The Joy Luck Club Study Guide

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Summary

Summary of the Novel
The novel contains four sections, each beginning with a vignette depicting a stage in the life cycle. The four stories in each section explore the relationship between the mothers and the daughters at the same stage.

One series of stories focuses on Suyuan Woo, who comes to America in 1947, having lost her family, including twin daughters, during war. She does not know her daughters were rescued. Now remarried, she settles in San Francisco, has a daughter, Jing-mei (June), and starts a Joy Luck Club similar to one in China with three other women. The four form strong friendships.

As she grows up, Jing-mei and her mother struggle to understand one another. They never completely resolve their differences, and Suyuan dies unexpectedly. At the next meeting of the Joy Luck Club, her mother's friends tell Jing-mei that Suyuan's twin daughters have been found. They give her a check so she can visit them. As the novel ends, she meets her sisters in Shanghai.

A second set of stories focuses on An-mei, who lives with her grandmother because her mother has been disowned. When An-mei is nine, her grandmother dies; and An-mei leaves with her mother to live in the home of a wealthy man and his other wives. An-mei learns how her mother was forced into a dishonorable second marriage and why she has no control over her own life. Her mother's subsequent suicide provides An-mei a better life.

As an adult An-mei comes to San Francisco. She and her husband have seven children, including Rose. Rose marries Ted, a dermatologist, who has an affair and divorces her. Rose is overwhelmed but recovers.

The third series of stories focuses on Lindo. She marries Tyan-yu, but he never sleeps with her. Unable to tell her domineering mother-in-law the truth, she devises a clever plan and is released from her marriage honorably. She comes to San Francisco and marries Tin Jong. They have three children—Winston, Vincent, and Waverly.

Waverly is a child chess prodigy. She and her mother maneuver through their differences throughout her childhood and into adulthood. Their differences climax over Waverly's fiancé, Rich Schields, and the two women reconcile.

The fourth series of stories focuses on Ying-ying. Born into a wealthy family, she is a spirited child who nearly drowns when she is four. She grows into a haughty young woman and marries a crude man who abandons her after she becomes pregnant. Ten years later she marries Clifford St. Clair, an American exporter, even though she doesn't love him. They come to San Francisco and have one daughter, Lena. Their second

child is stillborn, and Ying-ying is depressed for months afterward. Her depression affects Lena.

As an adult Lena marries Harold Livotny, who takes advantage of her. Ying-ying feels responsible for raising so powerless a daughter. She wants to encourage Lena to speak up for herself.

Estimated Reading Time

The novel consists of 16 short stories, each requiring 25 to 40 minutes to read, and four vignettes requiring five minutes each to read. The entire novel can be completed in about 10 to 11 hours.

The Life and Work of Amy Tan

Amy Tan's grandmother, Jing-mei, was widowed when her daughter Daisy was young. She was later forced to marry a wealthy man who had raped her. Since Chinese custom prohibited widows from remarrying, both Jing-mei and Daisy were shunned. Jing-mei eventually committed suicide by eating food with raw opium in it. Daisy later married a man who abused her. She divorced him and came to America, but he forced her to leave their three daughters behind.

In California she met John Tan, an electrical engineer and Baptist minister who had also fled China in the late 1940s. They married soon afterwards. Amy, their second child and only daughter, was born in 1952. Her Chinese name, An-mei, means "gift from America."

Amy Tan said her parents "wanted us to have American circumstances and Chinese character" (*Current Biography*, 560). However, in order to assimilate, the children felt forced to choose "American" ways and to refuse "Chinese" things. This led to a deep sense of "shame and self-hate," Tan said (*Current Biography*, 560). For example, she once wanted to change her Chinese features so much that she went to bed with a clothespin on her nose every night for a week.

After the deaths of her father and older brother, eight months apart, the family spent a year in Europe. Tan was 16 years old. She finished high school early; when her family returned to America, she began college. There she met Louis DeMattei, her future husband, who is now a tax attorney.

Daisy Tan was unhappy when her daughter not only transferred schools to be with DeMattei, but also changed from pre-med to studying English and linguistics. The two did not speak for about six months. Amy Tan completed both her B.A. and M.A. degrees and was working on a doctorate when she left school to work with retarded and developmentally disabled people. Later she started a successful free-lance nonfiction writing business, partly in response to a supervisor who severely criticized her writing. When she and her husband bought Daisy Tan a place to live, Daisy conceded that perhaps writing was a good career for her daughter.

In 1987 Amy Tan went to China with her mother to meet her half-sisters, whom she did not know about until she was 26 ("Mother With a Past," 47). Tan said later, "There was something about this country that I belonged to. I found something about myself that I never knew was there" (*Current Biography*, 561).

Her first short story, "Endgame," was published in 1985 and was followed by "Waiting Between the Trees." When she learned that publishers were interested in the outline for *The Joy Luck Club*, originally titled *Wind and Water*, she left her free-lance business and finished the novel in four months. It was followed by *The Kitchen God's Wife* in 1991 and *The Moon Lady*, a collaboration with Gretchen Schields, in 1992. She also worked on the movie screenplay of *The Joy Luck Club*, released in 1993.

Summary

The Joy Luck Club takes its title from a gathering begun in wartime China by Suyuan Woo, who met with three women in a weekly attempt to maintain their sanity and luck. They prepared special foods and played mah-jongg, even though the city was filled with horror. In 1949, in San Francisco, Suyuan resumed the tradition with three new friends.

One critic has suggested that the book is structured like the four corners of the mah-jongg table at which the women sit, with four stories in each of the book's four sections, and four mother-daughter pairs. In mah-jongg, one critic has noted, "The game starts, always, with the east wind," and June Woo, whose narrative begins and ends the book, sits on the east side, taking her dead mother's place. The game ends when one player has a complete hand, and June completes her mother's life and dearest wish when she returns to China, with a ticket paid for by the Joy Luck Club, to meet the two half sisters her mother was forced to leave behind in her flight.

Recurring motifs link the stories of each mother-daughter pair. The second mother, An-mei Hsu, bears a scar from the spilling of hot soup on her neck as a child, an accident that nearly killed her. She carries a grievous inner scar as well: Her own mother had been banished, her name never spoken. Only later does she understand how her mother dishonored the family by becoming the third concubine of a wealthy married man. Yet when An-mei's grandmother was dying, her mother returned to cut a piece of flesh from her own arm to make a magic healing broth. "This is how a daughter honors her mother," An-mei remembers. "It is *shou* [respect] so deep it is in your bones."

This same mother poisoned herself, timing her death so that her soul would return on the first day of the lunar new year to settle scores with the rich man and Second Wife, ensuring a better future for her children. Dead, she had more power than ever in life.

Lindo Jong, the daughter of peasants, was betrothed at the age of two to her first husband and became a servant in his mother's house until their marriage. Although the family nearly convinced her that a daughter belonged to her mother-in-law and that her husband was a god, Lindo discovered herself on her wedding day: "I was strong. I was pure. I had genuine thoughts inside that no one could see, that no one could ever take away from me."

Thus, Lindo's willful and brilliant American daughter Waverly learns "the art of invisible strength" at six from her mother, who tells her, "Strongest wind cannot be seen." Waverly becomes a chess prodigy, but her early confidence falters as she tries to outwit the mother she fears. The tension between mother and daughter seems strongest with this pair. Waverly wants to become her own person, but her mother wonders, "How can she be her own person? When did I give her up?"

Little Ying-ying St. Clair, daughter of the wealthiest family in Wushi, celebrated the Moon Festival by falling off an excursion boat at night and never found herself again. After an unfortunate first marriage, she lost her "tiger spirit" and became a listless ghost. Motifs of the dark other self, of dissolution and integration, appear in her stories, yet mother-daughter love forms a stronger bond. Ying-ying's daughter struggles to rescue her mother's spirit after the devastating birth of an anacephalic child, and the mother, in turn, tries to give her daughter courage to break free of an empty marriage: "I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter's tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose. She will fight me, because this is the nature of two tigers. But I will win and give her my spirit, because this is the way a mother loves her daughter."

In the final section of the book, the mothers connect their past to their daughters' lives and encourage them to be strong. As a Chinese grandmother tells her baby granddaughter, "You must teach my daughter this same lesson. How to lose your innocence but not your hope."

Additional Summary: Summary

The Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan's first novel, debuted to critical acclaim. It takes its place alongside Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) as a chronicle of a Chinese American woman's search for and exploration of her ethnic identity. *The Joy Luck Club* is the best-selling, accessible account of four Chinese-born mothers and their four American-born daughters. One of the women, Suyuan Woo, has died before the story opens, but the other seven women tell their own stories from their individual points of view. Critics have noted that this approach is an unusually ambitious one. Nevertheless, the novel has reached a wide audience, especially since it was made into a feature film in 1992.

At the center of the story is Jing-mei "June" Woo, who has been asked to replace her dead mother as a member of the Joy Luck Club, a group of four women who meet for food and mah-jongg. Although Americanized and non-Chinese-speaking June is initially uncertain whether she wishes to join her mother's friends, she discovers that these women know things about her mother's past that she had never imagined. Her decision to become part of the Joy Luck Club culminates in a visit to China, where she meets the half sisters whom her mother was forced to abandon before she fled to the United States. The other Chinese-born women have similarly tragic stories, involving abandonment, renunciation, and sorrow in their native country. June says of her mother's decision to begin the club: "My mother could sense that the women of these families also had unspeakable tragedies they had left behind in China and hopes they couldn't begin to express in their fragile English." Each of these women's hopes includes hopes for her daughter. Each American daughter feels that she has in some way disappointed her mother. Waverly Jong fulfills her mother's ambitions by becoming a chess prodigy, then quits suddenly, to her mother's sorrow. June can never live up to her mother's expectations, and rebels by refusing to learn the piano. Rose Hsu turns away for a moment, and her youngest brother drowns. Lena St. Clair makes a marriage based on false ideals of equality, and only her mother understands its basic injustice. These American-born daughters insist that they are not Chinese; as June says, she has no "Chinese whatsoever below my skin." By the end of the novel, they find themselves realizing how truly Chinese they are.

Additional Summary: Summary

After Suyuan Woo passes away, her daughter, Jing-mei, is asked by her mother's friends to take her mother's place as a member of their Joy Luck Club, a group of friends who play Mah-Jongg together. At first, Jing-mei is reluctant to join the club. She is not very good at Mah-Jongg and not particularly interested in hearing her "aunties" talk about the past. Once she accepts, however, she begins to learn more about her mother's past and about the twin daughters her mother left in China. She also learns about her aunties' lives and about their daughters.

The aunties describe their childhood experience in China and their journey to the United States. An-mei Hsu recalls how her mother was mistreated by her husband's family after his death, and how she was disowned by Popo, her mother, for marrying Wu Tsing, who already had a wife and two concubines. When Popo became very sick, An-mei's mother nevertheless returned home to take care of her. An-mei later learned from a servant, Yan Chang, that her mother had been raped by Wu Tsing and tricked into the marriage, and that she was physically abused and emotionally tortured by Wu Tsing's wife and concubines.

Lindo Jong was a child bride. Her husband, Tyan-yu, was several years younger than she and even more immature. When Huang Taitai, Tyan-yu's mother, became angry with Lindo for not bearing the family a son, Lindo told her that from a meeting she had with the ghosts of the family's ancestors she was warned to leave the family to prevent calamity from descending on them. That trick enabled Lindo to leave Huang Taitai's house without disgracing her own family. The money Huang Taitai gave her was enough for her to go to America.

Ying-ying St. Clair was born to a well-to-do family, and she was brought up with strict rules about how to behave properly. Both her mother and Amah, the maid, believe that a "girl can never ask, only listen"; while a "boy can run and chase dragonflies, because that is his nature . . . a girl should stand still." In the legendary figure Chang-o, the Moon Lady, Ying-ying finds a companion and someone she can trust, but after Ying-ying makes a secret wish to Chang-o while watching a play, she is shocked to find out that the person who plays Chang-o is a man.

The aunties' daughters also tell their stories about the cultural conflicts they experienced growing up in America. Waverly Jong was Chinatown's chess champion when she was a child, but because she did not like the way her mother bragged about her achievement, she stopped playing. Lately, Waverly was fighting her mother over the way she treats her boyfriend, Rich Shields; it seems that her mother considers neither Rich nor Waverly's former Chinese husband good enough.

Lena St. Clair is tired of hearing her mother talk about how her marriage with Harold Livotny is unbalanced. She eventually comes to think that her mother was right all along and that she and her husband do not have an equal relationship. Lena is as important as Harold in the architectural firm Livotny and Associates but is not paid accordingly; yet they split the household bills and expenses evenly in half.

In the story "Half and Half," Rose Hsu Jordan sees a parallel between what happens to her brother Bing and what happens to her marriage. When Rose was a teenager, she was once given the responsibility to take care of her younger brothers while the family was vacationing on a beach. A misunderstanding between Rose and her father results in Bing's disappearance. From that incident, Rose learns that fate is shaped "half by expectation, half by inattention." Just as she knows now that she never expects to find Bing, Rose now also knows she will not find a way to save her marriage to Ted Jordan, who not only does not respect her being a housewife but also has an affair with another woman.

Jing-mei Woo is the spokesperson for both her and her mother. When Jing-mei was a child, Suyuan believed that her daughter was a prodigy and hired a piano teacher for her. Jing-mei was not very excited about playing piano, however, and did not practice hard. After a disastrous appearance on a talent show, Jing-mei has a big altercation with her mother, after which she never touches the piano again. After her mother dies, Jing-mei develops a sentimental attachment to the piano, and one day she plays Robert Schumann's piano pieces "Pleading Child" and "Perfectly Contented" a few times and discovers that they are "two halves of the same song."

When the aunties give Jing-mei an envelope with twelve hundred dollars and tell her to go to China to meet her twin sisters, she starts to understand the ontological significance of having taken her mother's place at the Mah-Jongg table—on the East, where things began. In the last story of the book, "A Pair of Tickets," Jing-mei Woo describes her trip to China in search of her "lost" twin sisters. When she finally meets them, Jing-mei can see that together they look just like their mother.

Chapter Summaries: Feathers from a Thousand Li Away, Vignette Summary and Analysis

Summary

A young woman leaves China to come to America. She brings with her a swan she plans to give to the daughter she will have someday, a daughter whose life will be much better than hers. Once they arrive in America, though, immigration officials take the swan away from her, leaving her only a feather.

As the vignette concludes, the woman has grown old. She has a daughter but has never given her the feather because she wants to be able to explain her "good intentions" in "perfect American English."

Analysis
This vignette focuses on the mother's actions when she was young and their effects later. Both the woman and the daughter are archetypes, or patterns, of the characters in the rest of the novel. Readers often try to identify the woman in the vignette as Suyuan, the mother in the next story, but she is not. The four stories in this section also focus on the mothers when they were young. As the novel progresses, the reader will see these events affect both mother and daughter later.

The swan is a symbol of the mother. In the first paragraph, the vendor says the swan was "a duck that stretched its neck"; in the second paragraph both swan and mother "[stretch] their necks toward America." The swan is described as "a creature that became more than what was hoped for," suggesting that the mother's life in America will be better than she had hoped for in China. When immigration officials confiscate the swan, Tan describes the mother as "fluttering her arms" like flapping wings.

The feather represents the mother's "good intentions." She wants to give her daughter part of herself, but she hesitates, waiting until she can explain herself "in perfect American English." The fact that the woman is now old suggests that day will never come, the explanation will never be given, and the daughter will never understand exactly what her mother intended.

The giving of gifts forms a motif throughout this novel. As you read, pay attention to how often gifts are given and whether they are appreciated.

Chapter Summaries: The Joy Luck Club Summary and Analysis

New Characters:
Jing-mei (June) Woo: narrator of most of this story; age 36, daughter of Suyuan and Canning Woo

Suyuan Woo: narrator of part of the story; Jing-mei's mother, Canning Woo's wife, and founder of the Joy Luck Club. She dies two months before the story begins

Canning Woo: Suyuan's husband; Jing-mei's father

An-mei Hsu: Suyuan's friend; one of the members of the Joy Luck Club

George Hsu: An-mei's husband

Lindo Jong: Suyuan's "best friend and arch rival"; one of the members of the Joy Luck Club
Ying-ying St. Clair: Suyuan's friend; one of the members of the Joy Luck Club

Uncle Jack: Ying-ying's younger brother

Waverly Jong: Lindo's daughter, one month younger than Jing-mei

Lena St. Clair: Ying-ying's daughter

Summary
Jing-mei, the narrator, attends a meeting of the Joy Luck Club to replace her mother, who has died two months earlier. The story flashes back to Suyuan and Canning Woo's arrival in San Francisco. Suyuan invites three other women to start the Joy Luck Club. As Jing-mei remembers what her mother told her about the first Joy Luck Club, in China, the story shifts, and Suyuan becomes the narrator.

Suyuan's first husband, an officer in the Kuomintang, had sent her and their twin daughters to Kweilin to escape the invading Japanese. To fight misery and despair, she started the Joy Luck Club with three other women. One morning an army officer warned her the Japanese were about to invade. She packed her daughters and some household belongings into a stolen wheelbarrow and fled on foot. When she arrived in Chungking, however, she had only the clothes she wore. When Jing-mei asks what happened to the babies, Suyuan says only, "Your father is not my first husband. You are not those babies."

The story returns to the American Joy Luck Club, now a successful stock investment club. After eating, the women play mah jong, with Jing-mei taking her mother's place. While they play, the aunties gossip and talk about their children.

When Jing-mei rises to leave, the aunties ask her to stay. Ying-ying tells her Suyuan had never given up hope of finding her twin daughters. Just after her death, someone found them. The aunties give Jing-mei a check for $1,200 and tell her to visit her sisters and tell them about her mother. Jing-mei protests that she doesn't know what to tell them. The aunties, incredulous, point out different facets of Suyuan she can talk about.

Jing-mei suddenly understands that they are afraid their own daughters also don't know anything about them. She says, "I will remember everything about her and tell them." Doubtful but hopeful, they return to telling stories, leaving Jing-mei sitting at the mah jong table, "on the East, where things begin."

Analysis
"*The Joy Luck Club*" is the title of both the novel and this story. Author Amy Tan introduces and explains the concept of "joy luck" by showing two different Joy Luck Clubs in action.

The first Joy Luck Club, in Kweilin, shielded the women's spirits against the harsh living conditions and constant threat of war. Suyuan had dreamed of visiting Kweilin, a place of great natural beauty, where she thought she would be perfectly happy. Instead, she and the other refugees lived with bad food, disease, overcrowding, and uncertainty. To combat their fear, the women played mah jong once a week. "Each week we could hope to be lucky. That hope was our only joy. And that's how we came to call our little parties Joy Luck."

The second Joy Luck Club, in San Francisco, offered hope to women with a common bond. Jing-mei says:

> My mother could sense that the women of these families also had unspeakable tragedies they had left behind in China and hopes they couldn't begin to express in their fragile English.

The second Joy Luck Club becomes an investment group and social gathering by the time Jing-mei is an adult, and the women have formed strong friendships.

"Joy luck" has become a concept the women would like to pass on to their American-born daughters, who do not understand the tragedies their mothers experienced. The mothers are afraid they will have "grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation."

Tan uses the device of the Joy Luck Club meeting to introduce the mothers and the daughters. She offers initial insight into the mothers' characters by giving Suyuan's opinion of them and develops the characters of Jing-mei (June) and Suyuan.

The conversation about black sesame-seed soup in the first few paragraphs reveals that Jing-mei understands some Chinese, but imperfectly. Her statement, "I can never remember things I didn't understand in the first place," begins the development of two conflicts. In the first, Jing-mei struggles with understanding her Chinese heritage. Not until the final pages does she come to terms with it. The second conflict, overcoming

language problems, affects all the characters to greater and lesser degrees. Later in the story, Jing-mei states she felt as though “my mother and I spoke two different languages, which we did. I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese.” Mothers and daughters struggle with their imperfect understandings of one another, seeking reconciliation.

Suyuan is a complex character. She has built such strong friendships with An-mei, Lindo, and Ying-ying that they are willing to pay for Jing-mei to visit China and see Suyuan’s daughters. However, Suyuan was also very critical of them. She claimed An-mei had no spine and never thought about what she was doing; she competed with Lindo by comparing their daughters; and she said Ying-ying was not hard of hearing but “hard of listening.” This criticism of her best friends suggests she is able to see and appreciate someone beyond her flaws. The reader will see her apply this appreciation to her own daughter as the novel progresses.

This story also introduces a continuing motif, the idea of seeking balance. Suyuan’s criticism runs along the lines of “Something was always missing. Something always needed improving. Something was not in balance.” Auntie Lindo explains that Jing-mei will take her mother’s place at mah jong because without her the women are “like a table with three legs, no balance.” These are minor examples of what will be a significant concept in the novel.

Chapter Summaries: Scar Summary and Analysis

New Characters:
Popo: An-mei’s maternal grandmother. An-mei and her brother have lived with her the last five years

An-mei’s mother: she is never given a name. Her family has ostracized her because she disgraced them

An-mei’s brother: younger than An-mei

Uncle and Auntie: Popo and the two children live with them in Ningpo, China

Summary
An-mei, now an old woman, narrates this story. As a child, she and her brother live with Popo, Auntie, and Uncle. As Popo grows increasingly ill, she calls An-mei to her bedside and tells her stories with a moral to them. Both Popo and Auntie tell the children that their mother has no respect for the family. An-mei feels unlucky to have such a mother.

The story jumps ahead to when An-mei is nine, and her mother returns. Auntie, Uncle, and the servants, unhappy with her presence, ignore her. She goes to Popo’s room and begins to take care of her. Popo is so sick she doesn’t even know who is there. If she had known who it was, she would have thrown An-mei’s mother out.

An-mei says her mother’s voice confused her, “a familiar sound from a forgotten dream.” Later she remembers when she had heard her mother’s voice before.

She had been four. During an argument between her mother and the rest of the family, a large pot of hot soup on the dinner table spilled on An-mei’s neck. The burn was very serious. The first night Popo told An-mei the family had made burial clothes for her, her mother had left, and if An-mei did not get well soon, her mother would forget her. An-mei recovered. Two years later the scar on her neck was pale and shiny, and she had completely forgotten her mother.

The story returns to the time when An-mei is nine, and Popo is dying. Her mother repeats an ancient tradition. She cuts a piece of flesh from her arm, puts it into a special soup, and feeds Popo, partly in one last attempt to save her life and partly out of respect for her. Popo dies a few hours later.

An-mei, now in the present, says that even then she could tell how much respect her mother had for Popo: “It is shou so deep it is in your bones.” Sometimes the only way to remember what is in your bones is to peel off everything until there is nothing else left.

Analysis
At the end of “*The Joy Luck Club*,” when Jing-mei protests that she doesn’t know anything about Suyuan, An-mei exclaims, “Your mother is in your bones!” This story shows how she has come to believe this.

“Scar” focuses on *shou*, respect for family. In this important Chinese tradition, respect is granted automatically; it does not have to be earned. The American-born daughters will not view respect for the family in the same manner as their mothers. This difference in the two cultures and generations creates conflict throughout the novel.

An-mei’s mother has disgraced her family. An-mei’s father died, and Chinese tradition forbids widows to remarry. For reasons we are not told in this story, however, she has remarried. Worse, she married a wealthy man who already had three wives.

Both Popo and Auntie teach An-mei and her brother that their mother is bad. The children think she is “thoughtless” and “a traitor to our ancestors.” Eventually An-mei believes them and considers herself unlucky to have such a mother. However, she thinks these thoughts while hiding from the portrait of her father, suggesting that she knew she was being disrespectful.

The story does not tell how An-mei’s mother knew Popo was dying. She returns to take care of her mother, even cutting flesh from her own arm for a special soup. She knew she could not save Popo’s life. The important thing was to demonstrate shou. An-mei realized that showing respect for Popo did not depend on whether Popo showed respect for her. She saw her mother’s sacrifice for Popo as a way of honoring her.

The title of the story, “Scar,” can be interpreted three ways. Most obvious is what An-mei calls her “smooth-neck scar,” the result of being burned by the soup. A second, an emotional scar, is suggested when An-mei says:

> In two years’ time, my scar became pale and shiny and I had no memory of my mother. That is the way it is with a wound. The wound begins to close in on itself, to protect what is hurting so much. And once it is closed, you no longer see what is underneath, what started the pain.

An-mei’s mother will have a scar as a result of the wound to her arm in addition to emotional scars from being separated from her children and disowned by her family. In another story we will see that she carries scars from other incidents in her life, too.

Popo is also scarred. From her point of view, disowning her daughter was the right thing to do. Even so, she has suffered. Her daughter is gone, and her family is in disgrace.

Chapter Summaries: The Red Candle Summary and Analysis

New Characters:
Lindo's mother: never named

Huang Taitai: Lindo's mother-in-law, mother of Tyan-yu

Tyan-yu: Lindo's first husband

The village matchmaker: she arranges both the match and later, the wedding, between Lindo and Tyan-yu

The matchmaker's servant: her mistake gives Lindo a chance to escape her marriage honorably

Another servant girl: she works for Huang Taitai and is kind to Lindo. When she becomes pregnant, Lindo helps her

Summary
Lindo Jong speaks to her daughter, Waverly, about the importance of keeping promises, comparing them to 24-carat gold. Then she talks about the promise her family made when they arranged the marriage between Lindo and Tyan-yu.

When she is 12, flooding destroys her family's farm, forcing them to move away. Lindo moves in with the Huangs, where she is treated like a servant. Determined that Huang Taitai will not be able to say anything against her family, she makes the best of circumstances. For the next four years Tyan-yu goes out of his way to treat her badly, and Huang Taitai makes sure she is thoroughly trained in household chores. When Huang Taitai announces that she is ready to become a grandmother, preparations begin for the wedding.

Just before the ceremony, Lindo cries about being forced into this marriage. Then she notices the wind. She says, "I realized it was the first time I could see the power of the wind." She looks into the mirror and realizes that she is like the wind—strong, pure, and able to think for herself. She promises herself she will respect her parents' wishes but she will also never forget herself.

During the ceremony a red candle is lit at both ends and placed in a special holder. The matchmaker's servant is to make sure neither end goes out. According to Chinese tradition, when the two ends burn together and flicker out, the husband and wife are joined in spirit forever.

After the wedding banquet the couple is escorted to their bedroom. Tyan-yu tells Lindo to sleep on the sofa. After he is asleep, Lindo walks into the courtyard. Through a window she sees the matchmaker's servant sleepily tending the candle. A sudden crack of thunder frightens the servant, and she runs out. Lindo impulsively runs in and blows out her husband's end of the candle. Then she returns to her room.

The next day, the matchmaker announces that the candle had burned from both ends. Lindo notices that her servant seems "shame-faced" and "mournful."

Lindo is a model wife in front of Huang Taitai, but every night she sleeps on the sofa. One morning Huang Taitai slaps her and says she will not feed or clothe Lindo if she refuses to sleep with her son. Lindo understands that Tyan-yu has lied to his mother about why Lindo is not pregnant, and she begins to sleep in the same bed with him. She develops a protective, sisterly feeling toward him.

A few months later Huang Taitai again becomes angry that Lindo is not pregnant and insists that Lindo remain in bed until she is. A servant apologetically serves her a bad-tasting medicine every day. When Lindo still does not become pregnant, the matchmaker is summoned. She announces that Lindo has too much metal, that she is out of balance and cannot conceive. Huang Taitai happily reclaims the jewelry she gave to Lindo as

wedding gifts; Lindo begins to plan her escape from this marriage.

Early in the morning on the day of the Festival of Pure Brightness, she cries out, claiming to have a bad dream. She tells everyone the ancestors are angry. They know that the marriage candle did not burn all the way through, as the matchmaker claimed; and they will begin the cycle of destruction if this marriage is not ended. Lindo also says that they have given three signs. First, a mole on Tyan-yu's back will grow and kill him. Second, Lindo's teeth will fall out one at a time. Third, one of the ancestors has impregnated a servant who is Tyan-yu's true spiritual wife.

Huang Taitai finds the mole on Tyan-yu's back and a tooth Lindo had lost four years earlier. Eventually she finds the pregnant servant and learns the truth about the wedding candle from the matchmaker's servant. She releases Lindo from her marriage honorably.

The story ends in the present. Lindo tells Waverly, "I know what I'm worth," as she describes buying 24-carat gold bracelets every few years. She still observes the Festival of Pure Brightness, however, by removing all her jewelry and remembering the promise she made not to forget herself.

Analysis
At the end of "*The Joy Luck Club*" Jing-mei says that she doesn't know what to tell her half sisters about their mother. Lindo says, "Tell them stories of your family here. How she became success." This story reveals that Lindo knows the meaning of success.

The Huang house serves as a metaphor for the family. Its placement high on a hillside represents their social status. When Lindo says, "they looked down on us," she speaks both literally and figuratively. The river rocks of the house's first level suggest humble origins. Each succeeding level grows more ostentatious until "someone, probably Huang Taitai" adds imperial pretensions. Inside, only the room guests see is lavished with "the look of wealth and old prestige"; the rest of the house is "crowded" and "uncomfortable." Lindo also says the house has "a confused look" to it, a parallel to the confusion she will later manipulate as she convinces Huang Taitai to find another wife for Tyan-yu. This family is only concerned with appearances, foreshadowing their treatment of Lindo and providing her with an essential element of her escape. Their facade is no match for her integrity.

Lindo rescues the pregnant servant from tragedy by claiming she is Tyan-yu's true wife. Pregnancy without marriage was very serious in China; it caused a "loss of face," public embarrassment, not only to the woman and her family, but also to the entire village. History records acts of violence by the village against an unwed mother and her family that could easily result in death. Lindo is apparently the only one who has noticed the servant's condition so far.

She adds a nice touch when she announces that the servant is really of imperial blood. That claim will appeal to Huang Taitai, who will gain status by including her in the family. The servant is astute enough to go along with it; Lindo relates ironically, "they forced her to tell the truth about her imperial ancestry." The servant also cherishes her good fortune. Lindo says she orders the servants to sweep the graves of the ancestors, demonstrating shou, once a day instead of the traditional once a year.

Lindo is able to protect Tyan-yu, whom she has come to think of fondly; provide Huang Taitai with a grandson; repay the servant for her kindness; and keep her promises while extricating herself from this abusive situation. That constitutes success by any definition.

Chapter Summaries: The Moon Lady Summary and Analysis

New Characters:
Amah: Ying-ying's nanny

Chang-o, the Moon Lady: in Chinese tradition, wife of the Master Archer

Hou Yi, the Master Archer: husband of Chang-o, associated with the sun

The Queen Mother of the Western Skies: also called Syi Wang Mu, associated with the yin principle

Mama and Baba: Ying-ying's parents

Number Two and Number Three: Ying-ying's younger half sisters

The family on the fishing boat: they rescue Ying-ying

Summary
Ying-ying, the narrator, speaks of her daughter, Lena, who does not hear or see Ying-ying because Ying-ying has kept her "true nature" hidden, "running along like a small shadow so nobody could catch me." She says that both she and Lena are lost, "unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others."

The story flashes back to 1918, when Ying-ying is four, and her family is preparing to celebrate the Moon Festival. They have rented a large boat on Tai Lake for the day, and a special ceremony will take place in the evening. Part of the ceremony is when Chang-o, the Moon Lady, grants a secret wish.

Ying-ying chases a dragonfly. Amah becomes upset that Ying-ying's clothes and hair are a mess. Her mother tells her that boys can be active and run, but girls must be still, so the dragonfly will seek their shadow. Ying-ying had not noticed her shadow before; captivated, she plays with it until the family leaves for the lake.

The boat the family has rented is a floating pavilion with elaborate furnishings and decorations. Alone at the back of the boat at sunset, Ying-ying dangles her legs over the side and looks at her reflection. Noticing the large full moon, she twists around to tell the Moon Lady her secret wish and falls into the lake.

By chance a fishing boat catches her in its net. Her rescuers leave her on shore, expecting her family to find her there.

Ying-ying hides in some bushes until she hears music and an announcement that a play dramatizing the Moon Lady's story is about to begin. The Moon Lady in silhouette tells her story from behind a screen that represents the moon. As the play ends, one of the actors tells the audience that the Moon Lady will grant one secret wish to each person for a small fee. The audience breaks up, and no one notices Ying-ying leave the bushes and run forward with her wish.

She runs all the way to the other side to talk to the Moon Lady, who has left the stage. The actor removes both costume and wig, and Ying-ying sees, just as she is stating her wish, that the Moon Lady is a man.

The story returns to the present, and Ying-ying says that for many years she couldn't remember what she wished for that night or how her family found her. She is certain that the entire experience changed her. But as she has grown older, some of the memories of the day have returned, and today, once again the Moon

Festival, she has finally remembered her wish: to be found.

Analysis

In "*The Joy Luck Club*," when Jing-mei states she won't know what to tell her half sisters about their mother, Ying-ying suggests telling them "what you know about her mind that has become your mind." The theme of the mother's way of thinking strongly influencing the daughter's way of thinking is suggested at the beginning of this story; it becomes quite striking when all four of the stories about Ying-ying are put together. In this first story we see most clearly two motifs and the initial development of Ying-ying's character.

The first motif, alluded to in "*The Joy Luck Club*," is the Daoist concept of seeking balance: the yin and the yang. This motif dominates the novel. The Moon Lady sadly states, "For woman is yin, the darkness within, where untempered passions lie. And man is yang, bright truth lighting our minds." The yin, or female principle, refers to emotion, passivity, chaos, wetness, and the body; the yang, or male principle, is logic, action, discipline, dryness, and the mind. Combined, they produce life. Out of balance, they bring misery, as the story of the Moon Lady and Master Archer suggests.

Ying-ying's name, which means "clear reflection," represents an amalgam of the two concepts. She illustrates problems occurring when life is not in balance. Her fascination with her shadow represents her yin, her undisciplined emotions. Her fall into the lake immerses her in yin and separates her from the yang, the structure and order, of her family. She is too young to handle so much chaos. Her response, suggested in the opening paragraphs, is to go too far the other way, hiding her yin and living entirely in yang. The reader will see the consequences of such an approach in future stories.

