
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Initiation of Chinese-American Daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* and *Everything I Never Told You*

Li Yingying

Postgraduate Student, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Jinan University, Guangzhou, China

Corresponding Author: Li Yingying, **E-mail:** 0108yingying@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The protagonists in *The Joy Luck Club* and *Everything I Never Told You* face multiple challenges related to identity, family expectations, and social pressures within different cultural backgrounds and family environments. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the protagonist, June, embarks on a "journey of self-discovery" that leads her to gradually recognize and embrace Chinese culture, ultimately achieving a balance between her Chinese and American identities. The protagonist Lydia, in *Everything I Never Told You*, suppresses her true self under the weight of family pressures and social isolation. Though she experiences an epiphany that helps her realize her true needs, she is ultimately unable to escape her predicament. This paper uses the theory of the Bildungsroman to compare and analyze the growth experiences of the Chinese-American daughters in these two works, revealing how, in a multicultural context, ethnic daughters seek cultural identity and self-recognition, and examining the roles that family and social environments play in this process.

KEYWORDS

The Joy Luck Club; *Everything I Never Told You*; Bildungsroman; Mentors; Epiphany

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 January 2026

PUBLISHED: 28 January 2026

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2026.9.2.5

1. Introduction

"Growth" is a common theme in the history of literature. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, written in 1778, has long been recognized as a quintessential example of the Bildungsroman. (Mai,2007) The definition of the Bildungsroman varies widely among scholars. Some put forward that "The protagonist of the Bildungsroman sets off on a journey alone, heading for the world of his imagination. Due to his own temperament, he often encounters a series of misfortunes during the journey, and faces frustrations in choosing friendships, love and work, but at the same time, he always finds a way out of desperate situations. He tends to meet various kinds of mentors and advisers, and finally, through his own multi-faceted adjustment and improvement, he adapts to the requirements of the specific historical background and social environment, and finds his own position." (Howe,1930) Others, from an epistemological perspective, define the Bildungsroman as "a novel centered on a sensitive young protagonist who attempts to understand the essence of the world, uncover the meaning of reality, and gain insights into life philosophy and the art of living." (Holman,1972) Bakhtin emphasized the difference between the Bildungsroman and other novels in that "the image of the protagonist is not a static unity, but a dynamic one. Time enters into the inner being of the person, into the character itself, bringing profound changes to the character's fate and the things in life." (Bakhtin,230) Unlike traditional American Bildungsroman, protagonists in ethnic Bildungsroman typically belong to minority groups. In their journey of growth, they not only face the challenges of personal psychological development but also must confront the social pressures and identity dilemmas arising from their racial and cultural backgrounds.

The Joy Luck Club is a novel by Chinese American author Amy Tan, published in 1989. Through the perspectives of four Chinese immigrant mothers and their Chinese American daughters, the work reveals the conflicts and understandings between mothers and daughters against the backdrop of cultural clashes between China and the United States. In the end, the daughters find and establish their identities through an acceptance of Chinese culture. Although *The Joy Luck Club* includes four daughters:

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Wavely, Jing-mei(June), Rose, and Lena, this paper will only focus on one of the character - Jingmei, for her initiation story has rather complete line.

Everything I Never Told You is the debut novel of Chinese American author Celeste Ng, published in 2014. Through the character of Lydia, a mixed-race daughter, the novel explores the struggles and confusion faced by ethnic minority adolescents in their quest for self-identity under the dual pressures of society and family. Both *The Joy Luck Club* and *Everything I Never Told You* situate the initiation story of their female protagonists in the multicultural American, reflecting diverse values of growth and the unique challenges faced by ethnic minority youth.

This paper applies the theory of the Bildungsroman to examine the similarities and differences reflected in the protagonists' growth in *The Joy Luck Club* and *Everything I Never Told You*. It reveals the common challenges faced by Chinese-American daughters in their difficult journey of self-discovery, while also exploring the differences in their construction of self-identity within a multicultural context.

