



# Cultural Perspectives on Identity in "Two Kinds" by Amy Tan

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## ABSTRACT

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This study explores the complex interrelationship between parental aspirations and the nurturing of children's abilities, as illustrated in Amy Tan's novel *Two Kinds*. The research uses a qualitative approach and focuses on three key thematic areas: parental expectations, cultural influences and the costs associated with ambition. A detailed textual analysis is employed to examine the manner in which the protagonist Jing mei's experiences are shaped by her mother's aspirations, which are rooted in cultural values and the immigrant experience. Additionally, the paper considers the influence of American culture, which prioritises individualism and self expression, in juxtaposition with Jing mei's Chinese heritage. This cultural dichotomy serves to intensify the tension in her relationship with her mother, underscoring the challenge of reconciling parental expectations with the formulation of a personal identity. The findings reveal that parental expectations are often a reflection of cultural norms that prioritize success and achievement, creating a pressure cooker environment for children. Cultural influences are shown to drive the mother's relentless pursuit of her child's talent, illustrating the weight of tradition and the desire for recognition within the community. Additionally, the analysis highlights the emotional and relational costs of such ambition, including feelings of inadequacy, rebellion, and strained mother-daughter relationships. This paper contributes to the discourse on family dynamics and cultural expectations, offering insights into the complexities of ambition in the context of talent development, and underscores the need for a balanced approach to nurturing children's potential.

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## 1. Introduction

In Amy Tan's narrative "Two Kinds," the concept of identity is situated at the core of the text, as it is examined through the prism of Chinese culture and the immigrant experience in the United States (Tan, 1989). This exploration is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it enables an understanding of the protagonist's struggles. Secondly, it illuminates broader themes relevant to immigrant communities. The narrative encapsulates the tension between traditional cultural values and the influences of American society. It also highlights how these dynamics shape individual identity.

In this context, it is of paramount importance to comprehend the role of culture in the formation of an individual's identity (Hofstede, 1980). Culture can be defined as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group from another" (Hofstede, 1980). This definition emphasizes the ways in which cultural norms and values are emphasized, guiding behaviour and shaping aspirations. In the context of Chinese culture, values such as filial piety and the pursuit of excellence are held in high regard (Cheng, 1996). These values manifest in the expectations that Jing-mei's mother sets for her, reflecting the cultural imperative to achieve success as a means of honouring one's heritage and family.

Stuart Hall (1990) posits that identity is not a fixed entity but rather the result of complex interactions between the individual and the surrounding culture. This perspective allows for a nuanced understanding of Jing-mei's journey as she navigates the expectations imposed by her mother alongside her own desires. Hall argues that identity is shaped through social and cultural experiences and can evolve over time, suggesting that Jing-mei's experiences are not static but rather part of an ongoing negotiation between her Chinese roots and her American upbringing.

This research project aims to analyze how Tan depicts cultural conflict and identity in "Two Kinds" and how these themes reflect the experiences of many Chinese immigrants in America (Li, 2006). The narrative serves as a microcosm for understanding the immigrant experience, where the clash between traditional values and modern individualism creates a fertile ground for identity negotiation. Using the theoretical frameworks developed by Hall and Dyer, this paper will explore how identity is formed and negotiated within diverse cultural contexts, as well as its implications for self-understanding and interpersonal relationships (Jiang, 2012). Through this analysis, it is hoped that deeper insights will be gained into the complexities of identity within varied cultural frameworks (Ng, 2005), particularly regarding how these frameworks influence personal agency and familial relationships.

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## 2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis of Amy Tan's "Two Kinds" will be informed by two principal theoretical frameworks: The theoretical frameworks to be employed are those of Stuart Hall (1990) and Richard Dyer (1997) in relation to identity and representation. Hall posits that identity is a fluid and dynamic construct, shaped by cultural and social contexts (Hall, 1990). He argues that identity is formed through interactions with cultural narratives, as evidenced by Jing-mei's struggle to navigate the tensions between her Chinese heritage and American individualism (Dyer, 1997).

This negotiation process highlights her attempts to assert her own identity against her mother's expectations (Huang, 2015). Hall also posits that identity is constructed through representation, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and others. In "Two Kinds," the mother's portrayal of success and failure serves as a lens for examining broader cultural implications (Ng, 2005).