The second motif is specific to this story alone: the shadow. Ying-ying mentions it in the second paragraph, saying that she kept her real personality hidden "like a small shadow." As a child she is amazed by it, saying, "I loved my shadow, this dark side of me that had my same restless nature." The shadow represents Ying-ying's emotions—her active, spirited self—her yin.

After nearly drowning, fearing for her life among strangers and being unable to locate her family among the throngs on the lake, Ying-ying states, "I felt I was lost forever." The next mention of her shadow parallels that emotional state. Her rescuers leave her on the dock, and she sees her shadow again, "shorter this time, shrunken and wild-looking."

The play Ying-ying watches from the bushes is done in silhouette, shadows against a screen. In it she sees a statement of Chinese belief about the true nature of women and men. Taking action has caused Ying-ying to ruin her clothes and to fall off the boat. Taking action also causes the Moon Lady's woes. Ying-ying says of the Moon Lady, "I understood her grief. In one small moment, we had both lost the world, and there was no way to get it back."

Ying-ying is too young to understand that the Moon Lady is an actor. When the young man offers the granting of a wish for a donation, Ying-ying says, "nobody was listening to him, except my shadow and me in the bushes." Thinking it is really Chang-o, she runs up "to the other side of the moon" with her wish. What looked in shadow like a beautiful woman turns out to be a man with "shrunken cheeks, a broad oily nose, large glaring teeth, ... red-stained eyes ... [and] a [tired] face." This Chang-o will not grant her wish.

Her family is gone, Amah is gone, and she can't even trust her own perceptions. Ying-ying's world is as lost to her as the Moon Lady's. She recalls that both her wish and being found by her family "seemed an illusion … a wish granted that could not be trusted." The reader will see in the other stories that Ying-ying spends the rest of her life trying to understand what she can trust, not only in the external world, but also in herself.

The reader must reflect on Ying-ying’s statement, “I never believed my family found the same girl” in order to understand her opening remarks describing both herself and her daughter as “unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others.” Even more pain lies in her future stories, ultimately leading her to keep her “true nature” safely hidden. This decision offers a measure of safety, but it also robs her of her energetic, trusting spirit. She remains tragically “out of balance” most of her life.

Chapter Summaries: The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates, Vignette Summary and Analysis

Summary
A mother tells her seven-year-old daughter not to ride her bicycle around the corner. When the daughter wants to know why, the mother says the daughter will fall and the mother will not see or hear her. When the daughter asks how her mother knows this will happen, her mother replies that it is written in *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates*, as are all the bad things that can happen to children who are away from their mothers. The daughter wants to see the book, but the mother says it is written in Chinese and she will not understand it. The daughter asks what the 26 bad things are in the book, but her mother does not answer; she sits and knits. The daughter repeats the question, and still her mother does not answer. The daughter decides her mother doesn’t know what they are and, further, doesn’t know anything at all. She jumps on her bike, pedals furiously toward the corner, and falls before she gets there.

Analysis
This vignette, like the first one, consists of archetypal characters. Readers should resist the temptation to identify the mother of this piece as Suyuan or Lindo, the daughter as Jing-mei or Waverly.

The young woman who brought the swan and all her good intentions to America now has the daughter she dreamed of. Her Chinese approach to motherhood insists upon obedience; however, this trait does not come easily to her American-born daughter. The mother wants to protect her daughter from harm, but the daughter takes risks finding things out for herself. The mother is quiet and calm, a typical Chinese woman; her daughter is loud and active, a typical American child. The mother wants her daughter to trust her; she says, “You must listen to me.” The daughter, though, wants to make up her own mind; she tells her mother, “You don’t know anything!” In her rebellion she discovers just the opposite.

All four stories in this section share this underlying conflict of the daughters’ desire for independence in conflict with the mothers’ guidance. We might call it, to paraphrase the title of an early 1960s sitcom, “Mother Knows Best.”

Chapter Summaries: Rules of the Game Summary and Analysis

New Characters:
Waverly Jong: Lindo’s only daughter and youngest child; narrator

Vincent and Winston Jong: Lindo’s older brothers

Lao Po: an old man in the park who helps Waverly learn chess

Summary
The adult Waverly looking back on her childhood tells this story. An incident with her mother and some salted plums teaches her “the art of invisible strength,” encapsuled in two sayings: “Bite back your tongue”

and “Strongest wind cannot be seen.”

One year at a Christmas celebration at the First Chinese Baptist Church, Vincent gets a used chess set; Waverly selects a box of Life Savers; and Winston receives a kit for a model submarine. Once home, Waverly offers two of her Life Savers to substitute for the missing two chessmen if Vincent will let her play. The winner could eat both Life Savers.

When Waverly starts asking too many questions, Vincent hands her the manual and tells her to read the rules for herself. Her mother encourages this, saying that immigrants are often not told all the rules so that they don’t get ahead of the local people. Waverly begins to study chess seriously.

In addition to learning each piece and the different moves, she comes to understand the importance of strategy and the value of not revealing her plans. She becomes so involved in chess that she makes a chessboard, hangs it on the wall in her bedroom, and stares at it for hours, playing imaginary games. Soon her brothers no longer play with her.

Waverly begins playing chess in the playground at the end of the alley with an old man named Lao Po. At first she loses, but Lao Po teaches her both strategies and chess etiquette. On weekends small crowds gather as Waverly defeats opponent after opponent. Even Lindo comes to watch, sitting proudly on the bench while humbly declaring, “Is luck.”

Someone suggests that Waverly compete in area chess tournaments. Waverly says, “I desperately wanted to go, but I bit back my tongue.” Instead, she tells her mother she doesn’t want to. “They would have American rules. If I lost, I would bring shame on my family.” The technique works just as she wishes; Lindo insists that she try.

Waverly wins at that meet easily. As she continues to compete, Lindo encourages her all she can. The Chinese community also encourages her, and by the time she is nine, Waverly has become a national chess champion. On Saturday morning shopping expeditions, Lindo proudly tells everyone, “This my daughter Wave-ly Jong.”

One Saturday Waverly expresses embarrassment at Lindo’s pride. Her mother has nothing to say; the angry expression on her face says it all. Waverly runs away.

After a couple of hours, realizing she has nowhere else to go, she comes home. The family is having dinner, and Lindo has little to say. Waverly walks into her room, lies down, and tries to figure out what to do next.

Analysis
The title of this story, “Rules of the Game,” works on three levels. Most obviously it refers to Waverly’s learning the rules of chess. It also refers to Lindo’s observation that immigrants must learn the rules of their adopted country for themselves, because the locals will not share them. Finally, it refers to Waverly’s relationship with Lindo, which becomes a power struggle between the two. Learning the rules of chess takes up much of the plot of this story, but learning to get along with her mother will occupy the rest of the novel.

The theme of this story, “strongest wind cannot be seen” or “the greatest power lies in the unexpected,” also works on multiple levels. In the opening paragraphs Waverly says this way of thinking helped her win arguments, respect, and chess games. “I discovered that for the whole game one must gather invisible strengths and see the endgame before the game begins.” Waverly also learns to keep her strategy a secret. “A little knowledge withheld is a great advantage one should store for future use.” At her first chess tournament Waverly keeps her secrets so well that her opponent never sees defeat coming.

Waverly's failure to "bite back [her] tongue," issuing her challenge to Lindo even though she "knew it was a mistake to say anything more," has disastrous consequences. Lindo cannot tolerate such disrespect as a mother and especially as a Chinese mother dealing with a daughter. She switches from "protective ally" to opponent. Waverly is about to learn that her mother does indeed know how to play chess, how to be the "strongest wind."

Tan underscores the analogy of Waverly and Lindo's relationship to a chess game subtly. Vincent explains that there are 16 chess pieces per player. When Waverly returns home after running away, she says, "I climbed the 16 steps to the door. . .." The apartment thus becomes a metaphoric chess board on which Waverly and Lindo play out their game.

When Waverly runs away, she envisions Lindo walking through the streets looking for her, then going home to wait. She does not foresee that Lindo gathers invisible strengths. She is calmly eating supper with the family when Waverly appears at the door. Like a good chess player, Lindo does not reveal her strategy. She bites back her tongue and says only, "We not concerning this girl. This girl not have concerning for us." No scolding, no punishment: Waverly has no idea what will happen next. The reader, however, may well suspect that she will have a hard time outmanipulating this opponent. From "The Red Candle" we already know that Lindo knows how to use secrets to her advantage.

Like the woman with the swan feather in the first vignette, Lindo wants a better life for her daughter. Waverly grows up in a warm, loving home in a supportive community. She does not appreciate what she has, though: She thinks her success is due entirely to her own efforts. While she certainly has dedicated a great deal of time and effort to the game, she has not been alone in her pursuit. She owes a debt to her brothers, who sleep in the living room and do her chores so she can study chess; to Lau Po, who has taught her his secrets; and to her mother, who has shown her love, pride, and support in many ways. Unfortunately, Waverly does not recognize this. Her comment, "If you want to show off, then why don't you learn to play chess?" reveals self-centeredness, an attitude Lindo had not envisioned in her daughter. In the power struggle between the two, Lindo has the next move.

Chapter Summaries: The Voice from the Wall Summary and Analysis

New Characters:
Lena St. Clair: Ying-ying's daughter, 10 years old at the time of this story

Clifford St. Clair: Ying-ying's husband, Lena's father

Teresa Sorci and Mrs. Sorci: neighbors in the St. Clairs' apartment building. Teresa is about 12 years old. Her bedroom is next to Lena's

Summary
The adult Lena narrates this story. As a child she wondered about "the death of a thousand cuts," in which a condemned man is sliced away little by little until he dies. Her great-grandfather had once ordered someone to die in this manner, and the ghost of the executed man returned and killed him. "Either that," she says, "or he died of influenza a week later."

Lena imagines her great-grandfather's last moments. The ghost appears, saying he thought the worst that could happen to him was this torturous execution. "But I was wrong," he says. "The worst is on the other side," meaning the other side of life—death. In her daydream the ghost then drags her great-grandfather from this world through the wall to the other side.

When Lena was five, she fell down the basement stairs. Ying-ying told her to stay out of the basement because an evil man who had lived there thousands of years would impregnate her and eat her family. After that Lena saw danger everywhere with her "Chinese eyes," she says, "the part of me I got from my mother."

Communication in the family is poor. Ying-ying warns Lena about dangers all around her, but Lena knows Ying-ying makes things up when challenged. Ying-ying's English is poor and St. Clair's Chinese worse, so communication between the parents is tenuous. Sometimes her father makes up what he thinks Ying-ying says. Lena also makes things up to her advantage when translating for either parent.

When Lena is 10, the family moves to North Beach, an Italian neighborhood of San Francisco. Lena adjusts easily to the noise and smells, but Ying-ying has trouble. The house is on a hill so steep that Ying-ying says a person's life is always rolling backward. She tries to restore balance by rearranging the furniture several times. Her father dismissively claims, "Your mother is just practicing her nesting instincts." A few days later, a new baby crib in Lena's room suggests he may be right. Lena notices other, ominous signs, though, and she worries.

Lena hears her neighbors, the Sorcis, shouting at night. Then she hears what sounds like someone being killed with the death of a thousand cuts. The next night she hears it again. She meets the girl she believes to be the victim one day and is surprised that she looks so happy. Lena feels guilty for knowing the truth about her.

One day Suyuan and Canning Woo pick up Lena at school and take her to the hospital to visit her mother. Ying-ying's baby was born with a severe birth defect and is dead. Ying-ying is incoherent, and St. Clair asks Lena to translate; but her words seem like insanity to Lena, so she makes up a translation.

Ying-ying enters a deep depression, unable to function. St. Clair tries to convince Lena and himself she is just tired, but Lena is frightened. When she hears the Sorcis fighting at night, she is comforted by thinking that someone else's life is worse than hers.

One evening, however, the doorbell rings and the girl next door, Teresa, walks through the apartment to Lena's bedroom and climbs out the window. Her mother has kicked her out in one of their arguments. Teresa wants to climb back into her bedroom via the fire escape. When Lena asks if Mrs. Sorci will be angry, Teresa casually says that they fight like this "all the time."

Later that night Lena hears Teresa and her mother shouting at each other, but this time she also hears the love between them. She lies in her bed and cries, happy to have misjudged them.

That experience brings Lena hope. Her mother is still depressed, but Lena believes it will pass. She envisions a mother being sentenced to the death of a thousand cuts and being told, "It is the only way to save you." The sword goes up and down, but no harm is done. The mother understands that she has already been through the worst possible. Then the daughter reaches out and pulls her mother back through the wall.

Analysis

The title "The Voice from the Wall" refers to three parts or voices. The first is the ghost returning from "the other side" for Lena's great-grandfather. His voice threatens doom. The second voices belong to Teresa Sorci and her mother. They demonstrate love. Finally, Lena herself near the end of the story tries to bring her mother back from the other side of her depression. Hers is a voice of hope. The arguments between Teresa and her mother form an important part of the plot; both the image of the ghost and Lena's struggle, while more subtle, underscore a theme of dealing with adversity.

When Tan sets the St. Clair family next to the Sorcis, she emphasizes their differences. The St. Clairs, Chinese-Americans, are quiet; the Sorcis, Italian-Americans, are loud. The St. Clairs are gentle with each

other; the Sorcis are violent. The St. Clairs communicate almost by guessing; the Sorcis make their thoughts known not only to each other but also to the neighbors. The St. Clairs live in fantasy worlds: Clifford, by making up what he wants his wife to have said; Ying-ying, by retreating into her pain; Lena, by thinking she knows everything about Teresa Sorci. The Sorcis, on the other hand, live without illusions. Teresa tells Lena exactly what her mother is thinking, what she will do, and how she will react. She is also confident of her mother's love. Strengths and weaknesses exist in both apartments.

The story of the ghost and Lena's great-grandfather parallels the circumstances surrounding Lena and Ying-ying. Lena envisions the ghost "looking like a smashed vase hastily put back together" when he returns to exact his revenge. She compares her mother's depression to that kind of death, saying Ying-ying's fears "devoured her, piece by piece." Lena's world is as shattered as both the ghost and her mother. She describes Ying-ying's despondency as "the worst possible thing," in part because the stability of her family has been destroyed. While communication has never been a strength in the St. Clair household, Lena usually knew what to expect. Now her mother's sorrow is a wall she can only dream of penetrating.

This story is one of the best in the novel at transcending the specific circumstances of Chinese women who raise American children. Sometimes funny, sometimes tragic, always complex, the St. Clair family represents every family at one time or another. Clifford St. Clair exemplifies not just an American who speaks minimal Chinese but also every husband who doesn't try very hard to understand his wife. Ying-ying, in addition to being an immigrant who speaks English poorly, represents every wife who pleases her husband when he's around and does what she wants when he's gone. What child hasn't taken advantage of a parent's ignorance at one time or another? Lena manipulates the language weaknesses of both her parents to her advantage, one time to gain a metal lunch box, much later to escape a situation beyond her comprehension. The cultural aspects of the characters become secondary in these contexts.

Chapter Summaries: Half and Half Summary and Analysis

New Characters:
Rose Hsu Jordan: narrator of this story, daughter of An-mei and George, wife of Ted Jordan; a free-lance production assistant for graphic artists

Ted Jordan: Rose's husband, a dermatologist

Mrs. Jordan: Ted's mother

George Hsu: An-mei's father

Janice, Ruth, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Bing Hsu: Rose's sisters and brothers

Summary
Rose, the narrator, describes a "white leatherette Bible" her mother uses to prop up one leg of a crooked table. After spending more than 20 years on the floor, it is still "clean white." As she looks at it, Rose wonders how she will tell An-mei that she and Ted are getting a divorce. She knows her mother will insist that she try to save her marriage.

At the beginning of Rose and Ted's relationship, both mothers object to their dating because of the difference in race. Their parents' opposition draws them closer together, and they are married just before Ted begins medical school.

Rose and Ted have an unusual relationship: He makes all the decisions because she wants him to. Ted becomes dissatisfied with this arrangement after losing a malpractice suit. He begins to insist that Rose choose. Finally, he tells her he wants a divorce. Rose is devastated.

Rose reflects on her mother's faith, which An-mei mispronounces as "fate." Rose wonders whether hope might be all that people can really have, and says the day she started wondering about this was the same day An-mei lost her faith in God.

The story flashes back to the day when Rose, 14, and her family go to the beach. When her father decides to go fishing and her sisters race down the beach, Rose watches her four brothers. The three older boys play together, but Bing, age 4, wanders down the beach. Rose warns him to stay away from the water.

Later Bing walks out on the reef where his father is fishing. As Rose watches, he falls into the water and is never seen again.

The next morning An-mei, who has never driven before, takes Rose back to the reef along with the white Bible, a thermos, and a teacup. An-mei holds the Bible and prays aloud in Chinese for the return of Bing, alive. At the end of her prayer, she waits. Three times she thinks she sees him, but each time "Bing" becomes a mass of seaweed.

An-mei puts the Bible down and takes the thermos and teacup to the edge of the water. She pours sweetened tea from the thermos into the teacup and throws it into the sea, and she adds a blue sapphire ring. For the next hour all they see is seaweed; then An-mei glances down the beach and sees Bing walking toward them. Rose does, too. Or they think they do. He lights a cigarette, and they realize he is a stranger.

Rose wants to leave, but An-mei is undaunted. She believes Bing is in a cave in the reef. She pulls a large inner tube out of the trunk of the car, ties the line from her husband's fishing pole around it and throws it into the sea, holding on to the pole. She tells Rose that the inner tube will go where Bing is and help him out of the cave and back to them. Eventually the line snaps, and An-mei and Rose scramble to watch it travel across the cove. A wave forces it first against the wall and then into a cavern under the surface. The tube floats in and out several times until finally it comes out "torn and lifeless." When that happens, An-mei abandons the search.

The story returns to the present. Rose never expected to find Bing that day, and she does not expect to save her marriage. Her mother insists that she must try and leaves Rose alone to think about why. Rose says she had known Bing was in danger and did nothing; she also knew her marriage was in danger and did nothing. In a moment of insight, she realizes that faith balances the loss caused by fate. She thinks that An-mei still pays attention to the loss of Bing. To confirm her suspicions, she takes the Bible out from under the table leg and opens it to find what An-mei wrote in it before she used it to prop up the table leg: Bing's name appears in pencil on the page marked "Deaths."

Analysis
This story returns to the motif of yin and yang, beginning with the title, a reference to the Daoist ideal of two halves balancing to make a whole. Rose and Ted's relationship is an example of yin and yang gone awry. Instead of balancing the characteristics of both yin and yang in her personality, Rose is entirely yin, always the victim. Ted, on the other hand, is all yang, always the rescuer. Unhealthy though their relationship is, it works until Ted loses the malpractice suit and becomes the one in need. Rose, unaware of how hard he has taken the loss, does not help him. The balance destroyed, their marriage falls apart.

Balance is the key to the theme of this story, suggesting our lives are shaped both by what we control and what we don't control. Echoing the theme of "*The Joy Luck Club*," it suggests that hope is all people really

have. Rose says of her own hope, “I was not denying any possibility, good or bad. I was just saying, If there is a choice, dear God or whatever you are, here’s where the odds should be placed.”

When An-mei returns with Rose to the site of Bing’s drowning, she has complete confidence one of her three plans will work. First she uses her Christian faith, holding the white Bible and praying to God.
When Bing does not appear, she turns to her Chinese tradition. Explaining that an ancestor had once stolen sacred water, she throws tea into the sea to “sweeten the temper of the Coiling Dragon.” She also throws in a blue sapphire ring, possibly her most valuable possession, a gift from her mother. When he still does not reappear, An-mei falls back on her nengkan, the powerful self-confidence that has served her family so well in the past. She is convinced her own efforts will succeed where Christian faith and Chinese tradition have failed: the inner tube attached to her husband’s fishing pole will go where Bing is and bring him back. But when the fishing line snaps, she no longer has the “illusion that somehow [she’s] in control.” She and Rose can only watch powerlessly and hopefully as the inner tube is smashed against the cove wall until it is destroyed.

“At that moment, and not until that moment, did she give up,” Rose says, adding, “It made me angry—so blindingly angry—that everything had failed us.”

The story concludes that fate consists of expectation—a positive force, yang—coupled with inattention—a negative force, yin. Those who lose something they love, as An-mei lost Bing and Rose lost Ted, must fill the void, must “pay attention to what [was] lost.” The family Bible’s clean condition tells the reader that An-mei notices it even though she pretends not to. It represents the absent Bing. Bing’s name written “in erasable pencil” in it suggests that An-mei, like Rose, now believes hope is the most a person can have. Rose must pay attention to her marriage, something she acknowledges she has not done, in order to restore the balance in her life. This is her fate.

Chapter Summaries: Two Kinds Summary and Analysis

New Character:
Old Chong: Jing-mei’s deaf piano teacher

Summary
This story is narrated by the adult Jing-mei looking back on her childhood piano lessons.

When Jing-mei is nine, Suyuan wants her to be a prodigy like Lindo’s daughter and Shirley Temple. Jing-mei at first agrees, but after repeatedly failing to find her special talent, she quits trying.

A few months later Suyuan notices a young Chinese girl playing piano on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Three days afterward she announces that she has made arrangements for Jing-mei to take piano lessons from Mr. Chong. Jing-mei quickly discovers he can’t tell when she is making mistakes because he is deaf. As long as she maintains the right tempo, “Old Chong” thinks she is doing well.

The adult Jing-mei interrupts here to observe, “Maybe I never really gave myself a chance. I did pick up the basics pretty quickly, and I might have become a good pianist at that young age. But I was…determined not to try.”

After about a year of half-hearted effort, Jing-mei enters a talent competition. Instead of memorizing the music in preparation, however, she practices her fancy curtsy. The night of the recital, in front of an audience that includes all the Joy Luck Club aunties and uncles, Jing-mei plays very badly. She gets the fancy curtsy right, but the audience is silent, except for Old Chong, who shouts, “Bravo! Bravo! Well done!” Jing-mei sees

Suyuan's "stricken face" in the audience and tries not to cry as she sits down, ashamed.

She thinks her piano lessons are behind her, but the next afternoon, Suyuan reminds her it's time to practice. When she refuses, they argue. Jing-mei shouts that she wishes she weren't Suyuan's daughter. She wishes she were dead, like Suyuan's two daughters in China. Suyuan, stunned, leaves the room. The piano lessons are over.

The adult Jing-mei comments that she disappointed her mother again and again in later years when she insisted on the right to be less than her best. She finds her old recital piece in the piano bench and begins to play it. Then she notices the piece on the page opposite, "Perfectly Contented." After she plays through both pieces, she realizes they are "two halves of the same song."

Analysis
Hope was the basis for founding the original Joy Luck Club in Kweilin. At the end of "*The Joy Luck Club*," Jing-mei observes that the aunties "see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation." Hope is both theme and motif in this story. The opening paragraphs remind the reader of how much Suyuan lost in China, emphasizing her dreams for a new life in America. These ambitions extend to Jing-mei as well, connecting mother and daughter.

Suyuan's declaration to Jing-mei, "You can be best anything," reveals her appreciation of the opportunities available in America. Jing-mei shares her mother's enthusiasm at first, believing that her prodigy side, symbolized by her Peter Pan haircut, will be perfect. As she fails test after test, however, she says, "I hated . . . the raised hopes and failed expectations." Frustrated, she quits trying, and eventually so does her mother. Jing-mei says, "At last she was beginning to give up hope." The young Chinese piano player on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, however, changed that.

The argument about continuing piano lessons lasts until Jing-mei mentions Suyuan's lost twins. The reader will recall from "*The Joy Luck Club*" that Suyuan never stopped hoping to see her daughters again. Jing-mei's childish anger creates an image greater than Suyuan can bear: "her face went blank, her mouth closed, her arms went slack, and she backed out of the room, stunned, as if she were blowing away like a small brown leaf, thin, brittle, lifeless." Ironically, Jing-mei wonders later why her mother had given up hope, as the piano sits in the living room, its lid shut against "dust, my misery, and her dreams." She never connects the hopes for one daughter with the hope of seeing the other two.

Jing-mei's observation that "Pleading Child" and "Perfectly Contented" are "two halves of the same song" returns the reader to the motif of yin and yang that runs throughout the novel. "Pleading Child" was the "simple, moody" piece from the recital, which now looks "more difficult than I remembered." "Perfectly Contented" is lighter, longer, faster, and just as easy. The titles suggest Jing-mei's attitude as a child and as an adult. Not until later in the novel will she realize where her refusal to strive for the best has led her.

Chapter Summaries: American Translation, Vignette Summary and Analysis

Summary
The mother insists her adult daughter move the mirrored armoire at the foot of her bed. She says her daughter's "marriage happiness" will reflect off the mirror and turn to unhappiness. The daughter, annoyed, says there is no other place in the bedroom of the new condominium to put it. It will have to stay where it is.

The mother pulls a mirror, her housewarming present, out of a used Macy's shopping bag. She tells her daughter to mount this mirror above the head of the bed, across from the other mirror, so the reflections will

“multiply your peach-blossom luck.”

When the daughter asks what peach-blossom luck is, the mother only smiles mischievously, tells her to look in the mirror, and asks, “Am I not right? In this mirror is my future grandchild, already sitting on my lap next spring.” The daughter looks and—yes, there it is!—her reflection.

Analysis
The mother in this vignette invokes the Chinese tradition of feng shui, which holds that locations can be lucky or unlucky. Feng shui influences Chinese and Chinese American architectural styles, building locations, and even furniture arrangement. Telling her daughter to move the mirror is one more way this mother tries to ensure her daughter’s happiness.

The daughter does not understand the theories of feng shui or her mother’s purpose in predicting trouble, nor does she care. She knows what she wants; the armoire will stay where it is. The mother compromises with the second mirror and defines “peach-blossom luck,” children, as a desirable trait in a marriage.

Both “*The Joy Luck Club*” and “Two Kinds” point to a hope connecting generations. One of the characteristics of contemporary American society has been couples who delay starting a family or who decide not to have children at all. The daughter in this vignette has no children yet, and her mother encourages her to start a family. Otherwise, there may be no generation to pass hope on to.

This vignette introduces four stories told by the daughters, now adults in their thirties. Like the daughter who looks into the mirror, the daughters in these stories see and do not see what their mothers try to show them.

Chapter Summaries: Rice Husband Summary and Analysis

New Characters:
Harold Livotny: Lena’s husband, an architect

Arnold Reisman: a neighbor who was mean to Lena when they were children

Summary
Ying-ying is visiting Lena, 36, and her husband, Harold, in their new home in Woodside. Lena worries that Ying-ying will see how precarious their marriage is.

The story flashes back to when Lena was eight. To encourage her to finish her food, Ying-ying told her that her future husband would have a pock mark on his face for every piece of rice she did not eat. Lena immediately thought of Arnold, a neighbor who had small marks about the size of grains of rice on his face and was mean to her. She was frightened she would have to marry him. At Sunday school later that week Lena saw a film about people with leprosy. She thought her mother would say their future spouses had left several meals unfinished. She tried to kill Arnold by not finishing her food, so she wouldn’t have to marry him.

Five years later her father read in the paper one morning that Arnold had died of complications from a case of measles he’d had about the time Lena refused to finish her food. Lena felt responsible for his death, and that night she ate ice cream until she vomited.

The story returns to the present, with Lena observing that people get what they deserve. As evidence she cites her husband, Harold, whom she met eight years earlier at the architectural firm where both worked. They split the bill for working lunches in half, even though Lena’s share was usually less than Harold’s. Later they did

the same when they met secretly for dinner. Lena didn't mind the unfairness.

Later she convinced Harold to start his own firm and offered to help finance it. He would not accept money from her under any business arrangement; instead, he invited her to move in with him and pay him $500 a month rent. Lena accepted, thrilled that they would be living together.

Both of them quit their jobs to work at this new business. Lena encouraged Harold not to give up and came up with some unusual ideas for restaurant designs. Harold used her ideas and became successful. The firm now employs 12 people, one of them Lena. Harold will not promote her, even though she is very good, saying the other employees will think the promotion is just because they are married. Lena feels that trying to keep things equal with Harold is not working any more.

The story returns to the present. Ying-ying looks at a tally of expenses on the refrigerator door, and Lena explains that they split expenses 50-50. Ying-ying notices Harold has put "ice cream" on his list and points out that Lena has never eaten it since Arnold died. She has always paid for half of it, though.

Lena shows Ying-ying to the guest room, a plain room decorated in Harold's taste. By the bed an unsteady table has a vase of freesias on it. Lena warns Ying-ying about it, then goes downstairs and marks the ice cream off the refrigerator list. She and Harold argue about the way they split expenses until Lena hears the vase in the guest room fall and break. She goes upstairs and sees that the table has collapsed. Lena tells her mother she knew it would happen, and Ying-ying asks her why she didn't prevent it.

Analysis

Ying-ying's closing words to Lena, "Then why you don't stop it?" complete a motif that runs through this story, *chunwang chihan*. The phrase literally means, "If the lips are gone, the teeth will be cold." Figuratively it suggests cause-and-effect relationships for everything that happens.

Referring to events in "The Voice from the Wall," Lena relates that Ying-ying knew her baby would be born dead, saying the family's home was built on a hill that was too steep. A Western reader might not see the feng *shui* cause and effect Ying-ying did, but would see clearly the relationship between Clifford St. Clair's bacon-and-egg breakfasts and his heart attack and death. The motif resurfaces when Ying-ying encourages Lena to eat by telling her leftover food will cause pock marks on her future husband's face. At first Lena eats, but later she decides against it. With the logic of an eight-year-old, she thinks this will kill Arnold, a mean neighbor she is afraid of having to marry. When the events surrounding Arnold's subsequent death appear to indicate she was right, she feels guilty and gorges herself on ice cream. The causes and effects exist only in the minds of the participants but are no less real for it.

Ying-ying criticizes Harold's table with "*Chunwang chihan*," wondering what to do with a table too unsteady for anything but a small vase of flowers. When the table falls, she points out that when the cause is obvious, the effect should be prevented.

This motif underscores the character development of both Harold and Lena. When Ying-ying tells Harold that Lena has "become so thin…you cannot see her," she is commenting on their marriage. She sees clearly what Lena denies: Harold abuses Lena's generosity and love when he insists that she pay for half of everything. "As long as we keep the money thing separate," he insists, "we'll always be sure of our love for each other." He uses their financial arrangement to ensure he has his way in every major decision. This pattern is so entrenched in their relationship that Lena does not even know how to articulate it at the end of the story.

Harold thinks Lena is talking about the cat when she brings up the subject of changing the way they manage household expenses. After all, she has gone along with everything up to now. At first it was just meals. Later he didn't want to accept her financial support for his firm on any businesslike basis such as a loan, which

would benefit both equally. Instead, he exploited her by asking her to move in with him so he could start his business with her rent money. He now owns a very successful firm with 12 full-time employees, and Lena has nothing to show for her investment.

This pattern of Harold taking advantage of Lena continued into their marriage. It is present in their prenuptial agreement, in Harold's refusal to promote Lena even though she deserves it, in the uninviting style of their home, in their vacation plans, and in their day-to-day expenses. Lena has gone along with it, even though she recognizes that something is wrong. She values her contribution too little, afraid Harold might one day see her "as a sham of a woman." She considers herself lucky that Harold loves her but does not consider that Harold is lucky she loves him.

The wobbly table in the guest room symbolizes the couple. Lena wonders why Harold is proud of its clumsy design. The fragile legs will support their marble burden only as long as nothing jars the table. Similarly, Harold and Lena have a clumsy marriage, Lena often not saying what she is thinking, Harold pretty much getting whatever he wants. It is uneven and unfair, and something as small as a cat or a box of ice cream can shatter the assumptions that support it.

Chapter Summaries: Four Directions Summary and Analysis

New Characters:
Mr. Rory: Waverly's hairdresser

Marlene Ferber: Waverly's friend

Marvin Chen: Waverly's first husband

Shoshana: Waverly's and Marvin's daughter

Rich Schields: Waverly's fiancé, a tax attorney

Lisa Lum: Vincent Jong's girlfriend

Summary
Waverly, age 36, describes meeting her mother for lunch in an unsuccessful bid to tell her she's marrying Rich Schields. Lindo has never met him, and she changes the subject whenever Waverly mentions him. Waverly takes Lindo to her cluttered apartment to show off a mink jacket, Rich's Christmas gift. Lindo criticizes its poor quality and refuses to acknowledge the unmistakable signs that Rich lives there.

Waverly comments that Lindo "knows how to hit a nerve." The first time it happened, she was 10 and a chess champion. They argued in the middle of a busy street and didn't speak to each other for several days afterwards. Waverly said she wouldn't play chess again. After another argument Waverly came down with chicken pox.

Lindo returned to her usual self during her daughter's illness. Waverly returned to chess, but she noticed that Lindo didn't pay as much attention to her success as she had before. She began to lose more often. At 14, she quit.

Waverly thinks Lindo will criticize Rich a little at a time until it ruins her feelings for him, as she did with Marvin, Shoshana's father. Waverly doesn't want her mother to find flaws in Rich.

Finally, she figures out how to arrange for Rich to meet her parents. They visit Suyuan and Canning Woo one Sunday afternoon in time to be invited to stay for dinner. When she writes her thank-you note, she adds, "Rich said it was the best Chinese food he has ever tasted." Shortly afterward, Lindo invites Waverly to bring "a friend" for a birthday dinner for her father.

When they arrive, she notices Lindo's "forced smile" as she meets Rich. In the kitchen later Lindo remarks that Rich has "spots on his face" when asked what she thinks. At dinner Rich commits one error after another without even realizing it; at home he tells Waverly that he thinks everything went well.

The next day she drives back to her parents', determined both to announce her engagement and to confront Lindo. Her mother is sleeping on the sofa and looks dead. Waverly starts crying, causing Lindo to wake up, afraid something has happened. Waverly announces she's going to marry Rich and awaits Lindo's criticism.