2. Confusion During Growth

In a Bildungsroman, the protagonist embarks on a journey to find meaning in life after experiencing setbacks or unfortunate events, transitioning from ignorance to maturity, and gaining a deeper understanding of life, society, and the self. A scholar argues that Bildungsroman tend to have a certain degree of narrative convergence, summarizing the common plot structure in Bildungsroman as "innocence—temptation—departure—trial—confusion—epiphany—loss of innocence—understanding of life and self." (Rui,2004) In *The Joy Luck Club* and *Everything I Never Told You*, the protagonists also face confusion in their growth, though with subtle differences.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, the mothers are all first-generation Chinese-Americans who have lost their original Chinese identity after immigrating to the United States. They cannot shake off the past glory in China, nor can they adapt to the unfamiliar American environment. After arriving in the United States, the four mothers organized the Joy Luck Club to get rid of loneliness. However, their daughters are second-generation Chinese-Americans born in the United States. They grew up in the mainstream American cultural environment and received American-style education. In their impression, China is a mysterious and distant place. The past stories told by their mothers are all fictional. They have even forgotten that they are Chinese and only strive to adapt to the mainstream American culture, trying to become a true American. Jing-mei Woo once viewed her mother through American eyes, so she disliked the Chinese-style behaviors in her mother's life. "All those things my mother did to embarrass me - haggling with store owners, pecking her mouth with a toothpick in public, being color-blind to the fact that lemon yellow and pale pink are not good combinations for winter clothes." (Tan,1989,p.307) She hated the Chinese way of life and was even ashamed of her mother's Chinese-style behaviors. When her mother mentioned the "five elements", Jing-mei dismissed it as mere Chinese superstition.

Besides confusion about Chinese culture, Jing-mei also grows under the pressure of her mother's personal expectation. One of Chinese mother Suyuan Woo abandoned her twin daughters in China during the war, leading to a life filled with guilt and torment. She projected all her hopes and expectations onto her American-born daughter, Jing-mei(June) Woo. Suyuan believed, "you could be anything you wanted to be in America." She often said, "you can be prodigy" and "you can be the best anything." (Tan,1989,p.141) Initially, Suyuan wanted to mold June into the Chinese Shirley Temple, but this attempt failed. Under her mother's expectations, "in the beginning, I was just as excited as my mother, maybe even more so. I pictured this prodigy part of me as many different images, trying each one in size". (Tan,1989,p.142) Later, Suyuan continued collecting stories of prodigies from magazines and subjected June to various talent tests. After repeated failed attempts, Jing-mei lost her sense of self. "I looked in the mirror above the bathroom sink and when I saw only my face staring back - and that it would always be this ordinary face - I began to cry. Such a sad, ugly girl! I made high-pitched noises like a crazed animal, trying to scratch out the face in the mirror". (Tan,1989,p.144) Jing-mei had a Chinese appearance but was expected to gain success in American society. She had Chinese heritage but grew up in America, finding it difficult to establish an identity that blended both cultures.

In *Everything I Never Told You*, the protagonist Lydia's growth struggles are shaped by the dual pressures of family and society. Lydia needs the sense of security provided by her family, but her mother's departure severely undermines that security. The conscientious Lydia blames her mother's leaving on her own faults. Amidst confusion and guilt, Lydia promises herself, "She would do everything her mother told her. Everything her mother wanted".(Ng,2015,p.130) This promise brings her immense pressure and also alters her life. She chooses to follow the path her mother planned for her as a doctor and pretends to be happy while diligently meeting her mother's every demand. In addition to the pressure from her mother's departure, her father, James, also causes distress by focusing on and intervening in her social life. James insists that she stay in touch with friends and frequently inquires about their well-being. However, Lydia does not have any real friends. To avoid disappointing her father, she often pretends to talk to friends in front of him, telling him that she will watch movies with friends and lying about her friends being well. On Christmas when she was fifteen, her father's gift reopened her wounds. Lydia was deeply disappointed by the Christmas gift from her father—a book titled *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Lydia felt "her heart in her chest like a pellet of ice, sliding down out of reach". (Ng,2015,p.167) Rather than the book, she wished her father had given her a beautiful gold necklace like everyone else's, and told her, "I love you. You're perfect just as you are".(Ng,2015,p.166)

Beyond the family dilemmas, Lydia also faces social challenges due to her minority status. In the 1970s, Lydia's family was the only Chinese family in Midwood, and due to their mixed-race identity, they were always subjected to strange looks from others.

