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Sino-American Cultural Conflicts in the Joy Luck Club from the Perspective of Cultural Identity

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ABSTRACT

The Joy Luck Club is the masterpiece of Chinese American author Amy Tan that tells the stories of four pairs of mothers and daughters in Chinese American families. In the novel, conflicts between mothers and daughters develop with the collision and integration of two cultures. In recent years, plenty of scholars have conducted research on this novel from various perspectives, such as Orientalism, mother-daughter relationships, and Sino-American culture. This article applies the theory of cultural identity to analyze the manifestations and causes of conflicts between two generations and two cultures. Instead of merely comparing the pairs of conflicts, the article combines the conflicts with the establishment of cultural identity and aims to promote awareness of identifying one's cultural identity and standing firm when experiencing two or more types of culture.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the 1950s, the African American Civil Rights Movement sprung up in America, which successfully aroused awareness of the ethnic identity of ethnic minorities. Against this background, Chinese Americans also started to become aware of their negative situations in a foreign land. Chinese American writers, among this minority group, entered the American literary world and gave a voice to their marginal group in order to explore their own identity.

As an offspring of emigrants, Amy Tan spent her whole childhood and youth in America and immersed herself in American culture. *The Joy Luck Club*, her first novel, was published in 1989. Based on the development of mother-daughter relationships, the novel shows the conflicts between two cultures and finally how the conflicts are resolved through the efforts of two generations.

Nowadays, we have a growing population emigrating to other nations, from youngsters who accept higher education admissions offers to businessmen who operate international companies in overseas markets. Each of these emigrants is supposed to become accustomed to a new culture while also maintaining their cultural identity. *The Joy Luck Club* provides a kind of reference for appropriately dealing with cultural identity when two types of cultures collide with each other. This novel will serve as a typical case for this article. This study will help people to understand the respective characteristics and commonalities of Chinese and American cultures and to explore the possibilities of diversified development of Chinese and American cultures through retaining confidence in one's own culture.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the publication of *The Joy Luck Club*, plenty of scholars in related fields both at home and abroad have researched this book from various aspects such as orientalism, mother-daughter relationships, and Sino-American culture.

Edward Said wrote in his work *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* that the east is completely absent when being discussed; what is present are orientalists and their remarks. *The Joy Luck Club* reflects Amy Tan's tendency

towards Orientalism and also reveals her desire to be accepted and recognized by the Western literary world. In terms of her mode of thinking and literary creation, she deliberately uses the perspective of Orientalism to examine past generations and show the negative image of Easterners, as “the other,” to the readers (Said, 1979: 3).

The contradictions and conflicts between mothers and daughters actually result from the considerable differences between Chinese culture and American culture. The mothers come from the Confucian culture, which attaches great importance to loyalty, filial piety, introversion, authority, family, and blood relationships, while the daughters immerse themselves in the Western culture, which emphasizes freedom, individuality, and extroversion (Zhang, 2018: 81-87).

As for Sino-American culture, most scholars who have researched this topic have summarized that the two cultures mainly differ in terms of family values, language expression, and also religious views. In terms of family values, Chinese culture stresses the importance of collectivism, which weighs group interests over individuals', while American culture pays more attention to expressing one's own ideas, which is the essence of individualism. Therefore, the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* think highly of family bonds, and they consider all the family members as a whole, but the daughters are accustomed to the American lifestyle and mode of thinking that encourages children to be independent, express themselves, and fight for their rights in the family. In regard to language expression, American anthropologist Edward Hall has constructively divided cultures based on their use of context into high-context cultures and low-context cultures, and he pointed out that cultures that use context differently follow different ways of language expression (1976). In *The Joy Luck Club*, the mothers grew up in the high-context Chinese culture, while the daughters have come of age in the low-context American culture, and different rules about context in these two cultures lead to unpleasant misunderstandings in communication. The daughters get used to calling a spade a spade, so it is not an easy task for them to understand the

indirect euphemisms in Chinese culture. Besides, religion also plays an indispensable role in cultural life. The Chinese mothers believe in Buddhism, and the American daughters believe in Christianity, and these different religious views can hardly coexist with each other.