To Waverly's surprise, her mother already knows they're getting married. Waverly stammers that she knows Lindo doesn't like Rich. Lindo is hurt Waverly thinks she would be so devious and accuses Waverly of being devious. Waverly, confused, says she isn't sure what's inside her. Half of her, Lindo explains, comes from her father's Cantonese family. The other half is from her mother's clan in Taiyuan. They have a pleasant conversation until Waverly confuses Taiyuan with Taiwan. To her they sound alike, but Lindo indignantly insists they are completely different.

Waverly doesn't understand the point, but she learns something about herself. She sees that the little girl who ran away from her mother years ago has been hiding. When she finally lets down her guard a little, she sees "an old woman, a wok for her armor, a knitting needle for her sword, getting a little crabby as she waited patiently for her daughter to invite her in."

The story shifts to the present. Waverly says she and Rich will postpone their wedding so they can honeymoon in China in October. Lindo mentions she plans to go back then, too, but not with them. Waverly knows Lindo really would like to travel with them. She knows it would be a disaster, but she also thinks it's a good idea.

Analysis
Tan returns to the motif of chess maneuvers to characterize the relationship between Waverly and Lindo. The story contains several allusions to chess, beginning with the argument on Stockton Street described from Lindo's point of view in "Rules of the Game" and from Waverly's perspective in this story. When Lindo does not speak to Waverly for a few days, Waverly recognizes a stratagem. Rather than responding in anger and falling into a trap, she, too, refuses to speak.

After a few days Waverly decides the next move is hers, and she stops playing chess. She even chooses "to sacrifice a tournament," as she might strategically give up a chess piece. When the tournament comes and goes and Lindo still does not speak, Waverly's next ploy is "to pretend to let her win" by announcing she wants to resume chess. She is startled when Lindo says "no." In a scene reminiscent of the ending of "Rules of the Game," she retreats to her bedroom and stares at her chessboard, trying to "undo this terrible mess."

Chicken pox returns the mother/daughter relationship to a semblance of normalcy. Waverly returns to competitive chess, but Lindo no longer offers her support. Waverly loses a tournament and reports that Lindo looked satisfied, "as if it had happened because she had devised this strategy."

As an adult, Waverly continues manipulating circumstances to her advantage. When Lindo refuses to react to the obvious signs that Rich lives with her, she devises a gambit to get her to meet him. It succeeds: after Waverly sends a thank-you note to Lindo's arch-rival Suyuan, telling her Rich said it was the best Chinese food he had ever eaten, Lindo invites Waverly to bring a friend over for dinner. Waverly knew Lindo would

want to outdo Suyuan.

After the dinner, Waverly says, "In her hands I always became the pawn….And she was the queen." She visits her parents to announce her engagement and ends up talking with Lindo about her family background. At the end, she says, they have reached "a stalemate." Neither dominates the other.

Tan offers hope for reconciliation between the women when Waverly acknowledges that the problems in her relationship with Lindo are at least partly of her own making. Waverly also sees that Lindo has not given up on her. The closing image, of Waverly, Rich, and Lindo flying to China together, "moving West to reach the East," evokes Jing-mei's observation in "*The Joy Luck Club*" that the East is "where things begin." In the next section "Double Face" reveals Lindo's attitude toward a new relationship with her daughter.

Chapter Summaries: Without Wood Summary and Analysis

New Character:
Old Mr. Chou: the Chinese equivalent of the Sandman

Summary
When Rose was little, she had bad dreams. In one of them, she fell through a hole in Old Mr. Chou's floor into a garden. When he shouted at her, she began to run through fields of surrealistic flowers until she came upon sandboxes, each containing a new doll. An-mei told Old Mr. Chou that she knew which one Rose would select, so Rose deliberately chose a different one. An-mei shouted, "Stop her!" and Rose ran off, followed by Old Mr. Chou, who told her she should listen to her mother. When Rose told her the dream, An-mei laughed and said Rose should ignore Old Mr. Chou and just listen to her; Rose protests that even Old Mr. Chou listens to her.

The story jumps to the present. Rose meets An-mei at a funeral one month after telling her that she and Ted are getting a divorce. An-mei talks during most of the service, telling Rose she is too thin, asking her if she has money, asking her why Ted has sent a check, deciding that Ted "is doing monkey business with someone else." Rose disagrees with the last statement. An-mei asks why Rose can talk to a psychiatrist, but not to her, about her problems. She says a mother knows what is inside her children and that psychiatrists "only make you *hulihudu*, make you see *heimongmong*." The English equivalents are "confused" and "dark fog." The terms mean the sensation of being frightened and in the dark while trying to find the way. That is how she has felt lately, because she has been talking to everyone but Ted.

Ted sends divorce papers for her to sign and a check to help her out until the settlement. Rose is hurt because the pen he used to write the check was her gift to him last Christmas. He had promised he would only use it for "important things." Rose doesn't know what to do, so she puts the papers and the check "in a drawer where I kept store coupons which I never threw away and which I never used either."

Just before she pulls the papers out of the drawer to sign them, she thinks about how much she loves her house. She remembers that Ted used to pay careful attention to the garden. As she looks at it through a window, she notices that the garden has been neglected and wonders when Ted stopped working in it. She remembers a fortune she once read from a cookie: "When a husband stops paying attention to the garden, he's thinking of pulling up roots."

Three days later Ted calls. He is annoyed that Rose hasn't cashed his check or signed the papers and threatens to have them formally served. He wants the house; he wants to get remarried. Rose is stunned. She asks Ted to come over the next day, promising him the papers.

The next day she shows him the overgrown garden and says she likes it that way. She gives him his papers, and he offers to let her live in the house 30 days until she finds someplace else to live. Rose says she's staying in the house and that her lawyer will be serving him with papers. She has not signed his.

Rose tells Ted, "You can't just pull me out of your life and throw me away." She sees by his expression that he is *hulihudu* and that her words have power. That night she dreams that she is in the garden with Old Mr. Chou and her mother. It is foggy, and they are planting something in the planter boxes. When she walks closer, she can see freshly planted weeds "below the *heimongmong*, all along the ground…spilling out over the edges, running wild in every direction."

Analysis

Rose, who never had to make a decision before, now finds herself facing several. Amy Tan uses the situation to develop two intertwining themes. The first might be stated simply as "Listen to your mother." The second theme affirms the value of Chinese thinking in a multicultural society. The common denominator for the themes is An-mei.

The title refers to the Chinese belief that people consisted of fire, water, earth, metal, and wood. An imbalance of even one element could have serious consequences, as suggested in "The Red Candle," when the matchmaker says Lindo was unable to conceive because she had too much metal. In "*The Joy Luck Club*" Jing-mei says that An-mei had too little wood and was therefore unable to think for herself. In this story An-mei states that Rose has no wood, and, in an irony apparent only to the reader, confides that she herself almost became that way once. An-mei uses the analogy of a tree and a weed to explain the difference between having and not having wood and promises that a girl who listens to her mother will be strong.

"I used to believe everything my mother said," Rose says in the opening line of the story, "even when I didn't know what she meant." The children of immigrant parents usually reject their parents' culture and adopt the ways of the new country as they try to assimilate, and Rose fits the pattern. Forced to choose between American ways and Chinese ways, Rose chooses the American ways almost every time. "It was only later that I discovered there was a serious flaw with the American version," Rose asserts. "There were too many choices, so it was easy to get confused and pick the wrong thing." Again Rose fits the pattern of immigrants' children not appreciating their parents' culture until they are older.

An-mei suspects Ted is having an affair when she learns he has sent Rose a check. Rose finds the idea laughable at the time, but later she discovers her mother was right. At that point she abandons her American ideas in favor of her mother's Chinese ideas, decides she will speak to Ted, and invites him over. She retrieves the divorce papers from the drawer where she puts things she can't decide about, and finds her voice: "You can't just pull me out of your life and throw me away."

Rose's remark alludes to An-mei's analogy. She will not allow Ted to treat her like a weed. She has listened to her mother and has wood now. Ted is confused, *hulihudu*, by the power of her words; and Rose is pleased. Once the power of her mother's words had shaped her life, but Rose finally has power in words of her own. The incident underscores the twin themes.

The weeds in the garden represent Rose. An-mei's earlier description of weeds "running along the ground until someone pulls you out and throws you away" foreshadows Ted's intentions. Rose notices some weeds that have worked their way into cracks in the patio and under loose shingles and can't be pulled out without structural damage. The image suggests that Rose herself won't be discarded easily. She tells Ted she likes the garden overgrown and wild. Her defiance suggests her new strength.

The fog of the garden that afternoon parallels the *hulihudu*, confusion, Rose sees in Ted's face after this announcement. It returns in Rose's final dream, where planter boxes replace sandboxes and lovingly tended

weeds “below the *heimongmong*” replace the dolls of her first dream. This image suggests that Rose can accept herself as she is.

Chapter Summaries: Best Quality Summary and Analysis

Summary
Jing-mei, the narrator, describes a pendant necklace Suyuan gave her a few weeks before her death. Called a “life’s importance,” the pendant is an elaborately carved piece of white and green jade about the size of her little finger. She believes the carvings symbolize her mother’s wishes for her, but she doesn’t know what they are, and no one else can tell her.

The story flashes back to the night her mother gave her the pendant. Suyuan had invited the Jongs over to celebrate Chinese New Year, so earlier in the day she and Jing-mei went shopping for crabs. As Jing-mei selects the tenth crab, she accidentally causes another crab to lose a leg. The manager sees them and forces them to buy the extra crab.

At dinner each person takes the best of the crabs left, until the platter reaches Jing-mei. She starts to take the one with the missing leg, offering the better one to her mother. Suyuan insists that Jing-mei take the good one. As the others eat, Suyuan quietly takes her crab into the kitchen.

The dinner conversation is friendly and lively until Waverly asks Jing-mei if she isn’t afraid to have her hair cut by a gay beautician. After more insults, Jing-mei decides to embarrass Waverly. She asks when Waverly’s firm will pay for some free-lance copywriting she had done more than a month ago. Everyone grows quiet. Waverly tells June that her writing was not good enough. Jing-mei stammers that of course revision is at no cost. Waverly says that Jing-mei’s work is unsophisticated and has no style. She mocks it, repeating it as a television announcer would, and everyone laughs. Jing-mei picks up a couple of plates, trying not to cry.

After everyone has left, Suyuan comes into the kitchen and starts to make tea as Jing-mei puts away the dishes. When Jing-mei asks why Suyuan didn’t eat her crab, Suyuan answers that it was a bad crab. What if someone else had chosen it? she wonders. Suyuan smiles. “Only you pick that crab. Nobody else take it. I already know this. Everybody else want best quality. You thinking different.” It sounds like a compliment.

Jing-mei asks Suyuan why she didn’t use the new dishes, her gift five years ago. Suyuan replies she forgot she had them. Then, as if she had just remembered, she gives Jing-mei the necklace she is wearing. When Jing-mei protests, Suyuan insists, saying she had meant to give it to her long ago. Jing-mei accuses Suyuan of giving her the necklace because of the scene with Waverly. Suyuan dismisses the idea, saying Waverly is like a crab that always walks sideways or crooked. Jing-mei, she says, goes a different way.

Analysis
“Best Quality” moves easily between discussion of best quality things and best quality people, emphasizing that life’s importance lies in showing respect to others and to oneself.

Suyuan buys crab, a delicacy, to celebrate the Chinese New Year. She wants to offer her guests the best, so when she is forced to purchase the one with the missing leg, she considers it an extra, not one of the ten she needs. She is not expecting Shoshana, a child, to eat crab. Waverly, however, gives the biggest and best crab to her daughter, even though she knows Shoshana doesn’t like it. Like every other mother, Waverly wants her daughter to have the best.

As the platter goes around, the guests each choose the best for themselves except Jing-mei, who offers the better one to her mother. Suyuan, like Waverly, insists that her daughter have the best, even though she knows Jing-mei doesn't care for crab and even though she believes the crab she gives herself is not fit to eat. Both Jing-mei and Suyuan offer the best to others and are willing to take second-best for themselves.

Suyuan says of the pendant she gives Jing-mei, "Not so good, this jade." She offers hope for its future, though, saying it will become greener if Jing-mei wears it every day. Jade symbolizes purity, in this case purity of intention: Mother and daughter share a willingness to offer their best to others, which is more important than having the best quality possessions.

Some critics have suggested that Suyuan's words to Jing-mei in the kitchen are in the nature of a gentle scolding, that Jing-mei has never wanted the best for herself, a pattern introduced in "Two Kinds" when she refused to develop her musical talent. The necklace suggests that Suyuan wants her daughter to remember that she is "still worth something." The gift follows Jing-mei's vision of herself as a success only at small things. No doubt her mother's vote of confidence is welcome.

Several critics have commented on the final scene in this story, in which Jing-mei takes her mother's place in the kitchen, symbolically becoming her mother. Throughout literature daughters have identified with their mothers hesitantly or uncertainly. Jing-mei, however, is quite comfortable in assuming some of her mother's role, suggesting that she has found strength in her mother's confidence and love. She will need that strength when she travels to China to tell her sisters about Suyuan.

Chapter Summaries: Queen Mother of the Western Skies, Vignette Summary and Analysis

Summary
A grandmother plays with her infant granddaughter on her lap. She says she doesn't know which is better, innocence or safety. She was once innocent and laughed "for no reason" but gave up that foolishness to protect herself. She taught her daughter to do the same. Now she wonders if she did the right thing.

The baby laughs. The grandmother pretends the baby is Syi Wang Mu, the Queen Mother of the Western Skies, who has already lived many lifetimes and knows the answer. She listens, and thanks the baby for her advice. She says the baby must teach its mother, the grandmother's daughter, "how to lose your innocence but not your hope. How to laugh forever."

Analysis
This vignette completes the cycle. In the first vignette, a young woman travels to America with a swan and dreams. In the second, the woman, now the mother of a young child, struggles to raise her. In the third, her daughter is an adult, but she still tries to help her. In this vignette the woman is a grandmother. She reflects on her life and wonders whether she has done the best she could for her daughter. She decides that the best way to raise children is to show them the evils of the world but to maintain the hope that life can be good despite evil.

Maintaining hope in the face of the realities of life is one of the most important themes of this novel.

Chapter Summaries: Magpies Summary and Analysis

New Characters:
Wu Tsing: An-mei's mother's second husband, a wealthy merchant in Tientsin

Yan Chang: An-mei's mother's personal servant

First Wife: Wu Tsing's official wife, mother of two daughters. She is addicted to opium

Second Wife: Wu Tsing's concubine. She dominates the other women in the household

Third Wife: Wu Tsing's concubine. She has three daughters

Fifth Wife: Wu Tsing's most recent concubine. She is very young

Syaudi: son of Wu Tsing and An-mei's mother. Second Wife claims him as her own

Summary
An-mei, the narrator, talks about Rose's divorce. Rose complains that she has no choice in the matter, but An-mei says refusing to make an effort is a choice. An-mei's Chinese upbringing trained her to want nothing for herself. She tried to raise Rose differently, but "she came out the same way!" An-mei wonders if it's just because they're all women.

The story flashes back to when An-mei is nine, and her mother returns to the family home in Ningpo. She is not welcome. She mourns the death of her mother, Popo, even though Popo had disowned her years earlier. After Popo's funeral, she prepares to leave. An-mei leaves with her.

During the long trip to Wu Tsing's, An-mei's mother points out that An-mei will have a new home, new family, and many new things. Every night An-mei falls asleep snuggled next to her mother. She feels very comfortable.

When Wu Tsing and the other wives return, everything changes. Yan Chang tells An-mei the circumstances allowing Second Wife to manipulate Wu Tsing easily. She also relates why An-mei's mother married him. These revelations cause An-mei to view the household dynamic from an adult perspective. When her mother later commits suicide, An-mei understands both the causes and the intended effect. She gains the life her mother wanted for her and Syaudi, her son.

The story returns to the present. An-mei understands confusion and powerlessness, but she refuses to submit. A village that fought off birds that had destroyed their crops for generations represents that courage to her.

Analysis
An-mei's story concludes with her observation that women have more choices in America today than they had in China in her childhood. An-mei herself participates in the transition between the two. She stops submitting, swallowing her tears, and begins asserting herself, shouting.

Amy Tan uses both swallowing tears and shouting as motifs to underscore this progression. Early in the story An-mei's mother tells her daughter how disappointed she was when Popo told her it was time to grow up, to stop shouting, playing, and crying. She learned that women should swallow their tears so they don't let their sorrow cause others to be happy. Thus, women were denied the expression of even basic emotions. Men could shout, as An-mei's uncle does; but women were not permitted to respond in kind. An-mei's mother kneels before him instead, "crying with her mouth closed," completely powerless. An-mei's decision to leave with her mother is a silent defiance of his wishes.

When Wu Tsing acknowledges his debt to her mother, An-mei sees another opportunity to assert herself. She begins to shout, noisily claiming power. Years later the story of the villagers shouting to defeat the predatory birds causes her to shout for joy. The transition from vulnerability to strength is complete.

In addition to these two motifs, three symbols in this story deserve mention. An-mei describes the elaborate European clock in her mother's room. The figures go through their routines when the clock chimes the hour. At first An-mei is fascinated by its intricacy. Later it becomes a nuisance, keeping her awake at night. Eventually she learns to ignore it and discovers that she has developed the ability to disregard "something meaningless calling to me." Recognizing and resisting the meaningless things is a measure of An-mei's developing ability to recognize what is true.

An-mei learns the lesson a second time when Second Wife gives her the necklace. Once her mother demonstrates that it is glass, she sees it as "something meaningless." Once we learn of Second Wife's earlier treachery, the purpose of the necklace becomes evident: to buy An-mei's loyalty. The ring of watery blue sapphire that An-mei's mother gives her at the end of this lesson is the same ring An-mei throws into the cove to bring back Bing in "Half and Half."

The final symbol serves as a foreshadowing. When An-mei's mother gives her a Western outfit to wear from the steamer to Wu Tsing's home, nothing fits. Tan points especially to the white shoes, which have to be stuffed with paper before An-mei can wear them. She mentions twice that she has trouble walking in these shoes, a suggestion that she will have difficulty following in her mother's footsteps in the household of Wu Tsing. Her efforts to assert herself are the result of her mother's actions, but the opposite of them as well. She does not swallow her tears; she shouts.

Tan frames the story of An-mei's childhood with reference to Rose and her divorce, an ongoing plot from "Half and Half" and "Without Wood." Rose believes she has no choices, but Rose does not know what it means to have no choices. An-mei does, and she shouts for joy that the change has come.

Chapter Summaries: Waiting Between the Trees Summary and Analysis

New Character:
Ying-ying's first husband: never named, Ying-ying called him "Uncle" when she first met him. He is murdered by a mistress

Summary
Ying-ying, the narrator, loves her daughter Lena, but they have never been close. She wants to tell her daughter everything about her life now in an effort to rescue Lena from herself.

The story flashes back to Ying-ying's childhood. She says she was a wild, stubborn, and arrogant girl from a wealthy family. She met a coarse, drunken man the night her youngest aunt was married. The day after her aunt's wedding, she saw a sign that convinced her she would marry him.

As they sat in a boat on Tai Lake not long after their marriage, Ying-ying fell in love with him and began to do everything just for him. She knew she was pregnant with a boy the night it happened, and she was very happy.

She began to worry when she noticed her husband taking more frequent and longer business trips, especially after she was pregnant. Eventually her youngest aunt told her he was living with an opera singer in the North. Even later she learned there had been many other women. In her grief and anger at being abandoned, she had an abortion. Ying-ying remarks ironically that Lena thinks she doesn't know "what it means to not want a baby."

Ying-ying was born in the year of the Tiger, and her tiger spirit helped her overcome adversity. The tiger's colors symbolize its two sides: The gold side is powerful and active; the black side is shrewd and patient. She learned to be patient after her husband left her. Overcome by depression, she left her mother-in-law's home and moved in with some cousins in the country outside Shanghai. She lived in crowded, dirty conditions for 10 years. Then she moved to the city and got a job selling women's clothing.

Clifford St. Clair, an American clothing importer, introduced himself one day. Ying-ying found him unremarkable, but she also knew he was a sign that her life was about to change again.

Four years later a letter from her aunt told her that her husband was dead. Ying-ying "decided to let Saint marry [her]." She put aside her own spirit, her chi, because it had only brought her pain and describes herself as "a tiger that neither pounced nor lay waiting between the trees. I became an unseen spirit." She came to America with him and raised a daughter with whom she did not feel close. She didn't care, because she had no spirit. She can't say she didn't love her husband, but she says "it was the love of a ghost."

Ying-ying wants to give Lena her tiger spirit, because, to Ying-ying's shame, Lena has no chi. She can hear Lena and Harold talking downstairs. She knows that once she knocks over the vase and table, Lena will come upstairs. She says, "Her eyes will see nothing in the darkness, where I am waiting between the trees."

Analysis
The image that unites this story is that of the tiger. Ying-ying was born in 1914, a year of the Tiger. Her husband fills out her paperwork incorrectly when she enters the United States, we are told in "The Voice from the Wall," but that does not change her from a Tiger to a Dragon.

According to the Chinese zodiac, which runs on a 12-year cycle, tigers have great courage. They are sensitive, emotional, kind to their friends, and capable of great love. They can also be mean and stubborn, and they do not trust easily. Many of these qualities describe Ying-ying.

As a child Ying-ying might be characterized as living in the golden, or yang, side of the tiger because she is very active. As a young woman she stubbornly believes she is too good for any one man. When she falls in love with her first husband, however, every action she takes is designed to please him.

When he abandons her for another, Ying-ying aborts his son. Here the reader learns the background for Ying-ying's statement in "The Voice from the Wall" that the loss of her second son was her fault partly because "I had given no thought to killing my other son!" The years spent in the country may be seen as living in the black, yin, side of her tiger, passive and patient.

When the news of her first husband's death comes 14 years later, she decides to marry Clifford St. Clair, whom she calls "Saint." To do that, she says, "I willingly gave up my *chi*, the spirit that caused me so much pain."

Chi describes not only force of personality, but also a sense of self-worth. When Ying-ying suppresses hers, Lena has no model to learn from. As a result both women are manipulated by their husbands without protest in "Rice Husband," one linguistically and one financially. Ying-ying feels responsible that Lena will not speak up for herself. Before she dies, Ying-ying wants to pass on her chi, a final gift to Lena.

In the closing scene, she summons the pain she has avoided to fashion a metaphoric weapon. Lena, born in 1950 and also a Tiger, will resist her mother because she does not see what Ying-ying sees. The end of "Rice Husband" suggests that Lena is beginning to see that change is needed, however, so the reader is hopeful for both women's sakes.

Chapter Summaries: Double Face Summary and Analysis

New Characters:
Lindo's helper in Peking: never named, she gives Lindo advice about coming to America

Lindo's helper in San Francisco: never named, she helps Lindo get an apartment and job

Summary
Lindo narrates this story, set in the present. Waverly has second thoughts about going to China on her honeymoon with Rich. Lindo assures her that everyone in China will know she is not Chinese by the look on her face.

Lindo wanted her children to have "the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character." She did not realize that the two don't mix. She was able to teach Waverly the American part about opportunity but not the Chinese part about personal integrity.

Lindo and Waverly are at Mr. Rory's, having Lindo's hair styled. When Mr. Rory mentions that Lindo and Waverly look alike, Lindo tells Waverly a person can see someone's character and future in their facial features.

Lindo recalls coming to America. She had paid a woman to advise her on how to deal with American immigration officials and how to complete paperwork. The woman had also given her the address of someone in San Francisco's Chinatown who would help her after she arrived. The woman in Chinatown charged Lindo $3.00 for a hastily jotted list of addresses. Lindo used the list to find an apartment and a job in a fortune cookie factory, where she made a friend, An-mei Hsu.

An-mei introduced Lindo to Tin Jong. At first Lindo objected to An-mei's introducing her to someone from a different region of China, but An-mei pointed out that, in America, "everybody is now from the same village even if they come from different parts of China." Because Lindo and Tin spoke different dialects of Chinese, they couldn't really speak to each other. They attended English class together, and sometimes wrote in Chinese. Lindo was sure Tin really liked her, though, because he would act out what he was trying to say. Lindo used a carefully planted fortune cookie to let Tin know she wanted to marry him. Nine months after their marriage their first child, Winston, was born.

When Waverly was born, Lindo started thinking about things differently. She wanted everything to be better for her daughter. She named her after the street they lived on because she wanted Waverly to know she belonged somewhere. She also realized that one day her daughter would move away "and take a piece of me with [her]."

The story returns to the present, as Mr. Rory puts the finishing touches on Lindo's hair. Lindo compares her reflection to her daughter's and notices Waverly's nose is crooked. Waverly says it has always been this way, just like Lindo's; and she likes it. It makes them both look devious.

Lindo remembers that when she returned to China last year, everyone could tell she was a foreigner. She wonders what she has lost and gained, and decides she will ask Waverly's opinion.

Analysis
The title "Double Face" returns the reader to the motif of yin and yang, which dominates the novel. In this story, however, more attention is placed on the search for balance between the two. The title works on several levels, suggesting the duality of Lindo and Waverly, of American circumstances and Chinese character, of

Lindo's "American face," which hides her thoughts, and her "Chinese face," which is sincere, and even the duality of a straight nose and a crooked one.

One of the important images in this story is the reflection in the hairdresser's mirror. Waverly is a reflection of Lindo, and Lindo is proud of her. Lindo, on the other hand, will reflect on Waverly at the wedding; and Waverly is not proud of her. Lindo is disappointed. Reflection also serves as a metaphor as Lindo thinks about the events of her life before Waverly's birth.

When Mr. Rory remarks on how much the two women look alike, Lindo is pleased, but Waverly is not. The reader will recall that young women often resist identifying with their mothers from the discussion in "Best Quality." Waverly certainly fits that pattern. She refers to Lindo in the third person while she is present, for example, and asks her a question and then answers it herself. She does not treat her mother as she would treat anyone else she respects.

Lindo's reflection on the day her mother told her fortune by reading her face points indirectly to Waverly, too, since the two women look so much alike. Her mother warns that a twisted nose leads to bad luck. A woman who has a crooked nose, she says, "is always following the wrong things, the wrong people, the worst luck." Lindo's nose is straight until the bus accident, but Waverly's has always been crooked. She likes it, saying it makes both women look "devious," which she defines as "looking one way, while following another….We mean what we say, but our intentions are different…we're two-faced." As long as she gets what she wants, Waverly is happy to be two-faced.

This is a very un-Chinese way of thinking. Lindo has to get used to it. She remembers that, on her recent trip to China, everyone knew just by looking at her face that she was a foreigner. Lindo wonders what she has lost and gained from her American circumstances. In a move that suggests that she has come to value Waverly's opinion, she decides to ask her.

One of the strengths of this story is Lindo's voice summarizing her life. The author grants the older generation a respect that her character Waverly does not. The daughter will have the last word only because her mother values her opinion. The stories of the mothers do not end just because the daughters are adults. Wisdom continues to develop. In this sense Tan is using a Chinese character trait, respect, to illustrate American circumstances.

Chapter Summaries: A Pair of Tickets Summary and Analysis

New Characters:
Aiyi: Jing-mei's great-aunt

Lili: Aiyi's great-granddaughter

Wang Chwun Yu and Wang Chwun Hwa: Suyuan's twin daughters, Jing-mei's half sisters. Their names mean "Spring Rain" and "Spring Flower"

Mei Ching and Mei Han: the couple who find and raise the twins

Suyuan's schoolmate: never named. She recognizes the twins and contacts Suyuan with their address

Summary
Jing-mei narrates this story. She and her father are on a train from Hong Kong to Shenzhen, China. Her father

has tears in his eyes as he looks out the train window at the countryside. Even Jing-mei is moved by the sight, "as if [she] had seen this a long, long time ago, and had almost forgotten." After they visit Canning's aunt in Guangzhou, they will go to Shanghai to meet Jing-mei's twin half sisters, whom she has never seen before.

At Guangzhou Jing-mei and her father meet Aiyi, his aunt, and her family. The city seems very modern, and the taxi pulls up in front of an imposing hotel that doesn't fit Jing-mei's ideas of Communist China. The rooms are even stocked with Western snacks and drinks. The family decides just to stay at the hotel so they can visit.

At 1:00 a.m. Jing-mei wakes up, sitting on the floor in her hotel room. Everyone has gone to sleep except Aiyi and Canning, talking quietly about Suyuan's daughters. Jing-mei asks why her mother abandoned the twins.

Canning narrates this flashback. Suyuan walked several days, unable to get a ride. Eventually she could not walk any farther. Convinced she was going to die, she put the babies on the side of the road and lay down next to them, begging passers-by to take them. No one would.

When no one was left on the road, Suyuan put jewelry under one girl's shirt and money under the other's. She wrote a message on the backs of photos of her family, asking whoever found the girls to take care of them and take them to their family in Shanghai for a reward. She touched the girls on the cheek and left without looking back. Her only hope was that they would be found by someone who would take good care of them. She did not allow herself to envision any other alternative.

She walked a while, then fainted. She awoke to find she had been rescued by American missionaries who brought her to Chungking, where she learned that her husband had died two weeks earlier. She met Canning in the hospital there.

Mei Ching and her husband, Mei Han, who lived in a hidden cave, found the twins and raised them, since they had no children of their own. They discovered the valuables and photographs Suyuan had left, but neither of them could read. By the time they found someone who could tell them what was written on the photographs, Mei Ching didn't want to give them up.

When the girls were eight, Mei Han died. Mei Ching decided to take the girls back to their family, hoping she would be hired as their nanny. The address on the back of the pictures was now a factory, though, and no one knew anything about the family whose house had been at that site. Suyuan and Canning had returned to that address, too, seven years earlier, hoping to find her daughters and family.

When it was possible to send mail to China once again, Suyuan immediately began to write to her old friends, asking them to look for her daughters. Suyuan even contemplated going back to China, but Canning, not knowing her motives, told her they were too old for the trip. Canning wonders if perhaps Suyuan's spirit guided the friend from Shanghai who found the twins walking down the stairs in a department store not long after Suyuan died.

Jing-mei narrates as she and Canning say good-bye to Aiyi and her family at the airport, knowing they'll never meet again. Their plane lands in Shanghai. Someone shouts, "She's arrived!" and Jing-mei thinks she sees her mother. Then she sees the other sister. Both are waving, and one is holding the picture of her she sent them earlier. Once Jing-mei gets past the gate, they all hug.
Her sisters look familiar to her. She realizes that she is Chinese because her family is Chinese. As Suyuan had predicted, it was in her blood, "waiting to be let go."

Canning takes a Polaroid of the three women, and they stand together to watch it develop:

> The gray-green surface changes to the bright colors of our three images, sharpening and deepening all at once. And although we don't speak, I know we all see it: Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish.

Analysis
Jing-mei's trip to China serves as a metaphor for a journey into her perceptions about herself. She considers how she has viewed her sisters, China itself, her mother, and herself as Chinese.
Tan incorporates a subtle motif about age that points out not only Jing-mei's view of her sisters but also everyone else's assumptions about her. At first Jing-mei thinks of her sisters only as babies. When she discovers that they are alive, she pictures them first as six-year-olds and later as ten or eleven. Not until she imagines herself bringing them the news of Suyuan's death does she see them as adults. The motif resurfaces when Jing-mei meets Aiyi, her great-aunt. Aiyi's first word to her is "*Jandale*," "So big already." Her sisters say something similar when she meets them at last: "*Meimei jandale*," "Little sister has grown up." Other changes in vision also take place.

For example, Jing-mei says, "This is Communist China?" as she gets used to the idea of modern cities and traffic, luxurious Western-style hotels, and Western food. She expected China to be like the shampoo in the hotel, somehow inferior. Being Chinese is not what she thought it would be, either. In China Jing-mei does not look different from anyone else. In America she is separated from many people by appearance. Here, she fits right in.

During the trip Jing-mei also learns the rest of her mother's wartime story. She sees that her actions were justified. Suyuan's quixotic and necessary efforts to find the girls again ennoble her. The Dickensian coincidence of the girls' discovery becomes a forgivable device when matched with the tragedy of Suyuan's early death. Jing-mei sees her mother in a different light. In "*The Joy Luck Club*," she said she didn't know anything about her mother. By the time she meets her sisters, she has much to tell them.

The new perception of her mother leads Jing-mei to a new understanding of herself. From the generation before her father to the generation after her, she sees friendly, hardworking people who seem very typical to her. Her family is Chinese, and she does not have to resist the designation any longer. "It is so obvious…After all these years, it can finally be let go."

The meeting with her sisters, long anticipated in the novel, is anticlimactic. It serves more as a resolution to the conflicts Jing-mei and Suyuan experienced individually and together. As the women crowd around the Polaroid, a device Tan uses throughout the story, the reader sees Suyuan's strength and influence as surely as the three women see her physical characteristics. Her hope has become their joy and luck.

Themes

Choices and Consequences
The Joy Luck Club presents the stories of four Chinese immigrant women and their American-born daughters. All of their lives, the Chinese mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* have struggled to make their own decisions and establish their own identities in a culture where obedience and conformity are expected. For example, when Suyuan Woo is a refugee during the Japanese invasion, she decides that she will not be a passive victim and will choose her own happiness. She forms the Joy Luck Club to provide a distraction for herself and her friends. Thus, in a situation where there appears to be no room for disobedience, Suyuan creates an identity that she and her friends assume in order to survive. The continuation of the club in the United States helps Suyuan and her friends redefine themselves in a new culture.

The mothers want their daughters to take charge of their own lives, too. Yet the mothers find it difficult to voice their concerns and be open enough about their personal experiences to make their advice valid with their daughters. Ying-Ying St. Clair, however, sees her daughter Lena's unhappiness in her marriage and courageously faces her own bad memories to help Lena make the decisions she needs to make to be free.

Identity
The American-born daughters have their own choices to make and their own identities to establish. While their mothers want Chinese obedience from their daughters, they do not want their daughters to be too passive. The Chinese mothers want their daughters to have American-like strength. The daughters work to find compromises their mothers can accept. Rose Hsu Jordan, for example, overcomes her passivity with the help of her grandmother's story and stands up to a husband who is trying to take everything from her.