In addition to Hall's framework, Dyer 929mphasizes the role of cultural representations in shaping identity perceptions and societal views (Dyer, 1997). He addresses the perpetuation of stereotypes and their impact on 929mphasizes929d groups, which is pertinent in understanding the expectations placed on Jing-mei by her mother (Tseng & Hsu, 1999). Dyer's insights demonstrate the impact of these representations on personal and familial dynamics, illustrating the complexities of identity formation (Zhou & Bankston, 1998). By integrating these theories, the analysis will provide a comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationship between cultural identity, representation, and personal agency in Tan's narrative, ultimately reflecting the struggles of balancing cultural heritage with individual identity in the Chinese-American experience (Li, 2006).

## 3. Method

This research employs a qualitative approach to analyse "Two Kinds" by Amy Tan, with a particular focus on the themes of identity and cultural conflict (Kim, 2007). Qualitative research is particularly suited to the exploration of complex social phenomena and the understanding of the nuanced experiences of individuals within their cultural contexts (Dyer, 1997). Through close textual analysis, the study examines how Tan's narrative reflects the struggles of Chinese American identity and parental expectations (Rumbaut & Portes, 1995).

The analytical framework is based on the theories of Stuart Hall (1990). Hall's concept of identity as a fluid and dynamic construct emphasizes the interplay between individual experiences and cultural narratives. His idea that identity is formed through social contexts allows for an exploration of how Jing-mei's character navigates her dual cultural heritage, balancing her Chinese roots with the American individualism she encounters (Fong, 2004).

The combination of qualitative methods with the theoretical frameworks of Hall enables a deeper understanding of the cultural dynamics at play in "Two Kinds" and their impact on the identities of Chinese-American individuals (Yue, 2004). This methodology facilitates a comprehensive interpretation of the text, elucidating the complex interconnections between culture, identity, and personal agency (Liu, 2015).

## 4. Result and Discussion

Results and discussion can be made as a whole that contains research findings and explanations.

### 4.1. Results

A critical analysis of Amy Tan's short story "Two Kinds" employing the theoretical frameworks of Stuart Hall reveals profound insights into the intricacies of identity and representation embedded within the narrative.

**Table 1.** Short Story "Two Kinds"

The Mother's Aspirations	"You could be anything you wanted to be in America."  "You could open a restaurant. You could work for the government and get good retirement. You could buy a house with almost no money down."	This section illustrates the mother's belief that in America, anyone can achieve greatness, and it also demonstrates the aspirations she has for Jing Mei and the pressure she exerts on her.
Conflict with Piano	"I was not a prodigy. I was not a genius. I was just a girl."	This moment illustrates Jing mei's unease with her mother's expectations, particularly in relation to her newly initiated piano lessons.
The Failed Piano Recital	I had forgotten the piece. I had forgotten the notes."	The description of Jing mei's lacklustre performance at the piano recital represents a pivotal moment in their relationship.
Jing mei's Rebellion	"I won't let you down. I won't be your daughter anymore."	This excerpt illustrates Jing mei's refusal to continue piano lessons, which can be seen as an expression of her desire to take control of her own identity.
Reflection After the Mother's Death	"And now I have the piano. It is the only thing that remains."	In the conclusion of the narrative, Jing mei ponders the nature of their relationship and the intricacies of her mother's affection and anticipations in the aftermath of her demise.
High Expectations	"Of course you can be prodigy, too," my mother told me when I was nine.	This quote highlights the immense pressure Jing mei feels from her mother, who believes that greatness is attainable for her daughter. It illustrates the unrealistic standards that are imposed on Jing mei,

		contributing to her internal conflict and sense of inadequacy.
Frustration with Identity	"You look like Negro Chinese," she lamented, as if I had done this on purpose".	This moment reveals the mother's disappointment in Jing mei's appearance, reflecting the cultural pressures of fitting into a certain image. It emphasizes the struggle Jing mei faces in reconciling her identity with her mother's expectations and societal stereotypes.
Fear of Failure	"If you don't hurry up and get me out of here, I'm disappearing for good," it warned. "And then you'll always be nothing."	This statement embodies the mother's fear of failure and the stakes involved in their immigrant experience. It illustrates the urgency she feels for Jing mei to succeed, suggesting that anything less would result in both personal and familial shame.
Community Pressure and Comparison	"She bring home too many trophy," lamented Auntie Lindo that Sunday. "All day she play chess."	This remark reflects the competitive nature of the immigrant community and the high standards set for children. It underscores the theme of comparison among peers, illustrating how societal expectations can complicate familial relationships and individual ambitions.