On the one hand, the studies on *The Joy Luck Club* in the past decade have their advantages and have provided much enlightenment for later researchers. On the other hand, most of these studies have simply analyzed the pairs of conflicts in the book horizontally but have lacked a dynamic study of the cultural conflicts and the formation of the characters' cultural identity.

III. CULTURAL IDENTITY IN INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION

In the 1950s, the theory of cultural identity was first proposed by American psychoanalyst Erik Eriksson (1993: 168), and later it was widely applied in the field of humanities and social sciences. Cultural identity refers to people's positive identity with the most representative ideas of their nation, and this kind of identity proves to be gradually developed when people are influenced by their surroundings over the long term. As the spiritual ties that unite a nation, cultural identity has laid a foundation for the inheritance of national spirit from generation to generation. Individual cultural identity is closely related to national cultural identity (Zheng, 2008: 100-150). According to Phinney (1993: 61), the establishment of cultural identity includes three stages: unexamined cultural identity, cultural identity search, and cultural identity achievement.

3.1 Unexamined Cultural Identity

Unexamined cultural identity is the first stage, and just like the air people breathe in in daily life, in this stage cultural identity is easily ignored and taken for granted. During people's childhood, their access to information is limited, so they naturally believe what they are told. Due to children's vulnerable position in society, they receive information passively and uncritically from their parents, schools, friends, communities, and the mass media. Their lack of critical thinking

or an overall view prevents them from doubting or challenging the information they have been presented. Without the motivation to know other cultures objectively and spontaneously, they often fall into a blind zone and merely see things by focusing on their own culture.

In this stage, such an immature cultural identity frequently brings about cultural prejudice, cultural stereotypes, ethnocentrism, or parochialism, and it still exists even in modern society.

3.2 Cultural Identity Search

The second stage is cultural identity search. With the growth of age, people gradually gain mental maturity and start to ponder things happening around them. The results of these more complicated mental activities can be mainly divided into two categories. The first situation is that, after contacting other cultures, one can still recognize one's own culture and consider it acceptable and reasonable, which will result in a relatively stable culture identity. Another possible result is that one may generate doubt about the culture one used to believe in firmly after repeated critical thinking as well as careful introspection. The second situation is highly common in the process of cross-cultural adaptation, especially when people are encountering cultural shock (Chen, 2009: 172).

3.3 Cultural Identity Achievement

Cultural identity achievement is the last stage and also a more ideal state. After the first two stages of exploration, individuals are able to accept their culture confidently and abandon stereotypes and prejudice as well as discrimination towards other cultures, but also have the power to face stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination from people of other cultures. Only by being able to do this can one be said to actually finish the formation of cultural identity and be tolerant and open.

The ability acquired in this stage is the foundation of biculturalism in cross-cultural adaptation. During this stage, a new ability to recognize self-identity and maintain the coexistence of multi

cultures is developed, so that one can become the multicultural person proposed by Adler (1998: 225).

Building cultural identity appropriately is conducive to interpreting our own and also others' behaviors and to promoting mutual understanding in the process of getting along with each other. All in all, there are four characteristics of cultural identity: [central to the self-sense, dynamicity, contrast, and multiplicity] (Belay, 1996; Kim, 1996; Lustig & Koester, 2000; Martin & Nakayama, 1997).

IV. ESTABLISHMENT OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE JOY LUCK CLUB

In this examination of cultural identity in *The Joy Luck Club*, the mothers are grouped together, and the daughters form another group because they respectively represent two generations. Furthermore, by examining their gradual changes from one stage of cultural identity to the next, the formation process of their cultural identities will be much clearer.

4.1 Chinese Mothers' Unexamined Cultural Identity

The four mothers emigrated to the United States in 1949 when China was still experiencing social unrest. Having arrived in the new nation, they strained every nerve to dress, speak, eat, and act like Americans, only to find themselves still trapped by their Chinese appearance and spirit. The first generation of overseas Chinese did not really enter the mainstream society of the United States. Struggling on the edge of the dominant white society, like Black American women, they had no voice and no decision-making power at all (Paul & Fran et al., 1991: 148-152).