Throughout the stories presented in *The Joy Luck Club* runs the common thread of mother-daughter connectedness and its influence on a daughter's identity formation. Tan's portrayal of the intense relationships between and among her characters shows the strength of the ties that bind culture and generation. These firmly undergird the choices the characters make and the identities they shape as a result of their decisions.

Culture Clash
The American-born daughters are ambivalent about their Chinese background. While they eat Chinese foods and celebrate Chinese traditions, they want their Chinese heritage to remain at home. They make American choices when they are in public and cringe in embarrassment when their mothers speak in their broken English. Worst of all, the American daughters do not see the importance of "joy luck"; to them, it is not even a word. They regard the Joy Luck Club as a "shameful Chinese custom."

The Chinese mothers fear the end of Chinese tradition in their families. Their American-born daughters hide their Chinese heritage and think like Americans. While the Chinese mothers want their daughters to enjoy the benefits of being Americans, they do not want them to forget their roots. They hope that their daughters will develop strong American characters, yet keep positive Chinese beliefs alive. The mothers need the daughters to understand the significance of the Joy Luck Club and all that it represents.

The clash of adolescence with the Amencan and Chinese cultures leaves the Chinese mothers without hope for their daughters' Chinese futures. Yet, time works its magic; the daughters grow up, and the mothers' dreams prevail. *The Joy Luck Club* survives with a daughter, Jing-Mei, continuing the tradition in place of her deceased mother, Suyuan Woo. Broken ties mend, and hope for happiness despite misfortune (what the Chinese call "joy luck") lives.

Structure
In presenting the stories of four Chinese immigrant women and their American-born daughters in *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan uses "cradling," a formal literary device that can be thought of as telling a story within a story, or nesting. In other words, Tan embeds the daughters' stories within the mothers' narratives. *The Joy Luck Club* is divided into four main segments that contain sixteen stories. The first and last sections tell eight stories—two for each mother—while the middle two sections each tell a story for each of the four daughters. The entire novel revolves primarily around the stories of Suyuan Woo and her daughter, Jing-Mei ("June"). Jing-Mei takes her mother's place in the Joy Luck Club, a club her mother created when she was in China and that she continued for her Chinese friends in America. Jing-Mei learns from her "aunties," the women who are members of the club, that they will fund her trip to China to meet with her "lost" sisters.

Setting
The Joy Luck Club is set in two places. The mothers' stories take place mostly in pre-World War II China, just before and during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). The daughters' stories occur primarily in contemporary San Francisco, although June does visit contemporary China in the final section. These

differing settings help emphasize the culture clash experienced by many of the novel's characters.

Point of View and Narration
Tan uses several first-person narrators in the novel, narrators who directly speak to the reader by using "I said", "I did" to express events. Because three of the mothers and all of the daughters tell their own stories, the narrative shifts from a mother's point of view to a daughter's point of view. Except for Suyuan Woo, each mother speaks for herself in the first and final sections of the book; the daughters each speak for themselves in the second and third sections of the book. Since Suyuan has already died when the story opens, Jing-Mei speaks for her.

Conflict
Conflicts arise between each mother and her daughter as the result of generational and cultural differences. The mothers and daughters experience the typical difficulties in understanding each others' viewpoints. Daughters try to establish their personal identities by being like their mothers, yet different in response to contemporary pressures. These generational differences are compounded by the mothers' culture-driven views of tradition. The mothers want their daughters to be Americanized, yet they also want their daughters to honor the Chinese way of life. In Asian culture, women's identities are more often defined by their relationships to others than by their occupational success, as scholar Tracy Robinson has observed. For example, while Waverly Jong is different enough from her mother to have established herself as a successful tax attorney, she is enough like her mother that she worries that her mother will not accept her Caucasian fiance. The mothers' basic concern is that their daughters will turn their backs on their culture and their Chinese heritage will be forgotten.

Symbols
Suyuan Woo's stories tell about a woman whose allegiances were divided between her American daughter and the Chinese daughters she had lost. Suyuan's Chinese and American souls are resurrected and reunited when the daughters meet at the end of the novel. The daughters' names symbolize this rebirth and reunion. Chwun Yu (Spring Rain), Chwun Hwa (Spring Rower), and Jing-Mei (June) represent the renewing force that is connected to the seasons of spring and summer. Even Suyuan's name, meaning Long-Cherished Wish, alludes to the resolution of the conflicts she and Jing-Mei shared. Finally, the Chinese interpretation of Jing-Mei's name, "pure essence and best quality," represents Jing-Mei's learning to appreciate and coming to terms with her Chinese heritage.

Characters: Characters Discussed

Suyuan Woo

Suyuan Woo, the founder of the Joy Luck Club, which meets monthly to play mah-jongg. In fleeing from a Japanese attack in 1944, she was forced to abandon her twin infant daughters on a road outside Kweilin. She searched for them until 1949, when she immigrated to San Francisco with her second husband. Her daughter Jing-mei was born in 1951. Suyuan secretly continued looking for her other daughters until her death at the age of seventy-two, two months before the book opens.

Jing-mei (June) Woo

Jing-mei (June) Woo, a thirty-six-year-old college dropout who writes advertising copy for a small ad agency in San Francisco. After her mother’s death, she learns that she has two half sisters still alive in China. By setting out to meet them, she begins coming to terms with her own Chinese heritage.

Lindo Jong

Lindo Jong, Suyuan's competitive and critical best friend, who was born in 1918 in a village near Taiyuan. A marriage was arranged for her when she was two, and she joined her husband's family when she was twelve. Eventually, she tricked her mother-in-law into dissolving the marriage. After immigrating to San Francisco, she worked in a fortune cookie factory with An-mei Hsu, who introduced her to her second husband, Tin Jong. They have three children: Winston, who is killed in a car accident at the age of sixteen, Vincent, and Waverly.

Waverly Jong

Waverly Jong, a thirty-six-year-old divorcee with a five-year-old daughter, Shoshana. Waverly is a tax attorney in San Francisco. When she was nine years old, she won national attention as a chess champion. She is insecure and fears that her mother will reject her new fiancé.

An-mei Hsu

An-mei Hsu, the wife of George Hsu and mother of Janice, Ruth, Rose, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Bing. Born in 1914, she was reared by her grandmother in Ningpo until she was nine. Her mother, the widow of a respected scholar, brought disgrace on herself by becoming the third concubine of Wu Tsing, a rich merchant in Tientsin, and she eventually poisoned herself. An-mei worries that her daughter Rose will not see the choices open to her.

Rose Hsu Jordan

Rose Hsu Jordan, the third of An-mei's seven children. When she was fourteen, she saw her four-year-old brother Bing fall off a pier at a family outing and felt responsible for his death. In college, she married Ted Jordan, a dermatologist, whom she allowed to make all the decisions in their marriage. When Ted announces that he wants a divorce after fifteen years, Rose must figure out how to stand up for what she wants.

Ying-ying St. Clair

Ying-ying St. Clair, the wife of an American man who calls her "Betty." Born in 1914 in Wushi to a wealthy family, she was married at sixteen to a philanderer who abandoned her, causing her to induce the abortion of her first child. She married Clifford St. Clair in 1946, after the death of her first husband. They have a daughter, Lena, and a son who dies at birth.

Lena St. Clair

Lena St. Clair, a thirty-six-year-old designer at her husband's architectural firm. After college, she married self-centered and success-oriented Harold Livotny and inspired him to start his own business. After five years of marriage, he still splits their expenses down the middle even though he makes seven times as much as she does.

Characters

The main characters in this novel are four women: China-born Suyuan Woo, An-Mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair; and their four daughters, American-born Jing-mei "June" Woo, Rose Hsu Jordan, Waverly Jong, and Lena St. Clair. Some readers have expressed difficulty in sensing a distinctness among the four mothers and the four daughters. The voices seem, at least on a first reading, too similar.

But if there is similarity in their voices and a sameness to the daughters' complaints about growing up Chinese-American, there is a brilliance of detail and individuality in the lives of the four women from China, who met and formed the San Francisco version of the Joy Luck Club in 1949. One cannot forget the picture of Suyuan Woo, fleeing Kweilin before the approaching Japanese army, leaving behind first her suitcases, then her food, and at last the twin daughters she could no longer carry. Or Linda Jong, getting out of a matchmaker marriage by her wits, getting to Peking, and getting out of the country. Or Ying-ying St. Clair and her stories of falling into Tai Lake at the celebration of the Moon Festival. Or An Mei Hsu, with her memories of her sad and bitter mother, the unhappy fourth wife of a wealthy man.

The daughters show varying degrees of success, American-style. Waverly, learning to play with a cast-off chess set donated by Baptist ladies, becomes a chess prodigy; June is accused by her mother of being a "college drop-off;" Rose is being divorced by her dermatologist husband; Lena has a "balanced" marriage with a successful architect — balanced down to every dollar. One thing that unites all eight voices is their expression of things they wish they could communicate to one another.

Character Analysis: An-Mei Hsu

An-Mei empowers her daughter, Rose, to stand up for her rights. Having grown up fearful of the people around her and being accustomed to self-denial, An-Mei refuses to see her own daughter endure the same unhappiness. She turns her back on her own pain and experiences, and vows to raise her daughter differently than she was raised.

An-Mei's grandparents cared for her after banning her mother for becoming another man's concubine following the death of her husband. The grandparents warned An-Mei never to speak of her mother. To them, An-Mei's mother was a ghost—someone to be forgotten entirely. An-Mei obeyed and never asked about her. An-Mei came to know her mother, however, when she returned to be with An-Mei's grandmother as she was dying. An-Mei learned from her that honor for one's mother goes much deeper than the flesh and that when you lose something you love, faith takes over.

An-Mei teaches her daughter the lessons she has learned from her own mother and from the loss of her son, Rose's brother. Rather than ignore loss, one must pay attention to it and undo the expectation. When Rose complains to An-Mei that her marriage is falling apart and she can't do anything about it, An-Mei reminds Rose of her upbringing and tells her to speak up for her rights. Rose passes An-Mei's test by advising her husband that she will not sign the divorce papers and that her lawyer will contact him about her keeping the house.

Character Analysis: Lindo Jong

Lindo Jong tries to instill in her daughter, Waverly, a sense of both obedience and self-worth. She wants her daughter to have "American circumstances and Chinese character."

Lindo's parents promise her to her future husband, Tyan-Hu, when she is only two-years-old. While she sees him at various functions over the years, she does not actually go to live with him and his family until she is twelve. Always the obedient daughter, she does not question this arrangement. She recognizes immediately, however, the kind of husband Tyan-Hu will be and feels discouraged.

Lindo and Tyan-Hu marry when she turns sixteen. While they are unhappy with each other, they do not let his family know. In the meantime, Lindo devises a plan that will allow Tyan-Hu's family to release her without their losing face. Lindo pretends that she has a dream in which Tyan-Hu's ancestors tell her that their marriage is doomed; she uses existing facts to back up her story.

When she is free of the marriage, Lindo leaves for America, where she remarries and has three children. She decides that her children should live like Americans and should not have to keep the circumstances someone else gives them. While she believes that she has succeeded in teaching this idea to her daughter, Lindo thinks she has failed to teach her Chinese character. She is surprised and satisfied, however, when Waverly demonstrates Chinese character that Lindo did not know she possessed.

Character Analysis: Waverly Jong

Waverly Jong is the figure to whom Jing-Mei is always compared by her mother, Suyuan Woo. Waverly's mother, Lindo, and Suyuan were best friends when the girls were growing up, but also tried to outdo each other when comparing their children's accomplishments. Waverly continually gave her mother something to brag about. As a child, she was a national chess champion; as an adult, she is a successful tax attorney.

When Waverly was very young, her brother received a chess set as a Christmas gift. She quickly caught on to the game and was soon winning matches against everyone she played. Her mother taught her how to "bite back her tongue," a strategy for winning arguments that also helped her win chess games. By the time she was nine, Waverly was a national chess champion. Her mother was so proud of her that she constantly boasted of her daughter's abilities, wanting people to know that she was Waverly's mother. Waverly hated her mother's bragging, and it soon became a point of contention between them.

Not only did Waverly despise her mother's bragging, she also hated that her mother tried to take credit for Waverly's talent. Lindo would tell people that she advised Waverly on the moves she made and that Waverly wasn't really smart, she just knew the tricks of the game. Finally, Waverly told her off—in public—saying that she knew nothing, that she should shut up. After that, it was a long time before Lindo spoke to Waverly, and she no longer encouraged her to play chess. When she and her mother did start talking, Waverly found that she could no longer play chess.

Remembering her mother's reaction to her public embarrassment, Waverly was afraid to let her meet her Caucasian fiance, Rich. She did not want Rich to have to suffer the criticism she knew her mother was capable of giving without thought to his feelings. She knew the silent attacks her mother would make on Rich's character; she knew that her mother could put on a front while hiding her true emotions. She knew too well how her mother could hurt her by stabbing her in her weakest parts.

Waverly finally allows her mother to meet Rich and is not surprised by her reactions. What does surprise Waverly is that when she confronts her mother about the meeting, she learns something about herself. Not only has Waverly learned the art of invisible strength from her mother, but also she has inherited her "double-faced" approach to meeting new challenges, probably the secret to her success as an adult.

Character Analysis: Rose Hsu Jordan

Rose Hsu Jordan, the daughter of An-Mei Hsu, marries Ted Jordan in defiance of their parents. Typically passive by nature, Rose takes charge by choosing to marry Ted, a non-Chinese. It is probably the most decisive action she has ever taken.

Ted balances her personality. Where she is weak, he bears the burden; where she is indecisive, he takes charge. Ted makes all the decisions in their married life until a professional mistake changes him. He then expects Rose to help him make the choices in their life together. When she can't change, he wants a divorce.

Rose begins to think about her mother's beliefs. Her mother had always had a firm belief in God until a family tragedy made her question God's wisdom. Her mother continues to believe, though, that a voice from above

guides all people and that Rose needs to listen to that voice. When Rose had nightmares as a child, with an angry Mr. Chou telling her bad things, Rose's mother told her not to listen to him, to listen only to that voice above. She told Rose that listening to too many voices would cause her to bend when she should stand strong.

Rose remembers her mother's past advice and continues to listen to her now. Her mother tells her that she must speak up for her own rights when Ted asks for the divorce. Rose finally makes a decision on her own. When she does, she dreams of her mother and Mr. Chou smiling at her.

Character Analysis: Lena St. Clair

Lena St. Clair grew up worrying about the mental health of her mother, Ying-Ying, who constantly battles paranoia and depression. While her father is English-Irish, Lena is more Chinese, having inherited many of her mother's Chinese traits—particularly her ability to see "with Chinese eyes." Lena could "see" the things her mother feared, but she kept them from her father by changing her mother's meanings in their translation to English.

Lena continually hoped that her mother would someday be well and that she and her mother could have the close relationship she saw in her dreams. Lena felt invisible and alone.

As an adult, Lena believes that her mother has always been able to see the terrible things that were going to happen to their family. Lena remembers that when she was eight, her mother had told her that she would marry a bad man. Now, she sees that her husband, Harold, might be the bad man her mother had envisioned.

While Lena and Harold had started out as equals in their relationship, Lena has discovered that their life together has become unbalanced. Harold has taken her business ideas and her money, yet has given little in return. He keeps a detailed accounting sheet and claims that they share everything equally. Lena, however, detects an unfairness. Where is Harold's love? Why must their relationship be reduced to columns on a ledger? Feeling invisible again, Lena yearns for something that she cannot put into words.

Character Analysis: Ying-Ying St. Clair

Ying-Ying, mother of Lena, experiences periods of depression and paranoia. She considers herself "lost" and attributes the cause of her mental illness to a ceremony she remembers attending as a four-year-old.

The Moon Festival ceremony gives people the opportunity to see the Moon Lady and secretly ask for a wish to be granted. Four-year-old Ying-Ying is being allowed to attend the event for the first time. She is warned, however, to behave and not to speak of her wish or it will be considered a selfish desire and will not be granted.

In the excitement of the celebration, Ying-Ying falls off the boat unnoticed and is lost. She encounters a dramatic production of the Moon Lady's arrival and believes the Moon Lady can grant her wish. When she hears the Moon Lady's sad story, she loses hope. Her despair deepens when she asks the Moon Lady that she be found, then sees that the Moon Lady is really only a man in disguise. Ying-Ying's parents find her, but she feels such a sense of loss, she never believes that she is really their daughter. This sense of loss, loneliness, and despair stay with her for the rest of her life.

Ying-Ying marries a man whom she loves very much, but who turns out to be abusive. In her pain, she aborts the son she is carrying. Ying-Ying later remarries but is never able to recover from the losses she has endured. She feels she has lost her chi, or spirit.

Only when Ying-Ying sees the pain in Lena's marriage does she decide to face her past and try to recover her chi. She symbolically breaks a table in her daughter's house to summon her spirit so that she can give it to her daughter.

Character Analysis: Jing-Mei Woo

Jing-Mei (Also called June Woo), daughter of Suyuan Woo, takes her mother's place in the Joy Luck Club when her mother dies. Jing-Mei searches for her own identity, lacks confidence, and wonders how she will fill her mother's shoes.

From the time she was a child, Jing-Mei has always lived in someone else's shadow. Her mother continually compared her to other people's children, particularly Lindo Jong's daughter, Waverly. Suyuan felt that Jing-Mei could do anything that she wanted to. She gave Jing-Mei intelligence tests and piano lessons, but Jing-Mei never measured up to her mother's expectations. Jing-Mei always felt that she was disappointing her mother.

As she got older, Jing-Mei still failed to succeed at the things her mother wanted her to do. She was less than a straight-A student. She was accepted at only an average college, from which she dropped out. Jing-Mei eventually became a freelance writer, even though her mother wanted her to earn a doctorate. Jing-Mei suffers one final insult when Waverly informs her that the freelance work Jing-Mei submitted to Waverly's tax firm was not accepted.

Jing-Mei had always felt uncomfortable with her mother's Chinese ways. When Suyuan attended the Joy Luck Club in her Chinese dresses, Jing-Mei was embarrassed. She viewed the Joy Luck Club itself as a "shameful Chinese custom." Jing-Mei's view changes, however, when she joins the Joy Luck Club. The realization that these Chinese women are depending on their daughters to keep their customs alive motivates her to reawaken her sleeping Chinese heritage. At last she has a purpose. She finds a new self-respect, confidence, and peace when she returns to China to meet with her half-sisters.

Character Analysis: Suyuan Woo

Suyuan Woo does not tell her own story in *The Joy Luck Club*. Recently deceased when the story begins, Suyuan speaks through her daughter, Jing-Mei. Because Suyuan started the Joy Luck Club, her story provides the foundation for the novel.

Suyuan started the original Joy Luck Club in Kweilin, China, during the second Japanese invasion (the Second Sino-Japanese War) right before World War II. She and other refugees had come to Kweilin seeking safety from the Japanese troops. The crowding, constant bombing, and fear immobilized everyone. Suyuan needed something to help her keep her faith. She decided to invite a group of women to play mah jong. They met weekly to play, raise money, and eat special foods. While other people criticized their extravagance, the women forgot their troubles for a short time and enjoyed one another's company. They met to share their desire to be lucky in life. Their hope for luck was their joy. Thus, the weekly meetings became known as the Joy Luck Club.

Suyuan, however, experienced great tragedy when news of the approaching troops forced her to leave for Chungking. Having no other way to travel, she fled on foot, pushing a wheelbarrow and carrying her infant twin daughters in slings on her shoulders. Suyuan grew more weary the farther she traveled. She had to start leaving her possessions along the way. Finally, when she could go no further, she left the babies along the road, too, with a note telling their names and asking that they be cared for. When she arrived in Chungking, delirious with dysentery and grief, she found that her husband had died two weeks before.

The San Francisco version of the Joy Luck Club originated in 1949, when Suyuan and her second husband arrived from China. The couple met other Chinese couples at church functions they attended to help get acclimated to their new culture. Knowing the situations from which they had all come, Suyuan felt she and her recent acquaintances needed each others' understanding and companionship. She started the Joy Luck Club so that the new friends could have joy in their hope to be lucky in this unfamiliar land.

Suyuan's friends in the Joy Luck Club honor her by telling her daughter the complete story. They offer Jing-Mei money to travel to China to meet her half-sisters, who were located just after Suyuan's death. Suyuan's life, therefore, comes full circle.

Critical Essays: Sample Essay Outlines

Topic #1
One of the unifying images of the novel relates to the Daoist concept of yin and yang and seeking balance between the two. In what ways does the author make use of these images?

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: *Author Amy Tan uses images of yin and yang to underscore the characters' search for balance*.

II. Rose in "Half and Half" and "Without Wood" must learn to speak for herself.

III. Ying-ying in "Waiting Between the Trees" must face her pain to help her daughter.

IV. Waverly sees An-mei as "protective ally" and as opponent before accepting her as she is in "Four Directions."

V. Jing-mei in "A Pair of Tickets" embraces both her American and Chinese heritage.

VI. Conclusion: The pursuit of balance teaches, as the grandmother tells her granddaughter in the final vignette, "how to lose your innocence but not your hope. How to laugh forever."

Topic #2
One of the unusual features of this novel is its narrative technique. Tan uses 10 different narrators in 20 stories and vignettes spanning 2 continents and at least 73 years. The result, however, is a coherent whole. What devices make this possible?

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: *Author Amy Tan uses vignettes, allusions among stories, and ongoing conflicts to add unity to the novel*.

II. The vignettes add unity.
A. Each vignette defines the basis for the next four stories.
B. Together the vignettes describe the life cycle.
C. The final vignette suggests a theme for the entire novel.

III. Allusions among stories add unity.
A. An-mei's sapphire ring
B. Ying-ying's first son
C. Lindo's chang

D. Suyuan's twins

IV. Ongoing conflicts add unity.
A. Suyuan and Lindo's friendly rivalry
B. Ying-ying's traumas
C. Lindo and Waverly's chess maneuvers
D. Jing-mei's understanding of who she is

V. Conclusion: The narrative technique in *The Joy Luck Club* uses dissimilar elements to create an effective whole.

Topic #3
One of the dominant themes of twentieth-century American literature has been the search to define the self. This search has variously explored the influence of history, economics, religion, family, gender, and ethnicity. Characters must reconcile themselves with these forces before they are able to face the future. In what ways do the daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* come to terms with these influences?

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: *Waverly Jong, Rose Hsu Jordan, Lena St. Clair, and Jing-mei Woo alternately resist and embrace their identities as daughters, as women, and as Chinese*.

II. Waverly as mother's daughter

III. Rose as woman of power

IV. Lena as woman of value

V. Jing-mei as Chinese

VI. Conclusion: As each character comes to terms with who she is, she affirms her mother's example of strength and courage.

Critical Essays: Suggested Essay Topics

Feathers from a Thousand Li Away
Vignette
1. In what ways might this mother represent all immigrants to America?

2. In what ways might this mother represent all parents?

The Joy Luck Club
1. Compare and contrast Suyuan's expectation of Kweilin with the reality of her life there.

2. Based on the details in this story, describe Suyuan.

3. Based on the details in this story, describe Jing-mei.

Scar
1. What evidence in the story suggests that Popo was a good mother, not only to An-mei and her brother, but also to her daughter, An-mei's mother?

2. What factors might have caused An-mei's mother to leave at the time An-mei needed her most?

3. In what ways are An-mei, her mother, and Popo "scarred"?

The Red Candle
1. Is Lindo's behavior in this story consistent with the description given of her in the first story, "*The Joy Luck Club*"? Explain your answer.

2. Compare and contrast the description of the Huang house with the people who live in it.

The Moon Lady
1. At the beginning of this story, Ying-ying describes herself as "lost." In what ways is that statement foreshadowed in "*The Joy Luck Club*"?

2. Explain the symbolism of Ying-ying's shadow.

3. Describe the expectations of women in China as they are revealed in this story. Consider expectations of Ying-ying, her mother, and Amah. Compare and contrast them with the expectations for Lindo in "The Red Candle."

The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates
Vignette
1. Discuss this vignette as a clash of cultures, typical of immigrant families.

2. Discuss this vignette as a clash of generations, typical of all families.

Rules of the Game
1. What does Waverly learn about playing chess? (Consider breaking this question into three parts: individual moves, etiquette, and overall strategy.)

2. In what ways does the story compare the relationship between Waverly and Lindo to a chess game?

3. The adult Waverly, looking back, says of her mother, "I think she thought of herself as my protective ally." Is this an accurate assessment of Lindo's attitude toward Waverly's talent and success? Explain.

The Voice from the Wall
1. Lena refers to her "Chinese eyes." Explain what she means on a literal and figurative level.

2. In what ways do problems in communication affect the St. Clair family?

Half and Half
1. Explain how the motif of yin and yang figures in this story.

2. This story touches on the issue of racial discrimination. In what ways is the author's depiction of both An-mei's and Mrs. Jordan's attitude accurate?

Two Kinds
1. In what ways does Jing-mei misunderstand Suyuan's hopes in this story?

2. In what ways do "Pleading Child" and "Perfectly Contented" describe Jing-mei?

American Translation
Vignette
1. In what ways is the mother in this vignette living in the contemporary world, and in what ways is she living in the past?

2. In what ways do parents often try to transmit their values to their children?

Rice Husband
1. Harold says, “As long as we keep the money thing separate, we’ll always be sure of our love for each other.” What evidence suggests that he is taking advantage of Lena by doing this?

2. What evidence suggests that Lena lacks self-esteem?

3. In what ways does Lena’s submission to Harold’s financial control parallel Ying-ying’s submission to St. Clair’s language control in “The Voice from the Wall”?

Four Directions
1. What references to chess maneuvers delineate the relationship between Waverly and Lindo in this story?

2. Compare and contrast Waverly’s version of her argument with Lindo with Lindo’s version in “Rules of the Game.”

Without Wood
1. In what ways does this story use the motif of weeds?

2. In what ways does this story validate the theme of “listen to your mother”?

Best Quality
1. After Waverly insults Jing-mei several times, Suyuan says to Waverly, “True, cannot teach style. June not sophisticate like you. Must be born this way.” Explain this apparent betrayal in light of Suyuan’s later contempt for Waverly.

2. Suyuan says she knew that only Jing-mei would choose the bad crab. She says, “Everyone else want best quality. You thinking different.” Is this a compliment or a scolding? Defend your answer.

3. Suyuan gives Jing-mei a gift of jade that she admits is not the best quality. Compare this necklace with Lindo’s gold bracelets in “The Red Candle.” Can we draw conclusions about the two women based on the attitudes surrounding these items?

Queen Mother of the Western Skies
Vignette
1. In what ways has the novel already shown characters who lost their innocence but not their hope?

2. In this vignette, the grandmother learns from her granddaughter and plans to share that learning with her daughter, the baby’s mother. What does this cycling of wisdom suggest about generations learning from one another?

Magpies
1. An-mei says she learned to shout the day Wu Tsing promised to treat her as if she were the daughter of First Wife. She also says she shouted for joy when the Chinese peasants defeated the birds that had plagued them. Where else does the story mention shouting? What does it add? Trace the development of the motif of

shouting in this story.

2. An-mei's mother is Fourth Wife, *Sz Tai* in Chinese. An-mei says that "sz" sounds like "die" if said incorrectly. In what ways is this an appropriate name for her?

Waiting Between the Trees
1. Ying-ying was born in the year of the Tiger. In what ways is the Tiger a good symbol for her?

2. What evidence suggests that Ying-ying lost both her innocence and her hope as a result of her first marriage?

Double Face
1. When Lindo mentions two faces, the reader may recognize a yin and yang. In this story, what pairs may be seeking balance?

2. You have read four stories about Lindo and Waverly: "The Red Candle," "Rules of the Game," "Four Directions," and "Double Face." Would you agree or disagree that Lindo's mother accurately predicted their lives and character by "reading" Lindo's face? Bear in mind that Lindo and Waverly look very much alike.

A Pair of Tickets
1. Why might Jing-mei want to hear the story of her mother's ordeal in Chinese rather than English?

2. Jing-mei does not understand what part of her is Chinese until she visits China and sees all the people that she is like. She is also like her American friends, but in a different way. Discuss what parts are American and what parts are Chinese.

Critical Essays: Masterplots II: Juvenile & Young Adult Literature Series The Joy Luck Club Analysis

The passage cited above is key to the novel. The sense that the daughters are reincarnations of their mothers is reinforced not only by June taking her dead mother's place at the gaming table but also by the mirror imagery that recurs throughout the book. Each of the sections opens with a kind of parable that unites the four stories that follow, such as the one that precedes the section entitled "American Translation." In this allegory, an anonymous mother, judging the mirrored armoire at the end of her married daughter's bed a bad omen, cures the defect by placing an opposing mirror at the head of the bed. Glancing in the mirror now, the daughter sees not her own reflection, but a reflection of her reflection. This phenomenon her mother calls "peach blossom luck," the happiness of seeing a seemingly endless parade of generations, each image a smaller version of the one that it reflects.

June, whose narrative voice dominates and unifies *The Joy Luck Club*, has lost her mother before the novel opens. Before her mother died, however, she revealed that June was not her only daughter. Indeed, June has two sisters, twins born of Suyuan's first marriage in China. The sorrow of Suyuan's life was that she was forced to abandon the infant girls along the roadside when, fleeing Kweilin as the Japanese invaded, she could no longer carry them. Suyuan never gave up hope of finding the twins, and shortly before her death, they were discovered to be alive and in China. She died, however, before receiving this news. Now, the aunties tell June, it is her job to travel to China to fulfill Suyuan's dearest wish of being reunited with the twins and—because the aunties have perpetuated the twins' belief that Suyuan still lives as a means of keeping her wish alive—to tell them of their mother's death.

When June, whose Chinese name “Jing-mei” signifies that she is the essence of her older sisters, arrives in China and meets the twins for the first time, she sees in them a double reflection of Suyuan. The twins, for their part, recognize June by her own resemblance to Suyuan, as well as from a recent photograph that she has sent them. The three sisters embrace, all murmuring “Mama, Mama.” They celebrate the occasion by taking a joint Polaroid photograph, which instantly reveals a collective portrait of their mother: “Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished dream.” Their shared blood, June discovers, is their common language. Thus is the novel brought full circle.

The failure of communication between the cultures and the generations is another important theme of *The Joy Luck Club*, which opens with a parable about a long-cherished swan’s feather that the Chinese mother harbors over the years, awaiting the day that she can relate its meaning to her American-born daughter in perfect English. June, who has fulfilled her mother’s wish by her reunion in China with the twins, is thereby empowered to tell her mother’s tale—in effect, to take her place not only at the mah-jongg table but in the narrative sweep of Amy Tan’s book as well.

Critical Essays: Masterpieces of Women's Literature The Joy Luck Club Analysis

At first glance, *The Joy Luck Club* may seem randomly structured, but in actuality the book’s organization is complex. Tan’s use of multiple narrators and connecting vignettes shows the influence of writers such as William Faulkner and Louise Erdrich, but the narrative scheme is also patterned after the game of mah-jongg. Each family is represented once in every group of stories, just as each family is represented at the mah-jongg table at the Joy Luck Club. In mah-jongg, after each of the four players has started a round, a series is complete and the players change positions round the table. Likewise, the order of narrators changes after each group of stories. The first storyteller in the book is June. This corresponds to the position that she assumes at the mah-jongg table, the East wind, which always starts the game.

The stories in *The Joy Luck Club* are structurally self-contained. Built around a central incident or conflict, each one can be read without reference to the other stories. Yet there are numerous links among the stories that give unity to the book as a whole. Characters appear in one another’s narratives, as when the Jongs eat Chinese New Year’s dinner with the Woos in June’s story “Best Quality.” A recurring motif throughout the work is misunderstanding caused by cultural differences. All the mothers are perplexed by their American-born daughters, as are the daughters by their Chinese-born mothers. A more subtle device occurs in the third and fourth sections of the book. Each of the daughters’ stories in the third group mentions the narrator’s mother in the first sentence. Likewise, each of the mothers’ stories in the fourth group begins with a reference to the narrator’s daughter. The effect is not only to create unity within each group but also to suggest a close tie between the pairs of mothers and daughters. What one thinks, says, and does is important to the other, even in relationships where conflict is pronounced, as with Lindo and Waverly.

The short vignettes between groups of stories are an important structural feature as well. They are narrated by an omniscient voice, and their fablelike quality derives from their depiction of universal situations, such as a child challenging her mother’s warnings against danger and a grandmother musing aloud to her infant granddaughter. The vignettes introduce important thematic concerns, such as preserving hope in the face of loss and passing on one’s cultural legacy.

The quest for personal identity is the central theme in *The Joy Luck Club*. The death of Suyuan Woo causes Jing-mei to realize that she knew very little about her mother’s life, and in her stories she ponders the meaning of her own life. Her discovery that she has two half sisters in China prompts her to take her cultural heritage seriously for the first time in her life. Rose, Lena, and Waverly are also engaged in various stages of the quest for selfhood. Rose and Lena are both learning to think and act independently of their husbands, and Waverly

is discovering that her mother is not an adversary that she must outsmart. The author depicts the mothers as having resources that the daughters lack. Suyuan, An-mei, and Lindo were all severely tested by circumstances when they were young and found the strength to survive cruelty and hardship. Although Ying-ying lost her inner drive for many years, her daughter's unhappy marriage inspires her to try to regain her true nature in order to show Lena how to survive.

Critical Essays: Critical Context

The Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan's first book, is avowedly autobiographical. Like the Chinese American daughters in the book, Tan shunned her own heritage while growing up in San Francisco in the 1950's and 1960's. When Tan took her first trip to China in 1987, like her character June Woo, she embraced a cultural identity against which she had long struggled; *The Joy Luck Club* followed in 1989. Since then, Tan has published other major works of fiction. In *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), a Chinese mother tells her daughter how her life has been distorted by male domination and class disparities. *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995) concerns the relationship between a Chinese American woman and her Chinese half sister.