Lydia's family had no friends in the town, and when going out with James, her mother Marilyn would even see "disapproving looks from passersby." They never truly integrated into the local community. The town's residents' rejection of Lydia's family further affected Lydia's relationships with her classmates. Lydia did not fit in with her class and school, reflecting her classmates' rejection of Lydia as a minority girl and her mixed-race background. Against the backdrop of racial integration not being widely accepted at the time, Lydia's distinct mixed-race identity made her feel inferior. When Jack asked Lydia how it felt to be the only non-white girl at school, Lydia hesitated and told Jack, "People judge others by appearances." Lydia's hesitation and her response indicate her reluctance to confront the issue directly and also reflect her feelings of inferiority about her own identity.

In both *The Joy Luck Club* and *Everything I Never Told You*, the protagonists confront immense pressure from familial expectations and confusion regarding their identities. However, the confusion in *The Joy Luck Club* stems more from the conflict between Chinese and American cultures and the projection of mothers' expectations, whereas the confusion in *Everything I Never Told You* is more intricate, encompassing not only familial expectations but also social pressures and the social exclusion resulting from an ethnic minority identity. Despite the differences in their origins and manifestations, both works reflect the profound influence of family and society on individual growth, as well as how the protagonists struggle and lose themselves under such pressures.

3. Mentors on the Path of Growth

In her work *A Study of American Bildungsroman*, Rui Yuping summarizes the function of the mentor as follows: "From a sociological perspective, everyone's growth is influenced by certain individuals who, from both positive and negative aspects, enrich the protagonist's life experiences and their understanding of society. Through observing the social roles played by these individuals, adolescents gradually establish their own roles and life directions". (Rui, 2004) The mentor is a crucial element in the narrative of Bildungsroman, serving as a guiding force in the process of the protagonist's self-identity construction and social cognition. They assist the protagonist in acquiring knowledge, wisdom, and insight during their journey of growth, leading them towards maturity.

In Bildungsroman, mentors are not merely assistants in the protagonist's growth process. They are also pivotal characters driving the development of the story. By providing knowledge, moral guidance, emotional support, and inspiring self-reflection, mentors help protagonists overcome difficulties during their growth, ultimately achieving maturity and self-identity. In *The Joy Luck Club*, mothers serve as mentors throughout their daughters' growth journey. Since the daughters were young, Auntie Lindo has consistently compared her daughter Waverly with Jing-mei, but Jing-mei often falls short. Therefore, Jing-mei always feels that there is someone chasing after her, forcing her to go forward. During a crab feast, Waverly critiques Jing-mei's advertisement copy as unusable, no matter how many revisions are made, leaving Jing-mei feeling ashamed. She feels defeated, thinking, "I had been outsmarted by Waverly once again". (Tan, 1989, p. 232) After everyone else leaves, Suyuan consoles her daughter, "Everyone wants the best quality. You think different". (Tan, 1989, p. 234) Suyuan recognizes her daughter's non-competitive and gentle nature as her best trait and helps build her confidence. "Why do you listen to her? Why do you want to follow behind her, chasing her words? You can make your legs go the other way." (Tan, 1989, p. 235) Suyuan also gives Jing-mei a gold necklace with a light green jade pendant, telling her that the jade holds the essence of life. "This is young jade. It is a very light color now, but if you wear it every day, it will become more green." (Tan, 1989, p. 235) This jade symbolizes Jing-mei's life. Currently, Jing-mei is still swayed by external evaluations, unable to establish a firm self-identity. But as time passes, Jing-mei will become more profound and thoughtful, just like the jade. The jade also represents a legacy, as the mother hopes Jing-mei will continue to pass on and promote Chinese culture and traditional values.