Suyuan Woo is the mother who has no chance to make her voice heard in *The Joy Luck Club*. What clearly shows Suyuan Woo's unexamined cultural identity is the way she educates and treats her daughter Jing-mei Woo. In China, most parents readily work hard to provide their offspring with a better life, which Chinese parents regard as their inescapable responsibility. Suyuan Woo offers to help her neighbor with cleaning work for free in

exchange for his guidance for Jing-mei Woo on how to play the piano. This is a typical type of mother-daughter relationship in which mothers are always giving while daughters are receiving. Nevertheless, she just makes the decision herself and arranges for the piano courses without asking for Jing-mei's opinions. In Suyuan's youth, she was in an old society where parents have the right to arrange their children's marriage and decide whom they are going to marry.

The habit of overlooking children's independent personalities and turning a deaf ear to children's voices can be seen in another detail. In a New Year celebration, Suyuan buys some crabs and invites her friends to have dinner. The number of crabs mismatches the number of people involved in the dinner because "to her way of thinking Shoshana was just a child and didn't count, at least not as far as crabs were concerned. She hadn't considered that Waverly might not think the same way" (Tan, 1989). On the one hand, Suyuan longs to raise and train her daughter to be a talent who is able to lead a decent life in the United States, and she has made great efforts to achieve her goal. On the other hand, she brings up Jing-mei in a Chinese style as well as an Eastern thinking mode, which naturally leads to Jing-mei's inadaptation and rebellion.

Lindo Jong is another typical Chinese mother in *The Joy Luck Club*, who is shown to have acted as a typical Chinese daughter when she was young. To fulfill the promise made by her parents, she sacrifices her childhood and youth to become a child bride. When she was very young, she learned the traditional ethics that hold that children should obey their parents. She is also aware of the significance of mastering the skills of carefully weighing up one's words and observing one's countenance. As she told Waverly, "Wise guy, he not go against wind. In Chinese we say, Come from South, blow with wind--poom! -- North will follow. Strongest wind cannot be seen" (Tan, 1989). For the purpose of protecting herself, Lindo is used to speaking and acting properly and catering to others, so she sees this as the rule for interaction with others and demands that Waverly suppress her personality.

Lindo Jong's unexamined cultural identity is revealed in her attitude towards tip culture. In the restaurant, after Waverly gives the waiter a tip, Lindo refuses to provide the tip and pulls back the dollar bills. Waverly has no idea what to do but can only slip the waiter a tip again when Lindo uses the restroom. Individuals in Western culture tend to be more individualistic, self-oriented, self-centered, and extroverted, and Western society is characterized by a sense of guilt. However, Chinese culture is collectivist, socially oriented, and situation-centered. It is an introverted culture and a society characterized by a sense of shame (Samovar & Porter, 1995). Lindo rejects giving the tip because it is never a tradition in China, and few Chinese have the habit of doing this. Chinese society is deeply influenced by Confucian culture, which regards money lightly but thinks highly of interpersonal ties, so Chinese people prefer to show their appreciation through actions or words rather than money given in return.

The third mother, An-mei Hsu, has also experienced a gloomy childhood and had contact with some negative sides of traditional Chinese culture. Her first stage of cultural identity is mainly related to feudal superstition, such as the idea of ghosts and gods as well as the five elements of Chinese philosophy: metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. Additionally, An-mei Hsu has witnessed the harm inflicted on women through "the three obediences and the four virtues." Her mother was driven away from home because she was raped by a rich man, but she was blame. An-mei's mother is dismissed as the disgrace of the family just because she disobeyed the so-called women's morality.

Furthermore, another vital element in An-mei Hsu's cultural identity is filial piety, which has been a traditional virtue for more than two thousand years in China. In the traditional Chinese cultural system, family values are the most basic values that advocate filial piety to parents and stress the interests of the family. The basic requirement of filial piety is to show respect and obedience to parents, and personal interests need to be sacrificed to make way for family interests when necessary. Despite outrageous

treatment from her family, An-mei's mother follows the tenets of filial piety and voluntarily cuts her flesh to feed her mother who is at her last gasp. Indubitably, for An-mei, filial piety is the bond tying family members together as well as maintaining orderly family relations.

As for Ying-ying St. Clair, her unexamined cultural identity mostly relates to women's plight as wives who are the victims of patriarchy. In a patriarchal society, men establish their dominant position by distinguishing themselves from women. Ying-ying is born in a rich family and such a background requires her to be quiet and obedient, but this endless tolerance lays the foundation for her first, unhappy marriage.