Tan is part of the generation of Asian American writers that first emerged in the 1970's to give voice to stories that previously were little known in the United States. Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiographical *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), which began this new wave, was both a critical and a popular success, and it provided at least a partial model for Tan's tales about growing up Chinese American. By emphasizing mother-daughter conflict within the context of competing cultures, both *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club* provide fresh variations on classic themes of family relations and inheritance. For better or worse, in these books it is the female offspring who carry with them the aspirations of the previous generation.

Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation

The development of Asian American literature can be divided into two periods. The first period was marked by the writers' interest in an autobiographical approach to identify their relationship with mainstream American culture and to establish an increased awareness of their other cultural heritage. The second period began with the publication of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* in 1989, which heralded the emergence of a large group of Asian American writers who were interested in experimenting with various literary genres and styles in search of a medium that could reflect and depict their experience accurately. Besides rekindling hope for many Asian American writers, the success of *The Joy Luck Club* pushed publishers' doors a bit wider. The book was succeeded in 1991 by Tan's second successful novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, and, that same year, by Gish Jen's *Typical American*, David Wong Louie's collection of short stories *Pangs of Love* (which won the Los Angeles Times 1991 Book Prize for first fiction), Frank Chin's *Donald Duk*, and Gus Lee's autobiographical novel *China Boy*.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan intermingles intercultural and intergenerational conflict. The mothers who immigrated to the United States from China and still have very strong cultural ties to their old home want to raise their children in the traditional Chinese way. Their Chinese American daughters, however, feel trapped between traditional Chinese culture and mainstream American society, between their aspirations for individual freedom and their desire to satisfy familial and social obligations, and between their false and their true identities. The daughters eventually conclude that they are as American as they are Chinese.

Tan spoke of her constant search "to find a harmony between the self and the world." Her thematic preoccupation with balance and harmony in *The Joy Luck Club* is revealed by chapter titles such as "Half and Half," "Two Kinds," "Four Directions," "Double Face," and "A Pair of Tickets" and in her skillful use of structure. The book begins with the mothers' stories about their experiences in China and emigrating to the

United States, and it ends with their conclusion that, much as they would like to believe they are still completely Chinese, they, too, now have two faces, a Chinese face and an American one. The daughters, on the other hand, come to the realization that “Once you are born Chinese, you cannot help but feel and think Chinese.”

Jing-mei Woo is first reluctant to join the Joy Luck Club, and she only halfheartedly accepts her Chinese name, though she mentions that it is “becoming fashionable for American-born Chinese to use their Chinese names.” She is not aware, however, that it is impossible for her to find her true identity without reclaiming her relationship with her ethnic cultural heritage. Only after joining the Joy Luck Club can she begin to understand her mother. The trip to China finally enables her to see that, together with her sisters, they look just like their mother: her “same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish.”

Tan’s use of ancient Chinese myths and legends in *The Joy Luck Club* works well with her thematic concerns. In the story “The Moon Lady,” for example, Ying-ying St. Clair, who is told that woman is “yin, the darkness within where untempered passions” lie and that man is “yang, bright truth lighting our minds,” finds a friend in Chang-o, the Moon Lady. According to the legend, Chang-o took medicine that belonged to her husband and was sent to the moon as punishment. Tan uses Ying-ying’s story and the mythical story to lament the way women were treated in a feudalist society and to suggest that that way should be rejected in traditional Chinese culture.

Critical Essays: Critical Overview

Both critics and the reading public loved *The Joy Luck Club* from the minute it came off the press in 1989. The book successfully crosses cultures and joins separate generations. An indication of the book's appeal is its translation into seventeen languages and its place on the *New York Times* bestseller list for nine months.

Literary experts appreciate Tan's skill in storytelling. They feel that she knows what makes a good story and that she handles dialogue well. In addition, they have commented that she aptly portrays the universal life cycles of life and death, separation and reunion, uncertainty and assurance. Her ability to empathize with her characters and her subject matter, observers note, makes her stories real. Readers of all ages, genders, and cultures can appreciate her insight and honesty.

Reviewers have referred to the common sense with which Tan writes about Chinese culture. Tan explores areas of Chinese life that most other writers have not attempted. Many critics note that this novel, as well as others Tan has written, stimulates cross-culture appreciation. Readers of all cultures are able to be objective about their own predicaments while at the same time making connections between themselves and Tan's Chinese characters.

In general, Tan's treatment of the mother/ daughter relationship and her understanding of her characters' ambivalence about their Chinese backgrounds provide an "intricate tapestry" that "alters the way we understand the world and ourselves, that transcends topicality," according to Michael Dorris in the *Detroit News*. Experts recognized Tan's talent, selecting her as a finalist in 1989 for the National Book Award for Fiction and nominating her for the National Book Critics Circle Award. She received not only the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award and the Commonwealth Club Gold Award, but also $1.23 million from Vintage for paperback rights; the book was also made into a popular film in 1993.

It is no wonder that Tan has sold over three million copies of *The Joy Luck Club*. As Dorris concluded, it is "the real thing."

Essays and Criticism: Exploring Mother-Daughter Differences

Published in 1989, Amy Tan's first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, remained nine months on the *New York Times* bestseller list. The book was considered a sensation and its success has not yet been duplicated by any other work of Asian-American literature. The film adaptation of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Chinese-American director Wayne Wang, was enthusiastically received as well. Though highly lauded, even Tan's later works *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Moon Lady* (1992)—a children's story based on an episode from *The Joy Luck Club*, and most recently, *The Hundred Secret Sens*es (1995), have not matched the legendary stature of Tan's first novel.

The success of *The Joy Luck Club*, according to Sao-Ling Cynthia Wong, is due in part to its "persistent allure of Orientalism." Other literary critics have attributed the author's achievements to Tan's excellent treatment of a prevalent theme in ethnic American literature: mother/daughter relationships. While most mother/daughter texts portray the daughter's struggles for identity, what distinguishes Tan's text from other ethnic novels, as Maria Heung points out, is the "foregrounding of the voices of mothers as well as of daughters." An analysis of Amy Tan's narrative techniques will explain how Tan brings the mothers' voices to the foreground.

The first narrative technique readers will notice is Tan's use of multiple points of view to narrate the stories, sixteen interlocking tales told from the viewpoints of four Chinese immigrant women and their four American-born daughters. (One of the mothers, Suyuan Woo, is recently deceased, so her story is told through her daughter, Jing-Mei (June) Woo.)

Tan's technique is relatively rare in literature. What is even more unusual is the portion of stories told from the mothers' points of view. The novel is divided into four parts. The mothers' stories constitute the first and fourth parts of the novel with the second and third parts told by their daughters. In other words, the mothers tell half of the stories in the novel.

Furthermore, the mothers are all depicted as strong and determined women who play significant roles in the daughters' stories. For example, Waverly Jong's stories portray her mother's power over her, a power so great that Waverly loses her ability to win chess tournaments after she becomes angry at her mother in the marketplace. Lena St. Clair remembers her mother's "mysterious ability to see things before they happen." Rose Hsu Jordan's mother wants her to fight her divorce. And Jing-Mei Woo remembers her mother's high expectations of her becoming a child prodigy on the piano. The presence of such significant mothers is one way *The Joy Luck Club* distinguishes itself from other mother/daughter texts.

Because of their significant presences, the mothers reinforce Tan's portrayal of tension existing in the intricate relationships between mothers and daughters. Gloria Shen notes that the Joy Luck Club "mothers are possessively trying to hold onto their daughters, and the daughters are battling to get away from their mothers." Lindo Jong may be the most possessive and powerful of the mothers. In both stories narrated by her daughter, Lindo often hovers over Waverly's shoulders as she practices chess; gives Waverly instructions such as "Next time win more, lose less"; takes credit for Waverly's victories; and brags about Waverly in the marketplace. Finally, Waverly, not able to bear her mother's boasts, says, "I wish you wouldn't do that, telling everybody I'm your daughter." The tension between mother and daughter then erupts into Lindo's prophecy of Waverly's future failures at chess. Lindo's prophecy is fulfilled; Waverly eventually gives up chess at fourteen. Twenty years later, Lindo Jong's power over Waverly nearly inhibits Waverly from reporting her forthcoming second marriage for fear of Lindo's disapproval. However, the daughter's battle song about getting away from her mother has a positive finale. Waverly's narrative about the conflict between her and Lindo ends with Lindo's acceptance of Waverly's fiance.

The mothers' overbearing presences in their daughters' stories are not meant to portray the mothers negatively. Almost all of the mothers' stories, in the first and fourth parts of the novel, begin with the mothers' concerns about the well-being of their daughters. In "The Red Candle," Lindo Jong addresses her story to Waverly: "It's too late to change you, but I'm telling you this because I worry about your baby." Ying-Ying St. Clair explains why she must tell her story to her daughter Lena: "All her life, I have watched her as though from another shore. And now I must tell her everything about my past. It is the only way to penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved." The telling and the stories themselves demonstrate the mothers' efforts to ensure better understanding between their daughters and themselves.

Both mothers and daughters try hard to communicate with each other, but sometimes misunderstandings result from linguistic differences. As Victoria Chen points out, "The lack of shared languages and cultural logic remains a central theme throughout all the narratives in Tan's book." For example, Jing-Mei Woo laments, "My mother and I never really understood one another. We translate each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what she said, while my mother heard more [than what I said]."

Tan's shrewd ear for dialogue captures the linguistic differences well. The mothers' English is undoubtedly imperfect. Subjects, articles, and prepositions are often missing. Verbs often do not agree with nouns. After, for instance, Waverly becomes angry at Lindo Jong for bragging about her at the marketplace, Lindo says, "So shame be with mother? .... Embarrass you be my daughter?" Waverly desperately tries to explain, "That's not what I meant. That's not what I say." Lindo persists, "What you say?" Further communication at this point is impossible. Mother and daughter do not talk to each other for several days after the incident. In another example, Ying-Ying St. Clair's uneasiness with the American way of life manifests itself in the way she pronounces the profession of her daughter and son-in-law: "It is an ugly word. Artytecky." Similarly, An-Mei Hsu cannot pronounce "psychiatrist" correctly: "Why can you talk about this with a psycheatric and not with mother?"

As we have seen, the linguistic differences between mother and daughter are a feature of Tan's narrative technique. This language difference not only explains communication problems but also marks the cultural identity of these two generations of women. The American daughters are adapted to the customs and language of the new country; the mothers still dwell in those of China. Tan gives readers an allegory of the cultural differences between mother and daughter in the prologue to the first part of the novel, "Feather from a Thousand Li Away." The old woman in the prologue dreamt that in America she would make her daughter "speak only perfect American English." But now that the old woman's wish is fulfilled—the daughter "grew up speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow"—the old woman cannot communicate with her daughter. She waits, "year after year," for the day she can tell her daughter "in perfect American English" about a swan she brought from China with her and her good intentions. None of the Joy Luck Club mothers speaks perfect English, so they are not able to communicate their good intentions in a way that the daughters will understand.

Despite linguistic and cultural differences, the mothers are eventually able to help their daughters embrace their racial identity. Before Jing-Mei's trip to China, she denies her Chinese heritage. She remembers Suyuan Woo telling her, "Once you are born Chinese, you cannot help but feel and think Chinese." Whenever her mother says this, Jing-Mei sees herself "transforming like a werewolf." But after Suyuan's death, the rest of the Joy Luck Club mothers insist that Jing-Mei visit her half-sisters in China. It is during this visit that Jing-Mei comes to terms with her true identity: "[M]y mother was right. I am becoming Chinese." Moreover, Jing-Mei has become her mother by taking over her mother's place at the mah jong table, "on the East [side of the table], where things begin." Her trip to China culminates in her realization that both her mother and China are in her blood.

In sum, through first-person narratives and linguistic differences, Tan brings the mothers to the foreground. In other words, the heroines of *The Joy Luck Club* are the mothers. While most mothers in ethnic American

literature sit silently in the background, Tan's Joy Luck Club mothers speak assertively. Disagreeing with popular assumptions that the Chinese are "discreet and modest," Amy Tan, in her article, "The Language of Discretion," urges us to reject such stereotypical views. Tan observes that "the more emphatic outbursts always spilled over into Chinese." Indeed, when asked why Chinese people commit torture, Lindo Jong, a strong, assertive Joy Luck Club mother, replies simply and emphatically, "Chinese people do many things. Chinese people do business, do medicine, do painting. Not lazy like American people. We do torture. Best torture."

Source: Shu-Huei Henrickson, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1997.
Henrickson is an instructor of English at Rock Valley College in Rockford, Illinois.

Essays and Criticism: Drowning in America, Starving for China

The only negative thing I could ever say about this book is that I'll never again be able to read it for the first time. *The Joy Luck Club* is so powerful, so full of magic, that by the end of the second paragraph, your heart catches; by the end of the first page, tears blur your vision, and one-third of the way down on Page 26, you know you won't be doing anything of importance until you have finished this novel.

The main narrative here is taken up by Jing-mei Woo, a first-generation American-Chinese woman whose whole tone is tuned to the fact that she is, essentially, lost. She's swimming upstream in American culture, doing the best she can, but she's gone through several jobs, she's gotten into the habit of settling for less than she should, and her own Chinese mother appears to be bitterly disappointed in her. Then, her mother dies, and Jing-mei is asked by three old family friends to take her mother's place at their mah jongg table, at a social club they've been carrying on in San Francisco for the last 40 years.

Here is Jing-mei (who goes by the name of June, now), recording her first night as a bonafide member: "The Joy Luck Aunties are all wearing slacks, bright print blouses, and different versions of sturdy walking shoes. We are all seated around the dining room table under a lamp that looks like a Spanish candelabra. Uncle George puts on his bifocals and starts the meeting by reading the minutes, "Our capital account is $24,825, or about $6,206 a couple, $3,103 a person. We sold Subaru for a loss at six and three quarters. We bought a hundred shares of Smith International at seven. Our thanks to Lindo and Tinn Jong for the goodies. The red bean soup was especially delicious...."

Not the stuff of high adventure. But the original Joy Luck Club was started in Chungking during the last of World War II by Jing-mei's mother when she was a young widow, literally setting herself and her friends the task of creating joy and luck out of unimaginable catastrophe: "What was worse, we asked among ourselves, to sit and wait for our own deaths with proper somber faces, or to choose our own happiness? We decided to hold parties and pretend each week had become the new year. Each week we could forget past wrongs done to us. We weren't allowed to think a bad thought. We feasted, we laughed, we played games, lost and won, we told the best stories., And each week, we could hope to be lucky."

The reason that the men in the present Joy Luck Club buy stock now is so that every member can feel lucky and have some joy, because by this time it has become unacceptable to lose anything more. The four women who have consoled themselves in America for 40 years with friendship, mah jongg and stories, have already lived lives that are, again, unimaginable. On top of all their other terrors and adversities, their pasts have been lost, as if these horrors have taken place not just in another country but on another planet. Their deepest wish is to pass their knowledge, their tales, on to their children, especially to their duaghters, but those young women are undergoing a slow death of their own; drowning in American culture at the same time they starve for a past they can never fully understand.

The author leavens this angst with Marx brothers humor, making you laugh, literally, even as you cry. What can you do with a Chinese couple who name their four boys Matthew, Mark, Luke and Bing? What can you tell a mother who thinks she's getting "so-so security" from the government, or (as Jing-mei remembers her own mother deep in indignation about an irate neighbor who believes that she's killed his cat) "...That man, he raise his hand like this, show me his ugly fist and call me worst Fukien landlady. I not from Fukien. Hunh! He know nothing!"

But the understandings don't come merely from vagaries of language. *The Joy Luck Club* is about the way the past distances itself from the present as speedily as a disappearing star on a Star Trek rerun. It's gone, gone, and yet the past holds the only keys to meaning in every life examined here. On her first night at the mah jongg table, her mother's friends revealed to Jing-mei that she has two half-sisters still in China, and that the Joy Luck ladies have saved money so that she, Jing-mei, can go home to tell them about their mother. "'What can I tell them about my mother?' Jing-mei blurts. 'I don't know anything....'" But the book is dedicated by the author: "To my mother and the memory of her mother. You asked me once what I would remember. This, and much more." What results from this stunningly devotional tour de force is an entrance into eight separate lives: four women whose "real" life occurred in China, in another world in another mind; and four of their daughters, themselves grown women now. To say they are all products of conflicting value systems is heavy-handed inaccuracy, wimpy paraphrase.

Here, for instance, is Eurasian Lena St. Clair, Ying-ying' s daughter, translating her mother's Chinese to her Caucasian father, after Ying-Ying has given birth to her stillborn baby brother. Lena's mother cries out "...Then this baby, maybe he heard us, his large head seemed to fill with hot air and rise up from the table. The head turned to one side.... It looked right through me. I knew he could see everything inside me. How I had given no thought to killing my other son!" Lena translates to her sad, ignorant father: "...She thinks we must all think very hard about having another baby ... And she thinks we should leave now and go have dinner."

And, 15 or so years later, it seems inevitable that Lena should end up with a Hungarian "rice husband" (so named for all those Chinese "rice Christians" who hung around missionaries in China simply so they could get a square meal). In the name of feminism and right thinking, this husband is taking Lena for every cent she's got, but she's so demoralized, so "out of balance" in the Chinese sense, that she can't do a thing about it.

If, so far, I haven't done justice to this book, that's because you can't turn a poem into prose, or explain magic, without destroying the magic, destroying the poem. One can only mention scraps. The four mothers come from different parts of (and times in) China, so for instance, the author allows us to see one peasant mother, Lindo Jong, who remembers she was not worthless: "I looked and smelled like a precious bun cake, sweet with a good clean color." Lindo, betrothed at 2, wangles her way out of a horrible marriage with courage and wit. But another mah jongg lady, An-mei, has watched her own mother lose her honor and "face" by becoming third concubine to a hideous merchant in Tiensing. An-mei's mother times her suicide in such a way that her ghost can come back to haunt the house on New Year's Day, thus insuring a good future for her child, who, in turn, comes to America, has a daughter, Rose, who somehow rustles up the courage to defy an American husband who's trying to swindle her...

But the stories of the four mothers, the four daughters, are not really the point here. *The Joy Luck Club* is dazzling because of the worlds it gives us: When Lindo, old now, says, "Feel my bracelets. They must be 24 carats, pure inside and out," if you have any sense at all, you let yourself be led down a garden path into a whole other place, where a little girl in San Francisco becomes chess champion at age 6 by using her mother's "invisible strength," where a woman who comes from the richest family in Wushi (with boxes of jade in every room holding just the right amount of cigarettes) is given the name of Betty by her dopey American husband, who doesn't know she's already "dead," a "ghost..."

At the perimeters of all these stories are all the men, buying and trading in this Mountain of Gold, selling Subaru at a loss, each one of them with his own story that has yet to be told. *The Joy Luck Club* has the disconcerting effect of making you look at everyone in your own life with the—however fleeting—knowledge that they are locked in the spaceships of therr own amazing stories. Only magicians of language like Amy Tan hold the imaginative keys to the isolating capsules. Which is why we have novels and novelists in the first place.

Source: Carolyn See, "Drowning in America, Starving for China," in *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, March 12,1989, pp. 1, 11.

Essays and Criticism: Your Mother Is in Your Bones

In 1949, when the Red Army marched into Beijing, America's "special relationship" with China abruptly ended, and so hostile did our two countries become toward each other that people on both sides of the widening divide seemed to lose the ability even to imagine reconciliation.

Apart from the international crises, and even wars, there was another consequence, which, although more subtle, was equally tragic. Those millions of emigrants who were part of the great Chinese diaspora—beginning in the middle of the 19th century when indentured laborers went to California, and ending in the 1950's when millions of refugees fled Communism—were left almost completely cut off from their homeland. While the members of the older generation who had grown up in China before Mao Zedong were at least able to bring a sustaining fund of memory with them into exile, the younger generation was denied even this slender means of connection to the ancestral homeland. Seeing old China as hopelessly backward, and contemporary China as besmirched by Communism, many in this new generation of Chinese-Americans wanted nothing more than to distance themselves as far as possible from the *zuguo*, or motherland.

But, unlike the children of European emigrants, they had obviously Oriental features, which made it difficult for them to lose themselves in the American melting pot. Living in the confinement of Chinatowns with parents who spoke broken English ("tear and wear on car," "college drop-off") and who clung to the old Chinese way, they felt an indelible sense of otherness that weighed heavily on them as they tried to make their way into middle-class American life.

When political barriers began to fall in the 1970's, older emigrants welcomed the chance to end their long and agonizing exiles. But their sons and daughters looked with a deep ambivalence on the idea of having to awaken a dormant Chinese side in themselves. And so, as the exterior world went about recognizing China, re-establishing diplomatic relations and initiating trade and cultural exchanges, these young Chinese-Americans found themselves wrestling with a very different and infinitely more complicated interior problem: how to recognize a country to which they were inextricably bound by heritage, but to which they had never been. It is out of this experience of being caught between countries and cultures that writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston and now Amy Tan have begun to create what is, in effect, a new genre of American fiction.

Born in Oakland, California, in 1952 to a father educated as an engineer in Beijing and a mother raised in a well-to-do Shanghai family, Amy Tan grew up in an American world that was utterly remote from the childhood world of her parents. In *The Joy Luck Club*, her first novel, short-storylike vignettes alternate back and forth between the lives of four Chinese women in pre-1949 China and the lives of their American-born daughters in California. The book is a meditation on the divided nature of this emigrant life.

The members of the Joy Luck Club are four aging "aunties" who gather regularly in San Francisco to play mahjongg, eat Chinese food and gossip about their children. When one of the women dies, her daughter, Jing-mei (June) Woo, is drafted to sit in for her at the game. But she feels uncomfortably out of place in this unassimilated environment among older women who still wear "funny Chinese dresses with stiff standup collars and blooming branches of embroidered silk sewn over their breasts," and who meet in one another's houses, where "too many once fragrant smells" from Chinese cooking have been "compressed onto a thin layer of invisible grease." The all-too-Chinese ritual of the Joy Luck Club has always impressed her as little more than a "shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war."

She is made uncomfortable by the older generation's insistence on maintaining old customs and parochial habits, which she views as an impediment to breaking loose from her parents' cultural gravity. What she yearns for is to lead an independent, modern and American life free of the burden of her parents' Chineseness and the overweening hopes for their children that they can't even "begin to express in their fragile English."

"At first my mother tried to cultivate some hidden genius in me," recalls June. "She did housework for an old retired piano teacher down the hall who gave me lessons and free use of a piano to practice on in exchange. When I failed to become a concert pianist, or even an accompanist for the church youth choir, she finally explained that I was late-blooming, like Einstein, who everyone thought was retarded until he discovered a bomb."

What she fears most of all is being dragged under by all that the Joy Luck Club symbolizes and transformed "like a werewolf, a mutant tag of DNA suddenly triggered, replicating itself insidiously into a syndrome, a cluster of telltale Chinese behaviors, 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."

Part of June's struggle is to distance herself from the kind of helpless obedience that she recognizes in traditional Chinese women, and that she fears is manifesting itself in passivity in her own, American life. "I was raised the Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat my own bitterness," says June's mother, spelling out the dangerously congenital nature of this Chinese female submissiveness. "And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she came out the same way! Maybe it is because she was born to me and she was born a girl. And I was born to my mother and I was born a girl. All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way." With a weary fatalism that speaks for June as well, her sister Lena confesses her propensity for "surrendering everything" to her American husband "without caring what I got in return."

However, after the death of June's mother a mixture of grief, guilt and curiosity, coupled with the relentless goading of the aunties of the Joy Luck Club, conspire to draw her into the very world from which she had so assiduously sought to distance herself. As the aunties talk over their mahjongg game, even scolding June at one point for her evident lack of interest in her parents—"Not know your own mother?" asks one of them. "How can you say? Your mother is in your bones!"—June begins to see her mother's generation in a different light. Rather than viewing the aunties as expressionless aliens from an opaque and distant land who hound and embarrass their children, bit by bit she begins to understand the real dimensions of the "unspeakable tragedies they had left behind in China," and to sense how vulnerable they actually are in America. Slowly she begins to comprehend how, after all they have endured, they might well be anxious and concerned lest all cultural continuity between their pasts and their children's futures be lost.

"Because I remained quiet for so long now my daughter does not hear me," laments one auntie. "She sits by her fancy swimming pool and hears only her Sony Walkman, her cordless phone, her big, important husband asking her why they have charcoal and no lighter fluid." It comes as a revelation to June that "they are

frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explajn things in fractured English. They see that joy and luck do not mean the same to their daughters, that to these closed American-born minds 'joy luck' is not a word, it does not exist. They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation."

When the aunties finally inform June that the two half-sisters her mother had been forced to abandon during the war miraculously survived and are now living in Shanghai, she is finally jolted into feeling the ways in which her mother is, in fact, still "in her bones." But it is not until she actually leaves with her aging father for a pilgrimage to China and a rendezvous with these half-sisters that the reader feels the intensity of heat building up, heat we know will finally fuse her to her hitherto elusive ancestral home. And when at last she steps off the plane to embrace these errant relatives who have grown up on the other side of the divide that once separated China from the United States so absolutely, we feel as if a deep wound in the Chinese-American experience is finally being sutured back together again:

> "Mama, Mama," we all murmur, as if she is among us.
>
> "My sisters look at me proudly.... 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."

As Amy Tan tells us of her own homecoming on the jacket of *The Joy Luck Club*, it was just as her mother had told her it would be. "As soon as my feet touched China, I became Chinese."

Woven into the narrative of the lives of June and her mother are the stories of the three other Joy Luck aunties and their California-born daughters. Moving back and forth across the divide between the two generations, the two continents and the two cultures, we find ourselves transported across the Pacific Ocean from the upwardly mobile, design-conscious, divorce-prone and Americanized world of the daughters in San Francisco to the World of China in the 20's and 30's, which seems more fantastic and dreamlike than real.

We come to see how the idea of China—nourished in America by nothing more than the memones of this vanished reality—has slowly metamorphosed in the minds of the aunties until their imaginations have so overtaken actual memory that revery is all that is left to keep them in contact with the past. When we are suddenly jerked by these sequences from the comforting familiarity of the United States into a scared child's memory of a dying grandmother in remote Ningbo, to remembrances of an arranged marriage with a murderous ending in Shansi or to recollections of a distraught woman abandoning her babies during wartime in Guizhou, we may readily feel bewildered and lost. Such abrupt transitions in time and space make it difficult to know who is who and what the complex web of generational Joy Luck Club relationships actually is.

But these recherches to old China are so beautifully written that one should just allow oneself to be borne along as if in a dream. In fact, as the story progresses, the reader begins to appreciate just how these disjunctions work for, rather than against, the novel. While we as readers grope to know whose mother or grandmother is getting married in an unfamiliar ceremony, or why a concubine is committing suicide, we are ironically being reminded not just of the nightmarishness of being a woman in traditional China, but of the enormity of the confusing mental journey Chinese emigrants had to make. And most ironic, we are also reminded by these literary disjunctions that it is precisely this mental chasm that members of the younger generation must now recross in reverse in order to resolve themselves as whole Chinese-Americans; in *The Joy Luck Club* we get a suggestion of the attendant confusion they must expect to endure in order to get to the other side.

In the hands of a less talented writer such thematic material might easily have become overly didactic, and the characters might have seemed like cutouts from a Chinese-American knockoff of Roots. But in the hands of Amy Tan, who has a wonderful eye for what is telling, a fine ear for dialogue, a deep empathy for her subject matter and a guilelessly straightforward way of writing, they sing with a rare fidelity and beauty. She has written a jewel of a book.

Source: Orville Schell, "Your Mother Is in Your Bones," in *The New York Times Book Review*, March 19, 1989, pp 3,28.
Critic Orville Schell is recognized as an authority on China.

The Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan: Introduction

The Joy Luck Club Amy Tan

(Full name Amy Ruth Tan) American novelist, screenwriter, and children's writer.

The following entry presents criticism on Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). See also Amy Tan Criticism.

The Joy Luck Club (1989) is Tan's most successful and widely acclaimed novel. It is regarded as a significant achievement in documenting the hardships and struggles of immigrants in America and in portraying the complexities of modern Chinese-American life.

Plot and Major Characters

The Joy Luck Club is a collection of sixteen interrelated stories, centered around the diverse emotional relationships of four different mother/daughter pairs. To escape war and poverty, the four mothers emigrate from China to America. In the United States, they struggle to raise their American-born daughters in a vastly different culture. The novel opens with the death of Suyuan Woo, the matriarch of the Joy Luck Club, a social group of women who play the Chinese tile game mah-jongg and rely on each other for support. Suyuan founded the club in China and later reformed it in San Francisco. Suyuan's daughter, Jing-mei, takes her mother's place at the east side of the club's mah-jongg table. Jing-mei's interactions at the table with her older “aunties” symbolize the generational conflicts that play a major role in all of the stories. Each of the mother/daughter pairs has their own personal and cultural conflicts that are unique to their situation. In each relationship, events in the mother's past deeply affect how she identifies with and relates to her daughter. Because Suyuan lost a husband and was forced to abandon her twin daughters during the Japanese invasion of China, she consistently pushed Jing-mei to succeed and make a better life for herself. But her mother's high expectations paralyze Jing-mei, who begins to doubt her own talents and abilities. “Auntie” Lindo managed to escape her disastrous arranged marriage by manipulating her husband's family. In America, Lindo's daughter Waverly becomes a junior chess champion whose achievements give Lindo a great sense of pride. Waverly feels that Lindo takes too much credit for her success and, eventually, she accuses her mother of living vicariously through her. This confrontation causes each of them to question their own personal identity and the respect they have for each other. “Auntie” Ying-Ying grew up in a wealthy family. After her husband leaves her, Ying-Ying is forced to move in with some of her poorer relatives. She emigrates with her second husband, Clifford, to America, where she is forced to change her name to “Betty” and adjust to an even lower standard of living. Ying-Ying's daughter, Lena, is a successful architect, but her husband doesn't value her. Furthermore, Lena's lifestyle and materialism clash with Ying-Ying's traditional Chinese ways, which she fears will be forgotten. “Auntie” An-mei Hsu's mother served as a wealthy gentleman's concubine. Because of her mother's occupation, young An-mei was raised surrounded by riches, but was not allowed to share in any of the luxuries. Her mother eventually commits suicide, giving An-mei a way to escape the life of a concubine. Rose Hsu Jordan, An-mei's daughter, struggles with filing divorce papers after her husband leaves

her. Rose's indecisiveness comes from recurring nightmares, inspired by her mother's stories and her mother's assertion that she can read Rose's mind. The novel concludes with Jing-mei, who decides to discover the end of her mother's life story by finding and meeting her abandoned twin half-sisters. Her aunties give Jing-mei the money she needs to travel to China, affirming the healing effect of storytelling and the very real—if elusive—bond between generations.

Major Themes

The major theme of *The Joy Luck Club* concerns the nature of mother-daughter relationships, which are complicated not only by age difference, but by vastly different upbringings. The daughters—who have grown up embracing the American emphasis on individuality—feel that their mothers are "Old World fossils." They rebel against the Chinese tradition of heeding their elders and pleasing parents above all else. The mothers are appalled at their daughters' insolence. They fear that their daughters' desire to achieve the American Dream will prevent them from ever learning about or understanding their Chinese heritage. Despite these fears, all four of the mothers attempt to give their children the best of both worlds. As Lindo states, "American circumstances but Chinese character. … How could I know these two things do not mix?" The painful events in the mothers' pasts and their "Chinese character" have a definite impact on their daughters' present lives. The power and importance of storytelling is another significant theme in the novel. One reason the mother-daughter relationships suffer is that neither generation speaks the language of the other—literally and metaphorically. The mothers try to compensate for this difficulty in communication by relating information through stories. However, most of the stories only frustrate their daughters, who are at a loss to interpret what they really mean. When the daughters—particularly Jing-mei—are finally able to see the true meaning behind their mothers' tales, they find that the stories are an important form of instruction and comfort. Issues of self-worth and identity are also central to *The Joy Luck Club.* All of the women (both mothers and daughters) wrestle with their past, their present, their ethnicity, their gender, and how they view themselves, as they struggle to construct their own life story and find a place for themselves in the world.

Critical Reception

Many critics have asserted that although the characters in *The Joy Luck Club* are Chinese-American, their struggles have a strong resonance for all people, especially women raised in America. Reviewers have studied the novel from a variety of angles and have generally agreed that the book presents a poignant, insightful examination of not only the generation gap between mothers and daughters, but of the gaps between different cultures as well. Critics have argued that the book works as an exploration of the issues that are vital to all immigrants in America—including ethnicity, gender, and personal identity. Some reviewers have identified the mother-daughter relationships in the book as part of a growing tradition of matrilineal discourse that is becoming ever more popular in America. Others have lauded the multiple perspectives presented in the novel, citing the work's multiple viewpoints as a unique strength that invites analysis on several levels. One critic has even analyzed the fable-like qualities of *The Joy Luck Club,* interpreting it as a modern-day fairy tale. Although several reviewers have argued that the novel presents stereotypical portrayals of China and of Chinese people, many critics feel that it addresses important universal issues and themes—common to all, despite their age, race, or nationality.

The Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan: Principal Works

The Joy Luck Club (novel) 1989

The Kitchen God's Wife (novel) 1991

The Moon Lady (juvenilia) 1992

The Joy Luck Club [with Ronald Bass] (screenplay) 1993

The Chinese Siamese Cat (juvenilia) 1994

The Hundred Secret Senses (novel) 1995

The Bonesetter's Daughter (novel) 2001

Criticism: Malini Johar Schueller (essay date Winter 1992)

SOURCE: “Theorizing Ethnicity and Subjectivity: Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club,*” in *Genders,* No. 15, Winter, 1992, pp. 72–85.