The positive guides in the Bildungsroman can be elders who are nearly perfect in knowledge and morality, or they can be companions. In the novel *Everything I Never Told You*, Lydia is always accompanied by her peers Nath and Jack. With their help, Lydia changes herself. Nath's role for Lydia mainly lies in providing emotional support. When Nath was five years old, out of jealousy for Lydia's monopolizing all of their parents' love, he impulsively pushed Lydia into the water. However, he quickly realized his mistake and rescued her from the water. From Nath's warm hands, Lydia regained the hope of life. "It had been the same ever since. Don't let me sink, she had thought as she reached for his hand, and he had promised not to when he took it." (Ng, 2015, p. 150) Nath, as Lydia's brother, also took practical actions to protect Lydia who was living under immense pressure. Lydia was thus cared for by her brother in daily life. Nath helped her reserve seats in the cafeteria and on the bus. He even didn't expose her lies when she reported her academic progress to her parents, understanding the heavy burden of her parents' expectations on Lydia. Nath has been silently guarding Lydia, giving her hope and the warmth of love when she is disappointed. Compared to her parents' love, Nath's love for her is more selfless, without seeking returns or imposing pressure, making it even more valuable.

Apart from her brother, Jack is also Lydia's true friend. During her time with Jack, Lydia is finally able to present her authentic self. Jack is the person who knows Lydia best in school, second only to Nath. Before befriending Jack, Lydia had never truly opened up her heart to anyone and shared her troubles. She confided in Jack about her academic pressure and Nath's indifference towards her, making Jack her genuinely trusted companion. Through Jack, Lydia learns how to emotionally communicate with others and realizes that she doesn't have to keep all her thoughts to herself. It can be said that her friendship with Jack is also her first step towards boldly making intimate friends with others.

Although the mentors in *The Joy Luck Club* and *Everything I Never Told You* have different identities and function in varied ways, they both play crucial roles in the protagonists' growth processes. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the mothers lead their daughters towards maturity through cultural heritage and wisdom. In contrast, in *Everything I Never Told You*, Nath and Jack help Lydia develop emotionally and cognitively through companionship and support. These guides not only drive the development of the stories but also leave profound impacts on the protagonists' growth journeys.

4. The Epiphany of Growth

According to Joyce's definition, epiphany can be understood as "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from an object, scene, event, or some memory of a thought, which appears without any apparent meaning or logical connection to the object that produced it." (Cuddon, 1979) In short, an epiphany arises from the stimulus of something, leading to the emergence of something new. Similarly, the protagonists in the process of growth can only recognize the essence and meaning of things after an epiphany. As an indispensable element of the narrative structure of Bildungsroman, the epiphany plays an irreplaceable role on the protagonist's path of growth. The protagonist's growth is a dynamic developmental process, and it is the accumulation of quantitative changes that leads to the occurrence of qualitative changes through epiphany. Epiphany can be divided into low-level epiphany and high-level epiphany. Yin Qi-ping (1996) believes that "low-level epiphany is a sudden understanding of individual experience or partial life, while high-level epiphany is an understanding of the true meaning of the whole life - a pure contemplation of truth, goodness, and beauty." For the protagonists of *Everything I Never Told You* and *The Joy Luck Club*, it is precisely under the guidance of their mentors that they have epiphanies and awaken from their lost states. Based on different reasons, their performances after the epiphany differ.