4.2 Chinese Mothers' Cultural Identity Search

Lindo Jong is wise enough to save herself from a suffocating family. As a newcomer, Lindo quickly realizes that she must obey the rules of the United States to make a living in a strange society. Such American rules generally include the culture, customs, living habits, ways of communication, and so on. Under this circumstance, nobody will tell one what one can or cannot do as well as why one can or cannot do it. What one can do is only explore the rules in person and then sum up experience from misunderstandings and mistakes. When her children are studying the rules of chess, Lindo tells them the rules of living in America deliberately. On the one hand, Lindo struggles a lot due to the American rules. On the other hand, she starts to reflect on what her own culture has taken from her and what the new culture will bring to her. The United States is called a melting pot, which is surprisingly inclusive. This young country encourages people to fight for their dreams, and citizens are able to enjoy growing social mobility through their hard work and diligence. This is why Lindo teaches her children to adapt to the American environment.

An-mei Hsu begins her cultural identity search when she starts to believe in God, goes to the church, and reads the Bible. On a vacation, their whole family go to the beach, but unfortunately An-mei's youngest son accidentally falls into the sea. At first, An-mei uses the traditional Chinese

way, throwing her valuable ring into the sea in the hope of salvaging her son from Coiling Dragon. Soon she finds that this once-effective ancient method does not work, and she resorts to the power of God. Her acceptance and dependence on a new religion witness that her cultural identity search is in process.

Ying-ying loses her cultural identity with the issuing of her immigration papers: Her name is changed from Ying-ying Gu to Betty St. Clair, and even her birthyear, Tiger, is mistaken as Dragon. What she is deprived of is not merely her name or birthyear but also her cultural identity as a Chinese person and her connection with her homeland. Chinese and English names are two different language symbols, representing different individualities. The two kinds of names have their own cultural characteristics, which are prominently reflected in the history, religious beliefs, national psychology, values, and changes of the times of the two different cultures (Chen, 2011: 52-55). The meaning of "Ying-ying" in Chinese may contain her parents' best wishes for her, while "Betty" is just a name. The changes of Ying-ying's representative identity symbols, to a large extent, bring serious crises to her own cultural identity.

4.3 Chinese Mothers' Cultural Identity Achievement

As time goes by, the mothers can make a clear distinction between the two cultures and also their respective advantages and disadvantages without holding strong cultural prejudices or falling into ethnocentrism. They are able to see the two cultures impartially and flexibly, showing their different cultural characteristics in various situations.

In Lindo's first marriage, her youthful affection is strangled by the old society and the decision made by her parents. Luckily, she later meets a boy who arouses the romantic feelings hidden in her heart, and they present each other with a happy marriage and family. After the totally different two marriages, she finally understands the true meaning of marriage and gradually agrees with some reasonable parts of American culture which

she used to blindly object to. It is also the harmonious coexistence of two cultures in her mind that allows her to let Waverly determine her own marriage. What she implies is not only her acceptance of Waverly's husband but also her affirmation of the free marriage choices in American culture.

An-mei has witnessed her mother's tragic experience resulting from polygamy and the inferior status of women in the old society, and she can also sharply detect and point out that her daughter's marriage has gone wrong. Rose plans to adopt the American method, seeing a psychiatrist to solve the problems in her marriage, while An-mei has the sober thought that a psychiatrist is not a person whom one can actually depend on. In the past, women like An-mei's mother in China indeed had no choice but to accept their fates. Although An-mei can correctly identify the past deficiencies of her own culture, she has the ability to confidently commend its progress with dignity. Having been struggling with the collision of two cultures, An-mei is able to recognize the cultural differences in a natural way and skillfully switch between the two cultures.

As for Ying-ying, although her cultural identity is not as evident as that of the other mothers, she can still jump out of the box and be profoundly introspective. By comparing the way couples get along with each other in the Chinese style with that of the American style, Ying-ying holds that women have to safeguard their equal status and make their voices heard in a marriage. Neither Chinese continuous forbearance nor American cold American strict equality is the perfect solution. Her world outlooks successfully transcend the limitations of her local culture and show a mentality of embracing and treating the two cultures openly and inclusively.

