing in the text is relatively limited throughout the excerpt, and is mostly represented by words such as “sob”, “smile” and so on.

Example 1: I was sobbing by now,... (Tan, 1989)

The physiological activity of “sob” in this clause vividly reflects Jing-mei's inferior position in her fight with her mother, which makes the readers better understand the sorrow of her daughter at this time.

Example 2: ..., smiling as if she were pleased I was crying (Tan, 1989).

In this short part, several verbs can be found: “smile”, “cry” and “be” verb. Among them, “smile” and “cry” are behavioral process verbs. The “smiling” of the mother is in sharp contrast with the “crying” of the daughter. This kind of comparison indicates the superior status of the mom when she is having verbal conflicts with her daughter.

5.5. Verbal Process

The verbal process marks a process of exchanging information in the speech. The “speaker” can be a person or a thing. The verbal process verbs of the excerpt are mostly “say”, and the two characters introduce the topic, so the speaker here is either the daughter or the mother.

Example 1: “No! I won't!” I screamed (Tan, 1989).

The verb of the verbal process in this sentence is “scream”. In addition to the role of introducing something, this word is full of the painful desperation of the daughter at this moment. This simple verb makes the character more real.

Example 2: “Then I wish...” I shouted (Tan, 1989).

The “shout” in this sentence, in addition to leading to what the daughter wants to say, demonstrates the innermost devil thought within her heart--ultimately hurting her mother. After shouting out this sentence, her aim of winning back her esteem is achieved in a disgraceful way.

This thesis focuses only on the selected material as the object of the research due to the space limit. The mother-daughter conflict in *the Joy Luck Club* is analyzed by adopting the system of transitivity. The analysis of the conflict between the two characters, on the one hand, demonstrates the feasibility of the system of transitivity in the textual analysis; on the other hand, it plays a crucial role in figuring out the personalities of these characters. Therefore, it is worthwhile to delve into the way these two characters get along with each other.

6. Conclusion

Due to different living environments, Suyuan Woo's ways of thinking and values are different from those of her daughter, which results in frequent conflicts in their lives. The structure of a typical mother-daughter conflict comprises five enduring features (Berkeley and Thomas-Mason Michelle, 2015), conduct; mothers' response to conduct; daughters' reaction to mothers' response; intensification and containment phase. The interaction between Suyuan Woo and Jing-mei Woo displays these features. This paper analyzes a certain part of the verbal conflicts between the two characters from the perspective of the transitivity system. It is concluded that Suyuan Woo has her decisive side as a human being, and her daughter Jing-mei Woo is profoundly influenced by Western mainstream culture, advocating freedom, equality and having her own viewpoints. The shaping of these two classic characters enables readers to know better about the life Chinese American is experiencing.

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Appendix 1: Excerpt from *the Joy Luck Club*

"Four clock," she reminded me as if it were any other day. I was stunned, as though she were asking me to go through the talent-show torture again. I wedged myself more tightly in front of the TV.

"Turn off TV," she called from the kitchen five minutes later.

I didn't budge. And then I decided. I didn't have to do what my mother said anymore. I wasn't her slave. This wasn't China. I had listened to her before and look what happened. She was the stupid one.

She came out from the kitchen and stood in the arched entryway of the living room. "Four clock," she said once again, louder.

"I'm not going to play anymore," I said nonchalantly. "Why should I? I m not a genius."

She walked over and stood in front of the TV. I saw her chest was heaving up and down in an angry way.

"No!" I said, and I now felt stronger, as if my true self had finally emerged. So this was what had been inside me all along.

"No! I won' t!" I screamed.

She yanked me by the arm, pulled me off the floor, snapped off the TV. She was frighteningly strong, half pulling, half carrying me toward the piano as I kicked the throw rugs under my feet. She lifted me up and onto the hard bench. I was sobbing by now, looking at her bitterly. Her chest was heaving even more and her mouth was open, smiling crazily as if she were pleased I was crying.

"You want me to be someone that I'm not!" I sobbed. I'll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be!"

"Only two kinds of daughters," she shouted in Chinese. "Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!"

"Then I wish I wasn't your daughter. I wish you weren't my mother," I shouted. As I said these things I got scared. It felt like worms and toads and slimy things crawling out of my chest, but it also felt good, as if this awful side of me had surfaced, at last.

"Too late change this," said my mother shrilly.

And I could sense her anger rising to its breaking point. I wanted to see it spill over. And that's when I remembered the babies she had lost in China, the ones we never talked about. "Then I wish I'd never been born!" I shouted. "I wish I were dead! Like them."