In order to fulfill her deceased mother's wish of finding her twin daughters left behind in China, Jing-mei embarks on a journey "from west to east" to China. On this journey of "seeking roots," Jing-mei feels different as soon as she arrives in China. "I can feel the skin on my forehead tingling, my blood rushing through a new course, my bones aching with a familiar old pain. I am becoming Chinese." (Tan, 1989, p. 306) When she meets her two sisters on behalf of her mother, she finally recovers the lost Chinese self within her. "I look at their faces again and I see no trace of my mother in them. Yet they still look familiar. And now I also see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood. After all these years, it can finally be let go." (Tan, 1989, p. 331) Jing-mei successfully discards the prejudices held by Americans towards China and begins to feel proud of being a descendant of the Chinese. Her quest for her lost Chinese self not only represents the reconciliation between the Chinese-American daughter and her mother, but also symbolizes the daughters' search for a complete self. In the process of seeking herself, she actively identifies with the wisdom of Chinese culture, gains spiritual strength to counter mainstream discourse through the affiliation of cultural bloodlines, and her reconciliation with her mother also signifies the fusion and balance of Eastern and Western cultures. Her self-pursuit is precisely as Amy Tan herself commented on *The Joy Luck Club*: "The fundamental question in the book is about balance. Where do we find that balance in life? How can one retrieve it?" (Wu and Wang, 256) Through the fusion and balance of Chinese and American cultures, Jing-mei emerges from her identity confusion, and by constructing a dual cultural identity, she launches a thorough rebellion against white hegemonic culture, achieving a transformation from innocence to maturity on her path of growth.

In *Everything I Never Told You*, with the help of her family and friend Jack, Lydia's emotional and social cognition develops, and her self-awareness deepens, paving the way for her spiritual awakening. Ultimately, during a conversation with Jack, Lydia realizes what she truly wants: to live life on her own terms. Lydia had intended to retaliate against Nath's indifference by sleeping with Jack, but Jack rejected her and jolted her awake with the words, "At least I don't let other people tell me what I want". Then, "In her mind words ricocheted like glass marbles—doctor, popular, happy—and scattered into silence." (Ng, 2015, p. 213) These were her parents' expectations for her, not her own aspirations. Nevertheless, Lydia could not immediately find her passion. Under Jack's questioning, Lydia begins to reflect on her life, wondering, "How had this all gone so wrong?" and "Where had things gone askew?" (Ng, 2015, p. 216) At this point, Lydia has already begun to awaken and seek the root of her mistakes. Finally, she discovers the starting point of her errors and knows where she "had to go" to correct them. Lydia realizes that since her mother left home that summer when she was five. "She had been afraid so long, she had forgotten what it was like not to be—afraid that, one day, her mother would disappear again, that her father would crumble, that their whole family would collapse once more." (Ng, 2015, p. 217) Lydia's fear stems from her dread of losing her mother and this intact family again, and from her disguise to meet her parents' expectations. After her epiphany, Lydia promises to share her true thoughts with her family and be honest with them.

The protagonists in both works have undergone a process from confusion to awakening, ultimately achieving a transformation of self-identity through epiphany. This epiphany serves as a crucial juncture on their path of growth, enabling them to understand themselves more clearly and find the direction of their lives. Jing-mei's epiphany naturally occurs as she sets foot on Chinese soil and engages with her mother's cultural heritage. This epiphany does not happen suddenly but gradually forms through the accumulation of cultural conflicts and personal exploration. Lydia's epiphany, on the other hand, erupts instantly during a conversation with her friend Jack. This conversation forces her to confront her inner needs for the first time, rather than continuing to evade or suppress them. Jack's rejection and questioning directly trigger Lydia's inner awakening, prompting her to re-examine her life and understanding of herself. Lydia's epiphany occurs in a split second but is the inevitable result of her long-

term suppression of self and accumulation of confusion. Jing-mei's epiphany revolves more around identity recognition and the fusion of Chinese and American cultures, while Lydia's focuses on the awakening of personal emotions and family relationships. Jing-mei's epiphany leads her to find a balance in her cultural identity, while Lydia's makes her realize the contradiction between personal freedom and family expectations, and begins to seek liberation and self-expression.