[*In the following comparative essay on Maxine Hong Kingston's* Tripmaster Monkey *and Tan's* The Joy Luck Club, *Schueller writes that Kingston uses a subversive male protagonist to illustrate how ethnicity is socially constructed, while Tan uses four separate mother-daughter relationships to simultaneously embrace and thwart conceptions of ethnicity and gender.*]

When women of color began to voice their estrangement from the theories and concerns of white feminists, they dramatized the fact that they had for too long been the objects of representation.[1] The task of these women was twofold: that of deconstructing the male/female binary opposition of white feminism by interjecting concerns of race, colonialism, and imperialism; and that of constructing theories of “identity” (and I use the term deliberately with caution) for women of color. Understandably, it was the deconstructive project that was (and is being) first undertaken with great energy. To mention only a few critics, there were those like Gayatri Spivak who deconstructed liberal feminist literary criticism and revealed its investment in the emancipation of white women alone[2] women like bell hooks revealed the concerns of Euro-American feminism to be restricted to those of middle-class white women;[3] critics such as Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar questioned the politics of feminists who viewed imperialism as having been historically progressive for Third World women[4] However, the task of construction has been much more complicated and fraught with ambivalences. On the one hand, women of color have had to emphasize their particular concerns, their differences from ideologies of universal womanhood—whether Anglo-American or French—while on the other hand they have been concerned about the problems of espousing a racial/ethnic essence. The concern with essentialism in feminist debates today, in other words, is also a major concern in theoretical discussions of ethnicity as well as in fictional works of women of color[5] Here, I wish to examine the task of construction in discussions of ethnicity and show how a focus on representation and the discursivity of identity offers possible alternatives to the notion of a racial/ethnic essence.[6] I argue that such a focus is not restricted to theory but is, in fact, a major concern in two recent texts by Chinese-American women writers: *Tripmaster Monkey* by Maxine Hong Kingston and *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan.

Some of the difficulties associated with constructing ethnicity in the context of a posthumanistic consciousness are evident in Lisa Lowe's insightful essay on the Asian-American subject. Lowe stresses the heterogeneity of Asian-American culture in order ultimately to “disrupt the current hegemonic relationship between ‘dominant’ and ‘minority’ positions.”[7] Yet it is necessary, Lowe further acknowledges, to keep the concept of ethnic identity “for the purpose of contesting and disrupting the discourses that exclude Asian American(s).”[8] To completely give up the model of oppression in formulations of ethnicity is to give up too much. Indeed the most problematic use to which ethnicity has been put has been the one that depoliticizes the term, dissociates it from marginalization and oppression, and opposes it to a supposedly fixed concept of race. To this camp belong Anglo-American critics who invoke the ideology of the melting pot and, without any sensitivity to relations of power and dominance, see a similarity among all “ethnic” groups—Irish-American, Italian-American, African-American.[9] Of course one only has to glance at the centuries of hysteria about

racial miscegenation in the United States to see the problems in invoking such; similarities.[10] Such a concept of ethnicity is of little use to women of color and must, indeed, be regarded with suspicion. The question seems to be the use to which ethnic definitions are put. There needs to be a healthy suspicion of definitions because it is precisely by using the strategy of restrictive definition and hierarchical binary opposition that the dominant culture has oppressed marginal groups. But this also does not mean that there is no political importance in appropriating the second term in the hierarchy and empowering it in slogans such as "black is beautiful." However, such slogans are empowering precisely because they question the hierarchy; what is empowering is the act of appropriation "Black is beautiful" expresses a political solidarity but does not suggest that there is an essential "blackness" to be empowered. The difficult task for women of color, then, is to articulate a politics of resistance and difference without resorting to purely definitional conceptions of ethnic identity.

The first step toward such a construction is to think of ethnicity not simply as essence but as representation, as something linguistically constructed. (After all, it is representations such as the black rapist, the duplicitous Asian, or the passive Asian woman that are used to dominate and suppress minorities) While constructions of subjectivity by liberal white feminists have typically relied on notions of the singular, autonomous self, women of color have typically relied on collective and social subjectivities.[11] Marxist theorists of language and subjectivity have similarly rejected the isolated, autonomous psyche of Freudian psychology for a conception of the psyche as a social and discursive entity. The psyche, according to Bakhtin, "enjoys extraterritorial status … [as] a social entity."[12] Experience is available to this psyche not in some immediate fashion but through a network of signs, most importantly, language. "Not only can experience be outwardly expressed through the agency of the sign … but also aside from this outward expression (for others), experience exists even for the person undergoing it only in the material of signs. Outside that material there is no experience as such."[13] The importance of a discursive notion of self in thinking about ethnicity is that it provides a powerful indictment of the idea of an essential, abstract biological self beyond language and society. It is a way of retaining the concept of identity, but as a social construct, constantly reformulated and reformulating itself through language. It is also a way of resisting essentialist definitions of ethnicity.

In *Tripmaster Monkey* and *The Joy Luck Club,* Kingston and Tan affirm a politics of resistance and difference and thematize the construction of a Chinese-American identity. Interestingly, representation plays a key role in the formation of ethnic identity in both works. Both works also emphasize the socially constructed, discursive nature of gender and ethnic identity. Kingston uses the discursivity of ethnic identity to completely subvert the idea of cultural origins while Tan uses discursivity to show how cultural origins are multiple and complex. In very different ways, the two works raise questions about ethnicity, identity, and difference which are crucial to the concerns of women of color.

Tripmaster Monkey is about the hopes, anxieties, fears, and angers of Wittman Ah Sing—first-generation Chinese-American, Berkeley graduate, fired retail employee, cynical lover, long-haired peacenik, passionate playwright—as he walks the streets of San Francisco reflecting on his place in American society and reading Rilke aloud to passengers on a Bay Area bus. It ends with Wittman staging a play for his Chinese-American audience and using the theater as a public forum to comment on the pathologizing of Chinese as exotic. In *The Woman Warrior* Kingston wrote polemically as a Chinese-American woman battling an oppressive white male culture and also deconstructed hierarchical oppositions between Chinese and American, male and female.[14] In *Tripmaster Monkey* Kingston further problematizes and subverts restrictive ethnic definitions by emphasizing the complex processes of representation and interpretation involved in the formulation of any such definition.

In a sense, the entire novel is an extended meditation on representation. Kingston emphasizes the marginalization of people of color by rewriting the "classic" texts of white American writers. Her hero, named Wittman by his actor father, is the latter-day incarnation of the poet of democracy and diversity, the supremely American poet who embraces the high and the low, the bleeding slave and the Indian. But

Kingston, by presenting her novel as a modern “Song of Myself,” compellingly confronts us with the fact that the prerogative to speak to and embody all America has always been a white male one: “‘Call me Ishmael.’ See? You pictured a white guy, didn't you? If Ishmael were described—ochery ecru amber umber skin—you picture a *tan* white guy. Wittman wanted to spoil all those stories coming out of and set in New England Back East—to blacken and to yellow Bill, Brooke, and Annie. A new rule for the imagination: The common man has Chinese looks. From now on, whenever you read about those people with no surnames, color them with black skin or yellow skin.”[15]

Kingston's appropriation of *Moby Dick,* the classic American epic, is an act of empowerment through which the Chinese Other can have a voice in America. And just as Kingston examines the hegemony of white American culture through its literary representation, thus emphasizing the discursivity of American identity, she similarly emphasizes the constructed nature of Chinese ethnic identity. Although Wittman despises the “Oriental Tea Garden” variety of exoticism, his own perceptions of Chinese people are influenced by the representations of Chinese in American popular culture. Walking the streets of San Francisco, Wittman sees “a Chinese dude from China, hands clasped behind, bow-legged, loose-seated, out on a stroll—that walk they do in kung fu movies when they are full of contentment on a sunny day” (*TM* 4–5). Interestingly, this is a description of a “Fresh Off the Boats” immigrant Chinese, one who should logically be the repository of an “original” culture. Kingston, however, suggests that the very idea of what an ethnic essence is comes out of popular representations. What Wittman is presented with, through the narrating voice, is both the nominal “original” and the second-hand represented simultaneously. Representation and reality, the socially constructed stereotypical and the experiential are inseparably mixed in Wittman's perceptions of ethnic difference.

It is, therefore, extremely significant that Kingston chooses the profession of playwright for her hero.[16] Wittman is agonizingly conscious of the different social roles he plays and keeps a running narrative of the play he is currently writing. He constantly undermines and subverts the narrow roles assigned to Chinese people in American culture. Instead of conforming to the demure and decorous look of Ivy League Chinese, Wittman flaunts his long-haired hippie look. To the officer at the unemployment office who attempts to classify him as a potential retail manager, as his last job indicates, he insists he be listed as a playwright. As his friend Nanci, the aspiring actress, constantly finds, being accepted in America means playing certain ethnic roles. At her auditions, Nanci is told to “act more Oriental.” “You don't sound the way you look. You don't look the way you talk” (*TM* 24). Angered by the straitjacketing Chinese are faced with, Wittman vows to wrest the theater back for the Chinese.

Wittman's stage production literally becomes an arena for alternative enactments of ethnicity. The cast of characters, which includes nearly all the characters in the book, participate in Wittman's play based on the epic Chinese *Romance of the Three Kingdoms.* But these Chinese-Americans, despite the mediation of the play and Wittman's attempts to subvert narrow racial definitions, are still subject to essentialist racial interpretation. Reviews of the play praise it as “East meets West,” “sweet and sour,” and “singing rice,” much in the same manner as many of the reviews of Kingston's own works.[17] Kingston does not suggest that the Chinese are simply the passive objects of Western definition. Like the natives who, in a colonial situation, internalize the norms and values of colonizers, the Chinese, too, see themselves through the eyes of their American viewers and enthusiastically applaud the reviews. Angered by the inability of the Chinese to perceive their own pathologizing, Wittman uses the stage to harangue his audience: “We're about as exotic as shit. Nobody so special here. No sweet-and-sour shit. No exotic chop suey shit. So this variety show had too much motley; they didn't have to call it ‘chop suey vaudeville’ … Do I have to explain why ‘exotic’ pisses me off, and ‘not exotic’ pisses me off? They've got us in a bag, which we aren't punching our way out of” (*TM* 308). Giving voice to the culturally marginalized is thus not a question of proclaiming the primacy of certain ethnic values over others—indeed. Kingston has her protagonist constantly scoff at what are perceived as particularly “Chinese” traits—but rather that of adopting a conscious political position of resistance to the oppressive definitions of the dominant culture. Indeed, Kingston makes her protagonist challenge these

definitions by taking them seriously at the literal level and thus revealing the racial ideologies such definitions seek to hide. As Wittman shouts to his audience: “I'm common ordinary. Plain black sweater. Blue jeans. Tennis shoes ordinaire. Clean soo mun shaven. What's so exotic?” (*TM* 308).

It is also important to emphasize that this resistance to definition is part of a politics of difference and not a coded longing to be part of a common “American” humanity. Kingston's works have too often been misread as exactly that. *The Woman Warrior,* for example, has been read as an attempt of the narrator to escape from Chinese restriction to American freedom. Similarly Wittman's politics in *Tripmaster Monkey* have been seen as “his identification with the ideals of the melting pot.”[18] But the ideology of the melting pot is a stance of pluralism and traditional liberal humanism. Humanism argues that at the end of all theorizing we are left with an essential humanity, a metaphysical identity which it is the purpose of activism to affirm and defend. The assumption is that although there are different social groups, these groups are positioned in relations of democratic equality and any consensual ideology emerges from an equal participation by all groups. Such an assumption denies the existence of class structure and the very real inequalities of power and position that all marginalized groups, particularly women of color, are subject to. Kingston, too, is conscious of the disempowerment of Chinese-Americans and is determined not to subsume their interests under the hegemony of a unified melting pot ideology. When Wittman rails about having “failed … to burst through their Kipling” and argues that in his play “there is no East. … West is meeting West,” he ruptures the hierarchical division which views the East as aberrance and challenges his American viewers to nurture a society of radical differences (*TM* 308). Instead of accepting the definitions of the dominant culture, Wittman argues for a strategic and political group identity. Knowing full well that the term “American” is used “interchangeably with ‘white,’” Wittman suggests that the Chinese politicize their identity. “It's our fault they call us gook and chinky chinaman,” says Wittman. “We've been here all this time, before Columbus, and haven't named ourselves. Look at the Blacks beautifully defining themselves” (*TM* 326).

Kingston's conception of social difference and her view of ethnicity as a represented, social construct are both intimately related to her rejection of the stable and unified subject on which both humanist and essentialist racial visions depend.[19] The loquacious and energetic hero of *Tripmaster Monkey,* unlike the sage after whom he is named, is not the transcendent poet who can rise above the social-material world into visions of spiritual unity but the person of this world whose identity is constituted by Otherness and is always changing. *Tripmaster Monkey* begins with a vision of Wittman's body scattered into fragments as he laconically contemplates suicide much in the manner of Hart Crane's speaker in *The Bridge.* Throughout the novel, Wittman enacts changes of character and identity. Accosted on the bus by a Chinese woman who stereotypes him as the quiet Asian science whiz. Wittman plays the role to fit the part:

> “I don't know what you say,” says Wittman. Know like no, like brain. “I major in engineer.”
>
> “Where do you study engineering?”
>
> “Ha-ah.” He made a noise like a samurai doing a me-ay, or an old Chinese guy who smokes too much.

(*TM* 75)

At other times, Wittman talks rap, wishes the Chinese had their own jazz and blues, and tries to appropriate the demeanor of the “heroic Black man” when he hears people at a restaurant cracking “chink joke[s]” (*TM* 214). Wittman thrives on being multifaceted, on driving his car like “an international student from a developing country” or like an “Oakie” (*TM* 208). At Coit Tower he plays at getting married to a white girl, Tana, by a man who is possibly a minister, while the production of his play turns into a marriage celebration as the Chinese actor-audience shower rice on the couple. Life and art, play and reality, Kingston suggests, are not easily demarcated.

Just as Kingston sees ethnicity and subjectivity as constituted by representation and social construction, she also views gender as a social construct and a site of difference. In *The Woman Warrior* Kingston had emphasized the variability of femininity and deconstructed oppositions between male and female, American and Chinese. Kingston "violate[d] the law of opposition making gender dichotomies proliferate into unresolved gender differences."[20] In *Tripmaster Monkey* she deliberately undermines any notion of an essential, singular female identity by making Wittman her central character and thus challenging easy experiential identification. At the same time, Kingston makes clear that gender boundaries are always constructed. It is significant that PoPo, the grandmother who has partly raised Wittman and to whom he is emotionally attached, calls him "honey girl" and "Wit Man." And the guise in which Wittman most frequently appears subverts traditional gender and ethnic dichotomies. Wittman is the modern-day reincarnation of Monkey King, the mythological trickster figure from Wu Cheng-en's sixteenth-century novel *The Pilgrimage to the West.* As a figure of Chinese mythology the monkey is firmly anchored within the culture, yet subject to change. The monkey breaks taboos, is punished by the gods, but manages to escape difficult situations through trickery. He goes along with the monk on a pilgrimage to get Buddhist scriptures, but he demonstrates the real impracticality of Buddhist pacifism in fighting with devils. The monk is spiritual, devout, and unquestioning: the monkey is earthly, appetitive, sensual, and changing. Unlike the monk, the monkey can change into different forms and can see through the various guises taken on by devils.

Kingston's use of the monkey as the figure for the ethnic subject is an affirmation of difference and resistance. Like the Afro-American signifying monkey who dwells in the margins of discourse and who challenges the dominant culture by multiple voicings. Kingston's Chinese-American Monkey King speaks for the people of Chinatown but refuses a singular ethnic discourse.[21] As a feminist of color it is important for Kingston to reject ethnic discourses which celebrate a singular Chinese identity. Such discourses belong to the language of patriarchal absolutism that women of color need to cast off. Kingston's decision to use a male protagonist instead of dealing directly with the experiences of women (as she did in *The Woman Warrior*) also suggests her determination to dissociate the concerns of women from simple biodeterminism alone. Kingston herself has suggested that the "omniscient narrator in *Tripmaster Monkey* is a Chinese American woman; she's Kwan Yin (the Goddess of Mercy) and she's me."[22] It is not as if Kingston associates her male protagonist with more "universal" values. Instead, she uses him to suggest the problems with gender dichotomies that equate maleness with singularity and universality and thus uses the occasion of the male protagonist to subvert gender oppositions much like she did in *The Woman Warrior.* The same is the case with ethnicity. If there is no "real" China or Chinese-American culture to valorize, there is no "real" Americanism that immigrants need espouse. Indeed, the striking feature of the book is that although it is so concerned with immigrant experience and the politics of assimilation, there is no Oedipal quest structure, the end of which is the attainment of a certain kind of ethnicity. There is, instead, a celebration of multiple enactments of ethnicity. Through Wittman, Kingston shows how ethnic identity as a shifting, constantly reformulated concept, related to an "origin" only through linguistic representations and fictions, is, in fact, empowering.

In contrast to *Tripmaster Monkey,* Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* deals explicitly with the experiences of Chinese-American women and their acculturation in a new environment. The narrative centers around the lives of four Mandarin-speaking Chinese immigrant mothers in San Francisco who have formed a mahjongg group called the Joy Luck Club and the American-born daughters of these mothers. The narrative unfolds through the four different mother-daughter narrators telling the stories of their lives. Tan places a decided emphasis on mother-daughter relationships, and much of the work can be seen as a celebration of values such as nurturance and connectedness that have been seen by many feminists to characterize women as opposed to male values such as separation and autonomy.[23] But Tan ensures that her work cannot simply be recuperated as an ahistorical feminism without attention to the particular status of women of color within universalist feminism. Like Kingston who presents ethnicity as a construct, Tan presents Chinese-American women's identity as resistance by appropriating (and thus questioning) the rhetoric of universalist feminism.

In order to appreciate Tan's appropriation, we need to consider the representations of women of color when they are the objects of feminist analysis. Aihwa Ong explains the dynamics of these representations as follows: “By portraying women in non-Western societies as identical and interchangeable, and more exploited than women in dominant capitalist societies, liberal and socialist feminists alike encode a belief in their own cultural superiority. … Studies on women in post-1949 China inevitably discuss how they are doubly exploited by the peasant family and by the socialist patriarchy.”[24] Within white American culture the dichotomies between Western and Asian women are clearly seen as those between activity and passivity, freedom and restraint, independence and submission. Tan is aware of these dichotomies and attempts to undermine the imperialism within universalist feminism. In *The Joy Luck Club* Tan polemically records the marginalization and disempowerment of all women within patriarchal institutions—whether in China or America. While wives within the traditional Chinese family are taught to find satisfaction in waiting on their husbands and their families, in America the mass media insidiously reinforces the same subservience. As Lindo Jong, one of the Chinese mothers, reflects. “I hurt so much I didn't feel any difference. What was happier than seeing everybody gobble down the shiny mushrooms and bamboo shoots I had helped prepare that day? … How much happier could I be after seeing Tyan-yu eat a whole bowl of noodles without complaining about its taste or my looks? It's like those ladies you see on American TV these days, the ones who are so happy they have washed out a stain so the clothes look better than new.”[25] Tan's subversion of the distinction between the progressive (Euro-American) woman and the traditional Asian woman is radical here. Lindo Jong, the woman who was married at the age of eight and sent to live with her husband's family at the age of twelve, is not only equated with the (ostensibly) free American woman but is also given the power to interpret her Western counterpart. Similarly, Tan uses another Chinese immigrant mother to voice the idea of the disempowerment of women across cultures and generations. Reflecting on the despair of her American-born daughter over an impending divorce, An-Mei Hsu concludes: “If she doesn't speak, she is making a choice. … I know this, because I was raised the Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing. … And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, she still came out the same way! Maybe it was because she was born to me and she was born a girl. And I was born to my mother and I was born to be a girl. All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way” (*JL* 215). Tan's formulation of a common oppression shared by what is traditionally perceived as Chinese-raised and American-raised women again subverts East-West cultural dichotomies. Tan carefully relies upon and upsets these hierarchical cultural expectations. “Because I was raised the Chinese way” in the above passage, for example, strategically reveals the imperialist racial context within which such casual formulations are taken as completely explanatory. In another instance Tan deconstructs the myth of American freedom. Male polygamy in China sanctions the mistreatment of women and their relegation to concubine status, the humiliation of which An-Mei Hsu's mother escapes only through suicide. However, in America, the ethnic woman is subject to dual disempowerment of ethnicity and gender. The seemingly lovable Irish husband of Ying-Ying St. Clair proudly imagines himself having “saved” his Chinese wife from some hideous, unimaginable life and passes this myth on to his daughter. In reality, as Ying Ying reflects, she was “raised with riches he could not even imagine” and he had to wait for four years “like a dog in a butcher shop” before she consented to marry him (*JL* 250). Once in America, St. Clair, in a sense, enslaves Ying-Ying. He crosses out Ying-Ying's Chinese name on her passport papers, names her Betty St. Clair, gives her a new birthdate, and insists she speak English. “So with him, she spoke in moods and gestures, looks and silences. … Words cannot come out. So my father put words in her mouth” (*JL* 106). The result: madness.

Just as Tan depicts a common oppression of women, she also depicts a resistance through maternal bonding and nurturing. The novel begins with the death of Suyan Woo, mother of Jing-Mei Woo and founder of the Joy Luck Club. A woman of incredible strength and moral courage, Suyan Woo started the Joy Luck Club, a mah-jongg group, during the Japanese invasion of China. Amidst the destruction and poverty caused by the invasion, the women decided to create an oasis of good cheer in which they pretended to be rich and carefree. The novel ends with Jing-Mei Woo going to China to meet her half-sisters, the two daughters Suyan Woo was forced to abandon during the invasion but which she never gave up trying to locate. Jing-Mei Woo's journey to China is thus a journey back to her mother, a retrieval of her memory into the present. “Together we look

like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish" (*JL* 288). Throughout the book we see the intensity and power of mother-daughter bonds. An-Mei Hsu's mother literally tears off her flesh and offers it in sacrifice in an attempt to revive her dying mother; Rose-Hsu Jordan is able to demand her divorce rights by imaginative identification with her mother; and Jing-Mei Woo looks for the memory of her mother to help her understand the present.

And this female identity as defined through the mother-daughter bond is integrally linked to ethnic identity. As Amy Ling suggests, the lost mother is a trope for lost motherland.[26] The return to the mother is also the return to cultural roots; separation from the mother is a separation from one's own cultural origins. Ying-Ying St. Clair's determination to bridge the separation between her daughter and herself is a synecdoche of the narratives of separation and togetherness that inform the text. "There is a part of her mind that is part of mine. … All her life I have watched her as though from another shore. And now I must tell her everything about my past. It is the only way to penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved" (*JL* 242).

But Tan builds up the romantic concept of cultural origins and lost ethnic essence only in order to radically undermine and reconfigure the notion of an ethnic essence. The narrative of separation and return—symbolized by Jing-Mei Woo's return to China/mother—on the plot level is questioned by the rhetorical structure of the text which undercuts any notions of simple identification of origins or of a cultural "reality" easily available for access. The experiences of Chinese immigrants in America and their past lives in China are not documented by a seemingly objective narrator but by a series of participants narrating their extremely subjective experiences. Tan's decision to have several mothers and daughters telling their different stories reflects her awareness of ethnicity as a constantly shifting social construct and her commitment to community. The mothers and daughters tell their stories within the framework of the Joy Luck Club, the purpose of which is to keep alive a memory of the past and create a community. Each section of the novel actually creates a different version of femininity and ethnicity. While the first section of the novel emphasizes the loss of separation from mothers, the second emphasizes the competitiveness of the relationship. Thus we have An-Mei Hsu's mother, who determinedly, despite the curses of her family, takes her daughter to live with her even though she only has the status of concubine; we also have Jing-Mei Woo, the Chinese-American daughter who wishes to understand and unite with the memories of her dead mother.[27] On the other hand, we have immigrant Chinese mothers who project their cultural anxieties on their daughters. Waverly Jong's mother, for instance, parades her daughter's chess trophies and lectures to her about winning tournaments while Suyan Woo tries unsuccessfully to create a musical child prodigy out of her unmusical daughter Jing-Mei Woo.

Further, Tan's construction of ethnic identity is not based on a vision of a stable and unchanging China that can be recalled at will. Although the theme of estrangement from, and unification with, cultural origins is integral to the work, these origins are multiple and discursive. Part of Tan's purpose in having four different Chinese-born mothers is to introduce different versions of China, neither of which is prioritized over the other. At the most obvious level, there are clear class differences among the mothers' experiences of China. Auntie Lin's family in China revels in consumerism, surrounding itself with color TV sets and remote controls; An-Mei Hsu's family, on the other hand, is awed at having a relative in the land of consumer goods. More importantly, for the American-born daughters, the Chinese past exists discursively, in language, through the stories told about it by their mothers. Ethnic origins, in other words, are always already complicated by representation. For An-Mei Hsu, a Chinese mother, for example, "China" is a mixture of memories of her mother's suicide and of peasant uprisings that she reads of in magazines from China, all of which have to be sorted out by her psychiatrist (*JL* 241). The most interesting example of ethnic origins being based on multiple and changing representations is the history of the Joy Luck Club itself. Suyan Woo tells her daughter the history of the Joy Luck Club which she started in Kweilin, but the history changes with each retelling. Her daughter, who has heard the story many times, never thinks her mother's Kweilin story about the origins of the Joy Luck Club is "anything but a Chinese fairy tale. The endings always changed. Sometimes she said she used that worthless thousand-yuan note to buy a half-cup of rice. She turned that rice into a pot of porridge. …

The story always grew and grew” (*JL* 25). In many ways, the club itself deconstructs traditionally perceived oppositions between history and fiction, the experiential and the discursive. The club is formed as a make-believe celebration of plenty during the devastation of Japanese occupation and thus has a fictive function. Yet the club survives as Suyan Woo's most “real” memory of the war period. The club is based on stories, “stories spilling out all over the place” (*JL* 24). The women tell each other stories about “good times in the past and good times yet to come,” pretending each week is a new year, and this self-consciously fictive club becomes the basis for creating an immigrant community in California.

Similarly, Tan's mode of narration questions the very idea of historical context as something that can be retrieved through a recording of facts. Tan uses a dialogic mixture of myth, fantasy, reverie, and historical facts without demarcating any as more true than the other and thus questions the truth status of a national history. Within “true” stories of the Chinese past of immigrant mothers, stories of arranged marriages and Japanese occupation, there are affective images of mythical women like the Moon Lady and grotesque images of destructive mothers dismembering their daughters. The concept of a Chinese woman's identity, Tan suggests, is a discursive one. Similarly, the last section of the book, which includes four narratives of mothers and daughters coming to an understanding, is titled “Queen Mother of the Western Skies” and obviously involves the figure of Queen Mother, the feminization of Buddha who appears (in White Lotus Buddhism) as the creator of mankind and the controller of time. The blend of myth and traditional historical storytelling that informs the narratives about China suggests that ethnic origins are always created and recreated in the complex process of social representation. To think of ethnicity as an essence is to fall prey to the fortune cookie syndrome, to create monologic definitions in order to manage differences. As An-Mei Hsu tells Lindo Jong about fortune cookies, “American people think Chinese people write these sayings.” “But we never say such things!” I said. “These things don't make sense” (*JL* 262).

Tan's simultaneous use of the motif of the return to origins and her complication of these origins raises a matter of unquestionable importance for women of color. Is it desirable for a radical feminist politics to view femininity and ethnicity as ever-changing social constructs? Is it possible to demand and affect social change without the construction of a whole and unified subject? The answer to both those questions has to be a yes if only because the alternatives are so dangerous. As an example of the problems inherent in momentarily positing a singular ethnicity and femininity we can look, for a moment, at Tan's text. The last chapter of *The Joy Luck Club* presents an idealized moment of ethnic identity, set deliberately against the multiplicities of the rest of the novel. The chapter concerns Jing-Mei Woo's trip to China to meet her two half-sisters whom her mother was forced to abandon and who have been miraculously located by the members of the Joy Luck Club. The trope of the lost motherland and the lost mother become one here. Jing-Mei Woo feels herself “becoming” Chinese as the train crosses the border from Hong Kong. “Once you are born Chinese, you cannot help but feel and think Chinese. … It is in your blood” (*JL* 267). The entire chapter enacts a rhapsody of ethnic identity as Jing-Mei and her father meet old relatives and finally the two lost sisters. Here Jing-Mei Woo understands an ethnic identity that is beyond language: “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” (*JL* 288). But while Tan celebrates this moment of ethnic wholeness, she is also aware of the problems that such essentialist concepts pose. Moments such as these deny the class differences between the tourist gazer and the ethnic subject and suggest an ethnic oneness that the text thus far has questioned. Tan therefore chooses to end her narrative not with this moment but with a commentary on it. The text ends with Jing-Mei and her sisters looking at a Polaroid photo of themselves that Jing-Mei's father has just taken, and with Jing-Mei recognizing her mother in the composite of the three sisters. Jing-Mei recognizes an ethnic identification but only through her active interpretation and by deliberately framing ethnic “subjects” in a momentary stasis beyond language.

Kingston and Tan succeed in creating a space for women of color to articulate themselves because they refuse to use definitional modes of locating gender and ethnic identity. Kingston presents a constructed and discursive ethnic identity by having her protagonist take on multiple roles and constantly enact versions of ethnicity, while Tan does so by presenting multiple representations of ethnic origins. The emphasis on the

discursivity and contextuality of ethnic identity does not mean that Kingston and Tan are attempting to write from beyond ethnicity or that they are denying the importance of racial divisions in society. On the contrary, it attests to the determination of these women to use ethnicity as resistance, to articulate it in such a manner that it cannot be reduced to definitional criteria which have always been used to marginalize people of color.

Notes

1. I use the term *women of color* deliberately in order to stress a political rather than biological category and also to maintain the insistence of many women of color (Alice Walker's use of “womanist” comes to mind) who have refused to use the label “feminist” because of its association with white feminism alone. See Chandra Talpade Mohanty's explanation of the term in the “Introduction” in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 7.
2. Spivak's critique of feminists who touted Jane Eyre as a feminist text and ignored the relationship of dominance between Jane and the West Indian, Bertha, is exemplary here. See Spivak's “Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 243–261.
3. bell hooks begins her discussion of the difference of women of color by pointing out how Betty Friedan's position in *The Feminine Mystique* assumed that all women were middle-class housewives with leisure. Constructions of womanhood under slavery, as hooks points out, clearly show the very different concerns of white versus African-American women. See bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).
4. See Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar's questioning of Maxine Molyneux's endorsement of imperialism. Such thinking, Amos and Parmar write, implies that “it is only when Third World women enter into capitalistic relations will they have any hope of liberation.” Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, “Challenging Imperial Feminism,” *Feminist Review* 17 (Autumn 1984): 6.
5. The first issue of *Differences* (1989) was devoted to discussions of essentialism with feminist theory.
6. The terms *ethnicity* and *race* have themselves been the objects of much discussion. Ethnicity has sometimes been seen as synonymous with culture, as opposed to the biological concept of race, or has been seen as a broader concept that, in fact, includes race. Some feminists have objected to the use of the term *race* because of its biological and definitional associations. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, for example, object to the essentialism they see inherent in the concept of race and favor using the concept of ethnicity instead. Ethnicity, they believe, can address the complex and historically specific conjunctures of ethnicity, gender, and class better than the concept of race. See Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, “Contextualizing Feminism—Gender, Ethnic and Class Divisions,” *Feminist Review* 15 (1983): 63. Michelle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, on the other hand, argue in favor of retaining the concept of race because of its politically charged associations: “To reject the black/white distinction in favor of a concept of ethnic division is to reject the political, social and ideological force of racism in our society” (27). But while seeming to favor the concept of race in a somewhat purist manner, Barrett and McIntosh go on to use the term *black* in their analysis to “people of Asian, African and West Indian origin,” in other words, all marginalized people of color in England (28). We can clearly see that whether we use the category of ethnicity or race, the important point is to maintain the linkage of these terms to the politics of oppression and domination. See Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh, “Ethnocentrism and Socialist Feminist Theory,” *Feminist Review* 20 (Summer 1985): 23–47.
7. See Lisa Lowe, “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences,” *Diaspora* (Spring 1991): 28.
8. Ibid., 39.
9. Werner Sollors' collection of essays, *The Invention of Ethnicity,* is designed to accomplish this purpose. Sollors rightly criticizes essentialist ethnic definitions but completely misrepresents the debates about ethnicity and race by insisting that critics who want to retain the concept of ethnicity want to do so in rigid, definitional form (xiii). According to Sollors' argument, the only alternative to essentialist ethnicity is a belief in the reality of the American melting pot (xiv). It is perhaps a

revealing absence in Sollors' collection that there are no essays by the most well known but radical theorists of race who have never espoused racial essentialism—Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Barbara Johnson. Henry Louis Gates, etc. See Werner Sollors, ed., *The Invention of Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

10. In the United States it is clear that ethnicity as a concept of marginalization and demarcation is used only with reference to people of color. Ishmael Reed cites the instructive example of a David Brinkley show in which three "ethnic" writers appeared: William Kennedy (Irish-American), E. L. Doctorow (Jewish-American), and Toni Morrison (African-American). Of the three, only Toni Morrison's ethnicity was cited. Thus, Ishmael Reed cynically concludes. "In the United States ethnicity is interchangeable with being black" (Ishmael Reed, in "Is Ethnicity Obsolete?" in *The Invention of Ethnicity,* 226).
11. See Lourdes Torres, "The Construction of Self in U.S. Latina Autobiographies," in *Third World Women,* pp. 274–275.
12. M. M. Bakhtin and V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language,* trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 39.
13. Ibid., 28.
14. I have made this argument in my essay "Questioning Race and Gender Definitions: Dialogic Subversions in *The Woman Warrior,*" *Criticism* 31 (1989): 421–438.
15. Maxine Hong Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 34. All subsequent references will be made parenthetically as *TM.*
16. Based on a personal conversation with Kingston, Amy Ling has suggested that Wittman might be modeled after the playwright Frank Chin. However, Ling does not analyze the ramifications of Kingston choosing as a protagonist a playwright who has been extremely critical of her work. *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990).
17. Reviewers of *The Woman Warrior* praised the book for its "myths rich and varied as Chinese brocade" and prose that "achiev[ed] the delicacy and precision of porcelain" (Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* [Philadelphia: Temple Press, 1982], xvi).
18. Tom Wilhelmus, "Various Pairs," *Hudson Review* 43 (Spring 1990): 150.
19. Some critics have seen Kingston's attempts as exactly the opposite. Linda Morante, for instance, reads *The Woman Warrior* as a text in which the act of writing "preserves the identity of the creator." Linda Morante, "From Silence to Song: The Triumph of Maxine Hong Kingston," *Signs* 12 (1987): 78.
20. Leslie W. Rabine, "No Lost Paradise: Social and Symbolic Gender in the Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston," *Signs* 12 (1987): 474.
21. Henry Louis Gates uses the figure of the signifying monkey to explain the double voicing of African-American writing. See "'The Blackness of Blackness': A Critique of the Sign and Signifying Monkey," *Critical Inquiry* (1983): 685–723.
22. Ling, *Between Worlds,* 150.
23. Feminist theorists have often identified maternal bonding as constitutive of the experience and morality of women. Nancy Chodorow, for example, identifies relationships among women as means that women evolve to maintain the feminine sense of self which, unlike the masculine, thrives on connectedness to others. See Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 169. Others see the productivity of thinking based on maternal practice or the importance of sustaining friendships between women. Sara Ruddick, for instance, finds in women a particular kind of maternal thinking that is holistic and open-ended (Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2 [1980]: 342–367).
24. Aihwa Ong, "Colonialism and Modernity: Feminist Re-presentations of Women in Non-Western Societies," *Inscriptions* 3, no. 4 (1988): 85. Chandra Talpade Mohanty similarly writes how Third World women as a group are "automatically and necessarily defined as religious (read 'not progressive'), family-oriented (read 'traditional'), legal minors (read

'they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights'), illiterate (read 'ignorant'), domestic (read 'backward')" ("Under Western Eyes," in *Third World Women,* 72).

25. Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* (New York: Putnam's, 1989), 56. All subsequent references will be cited parenthetically as *JL.*
26. Ling, *Between Worlds,* 132.
27. Lisa Lowe points out that "by contrasting different examples of mother-daughter discord and concord, *Joy Luck* allegorizes the heterogenous culture in which the desire for identity and sameness (represented by Jing-Mei's story) is inscribed within the context of Asian-American differences" (Lowe, "Heterogeneity," 36).

Criticism: Marina Heung (essay date Fall 1993)

SOURCE: "Daughter-Text/Mother Text: Matrilineage in Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club,*" in *Feminist Studies,* Vol. 19, No. 3, Fall, 1993, pp. 597–616.

[*In the following essay, Heung addresses how* The Joy Luck Club *portrays mothers and daughters struggling to maintain female-centered relationships—through language and storytelling—in the face of cultural and social pressures.*]

The critical literature on matrilineage in women's writings has already achieved the status of a rich and evolving canon.[1] At the same time, in recognizing race, class, and gender as crucial determinants in writings by women of color, some critics have indicated the need to develop a distinct framework for understanding these works. For example, Dianne F. Sadoff has examined the literature by African American women to note that "race and class oppression intensify the black woman writer's need to discover an untroubled matrilineal heritage." Referring to Alice Walker's adoption of Zora Neale Hurston as a literary foremother, Sadoff shows how "in celebrating her literary foremothers … the contemporary black woman writer covers over more profoundly than does the white writer her ambivalence about matrilineage, her own misreadings of precursors, and her link to an oral as well as written tradition."[2] Readers like Sadoff[3] suggest that, although matrilineage remains a consistent and powerful concern in the female literary tradition, the recognition of culturally and historically specific conditions in women's lives requires that we appropriately contextualize, and thereby refine, our readings of individual texts.

In the realm of writings by Asian Americans, this work has begun. Although it does not focus explicitly on the idea of matrilineage, Amy Ling's *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* is the first book to outline the literary tradition of one group of Asian American women. Her effort, Ling says, is inspired by Walker's "search for our mothers' gardens."[4] Similarly, in a recent essay, Shirley Geok-lin Lim identifies Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter* as a "mother text" for Joyce Kogawa's *Obasan.* In discussing these authors, Lim enumerates literary characteristics shared by Asian American and Asian Canadian women writers, such as "multiple presences, ambivalent stories, and circular and fluid narratives."[5] Lim's analysis points toward a commonality between Sone and Kogawa and two other writers, Maxine Hong Kingston and Chuang Hua.[6] In Kingston's *Woman Warrior* and Hua's *Crossings,* antirealistic narrative strategies and a provisional authorial stance correlate with experiences of cultural dislocation and of destabilized and fluid identities.[7] Thus, the works of Sone, Kogawa, Kingston, and Hua collectively define an emerging canon cohering around concerns with racial, gender, and familial identity and the concomitant rejection of monolithic literary techniques.

In *Nisei Daughter, Obasan, The Woman Warrior,* and *Crossings,* the theme of matrilineage revolves around the figure of the daughter. With the exception of *Crossings* (which focuses on a daughter-father relationship), each of these works depicts how a daughter struggles toward self-definition by working through the mother-daughter dyad. The daughter's centrality thus places these writings firmly in the tradition delineated by Marianne Hirsch in *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism.* Examining women's

fiction from the eighteenth century through postmodernism, Hirsch notes the predominance of the daughter's voice and the silencing of the mother. This inscription of the “romance of the daughter” forms part of the feminist revision of the Freudian family plot.

> It is the woman as *daughter* who occupies the center of the global reconstruction of subjectivity and subject-object relation. The woman as *mother* remains in the position of other, and the emergence of feminine-daughterly subjectivity rests and depends on that continued and repressed process of *othering* the mother. … Daughter and mother are separated and forever trapped by the institution, the function of motherhood. They are forever kept apart by the text's daughterly perspective and signature: the mother is excluded from the discourse by the daughter who owns it.

Interestingly, Hirsch's few examples of departures from this pattern are drawn only from the writings of African American women. As she suggests, the scantiness of this sampling of “corrective” family romances, incorporating rather than repressing maternal discourse, reinforces the argument that feminist writers need to construct a new family romance to move the mother “from object to subject.”[8]

Published in 1989, Amy Tan's novel, *The Joy Luck Club,* is about four Chinese American daughters and their mothers.[9] Like *The Woman Warrior* and *Crossings,* the novel contains autobiographical elements. In an interview, Tan describes how she was moved to establish a dialogue with her mother: “When I was writing, it was so much for my mother and myself … I wanted her to know what I thought about China and what I thought about growing up in this country. And I wanted those words to almost fall off the page so that she could just see the story, that the language would be simple enough, almost like a little curtain that would fall away.”[10] But despite Tan's explicit embrace of a daughter's perspective, *The Joy Luck Club* is remarkable for foregrounding the voices of mothers as well as of daughters. In the opening chapter of the novel, Jing-Mei Woo (also known as June) stands in for her recently deceased mother at an evening of mah-jong held by the Joy Luck Club, a group of elderly aunts and uncles. On this evening, three of her “Joy Luck aunties” give her money to fly to China to meet two half-sisters, twins who were abandoned by her mother during the war. In the last chapter of the novel, June makes this trip with her father. Her story (taking up four chapters) is told in her voice. The rest of the chapters are similarly narrated in the first person by three of June's coevals (Waverly Jong, Rose Jordan Hsu, and Lena St. Clair) and their mothers (Lindo Jong, An-Mei Hsu, and Ying-Ying St. Clair). Thus, totaling sixteen chapters in all, the novel interweaves seven voices, four of daughters, and three of mothers. In the way that it foregrounds maternal discourse, *The Joy Luck Club* materializes Marianne Hirsch's vision of a mother/daughter plot “written in the voice of mothers, as well as those of daughters … [and] in combining both voices [finds] a double voice that would yield a multiple female consciousness.[11] But because the maternal voices in the novel bespeak differences derived from the mothers' unique positioning in culture and history, the subjectivities they inscribe, in counterpointing those of the daughters, also radically realign the mother/daughter plot itself.

In the chapter, “Double Face,” in *The Joy Luck Club,* a scene implicitly illustrates the incompleteness of a model of the mother/daughter dyad defined only from the daughter's perspective. Here, the central motif is a mirror reflecting a mother and a daughter. Interweaving the themes of vision, recognition, and reflection, this scene shows the limits of viewing identification as an issue problematic for the daughter alone. The scene is set after Waverly has persuaded her mother to get her hair cut. Lindo is seated before a mirror as Waverly and Mr. Rory (the hairdresser) scrutinize her hairstyle. Sitting silently, Lindo listens to the two discuss her “as if [she] were not there.” Her daughter translates Mr. Rory's questions for her, even though Lindo can understand English perfectly well. When Waverly speaks directly to her, she does so loudly, “as if [Lindo has] lost [her] hearing.” But because this scene is narrated from Lindo's perspective, her vision and subjectivity are in fact in control. Even as her daughter seems determined to nullify her presence, Lindo sees the superficial social ease between Waverly and Mr. Rory as typical of how “Americans don't really look at one another when talking.” Despite her silence and apparent acquiescence, she interposes herself nonverbally through her smiles and her

alternation between her “Chinese face” and her “American face” (“the face Americans think is Chinese, the one they cannot understand”) (p. 255).

The scene turns on Mr. Rory's sudden exclamation at seeing the uncanny resemblance between mother and daughter reflected in the mirror. Lindo notes Waverly's discomfiture: “‘The same cheeks.’ [Waverly] says. She points to mine and then pokes her cheeks. She sucks them outside in to look like a starved person” (p. 256). Waverly's response exhibits her “matrophobia,” defined by Adrienne Rich as the daughter's fear of “becoming one's mother.”[12] Feminists have analyzed the daughter's ambivalence toward identification with the mother,[13] but Lindo's response in this scene allows us to consider identification from a maternal perspective. Much as Lindo possesses a “double face,” she also has access to a “double vision.” Seeing herself mirrored in her daughter, she recalls her own mother in China.

> And now I have to fight back my feelings. These two faces, I think, so much the same! The same happiness, the same sadness, the same good fortune, the same faults.
>
> I am seeing myself and my mother, back in China, when I was a young girl.

(P. 256)

With her “double vision,” Lindo is not threatened by her daughter's attempted erasure of her; in fact, she is moved by her daughter's resemblance to her, even as she registers Waverly's response. Lindo's perspective is informed by her personal history and by her ability to bridge time and cultures. At the same time, Lindo's knowledge of family history provides one key to her sense of ethnic identity. As critics have noted, in writings by Asian American women, issues of matrilineage are closely bound with those of acculturation and race. Thus, Shirley Lim writes: “The essential thematics of maternality is also the story of race … [The mother] is the figure not only of maternality but also of racial consciousness.”[14] But in presenting the mother as the potent symbol of ethnic identity, Lim implicitly adopts the perspective of the daughter. In her scheme, the mother's primary role is to set into motion the daughter's working through toward a separate selfhood and a new racial identity. Yet this elevation of the daughter as the figure around whom the “dangers of rupture and displaced selves” converge[15] marginalizes maternal subjectivity and voicing. But surely the issues of identification, differentiation, and ethnic identity have meaning for mothers as well, and this meaning must to a significant degree devolve from their relationships with their own mothers. As exemplified in this episode in “Double Face,” *The Joy Luck Club* moves maternality to the center. It locates subjectivity in the maternal and uses it as a pivot between the past and the present. In so doing, it reclaims maternal difference and reframes our understanding of daughterly difference as well.

Recent feminist revisions of the Freudian Oedipal family romance assume a culturally and historically specific model of the nuclear family. In her influential book, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender,* Nancy Chodorow shows how the institution of motherhood based on childcare provided by women sustains the central problematics of separation and differentiation for daughters.[16] Using a paradigm that is white, middle-class, and Western, Chodorow's analysis is not universally applicable. In this vein, Dianne E Sadoff and Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Brownley show how the Black family, distorted through the history of slavery in particular, needs to be understood through alternative models.[17] Such a culturally specific critique needs to be applied to the traditional Chinese family as well. Because of their historical devaluation, women in the Chinese family are regarded as disposable property or detachable appendages despite their crucial role in maintaining the family line through childbearing. Regarded as expendable “objects to be invested in or bartered,” the marginal status of Chinese women shows itself in their forced transfer from natal families to other families through the practice of arranged marriage, concubinage, adoption, and pawning.[18] The position of women—as daughters, wives, and mothers—in Chinese society is therefore markedly provisional, with their status and expendability fluctuating according to their families' economic circumstances, their ability to bear male heirs, and the proclivities of authority figures in their lives.

This pattern of radical rupture within families is illustrated by the family histories of An-Mei, Lindo, and Ying-Ying in *The Joy Luck Club.* As a child, An-Mei is raised by her grandmother; she has only confused memories of her mother. One day, when her grandmother is dying, her mother appears and removes her to Shanghai; An-Mei is then adopted into a new family where her mother is the fourth concubine of a wealthy merchant.

In contrast to An-Mei, Lindo is removed from her natal family through marriage, not adoption. At age two, Lindo is engaged to a young boy who is a stranger to her. A bride in an arranged marriage at sixteen, Lindo finally succeeds in freeing herself through a ruse by which she convinces her husband's family to find a concubine for him.

Like Lindo, Ying-Ying is chosen as a bride by a stranger, a man who associates deflowering her with the act of *kai gwa* ("open the watermelon"). A "wild and stubborn" girl in her youth, Ying-Ying's spirit is destroyed in this brutal marriage. Later, when she is pregnant, her husband leaves her for another woman; she decides to get an abortion.

In *The Joy Luck Club,* family allegiances are complicated and disrupted within a kinship system in which blood ties are replaced by a network of alternate affiliations. When Lindo is engaged to the son of the Huang family, for instance, her family relationships are immediately reconfigurated. Her mother starts treating her "as if [she] belonged to someone else," and she begins to be referred to as her future mother-in-law's daughter.

For An-Mei, the breakage and realignment of relationships involving parents and siblings are even more radical and arbitrary. When her mother removes her from her grandmother's household, her brother—her mother's first son—is left behind because patrilineal claims on male children cannot be challenged. After her adoption into her new family, An-Mei is introduced to three other wives in the family—each a potential surrogate mother. For instance, her mother tells her to call the Second Wife "Big Mother." She also acquires a new brother, Syaudi, who now becomes her "littlest brother" (p. 230). But An-Mei has to undergo one final upheaval when she finds out that Syaudi is truly her brother by blood and not adoption. This happens when her mother's attendant tells her how An-Mei's mother was forced into concubinage and bore a son; this son was then adopted by the Second Wife as her own. In this way, An-Mei makes a shocking discovery: "That was how I learned that the baby Syaudi was really my mother's son, my littlest brother" (p. 237).

Unlike Lindo and An-Mei, Suyuan Woo (June's mother) sees her family dispersed as a result of cataclysmic historical events. During the Japanese bombardment of Kweilin during the war, she is forced to flee south without her husband; discarding her possessions along the way and desperate for food, she finally abandons her twin daughters on the road. Later in America, her new daughter, June, grows up with the knowledge of a truncated family, haunted by her mother's words: "Your father is not my first husband. You are not those babies" (p. 26).

These stories of disrupted family connections, of divided, multiplied, and constantly realigned perceptions of kinship, constitute a pattern clearly diverging from the monolithic paradigm of the nuclear family. In *The Joy Luck Club,* their experiences of broken and fluctuating family bonds inspire Lindo, An-Mei, and Ying-Ying to construct stories of bonding with the mother precisely in answer to their memories of profound rupture and abandonment. Speaking from their experiences of mother loss, these immigrant mothers offer altered versions of the "romance of the daughter." Whereas typical versions of this romance highlight generational conflict and the repression of the mother, An-Mei, Lindo, and Ying-Ying construct consoling tales enacting a fantasy of symbiosis with the maternal. Recalling her first sight of her mother after a long separation, An-Mei describes how their exchange of gazes locks them into instant identification: "[My mother] looked up. And when she did, I saw my own face looking back at me" (p. 45). An-Mei also privileges her mother's story about two turtles joined through suffering; from this parable of shared grief, An-Mei derives a message connecting her to her mother: "That was our fate, to live like two turtles seeing the watery world together from the bottom of the

little pond" (p. 217). In this way, An-Mei transforms common experiences of pain and victimization into testimonials of mother/daughter bonding. Similarly, instead of feeling outrage at her mother's collaboration in her arranged betrothal and marriage, Lindo actually chooses collusion with her mother, behaving as the proper daughter-in-law so that her mother will not lose face (p. 55).

However, years later, in America, Lindo's assertion of instinctive bonding with her mother is contested by new realities. She comes to regret how her mother "did not see how [her] face changed over the years. How [her] mouth began to droop. How [she] began to worry but still did not lose [her] hair …" (p. 257). Acknowledging these inevitable changes in herself, Lindo implicitly admits the loss of symbiosis. Her transplantation into American culture and her advancing age have made her face no longer a perfect match of her mother's. Quite simply, her new "double face" reflects her changed cultural identity: "I think about our two faces. I think about my intentions. Which one is American? Which one is Chinese? Which one is better? If you show one, you must also sacrifice the other" (p. 266).

At the same time, Lindo's recognition of her own doubled identity has implications for how she understands her relationship with her daughter. Like her, Waverly is the product of two cultures, but Lindo sees that Waverly's experience of cultural mixing is different from her own: "Only her skin and hair are Chinese. Inside—she is all American-made" (p. 254). The otherness of her daughter's hybridized self for Lindo makes it unlikely that mother and daughter can achieve perfect identification: the burden of differences in personal history and cultural conditioning is too great. Yet, in *The Joy Luck Club,* the mothers' ability to accept their own loss of the maternal image also enables them to separate from their daughters. As Ying-Ying says: "I think this to myself even though I love my daughter. She and I have shared the same body. There is part of her mind that is part of mine. But when she was born, she sprang from me like a slippery fish, and has been swimming away from me since" (p. 242). Thus, in Tan's novel, the maternal experience of generational conflict and differentiation takes into account the realities of cultural difference; through this awareness, the Joy Luck mothers can negotiate their ambivalences about their daughters' desires for cultural assimilation and autonomous selfhood.

As the essential medium of subjectivity, language is the ground for playing out cultural differences. Gloria Anzaldúa has written about her language use as an insignia of her "borderlands" identity situated between Mexico and America: "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself." The speaker of this "language of Borderlands," Anzaldúa suggests, has the freedom to "switch codes" at will; it is a "bastard" language located at the "juncture of culture [where] languages cross-pollinate and are revitalized."[19] In *The Joy Luck Club,* the language of the mothers—their border language—marks their positioning between two cultures. However, in exposing linguistic limits, the novel also argues for reclaiming language as an instrument of intersubjectivity and dialogue, and as a medium of transmission from mothers to daughters.

In the novel, the daughters understand Chinese, but they speak English exclusively. The mothers, in contrast, speak a version of Anzaldúa's "language of the Borderlands," a *patois* of Chinese and English that often confuses their daughters. Observing her aunties, June thinks: "The Joy Luck aunties begin to make small talk, not really listening to each other. They speak in their special language, half in broken English, half in their own Chinese dialect" (p. 34). Embarrassing at times to the daughters, this language is a form of self-inscription in an alien culture, a way of preserving significance in the new reality of America. For one, the nuggets of foreign words incorporated into this speech duplicate aspects of self-identity that have no equivalent in another language. Words like *lihai, chuming* and *nengkan* must remain in their original Chinese in order to retain their power and meaning. For Ying-Ying, the essence of her youthful character before she became a lost soul, a "ghost," is contained in the word *lihai*: "When I was a young girl in Wushi, I was *lihai.* Wild and stubborn. I wore a smirk on my face. Too good to listen" (p. 243). Her confidence in her special knowledge is expressed by *chuming,* referring to her "inside knowledge of things" (p. 248). For Rose,

nengkan expresses her mother's ability to act on pure will and determination, as shown in An-Mei's summoning of her son's spirit after he has drowned at the beach (pp. 121–31). On another occasion, An-Mei's command of this hybrid language enables her to articulate, on her daughter's behalf, Rose's disorientation during her divorce. When An-Mei complains that Rose's psychiatrist is making her *hulihudu* and *heimongmong,* Rose ponders: "It was true. And everything around me seemed to be *heimongmong.* These were words I have never thought about in English terms. I suppose the closest in meaning would be 'confused' and 'dark fog'" (p. 188).

In discussing the use of "multilanguedness" in women's writings, Patricia Yaeger suggests that the "incorporation of a second language can function … as a subversive gesture representing an alternative form of speech which can both disrupt the repressions of authoritative discourse and still welcome or shelter themes that have not yet found a voice in the … primary language."[20] Although Yaeger is concerned with specific narrative strategies used in women's texts, her analysis has resonance for the significance of maternal speech in *The Joy Luck Club.* Without being overtly political or subversive, the mothers' bilingualism in the novel is nonetheless strategic. Switching from English to Chinese can express rejection and anger, as when June's mother berates her for not trying hard enough at her piano playing: "'So ungrateful,' I heard her mutter in Chinese. 'If she had as much talent as she has temper, she would be famous now'" (p. 136). Or, the switching of codes may initiate a shift into a different register of intimacy, as when the same mother speaks in Chinese when making her daughter a gift of a jade pendant (p. 208). To express her resentment against an American husband who persistently puts English words in her mouth, Ying-Ying uses Chinese exclusively with her daughter (p. 106). Deliberate deformations of language, too, are used to convey veiled criticisms, as when Ying-Ying snidely refers to her daughter's profession as an architect as "arty-tecky" (p. 242), and An-Mei dismisses Rose's psychiatrist as "psyche-tricks" (p. 188). Finally, the use of Chinese is a form of resistance to a hegemonic culture. In the following exchange, initiated when Waverly slyly asks about the difference between Jewish and Chinese mah-jong, Lindo's use of Chinese is self-reflexive; her switch from English to Chinese in itself expresses her sense of cultural difference and superiority.

> "Entirely different kind of playing," she said in her English explanation voice. "Jewish mah jong, they watch only for their own tile, play only with their eyes."
>
> Then she switched to Chinese: "Chinese mah jong, you must play using your head, very tricky. You must watch what everybody else throws away and keep that in your head as well. And if nobody plays well, then the game becomes like Jewish mah jong. Why play? There's no strategy. You're just watching people make mistakes."

(P. 33)

In *The Joy Luck Club,* "multilanguedness" bears the imprint of their speakers' unique cultural positioning, but this assertion of difference is also vexed by its potential to confuse and exclude. For the daughters, the special meaning of maternal language requires translation. After her mother's death, June thinks: "My mother and I never really understood each other. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more" (p. 37). Another question is how effectively maternal language functions as a medium of transmission between generations. The mothers in the novel worry that the family history and knowledge preserved in their hybrid language will be elided after their deaths. At one point, June comes to understand how important it is for her aunties to preserve the meaning of "joy luck": "They see that joy and luck do not mean the same to their daughters, that to these closed American-born minds 'joy luck' is not a word, it does not exist. They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope from generation to generation" (pp. 40–41).

Hybrid in its origins, maternal language in *The Joy Luck Club* possesses multiple, even contradictory, meanings. As an assertion of cultural identity, it both communicates and obfuscates. At the same time, it

stands in counterpoint to maternal silence. To the daughters, maternal silence hints at "unspeakable tragedies" (p. 20), and the maternal injunction to "bite back your tongue" (p. 89) binds daughters and mothers in a cycle of self-perpetuating denial. Yet both daughters and mothers resist this bind. The Joy Luck aunties, after all, plead frantically with June to tell her mother's—and, by implication, their own—history ("Tell them, tell them"). Similarly, Lena is aware of the power of the unspoken: "I always thought it mattered, to know what is the worst possible thing that can happen to you, to know how you can avoid it, to not be drawn by the magic of the unspeakable" (p. 103). Finally, it is the incomprehension enforced by silence that keeps mothers "othered" in the eyes of their daughters. An-Mei, for instance, is dismissed by Suyuan as a woman with "no spine" who "never thought about what she was doing" (p. 30), and Ying-Ying is seen by June as the "weird aunt, someone lost in her own world" (p. 35). As for Lindo, her special insight allows her to understand why her daughter and her friends see her as a "backward Chinese woman" (p. 255).

In the tradition of breaking silence that has become one of the shaping myths in the writings of women of color,[21] maternal silence in the novel is transformed from a medium of self-inscription and subjectivity into an instrument of intersubjectivity and dialogue. For the mothers, storytelling heals past experiences of loss and separation; it is also a medium for rewriting stories of oppression and victimization into parables of self-affirmation and individual empowerment. For the Joy Luck mothers, the construction of a self in identification with a maternal figure thus parallels, finally, a revisioning of the self through a reinterpretation of the past.

In Lindo's case, the brutality of a forced marriage is transformed, through its retelling, into a celebration of courage and resistance. She recalls looking into a mirror on the day of her wedding and being surprised at seeing her own purity and strength: "Underneath the scarf I still knew who I was. I made a promise to myself: I would always remember my parents' wishes, but I would never forget myself" (p. 58). Through a clever scheme, Lindo escapes from her marriage. After arriving in America, she chooses her second husband, getting him to propose by inserting a message inside a fortune cookie. Because all her jewelry was taken from her during her first marriage, she makes sure that she receives genuine gold jewelry from her husband and as gifts that she buys for herself: "And every few years, when I have a little extra money, I buy another bracelet. I know what I'm worth. They're always twenty-four carats, all genuine" (p. 66).

For An-Mei and Ying-Ying, self-articulation remedies early teachings in silence and self-denial. Both begin to recall painful memories when they see how their speech can save their daughters. Ying-Ying is stirred to speak directly to Lena when she sees her daughter's unhappy marriage. At one time a "tiger girl" who gave up her *chi* ("breath" or "lifeforce") in an unhappy marriage, Ying-Ying now recognizes that her daughter has "become like a ghost, disappear" (p. 163). The emptiness of Lena's life—with her fancy swimming pool, her Sony Walkman, and cordless phone—is apparent to her. Watching Rose go through a difficult divorce, An-Mei recalls her own mother's dying words, that "she would rather kill her own weak spirit so she could give me a stronger one" (p. 240). In the end, An-Mei and Ying-Ying find their voices: Ying-Ying to "wake up" Rose (p. 240) and Lena to "penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved" (p. 242).

The stories of their lives are the mothers' gifts to their daughters in the spirit with which the Joy Luck Club was originally founded. Years ago, June's mother formed the club in Kweilin in order to transmute the painful history of women like herself into a communal expression of defiance and hope, so that "each week [they] could forget past wrongs done to us … hope to be lucky" (p. 25). In breaking silence, these mothers reproduce the past as tales of "joy" and "luck." Like the scar on An-Mei's neck that her mother rubs in order to bring back a painful memory (p. 48), these narrations effect a passage from pain to catharsis, moving their tellers from inward knowledge to intersubjective dialogue. Significantly, each of the mother's stories suspends its mode of address between "I" and "you."[22] Thus, the closing sentence in Lindo's story is: "I will ask my daughter what she thinks" (p. 266). In inviting the daughters' interjections, the shift from interior monologue to dialogue enables the mothers to discover how they will mediate between the past and the present for their daughters. Their choices take them on the path, described by Kim Chernin, by which mothers can become

“co-conspirator[s]” with their daughters to stand “outside the oppressive system, united in some common effort.” Chernin suggests that a mother must ally herself with her daughter's struggle by first acknowledging that she too has passed “knowingly through a similar time of urgency and [has] been able to develop beyond it.” She concludes that a mother's entry into collaboration with her daughter involves a commitment to speech. She must be willing to “admit her conflict and ambivalence, acknowledge the nearness or actuality of breakdown, become fully conscious of her discontent, the hushed, unspoken sense of her life's failure.”[23] After all, as Adrienne Rich proposes, “the quality of the mother's life—however embattled and unprotected—is her primary bequest to her daughter.” Thus, the determination to provide models of “courageous mothering,” as envisioned by Rich,[24] is finally the subtext of the stories told by stories in *The Joy Luck Club.* Not the least of this maternal courage is the mothers' reclaiming of storytelling as an act of self-creation, one by which they enact, with a full complement of ambivalence and doubt, their passage from loss and dispossession to hope and affirmation.

In the opening story of the novel, June represents her recently deceased mother at a meeting of the Joy Luck Club. Feeling out of place, she imagines that the three Joy Luck aunties “must wonder now how someone like me can take my mother's place” (p. 27). The three aunties give her 00 to travel to China to meet her twin half-sisters, saying, “You must see your sisters and tell them about your mother's death. … But most important, you must tell them about her life” (p. 40). But until the moment of the meeting, June asks herself: “How can I describe to them in Chinese about our mother's life?” (p. 287).

The four stories told from June's point of view constitute pure family romance, in which family members are separated, lost, and reunited. The guiding spirit of this myth is June's mother, Suyuan. However, as told by June, the story is unmistakably the daughter's version of the family romance, in which a mother's death opens up the space for a daughter's recuperation of a lost maternal image.[25] Even while protesting that she doesn't know enough to tell her mother's story, June nevertheless proves correct her aunties' insistence: “Your mother is in your bones! … her mind … has become your mind” (p. 40). She starts cooking the same dishes for her father as her mother did; one evening she finds herself standing at the kitchen window, in imitation of her mother, rapping at a neighborhood cat (p. 209). Arriving in Shenzhen, China, just over the border from Hong Kong, she starts to feel different: “I can feel the skin on my forehead tingling, my blood rushing through a new course, my bones aching with a familiar old pain. And I think, My mother was right. I am becoming Chinese” (p. 267). Earlier she imagines that by dying her mother has left her, “gone back to China to get these babies” (p. 39). But as it turns out, it is she who is returning to China as her mother's emissary. Arriving in China with her father, she hears the final episode of her mother's story: how her mother was forced to abandon her twin babies and continued her search for them through the years. Turning to her father for this history, June urges him to tell it in Chinese: “No, tell me in Chinese. … Really, I can understand” (p. 281).

During the scene of June's reunion with her sisters, the rebounding of mirror images enacts a climactic moment, binding mother to daughter and sister to sister.

> Somebody shouts, “She's arrived!” And then I see her. Her short hair. Her small body. And that same look on her face. She has the back of her hand pressed hard against her mouth. She is crying as though she had gone through a terrible ordeal and were happy it is over.
>
> And I know it's not my mother, yet it is the same look she had when I was five and had disappeared all afternoon, for such a long time, that she was convinced that I was dead. And when I miraculously appeared, sleepy-eyed, crawling from underneath my bed, she wept and laughed, biting the back of her hand to make sure it was true.
>
> And now I see her again, two of her, waving, and in one hand is a photo, the Polaroid I sent them. As soon as I get beyond the gate, we run toward each other, all three of us embracing, all hesitations and expectations gone.

(P. 287)

In this encounter, sisterly and maternal identities are blurred, and through the recovery of lost sisters, the foundling myth is conflated with the romance of the daughter. Looking into her sisters' faces, June also sees mirrored in them part of her own ethnic identity: "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" (p. 288).

At the beginning of the novel, while representing her mother at the Joy Luck Club, June muses: "And I am sitting at my mother's place at the mah jong table, on the East, where things begin" (p. 41). June's story ends with her further east still in China, where there is yet another beginning. The meeting of the three sisters makes their generation whole again; resembling their mother as well as each other, the sisters' mutual identification recuperates maternal loss. Now June remembers her mother's remark to her: "Our whole family is gone. It is just you and I" (p. 272). With June's reunion with her sisters, however, the continuity of the family—but through the female line of descent—is reestablished. And finally, since the word the sisters speak upon recognizing each other—"Mama, Mama"—has common currency across cultures, matrilineage here signifies not only the possibility of a nurturing sisterhood but also the melding of cross-cultural linkages.

Although June's story matches the pattern of the idealized family romance, the overall structure of the novel offers such closure as a provisional possibility only. As we have seen, although maternal speech in the novel turns in the direction of intersubjectivity, this movement is tentative and incomplete. The narratives by Lindo, An-Mei, and Waverly shift from "I" to "you," but the absence of a reciprocal progression in their daughters' stories (from a daughterly "I" to the maternal "you") suggests the truncation of a truly dialogic process. Further, the novel's overall structure consciously resists any attempt to shape it definitively. As Valerie Miner has noted, the novel is "narrated horizontally as well as vertically"[26] Thus, June's symbolically complete and symmetrical story is contained within an overarching framework wrapping around a grouping of other stories whose arrangement is neither causal nor linear. Thus, although June's story offers closure in its progression from loss to recuperation, the other narratives are grouped in loose juxtaposition with each other. The mothers' stories are included in the first and last of the four main units in the novel and recount incidents in China; the daughters' stories appear in the middle two sections and are set in the immediate past or proximate present.

On closer reading, even the autonomy of each story as a clear-cut unit begins to dissolve, giving way to a subterranean pattern of resonances and motifs erasing the definite boundaries between individual narratives. Under this scrutiny, actions and motifs mirror each other from story to story, undermining absolute distinctions of character and voice. Thus, the formative moment of Lindo's story, when she looks into the mirror on her wedding day and pledges "never to forget" herself, is duplicated by June's standing in front of a mirror as a teenager, contemplating her self-worth under the assault of her mother's expectations: "The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. This girl and I were the same. I had new thoughts, willful thoughts, or rather thoughts filled with lots of won'ts. I won't let her change me, I promised myself. I won't be what I'm not" (p. 134). Similarly, Ying-Ying learns from the Moon Lady that the woman is "yin [from] the darkness within" and the man is "yang, bright with lighting our minds" (p. 81). Ying-Ying's lesson about the yin and the yang is echoed in Rose's description of her marriage: "We became inseparable, two halves creating the whole: yin and yang. I was victim to his hero. I was always in danger and he was always rescuing me." Or, to cite a final example of how the novel converges particular motifs: just before Rose's divorce, An-Mei tells her daughter that her husband is probably "doing monkey business with someone else" (p. 188); Rose scoffs at her mother's intuition, but a later discovery proves her mother right. Elsewhere, Lena similarly remarks on her own mother's "mysterious ability to see things before they happen"; in her case, Ying-Ying's uncanny foresight, like An-Mei's, predicts the collapse of Lena's marriage.