Tan, A. *The Joy Luck Club* [M]. New York: Ballantine Books, 1989.

Appendix-2. Data analysis with partner

No.	Clause	Process
1	"Four clock," she <i>reminded</i> me...	verbal
2	...as if it <i>were</i> any other day.	relational
3	I <i>was</i> stunned,	relational
4	as though she <i>were asking</i> me to ...	verbal
5	... <i>go through</i> the talent-show torture again.	material
6	I <i>wedged</i> myself more tightly in front of the TV.	material
7	" <i>Turn off</i> TV,"... she <i>called</i> from the kitchen five minutes later.	Material; verbal
8	I <i>didn't budge</i> .	material
9	And then I <i>decided</i> .	mental
10	I <i>didn't have to do</i> ...	material
11	...what my mother <i>said</i> anymore.	verbal
12	I <i>wasn't</i> her slave.	relational
13	This <i>wasn't</i> China.	relational
14	I had <i>listened to</i> her before ...	material
15	...and <i>look what happened</i> .	material; material
16	She <i>was</i> the stupid one.	relational
17	She <i>came out</i> from the kitchen...	material
18	... and <i>stood</i> in the arched entryway of the living room.	material
19	"Four clock," she <i>said</i> once again, louder.	verbal
20	"I'm not going to <i>play</i> anymore,"	relational; material
21	I <i>said</i> nonchalantly.	verbal
22	...I'm not a genius."	relational
23	She <i>walked over</i> and...	material
24	... <i>stood</i> in front of the TV.	material

25	I <i>saw</i> her chest ...	material
26	...was <i>heaving</i> up and down in an angry way.	behavioral
27	“No!” I <i>said</i> ,	verbal
28	and I now <i>felt</i> stronger, ...	mental
29	as if my true self had finally <i>emerged</i> .	material
30	So this <i>was</i> what ...	relational
31	...had <i>been</i> inside me all along.	relational
32	“No! I won' t!” I <i>screamed</i> .	verbal
33	She <i>yanked</i> me by the arm,	material
34	<i>pulled</i> me <i>off</i> the floor,	material
35	<i>snapped</i> off the TV.	material
36	She <i>was</i> frighteningly strong, half <i>pulling</i> , half <i>carrying</i> me toward the piano	relational; material; material
37	...as I <i>kicked</i> the throw rugs under my feet.	material
38	She <i>lifted</i> me up and onto the hard bench.	material
39	I was <i>sobbing</i> by now,	behavioral
40	... <i>looking at</i> her bitterly.	material
41	Her chest was <i>heaving</i> even more...	behavioral
42	and her mouth <i>was</i> open,	relational
43	... <i>smiling</i> crazily...	behavioral
44	...as if she <i>were</i> pleased ...	relational
45	... I was <i>crying</i> .	behavioral
46	“You <i>want</i> me to <i>be</i> someone that I'm not!”	mental; relational; relational
47	I <i>sobbed</i> .	behavioral
48	“I'll never <i>be</i> the kind of daughter...	relational
49	... you <i>want</i> me to <i>be</i> !”	mental ; relational
50	“Only two kinds of daughters,” she <i>shouted</i> in Chinese.	verbal
51	“Those who <i>are</i> obedient ...	relational
52	...and those who <i>follow</i> their own mind!	material
53	Only one kind of daughter can <i>live</i> in this house	material
54	“Then I <i>wish</i> I wasn't your daughter.	mental; relational
55	I <i>wish</i> you weren't my mother,”	mental; relational
56	I <i>shouted</i> .	verbal
57	As I <i>said</i> these things ...	verbal
58	... I <i>got</i> scared.	relational
59	It <i>felt</i> like worms and toads and slimy things ...	mental
60	... <i>crawling</i> out of my chest,	material
61	...but it also <i>felt</i> good,	mental
62	... as if this awful side of me had <i>surfaced</i> , at last.	material
63	“Too late <i>change</i> this,” <i>said</i> my mother shrilly	material; verbal
64	And I could <i>sense</i> ...	mental
65	...her anger <i>rising</i> to its breaking point.	material
66	I <i>wanted</i> to <i>see</i> it <i>spill over</i> .	mental; material; mental;
67	And that's when I <i>remembered</i> the babies...	relational; mental
68	...she had <i>lost</i> in China, ...	material
69	... the ones we never <i>talked about</i> .	verbal
70	“Then I <i>wish</i> I'd never <i>been born</i> !”	mental; material
71	I <i>shouted</i> .	verbal
72	“I <i>wish</i> I <i>were</i> dead! Like them.”	mental; relational