4.4 American Daughters' Unexamined Cultural Identity

Jing-mei Woo does not have a comprehensive understanding of her mother and what happened to her mother in China in the past. In her eyes, her mother is someone who always tries hard to

integrate into the mainstream of American life but can only speak a little, poor American English. Resulting from the lack of knowing her mother's stories and growth environment, Jing-mei even does not take it seriously when her mother tells her that she has twin sisters in China because China is a place very far away from her, and she has never been there. Later, she gets bored with her mother's intention to cultivate her into a prodigy and refuses to practice playing the piano. Jing-mei is born in American where individual freedom is highly advocated without restriction even by one's own parents. Motivated by a strong desire for freedom, American children are more independent from their parents and tend to have the courage to say no to their parents' unreasonable or excessive demands. For Jing-mei, it is ridiculous for children to completely accept whatever their parents impose on them.

The most distinct unexamined cultural identity in Waverly is her tendency towards individualism and avoidance of collectivism. From the discovery of the New World to the gold rush, we can see that the realization of the American dream is inseparable from personal struggle. Therefore, Americans have a strong sense of independence and a clear sense of distance between individuals. However, in Chinese traditional culture, people like to complete a task with the power of a group of individuals. A person's success or decline is often related to the honor and disgrace of the whole group (Larry, 2001: 80-81). Waverly feels annoyed that her champion status is shown off by her mother as if Waverly is a commodity to be advertised. In her eyes, she is an independent individual rather than her mother's personal honor.

Rose grows up in the United States, so most of the males around her are Americans, which affects her standard of spouse selection to some extent. In the stage of unexamined cultural identity, people always see things from the perspective of their own culture and treat foreigners unfairly with a strong sense of racial superiority. Rose is attracted by the boys with American faces, figures and characteristics that are different from her Chinese brothers'. Influenced by her education in

school and mass media in society, Rose believes that American boys are the best in the world, and she needs the husband of this kind.

Lena St. Clair's views on marriage early on are mainly formed by the impact of her husband. In the relationships between couples in the United States, husbands and wives are relatively more independent from each other, and they have clearly separated private space and personal interests. However, the overemphasis on self and equality is damaging their relationship.

4.5 American Daughters' Cultural Identity Search

The process of cultural identity search is also a process that allows Jing-mei to get closer to and know more about her mother and Chinese culture. During the process, she becomes willing to understand the Chinese cultural connotation of an event and to explain her mother's behaviors in a Chinese way. Jing-mei has received a jade pendant from her mother, but she just leaves it alone because she regards it as a simple ornament. It is not until her mother passes away that she realizes that the shapes and details of the jade have special meaning in Chinese and that the jade contains the best blessing and wishes from her mother. Their different opinions on things constantly challenged her cultural identity. At this stage, Jing-mei begins to strike a balance between her American characteristics and her mother's Chinese spirit.

If Waverly is forthright and candid in the first stage, she has become hesitant and far less decisive in the second stage for she has a deeper understanding of Chinese traditional values. On the one hand, Waverly thirsts for her freedom in marriage as an American. On the other hand, considering filial piety in China and her mother's feelings, she tries her best to persuade her mother into agreeing with her marriage to Rich. Waverly's friend advises her to ask her mother to shut up when Waverly complains about her mother, but Waverly is not a girl who dares to talk back to her mother anymore because it is clearly against filial piety in China. Furthermore, Chinese culture's growing influence on Waverly can be seen in another detail. In the Confucian ethical order, the

younger generation is often not allowed to directly use the elder's name. To do so would be regarded as uneducated and ignorant of the rules. In America, however, people can use names directly regardless of their seniority, which reflects their pursuit of equality (Gu, 2008: 95-98). In a farewell, Rich directly calls Waverly's parents by their names, which is considered disrespectful to the elders by Waverly.

It is Rose's marriage that marks a turning point in her cultural identity. Without the spirit of independence, Rose gradually loses herself in the relationship, which leads to the failure of their marriage. Over years, she realizes that both Chinese people and American people have their options from which she is able to choose the best from a personal standpoint. When still young, Rose would have chosen the American options without hesitation. Now, however, Rose discovers that the wide ranges of American options are so vast that she is easily confused and makes wrong decisions. The unsuccessful marriage urges her to think over her blind worship of American options.