5.The Consequences and Its Causes of Growth

Sun Shengzhong (2014) argues that "in the traditional coming-of-age narrative, the protagonist first rebels, gradually matures, and ultimately evolves into a happy individual who finds their niche in society. In contrast, modern coming-of-age novels often reverse this pattern, with the protagonist initially conforming, then rebelling, and ultimately rejecting societal integration." The growth trajectory of Jing-mei in *The Joy Luck Club* aligns with the traditional model. As a child, Jing-mei fails to identify with her mother's "five elements" theory, dismissing it as "Chinese superstition, beliefs that conveniently fit the circumstances." (Tan,1989,p.20) Upon returning to China and reuniting with her relatives, she develops a profound sense of identity and belonging to China, embracing her Chinese identity and culture. Conversely, in *Everything I Never Told You*, Lydia suppresses her true self to fulfill her parents' expectations, only to decide to reconcile with her family under Jack's influence. Lydia chooses the ritual of swimming to the dock as her "rebirth," bidding farewell to her past reliance on her brother and fear of her parents' departure, bravely embracing her authentic self. Ironically, from a realistic perspective, despite her fear of water and inability to swim, she insists on reaching the dock, ultimately drowning in the lake, which is a tragic yet logical end.

Some scholars posit that "there are three types of stories: those that end happily, those that end unhappily, and those that end neither happily nor unhappily, in other words, stories that essentially have no true ending." (Lodge,1992) *The Joy Luck Club* belongs to the first category, with its satisfying conclusion catering to people's psychological needs and reflecting author Amy Tan's optimistic vision for the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures. In contrast, *Everything I Never Told You* has a bad ending, conveying author Celeste Ng's empathy for the arduous growth of her cross-ethnic protagonist. Another reason for the differing outcomes in these novels, set against an ethnic backdrop, lies in the disparities in family education concepts and communication styles. In *The Joy Luck Club*, although mothers and daughters counters conflicts with each other, they are still willing to communicate with each other. However, in *Everything I Never Told You*, the strained relationship between Lydia's parents deprives her of sufficient love and reduces her to a mere tool for their unfulfilled dreams. Lydia passively accepts her parents' views, suppressing her true self. When she resolves to change her relationship with her family, she receives no timely feedback, leading to her tragic demise. Her ingrained pattern of interaction with her family is difficult to alter overnight, and she lacks guidance to transform her relationship with her parents. Her death symbolizes her confusion and despair amidst overwhelming pressures, signifying her inability to navigate her destiny.

6.Conclusion

Through the growth experiences of two generations of Chinese-American daughters against a multicultural backdrop, *The Joy Luck Club* and *Everything I Never Told You* reveal the intricate interplay between ethnic identity, familial expectations, and individual identity. Despite their differences in plot lines and cultural settings, these two works share numerous common themes in depicting the protagonists' confusion and epiphanies during their growth journeys.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Jing-mei's growth embodies her quest for identity between Chinese and American cultures. Initially feeling oppressed and confused by her mother's expectations, she ultimately comprehends and accepts her mother's cultural heritage through her "root-seeking" journey. Jing-mei's epiphany signifies her liberation from prejudice against Chinese culture and her attainment of a balanced bicultural identity. This process not only reconciles her with her mother but also symbolizes her personal transformation from loss to maturity.

Conversely, Lydia's confusion in *Everything I Never Told You* centers more on familial pressures and societal identity. She has always sought recognition by fulfilling her parents' expectations, suppressing her genuine desires. In a conversation with her friend Jack, she suddenly realizes that she has never truly pursued her own life. This epiphany prompts her to reflect on her life and identity, though she ultimately fails to fully escape her family's control and societal pressures.

Both *The Joy Luck Club* and *Everything I Never Told You* delve into the identity issues confronted by Chinese American daughters during their growth amidst multicultural contexts. Their growth is not merely a personal psychological and emotional journey but also a profound reflection on family, culture, and society. A comparative study of these two works reveals that in ethnic coming-of-age novels set against cross-cultural backdrops, the protagonists' growth confusions and epiphanies are often the result of a complex interplay of cultural, social, and familial factors. This complexity renders their growth fraught with challenges and pain, yet it is through these confusions and epiphanies that the protagonists ultimately achieve varying degrees of self-identity recognition and understanding.

Funding: This research received no external funding

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

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