A critical analysis of Amy Tan's short story "Two Kinds" employing the theoretical frameworks of Stuart Hall reveals profound insights into the intricacies of identity and representation embedded within the narrative (Hall, 1990). "In America, one is afforded the opportunity to pursue any career path one desires." The Mother's Aspirations This section illustrates the mother's conviction that in America, anyone can achieve greatness and also demonstrates her aspirations for Jing mei and the pressure she exerts on her (Chua, 2011). I did not possess the characteristics of a prodigy. I did not possess the characteristics of a genius. "I was merely a young woman." A source of contention between the two women was the piano. This moment serves to illustrate Jing mei's unease with her mother's expectations, particularly in relation to her newly initiated piano lessons (Huang, 2015). "I had failed to recall the requisite musical composition." "I had forgotten the notes." The Piano Recital that Did Not Succeed. The description of Jing mei's lacklustre performance at the piano recital represents a pivotal moment in their relationship (Li, 2006). "I will not fail you." "I will no longer be your daughter." Jing mei's Rebellion This excerpt demonstrates Jing mei's refusal to continue piano lessons, which can be interpreted as an expression of her desire to assume control of her own identity (Liu, 2015). "And now I have the piano. It is the only thing that remains." Reflection After the Mother's Death. In the conclusion of the narrative, Jing mei reflects on the nature of their relationship and the complexities of her mother's affection and expectations in the wake of her passing (Tan, 1989).

#### 4.2. Discussion

In "Two Kinds," Amy Tan adroitly intertwines themes of cultural identity and the immigrant experience, elucidating the challenges confronting Jing mei as she attempts to reconcile the expectations of her Chinese heritage with the tenets of American individualism (Tan, 1989). The narrative provides a lens through which the complexities of identity formation can be examined, particularly in the context of parental expectations and cultural representation (Ng, 2005).

Stuart Hall's theory of identity is of significant value in comprehending Jing mei's journey (Hall, 1990). Hall's theory of identity postulates that identity is not a fixed entity, but rather a malleable construct shaped by social interactions and cultural narratives (Hall, 1990). This is exemplified by Jing mei's efforts to satisfy her mother, who epitomises the aspirations associated with immigrant success (Chua, 2011). The mother's assertion that "you could be anything you wanted to be in America" reflects a cultural narrative that emphasises achievement and excellence. This places considerable pressure on Jing mei to conform to these ideals (Dyer, 1997). However, as Jing mei confronts these expectations, she begins to assert her own identity, thereby illustrating Hall's notion of identity as a process of negotiation (Rumbaut & Portes, 1995).

The narrative's pivotal moments, such as Jing mei's unsuccessful piano recital and her declaration of independence, exemplify her internal conflict and subsequent rebellion against her mother's aspirations (Huang, 2015). To illustrate, following her lacklustre performance, Jing mei considers her difficulties with the piano, realising that her failure is not merely a personal setback but a rejection of her mother's aspirations (Li, 2006). This moment represents a pivotal point in her pursuit of self-definition, demonstrating how Hall's theory is applicable to her emotional trajectory (Yue, 2004).

Jing mei's assertion, "I will not fail you," The assertion "I will not be your daughter anymore" represents a pivotal assertion of agency and autonomy (Liu, 2015). It encapsulates her aspiration to transcend the constraints of cultural expectations and pursue her own identity (Tan, 1989). This rebellion is not merely an act of defiance; it is a crucial step in her journey toward self discovery (Huang, 2015).

## 5. Conclusion

Two Kinds presents an intricate exploration of the intertwined themes of cultural identity and representation, offering a compelling reflection on the experiences of immigrants in the United States (Tan, 1989). The analysis, based on Hall's theoretical frameworks, sheds light on the complex dynamics of identity formation within the context of cultural expectations (Hall, 1990). Jing mei's journey serves as a compelling illustration of the ongoing negotiation between heritage and individuality, ultimately providing insights into the diverse experiences of Chinese Americans in their pursuit of self-understanding (Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

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