The relationship between Lena and her husband is also challenged by the cultural identity search resulting from the influence of the Chinese culture presented by her parents. According to Hofstede, in the family of a collectivist country, people have economic obligations to their relatives, and men and women share property after forming a family. In individualistic countries, men and women still have to retain a large private space after they are married, including economic independence, which reflects "economic independence among relatives" (2008: 7-9). The hidden Chinese cultural factors in Lina's mind force her to question and think critically about the strict equality among American couples.

4.6 American Daughters' Cultural Identity Achievement

At the end of the story, Jing-mei takes a visit to China with her father, and she finally steps into her cultural identity achievement by staying in China for some days. Only when Jing-mei leaves for China and see how China has developed in person can she abandon stereotypes about China

based on a lack of objectivity and partial observation. Although Jing-mei always shows obvious preference for American culture in the process of her growth, her mother continually instills Chinese culture into her mind. The Chinese culture that Jing-mei used to look down upon will give her power and courage to continue her life in the future.

The conflicts between Waverly and her mother are successfully resolved, which is conducive to bridging the gap between the two cultures around Waverly. Waverly decides to go to China for her honeymoon with her mother in order to know more about her mother An-mei Hsu as well their homeland. What is more, Waverly even desires to look Chinese due to her growing acceptance of Chinese culture, Chinese people's increasing international status, and the fact that half of her identity is Chinese.

As for Rose and Lena, both of them reconstruct their cultural identity and resolve the crisis they are confronted with by allowing and acknowledging the harmonious coexistence of their two cultures. Thanks to their mothers' enlightenment and their stronger and stronger national consciousness, Rose and Lena bravely fight for their rights and status in their marriages.

In the last but most important phase, the four daughters correctly establish their identity as Chinese with totally new understandings of their two cultures. From their perspective, one of the two civilizations is not better than the other. The four mothers come from the same place and suffered similar experiences in China and America, and that is why they gather together and set up the Joy Luck Club. The four pairs of mothers and daughters are tortured by the big differences of two cultures and trapped in troubled mother-daughter relationships. Through the process of dealing with these challenges, the mothers' and daughters' puzzlement and dilemmas are vividly presented. Fortunately, they successfully achieve their cultural identity after bitter struggles. The process for cultural identity is painful but the outcome is desirable. Those are also the difficulties and hope for millions of individuals who live in today's globalized world.

V. CONCLUSION

The four pairs of mothers and daughters in the novel have experienced the process of pursuing their own cultural identity. Many factors also play crucial roles in the formation of their cultural identity such as their changes of attitudes, openness towards other cultures, rich life experience, and changing environment. Through the theory of cultural identity, this article analyzes the transformation of the characters' cultural identity in three stages, which is a step-by-step process. At the same time, this analysis also reflects the dynamic characteristics of cultural identity, because developing cultural identity is not a mechanical and simple cognitive change but a transition happening over time. For plenty of cross-cultural individuals, the establishment of cultural identity is a tortuous as well as an arduous journey full of confusion.

Nevertheless, this article has its limitations. Firstly, the article only discusses Chinese culture and American culture. Although the two countries represent two kinds of voices, there are countless excellent cultures all over the globe, and they also are worth studying. Secondly, variables are produced by changes since the time period in which the novel was set. The story in the novel took place in the middle and late 20th century when the gap in strength between China and America was still wide. However, China has made a great progress and enjoyed greater reputation in the 21st century. As a result, Chinese people's attitudes towards our own culture and American culture may differ from our past generations'.

Nowadays, there is a growing popularity among Chinese citizens of going abroad to explore the outside world. How they can maintain their cultural identity within the collision of two or more cultures is therefore an urgent problem to be solved. The 21st century has witnessed the rise of China, which has significantly improved both its international status and its economic, political, cultural, scientific, and technological strength. A strong sense of cultural confidence equips Chinese people with great courage and confidence no matter where they are. Chinese Americans and the youngest generation of Chinese are the two groups

most deeply impacted by foreign culture, so they should have a clear understanding of their cultural identity. When facing heterogeneous cultures, one should embrace them with a friendly attitude and open mind instead of excluding them blindly or absorbing them completely. Cultural exchanges in international communication should also be equal and harmonious. Following the unavoidable trend of globalization is the responsibility and task of the people all over the globe.

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