Signaling the author's intent to undermine the independence of individual narrative units, even the chapter titles, by connecting motifs between disparate stories, seem interchangeable. The title of Rose's story, "Half and Half," is echoed at the end of a story narrated by June when, turning to the piano she has abandoned for

many years, she plays two old tunes and realizes that they are "two halves of the same song" (p. 144). The theme of "half and half" is continued in the story told by Waverly, in which her mother tells her that she has inherited half of her character traits from each parent: "half of everything inside you is from me, your mother's side, from the Sun clan in Taiyuan" (p. 182). In another illustration of how thematic echoes proliferate in the novel, this same story, entitled "Four Directions," encourages us to trace its various motifs elsewhere. Waverly's "good stuff" that she has inherited from her mother reiterates the theme of "best quality" that is continued in another story told by June: in "Best Quality," June's mother chides her for not wanting the best for herself. Meanwhile, the theme of "Four Directions" takes us back to the first story in the novel, where we find June and her aunties seated at the mah-jong table, each occupying one of its four directions.

Obviously, the notion of "four directions" is emblematic of the novel's centrifugal structure. At one point, Lena asks: "How can the world in all its chaos come up with so many coincidences, so many similarities and exact opposites?" (p. 154). Or, as June intones, in a more complaining mood, "It's the same old thing, everyone talking in circles" (p. 21). With its mirrored motifs and interchangeable characterizations, *The Joy Luck Club* demands a reading that is simultaneously diachronic and synchronic. Aligning itself with the modernist tradition of spatial form in narrative,[27] the novel defeats any effort to read it according to linear chronology alone. Instead, the reader's construction of interconnections between motif, character, and incident finally dissolves individualized character and plot and instead collectivizes them into an aggregate meaning existing outside the individual stories themselves.

The multivalent structure of *The Joy Luck Club* resists reduction to simple geometric designs; nevertheless, two figures—the rectangle and the circle—help to chart Tan's play on the theme of maternality. As the novel begins, June takes her place with three Joy Luck aunties around the mahjong table. Her position at one of the table's cardinal points determines the direction of her journey east which ends in China. At the end point of June's story, the trope of the rectangle merges with that of the circle: June's arrival in China brings her full circle to the place where her mother's story began, and her meeting with her half-sisters sets into motion a circulation of mirrored relationships blurring identities, generations, and languages. Because it repudiates linearity and symmetry, the circle is a privileged motif in feminist writings, one that suggests the possibility of reconfiguring traditional familial dynamics and dismantling the hierarchical arrangements of the Oedipal triangle and the patriarchal family. For instance, in her book on the reclamation of the pre-Oedipal in women's novels, Jean Wyatt envisions "the possibility … of imagining alternative family relations based on preoedipal patterns—family circles whose fluidity of interchange challenges the rigid gender and generational hierarchies of the patriarchal family." In Wyatt's analysis, there persists, in women's writings, the fantasy of a nurturant family where "family members come forward to share the work of fostering others' development [so that] the responsibility for nurturing [is extended] to a whole circle of 'mothering' people."[28]

In *The Joy Luck Club,* the discrete identities of familial members are woven into a collectivized interchangeability through the novel's parataxis its use of contiguous juxtapositions of voices, narratives, and motifs.[29] Through the novel's interweaving of time frames and voices, three generations of women are included within a relational network linking grandmothers, mothers, daughters, aunts, and sisters. For these women, however, mutual nurturance does not arise from biological or generational connections alone; rather, it is an act affirming consciously chosen allegiances. As Wyatt suggests, mothering as a "reciprocal activity" generally presupposes "a strong mother figure who has a central position in the family," but even "when the mother is not there, the circle remains, its diffuse bonds extends to a circle of equals who take turns nurturing each other."[30] In *The Joy Luck Club,* the death of June's mother, Suyuan, invites the Joy Luck aunties to step into the circle of "mothering reciprocity"; indeed, it is Suyuan's absence that inaugurates the meeting between June and her half-sisters, when they confirm their mutual identification as each other's sisters *and* mothers.

As we have seen, the maternal voices in *The Joy Luck Club* begin to shift from "I" to "you" to engage the discrete subjectivities of mother and daughter in a tentative exchange of recognitions and identifications. In the same way, the novel's resonant structure and its use of parataxis effectively write the reader into the text as

a crucial participant in the making of meaning.[31] The reader of *The Joy Luck Club* is a weaver of intricate interconnections who must, like Suyuan's unraveling of an old sweater, randomly "pull out a kinky thread of yarn, anchoring it to a piece of cardboard, [roll] with a sweeping rhythm, [and] start [a] story" (p. 21). This way of engaging the reader as an active constructor of meaning allows the feminist novel to project a community of sisterly readers.[32] In tracing a family history that blurs the demarcations between the roles of mothers, daughters, and sisters, *The Joy Luck Club* breaks down the boundary between text and reader in order to proffer the notions of sisterhood as a literary construction and as a community constituted through the act of reading. At once disintegrative and constructive in its operations, the novel holds its dual impulses in unresolved suspension and fulfills its fundamentally transformative project—a mutation from daughter-text to mother-text to sister-text.

Notes

1. See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985). For a useful survey of the critical literature on this subject, see Marianne Hirsch, "Mothers and Daughters," *Signs* 7 (Autumn 1981): 200–222.
2. Dianne F. Sadoff, "Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston," in *Black Women in America: Social Science Perspectives,* ed. Micheline R. Malson, Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi, Jean O'Barr, and Mary Wyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 198.
3. Marianne Hirsch reminds us of the need for "Western" frameworks to be "modified, reconstructed, and transformed" in considering the works of African American women writers. See Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). See also Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Brownley, *Mothering the Mind: Twelve Studies of Writers and Their Silent Partners* (New York: Holmes Meier, 1984), 144–63; Natalie M. Rosinsky, "Mothers and Daughters: Another Minority Group," in *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature,* ed. Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980), 280–90.
4. Amy Ling, *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990), xi. See also Elizabeth J. Ordoñez, "Narrative Texts by Ethnic Women: Rereading the Past, Reshaping the Future," *MELUS* 9 (Winter 1982): 19–28.
5. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Japanese American Women's Life Stories: Maternality in Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter* and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan,*" *Feminist Studies* 16 (Summer 1990): 290–91.
6. Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), originally published in 1975; Chuang Hua, *Crossings* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), originally published in 1968.
7. See Malini Schueller, "Questioning Race and Gender Definitions: Dialogic Subversions in *The Woman Warrior,*" *Criticism* 31 (Fall 1989): 421–37; Amy Ling, "A Rumble in the Silence: *Crossings* by Hua," *MELUS* 9 (Winter 1982): 29–36.
8. Hirsch, 136–37, 6–8, 11, 178–91 (Hirsch's examples are *Sula* and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"), 12. The emphasis on daughters' narratives in writings by Asian American women is reflected in Helen M. Bannan's essay, "Warrior Women: Immigrant Mothers in the Works of Their Daughters," *Women's Studies* 6 (1979): 165–77.
9. Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1989). All references are to this edition; subsequent citations appear in parentheses in the text.
10. Amy Tan, "How Stories Written for Mother Became Amy Tan's Best Seller," interview by Julie Lew, *New York Times,* 4 July 1989, 19(N).
11. Hirsch, 161.
12. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1977), 237.
13. See Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Jane Flax, "The Conflict between Nurturance and

Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships and within Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 4 (June 1978): 171–89; Christine Olivier, *Jocasta's Children: The Imprint of the Mother,* trans. George Craig (New York: Routledge, 1989); Rich, 218–58.

14. Lim, 293. Rosinsky (p. 280) writes: "Members of racial, ethnic, sexual, and economic minority groups, in particular, have delineated their apprehension of the social forces which intervene between mother and daughter. Perhaps because the added oppression of minority group membership exacerbates this often painful relationship, these writers seem particularly aware of its tragic destructiveness." Mary Dearborn has also written about how generational conflict is felt by many historians of ethnicity to be the most striking feature of ethnic American identity. See Mary V. Dearborn, *Pocahontas's Daughters: Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 72–73.
15. Elise Miller, "Kingston's *The Woman Warrior.* The Object of Autobiographical Relations," in *Compromise Formations: Current Directions in Psychoanalytic Criticism,* ed. Vera J. Camden (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1989), 148.
16. See Chodorow.
17. See Sadoff, 203; Perry and Brownley, 160. Hirsch similarly warns (p. 10) against the "androcentric and ethnocentric" biases inherent in the Freudian model of the family. For two critiques of Chodorow's analysis, see Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 83–113; Elizabeth Abel, "Race, Class, and Psychoanalysis? Opening Questions," in *Conflicts in Feminism,* ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990), 185–204.
18. Sue Grunewold, *Beautiful Merchandise: Prostitution in China, 1860–1936* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1985), 38, 37–45. See also Maria Jaschok, *Concubines and Bondservants: The Social History of a Chinese Custom* (London: Zed Books, 1988); Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women,* trans. Anita Barrows (New York: Marion Boyars, 1986), 66–99.
19. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/"La Frontera": The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute Book Co., 1987), 59; Preface, unpaginated.
20. Patricia Yaeger, *Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 40, 44. For a discussion of a second language as an alternate form of self-inscription, see David Leiwei Li, "The Naming of a Chinese American To Cross-Cultural Sign/ifications in *The Woman Warrior,*" *Criticism* 30 (Fall 1988): 515; Shirley K. Rose, "Metaphors and Myths of Cross-Cultural Literacy: Autobiographical Narratives by Maxine Hong Kingston, Richard Rodriguez, and Malcolm X," *MELUS* 14 (Spring 1987): 3–15. Michael M. J. Fischer has discussed the use of bilingualism and "interlinguistic play" in relation to ethnic autobiography; see "Ethnicity and the Arts of Memory," *Writing Culture: The Politics and Poetics of Ethnography,*" ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 218.
21. Roberta Rubenstein states, "If women are typically muted within their own culture even when they constitute a demographic majority, then women of ethnic minority groups are doubly muted. Both gender and ethnic status render them 'speechless' in patriarchy." See Roberta Rubenstein's *Boundaries of the Self: Gender, Culture, Fiction* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 8. See also Lim, 302; King-Kok Cheung, "'Don't Tell': Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior,*" *PMLA* 103 (March 1988): 162–74; and the selected writings by women of color in *Making Face, Making Soul/"Haciendo Caras": Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color,* ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990), 179–220.
22. Lindo's narratives interweave first-person discourse with second-person address throughout. Her first story, "The Red Candle," begins with her addressing Waverly directly, beginning: "I once sacrificed my life to keep my parents' promise. This means nothing to you, because to you promises mean nothing" (p. 49). In her second story, "Double Face," she addresses Waverly by referring to "My mother—your grandmother …" (p. 256) and asking "Why do you always tell your friends that I arrived in the United States on a slow boat from China? … Why do you always tell people that I met your father in the Cathay House … This is not true! Your father was not a waiter, I never ate in that

restaurant" (p. 259). Ying-Ying begins her story, "The Moon Lady," in the third person; she ends her second story, "Waiting between the Trees," with the declaration that "now I must tell my daughter everything" (p. 252). An-Mei's story, "Magpies," is the most distinctive in its clear shift from first-person narration to second-person address. When the story begins, she describes her daughter Rose's psychiatric treatment: "She lies down on a psychiatrist couch, squeezing tears out about this shame" (p. 215). At the end of the same story, she addresses Rose directly: "You do not need a psychiatrist to do this. A psychiatrist does not want you to wake up" (p. 241).

23. Kim Chernin, *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating, and Identity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 82, 51, 86.
24. Rich, 250.
25. The process by which a mother's death inspires women writers to begin to explore the meaning of the maternal has been written about by a number of scholars. In discussing women's writings in the 1920s, Hirsch has noted (p. 97) a pattern by which works by women artists "are not composed by the daughters until the mothers are dead. Only then can memory and desire play their roles as instruments of connection, reconstruction, and reparation." Similarly, Bell Gale Chevigny has examines how Margaret Fuller imagined her mother's death in her fiction in order to be able to "contemplate her mother's life much more freely than before." See her "Daughters Writing: Toward a Theory of Women's Biography," *Feminist Studies* 9 (Spring 1983): 86. See also Judith Kegan Gardiner, "A Wake for Mother: The Maternal Deathbed in Women's Fiction," *Feminist Studies* 4 (June 1978): 146–65.
26. Valerie Miner, "The Daughters' Journeys," *The Nation,* 24 Apr. 1989, 66.
27. See Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," in *Criticism: The Foundations of Modern Literary Judgment,* ed. Mark Schorer, Josephine Miles, and Gordon McKenzie (New York: Harcourt, Brace, World, 1958), 379–92; and Jeffrey R. Smitten and Ann Daghistory, eds. *Spatial Form in Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).
28. Jean Wyatt, *Reconstructing Desire: The Role of the Unconscious in Women's Reading and Writing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 3, 201 (I am indebted to an anonymous reader of the manuscript of this essay for referring me to this book).
29. Eric S. Rabkin, "Spatial Form and Plot," in *Spatial Form in Narrative,* 96–97.
30. Wyatt, 201.
31. As Eric S. Rabkin notes (p. 99), the "notion of spatial form directs our attention most specifically to works … in which the ultimate point of view must be foisted on the reader by the parataxis of the text."
32. This strategy has emerged as a signature of some recent fiction by women of color. See Deborah E. McDowell's discussion of Alice Walker's construction of a sisterhood of readers in *The Color Purple* in "'The Changing Same': Generational Connections and Black Women Novelists," *New Literary History* 18 (Winter 1987): 297; Gayle Greene's analysis of the participatory reading elicited by Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in "Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory," *Signs* 16 (1991): 318; and Wendy Ho's characterization of *The Woman Warrior* as a "self-talking story" that insists on writing as "something to be decoded and reconstructed through the reader's or listener's collaborative efforts" in her essay, "Mother/Daughter Writing and the Politics of Race and Sex in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior,*" in *Asian Americans: Comparative and Global Perspectives,* ed. Shirley Hune, Hyung-chan Kim, Stephen S. Fugita, and Amy Ling (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1991), 236. See also Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Arts of Memory," 232.

Criticism: Ben Xu (essay date Spring 1994)

SOURCE: "Memory and the Ethnic Self: Reading Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club,*" in *MELUS,* Vol. 19, No. 1, Spring, 1994, pp. 3–18.

[*In the following essay, Xu argues that the way that Tan constructed the story of* The Joy Luck Club *is similar to how an individual pieces together his or her past through memory.*]

The Chinese-American milieu in a San Francisco neighborhood furnishes the main contingent of characters in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club.* What the four families in that book, the Woos, Jongs, Hsus, and St. Clairs, have in common is mother-daughter relations. The mothers are all first generation immigrants from mainland China, speaking very little English and remaining cultural aliens in their new world. The daughters are all born and educated in America, some even married to "foreigners." Within the microcultural structure of family, the only means available for mothers to ensure ethnic continuity is to recollect the past and to tell tales of what is remembered. Lamenting the failing marriage of Lena, her daughter, and Lena's unfamiliarity with the "Chinese ways of thinking," Ying-ying St. Clair voices the anxiety and helplessness shared by all the mothers in the book:

> All her life, I have watched her as though from another shore. And now I must tell her everything about my past. It is the only way to penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved.

(274)

In her mother's eyes, because Lena, without a memory of the past, allows herself to be borne by the bustle of life, she doesn't know who she is, and cannot hold herself together. It may be true that through her mother's memory, Lena will learn to share a belief in certain rules, roles, behaviors and values which provide, within the family and the overseas Chinese community, a functional ethos and a medium of communication. But will she, even if she unexpectedly finds herself confronted by an hour which has a special connection with her mother's past, have access to her mother's deeply buried anxiety, psychic need, specific mental habits, and life-world perception? Can she really share her mother's unrepeatable life-experience? Can she ever learn how to overstep her own existential limits through her mother's story? What if she has to take cognizance of a barrier in her present existence that will eternally be a barrier between her and her mother? These questions can be asked not only about Lena, but also about all the other daughters in *The Joy Luck Club.* I will take a close look here at the conflict between the two generations of the book and the existential unrepeatability that separates them. Through examining the complexity of the operations of memory, I will also explore how the recollection and narration of the past are related to a present sense of ethnic identity.

"Memory" is an intellectually seductive concept, capable of drawing on diverse literatures, from the cognitive concerns of speculative philosophy to experimental psychological probes of the processing-storage-retrieval function of mind.[1] Yet because the intellectual roots are so diffuse, and the connotations quite varied, I should clarify the two basic assumptions that I make when I use this term in my discussion of ethnic identity in *The Joy Luck Club*: first, a premise of the narrative construction of memory, and second, an emphasis on its social-psychological mechanism.

Most of the philosophical thinking on memory lapses almost inadvertently into the idiom of the static picture by conceiving of memory as a particular content of the mind, as an "image," a "presentation," an "impression," and so on.[2] However, it is not just that we have "images," "pictures," and "views" of ourselves in memory, but that we also have "stories" and "narratives" to tell about the past which both shape and convey our sense of self. Our sense of what has happened to us is entailed not in actual happenings but in *meaningful* happenings, and the meanings of our past experience, as I will explore and defend in my reading of *The Joy Luck Club,* are constructs produced in much the same way that narrative is produced. Identity, as well as the implicated self-definition and self-narrative, almost certainly will be activated from memory. Recent social-psychological studies have shown that self-images bring forth a host of intricately related self-knowledge and self-identity, whose information, values, and related beliefs are socially situated as well as psychologically useful.[3] Such understanding of the social-psychological mechanism of memory narrative is

also implied in recent studies of narrative. Hayden White suggests that, in the narrative of individual life as well as in the narrative of history, the meaning of a given set of events, which he recognizes as taking the form of recurring tropical enfigurations, is not the same as the story they consist of (White 111). Using, as a guideline, his differentiation of two kinds of narrative meanings without committing to his tropological explanation of them, we may, in memory narrative, distinguish its *life-story* from the *existential perception* it entails. If the life-story is marked by a seeming actuality, the existential perception is what transforms the casual daily events into a functioning mentality or an existential concern that is not self evident.

This bifurcate view of memory narrative permits us to consider a specific life-story as imagery of existential themes or problems about which the story is told, and the existential perception as a comprehensive context in which meaningful questions can be asked about the factual events of that life-story (what, how, and especially why). A functioning mentality, such as the survival mentality which characterizes all the mother characters in *The Joy Luck Club,* hardly enters into view with factual occurrences. It manifests itself only in the distribution of existential themes of the memory narrative. Memory narrative does not represent a perfect equivalent of the events it purports to describe. It goes beyond the actuality of events to the determination of their coherency as an existential situation, and this general picture of life in turn assigns exemplary values to the events which are awakened in memory by a functioning mentality.[4]

This awakening of memory by a person's present mentality is illustrated by Ying-ying St. Clair's story of her childhood. When Ying-ying was four years old, she got separated from her parents on a Moon Festival trip to a scenic lake, and while watching a performance of Moon Lady, she made a wish which she could not remember for many decades. It is only after her first broken marriage, and a second one to a kind but alien Irishman, and many "years washing away my pain, the same way carvings on stone are worn down by water," when she was "moving every year closer to the end of my life," that she remembers that, on that night, as a child of four, she "wished to be found" (64, 83).

Of the four mother characters in *The Joy Luck Club,* Ying-ying had the happiest childhood. Her family was very wealthy and took good care of her. Her getting lost from her family on a festival trip was no more than a small accident with no harmful consequences. However, this insignificant incident in her early childhood is remembered as an emblem of her unfortunate life. This is the memory of a survivor of bad times, who has lost her capacity to remember a different life even though she did once experience it. The memory itself has become a psychic defense, which helps to justify her social disengagement, her fatalistic perception of the world as a system of total control, and her fascination with extreme situations and with the possibility of applying their lessons to everyday life.

Ying-ying's survival mentality is typical of all the woman characters who belong to the Joy Luck Club. All the Club Aunties have experienced two kinds of extreme situations: one kind is famine, war, forced marriage, and broken family in China, and the other is cultural alienation, disintegration of old family structure, and conflict between mother and daughter in America. In order to survive the drastic changes in their lives, these women need to maintain a psychological continuity, a coherent picture of life-world, and a continuity of self. Such a need requires the assuring structure of memory narrative: life-story narrative, with the genre's nominal continuity of aims and intentions, and hopes and fears. Memory is for them a socializing, ego-forming expression of anxieties, hopes, and survival instinct.

Indeed, the Joy Luck Club itself, with a magnificent mah jong table at its center, is an expression and embodiment of that survival mentality and its strategies of psychic defense. Suyuan Woo, mother of the book's first narrator, started the first Joy Luck Club in wartime Kweilin as a refugee running away from the triumphantly advancing Japanese troops. In times of trouble, everyday life became an exercise in survival, both physical and mental. If "hero" means someone who takes decisive action during a time of crisis, then for Suyuan Woo, whose life was in crisis, survival itself became a decisive action—a heroic action, albeit a pathetic and disenchanted one. In order to hang on to living, the club members in Kweilin tried to "feast," to

“celebrate [their] good fortune, and play with seriousness and think of nothing else but adding to [their] happiness through winning” (11). As Suyuan herself explains:

> It's not that we had no heart or eyes for pain. We were all afraid. We all had our miseries. But to despair was to wish back for something already lost. Or to prolong what was already unbearable.

(11–12)

Suyuan starts the second Joy Luck Club in San Francisco in 1949. This time she is a refugee fleeing from the triumphant Communists in China. This second club is both a memory of the first club and a renewed means of survival. For those new club members newly immigrated to America, “who had unspeakable tragedies they had left behind in China and hopes they couldn't begin to express in their fragile English,” the happy moments of playing mah jong are the only time they can “hope to be lucky”—“That hope was our only joy” (6, 12).

If the mah jong club reflects and is part of the Club Aunties's survival endeavor, it is not just a common sense survival that describes the difficulty of making ends meet or alludes to the fear of poverty. It expresses the perception that they are all survivors in the sense that they have lived through dark times and have emerged in the new world. It indicates the urgency to hold one's life together in the face of mounting pressures, which are seen in the dire light reflected from their memories of specific events that once victimized them in earlier times. Understanding is made necessary when one encounters the unfamiliar, the unknown, the uncanny. The process of understanding ordinarily begins with the displacement of the thing unknown toward something that is known, apprehended, and familiar. The process of understanding thus begins with an experiential shift. The domain of the unknown is shifted, by renewing the old strategy of survival, toward a domain or field presumably already mastered. All the stories included in the first section of the book are about mother-narrators's experiences of victimization. These old memories help shift the narrators, especially in an unfamiliar environment, to a growing belief that people are all victimized, in one way or another, by events beyond their control.

However, memories are not one-way tracks, as some early philosophers would like to suggest.[5] If the past casts a shadow on the present through memory, the present also pre-imposes on the past by means of memory. It is worth noting that John Perry, a philosopher who has written widely on the relationship between memory and personal identity, believes that “a sufficient and necessary condition of my having participated in a past event is that I am able to remember it” (69). The one-way track memory is what Nietzsche calls the “inability to forget,” a symptom of a sick person who has given in to past failures and discomforts, making the present unbearable and the future hopeless. What we find with the Joy Luck Club mothers is what Nietzsche calls “memory of the will,” an active memory that is sustained by the will to survive (Nietzsche “Second Essay”). Suyuan told her refugee story in so many varied ways that her daughter does not know how to relate them to reality and can only take them as “a Chinese fairy tale” (12). These stories, in the form of memory, test Suyuan's ability to forget. These stories are her symptomatic records of a traumatized soul making a desperate effort to push back the memory of the tragic loss of a husband and two baby daughters during the war. The real memory was suppressed but did not go away; and Suyuan, as her second husband feels intuitively, “was killed by her own thoughts,” which she could not even articulate to her husband and daughter (5).

Not only does Suyuan's early experience of extreme situations result in a defensive contraction of self, but also it transforms her relationship with her daughter into one of survival: a fear that she will lose her connection with her daughter, and that her experiences, thoughts, beliefs, and desires will have no future successors. The daughter may look like the mother, or even identify with her; and yet, the two are still worlds apart from each other. Perry makes a very important differentiation between “identification” and “identity,” and points out, “Identity is not a necessary condition of identification. I can identify with the participant in events I did not do, and would not do, even if they were to be done” (76). Georges Rey, in his study of the

existential unrepeatability of personal experience and identity, emphasizes the impossibility of passing on identity through the narrative of memory:

> There are … an alarmingly diverse number of ways in which one person might come to share the seeming memories of another: vivid stories, hallucinations. … All my and my grandfather's hopes to the contrary, he does not survive as me, no matter how much I seem to recollect (and even take as my own) the experiences of his life from having heard of them at his knees. This is partly because we were both alive when I heard and identified with them; and, for all our not inconsiderable mutual concern, none of it was (strictly) personal. I didn't thereafter enjoy any privileged access to his feelings and thoughts.

(Rey 41)

Memory is not just a narrative, even though it does have to take a narrative form; it is more importantly an experiential relation between the past and the present, projecting a future as well. It is the difference of experiential networks between Suyuan Woo and her daughter that accounts for the daughter's resistance to the mother's nagging about hard work and persistence, as well as for her confusion about the mother's constant sense of crisis.

Hard work and persistence are with the mother—and most "diligent" Chinese immigrants—less self-sufficient virtues than means and conditions of survival. These qualities are desirable to her just because she learnt from her previous experiences that they are attributes of a "winner" in life, and she is going to treat them only as such. It is only on the usefulness of these qualities that she will base her self-approval for exercising them. Even though she knows pretty well that her daughter will never get a Ph.D., she keeps telling her friends and neighbors that Jing-mei Woo is working on it. This is less a lie or wishful thinking than an expression of her survival instinct: what the mother seeks from her friends and neighbors is not the kind of approval that applauds her daughter's personal qualities, but the conviction for herself that her daughter possesses the attributes of a survivor. It is too easy to advance diligence, frugality, or whatever as Chinese ethnic qualities. What is wrong in such a view is an essentialist interpretation of these qualities as *inherent* "Chinese" attributes, and a blindness to their special relations with a particular kind of ethnic memory.

The disposition for many first generation Chinese immigrants in America to see life as a constant test of survival, to the extent that it almost becomes ethnic symbolism, is a complex mentality. It is deeply rooted in China's past of hardship and numerous famines and wars. The word in Chinese that denotes "making a living in the world" is *qiusheng*—seeking survival, or *mousheng*—managing survival. The Chinese classics are full of wisdom on how to survive, whether it be Taoist escapism, Confucian doctrine of the mean, or Legalist political trickery. The lack of religion and of a systematic belief in an after-life in Chinese culture indicates the preoccupation with the urgency of surviving in the present world. The simultaneous contempt for business (and "the rich")[6] and love of money (in the form of thriftiness) support the view of money not as a measure of success but as a means of survival.

However, survival mentality in China has never become a symbol of nationality and ethnicity. It is part of the living conditions which have remained intact with little change throughout centuries; but it has never been mobilized and turned into what Werner Sollors, in his *The Invention of Ethnicity,* calls "kinship symbolism." Only when a Chinese person is uprooted from his or her own culture and transplanted into an alien one does he or she become aware of the fluidity, proteanness, and insecurity of his or her self. It is not until then that he or she feels the need to define himself or herself by a reference group, or even deliberately manages a certain image or presentation of self using the symbolism of survival. "Ethnicity," as Sollors aptly observes, "is not so much an ancient and deep-seated force surviving from the historical past. … It marks an acquired … sense of belonging that replaces visible, concrete communities whose kinship symbolism ethnicity may yet mobilize in order to appear more natural" (xiv). The newly acquired ethnic awareness of being Chinese in America and

the sense of urgency about the individual's and the group's preservation and survival register the waning of the old sense of a durable public world, reassuring in its definiteness, continuity, and long-tested survival strategies.

Once the imagery of confinement, insecurity, alienation, and extreme situations takes hold of the imagination of an ethnic group, the temptation to extend this imagery to lesser forms of stress and hardship and to reinterpret every kind of adversity or difference in the light of survival proves almost irresistible. Things as trifling as the Chinese way of playing mah jong, which, according to the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club,* is different from and far superior to the Jewish mah jong, is jealously guarded as a matter of immense significance. The excessive concern with being "genuinely Chinese" announces the abandonment of efforts to adapt to a mixed and heterogeneous society in favor of mere ethnic survival.

Even at the mah jong table people have to face the agony of how to survive. "We used to play mah jong," explains Auntie An-mei to Jing-mei, "winner take all. But the same people were always winning, the same people always losing." This is what life has always been: there has to be someone who is a loser and a victim. But the San Francisco Joy Luck Club Aunties reformulate their mah jong game so that it becomes, symbolically at least, a game with no losers:

> We got smart. Now we can all win and lose equally. We can have stock market luck. And we can play mah jong for fun, just for a few dollars, winner take all. Losers take home leftovers!

(18)

The change in the mah jong game may appear insignificant. But it reflects the Club Aunties's view of the loser as a victim who fails to survive, and their belief that one should make every effort to defend oneself against the bruising experience of being a loser, even at a mah jong table. Such a view can alter the way competition and rivalry are experienced. Competition, whether it be in a chess game, in a piano performance, or for a college degree, now centers not so much on the desire to excel as on the struggle to avoid a crushing defeat. A willingness to risk everything in the pursuit of victory gives way to a cautious hoarding of the reserves necessary to sustain life over the long haul. For Lindo Jong, her daughter's chess championship is not just proof of her talent. It is more essentially her attribute of being "lucky" and being a winner. Worldly success has always carried with it a certain poignancy, an awareness that "you can't take it with you"; but among the Chinese, glory is more fleeting than ever, and those who win a game worry incessantly about losing it.

Lindo Jong gives her daughter Waverly her own talisman of luck—"a small tablet of red jade which held the sun's fire" (98)—in order to add to the latter's "invisible strength." Her daughter's chess battle becomes her own battle. But the worry and concern of her subtle survivalism is not appreciated by her daughter, who accuses her mother of using her to show off and trying to take all the credit. Lindo Jong's "all American made" daughter has a hard time understanding why her mother believes that "luck" and "tricks" are more valuable and more important than "skill" and "smartness." "You don't have to be so smart to win chess," Lindo Jong tells her daughter. "It is just tricks" (187).

Waverly Jong feels immobilized by her mother's "sneak attack" (191), and at first completely misses the disenchanted heroic style that underlies the "sneakiness" of her mother's attack. What she fails to see is that her mother's "sneakiness" is meant to prepare her for dealing with the unpredictable, in which she will constantly find herself faced with unstructured situations and the need to survive on her own. In contrast to the American strategies of survival that Waverly has been introduced to (such as upward mobility, security in legal protection, and active individual choice), Lindo Jong's survivalist strategy of "sneakiness" or "trickiness" is miserably nonheroic and shamefully "Chinese." Waverly fears and despises her mother, and resists her mother's teaching. Puzzled by her daughter's reaction, Lindo Jong confesses:

> I couldn't teach her about the Chinese character. How to obey parents and listen to your mother's mind. How not to show your own thoughts, to put your feelings behind your face so you can take advantage of hidden opportunities. Why easy things are not worth pursuing. How to know your own worth and polish it, never flashing it around like a cheap ring. Why Chinese thinking is best.

(289)

The wearing of a mask is to Lindo Jong an heroic act—an act necessary for the survival of poor immigrants like herself, who feel "it's hard to keep your Chinese face in America" (294). Wearing a mask means the ability to suppress one's true feelings and emotions—even to deceive—in order to be allowed to live. She is not unaware of the debt that the mask wearer has to pay to human guile; but in her understanding there is no rage that rips the heart, no passion of combat which stresses the heroic deeds of ethnic rebellion. With many Chinese-Americans like Lindo Jong, survivalism has led to a cynical devaluation of heroism, and to a resignation that is tinged with a bitter sense of humor.

When they first arrived in America, Lindo Jong and An-mei Hsu worked in a fortune cookie factory, making Chinese sayings of fortune for American consumption. Lindo Jong was wondering what all this nonsense of Chinese fortunes was about. An-mei explained to her.

> "American people think Chinese people write these sayings."
>
> "But we never say such things!" [Lindo Jong] said. "These things don't make sense. These are not fortunes, they are bad instructions."
>
> "No, miss," [An-mei] said, laughing, "it is our bad fortune to be here making these and somebody else's bad fortune to pay to get them."

(299–300)

Lindo Jong knows that the Chinese wearing of the mask, just like those Chinese fortunes, can convince many Americans that they know and understand Chinese people. She also has an unusual insight into the risk that the mask wearer can become psychologically dependent upon the mask, even when the mask is not needed. Continued wearing of the mask makes it difficult for the wearer of the mask to be her real self. Maskedness has almost become the ethnic symbolism for Chinese-Americans like Lindo Jong, who thinks like a person of "two faces," being neither American nor Chinese (304).

In a self-consciously two-faced person like Lindo Jong we find a detached, bemused, ironic observer, who is almost fascinated by the fact that she has not a self that she can claim as "me." The sense of being an observer of one's own situation and that all things are not happening to "me" helps to protect "me" against pain and also to control expressions of outrage or rebellion.[7] Survivors have to learn to see themselves not as free subjects, but rather as the victims of circumstances, be they the current situation or prefixed fate or disposition.

Chinese Taoist culture helps to maintain this kind of victim mentality because it reinforces a passive if not fatalist attitude toward life. The influence of Taoism, in its popularized form, is obvious in how *ying-yang-wu-hsing* is used by the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* as a physiotherapy that helps explain why the life of the unlucky people is what it is. In this popularized form of Taoism, human life is a constant struggle for a precarious balance between *ying* and *yang,* affected even by the placing of your bedroom mirror or the location of your condominium apartment. *Wu-hsing* (the five elements: water, fire, wood, metal, and earth), which were conceived by the Taoist masters as five fundamental phases of any process in space-time,

become the mystical ingredients that determine every person's character flaw according to one's birth hour. “Too much fire and you had a bad temper. … Too much water and you flowed in too many directions” (19).

Rose Hsu Jordan, like her mother, An-mei, has too little wood, and as a consequence, she bends to other people's ideas. Her marriage with Ted breaks down because he is annoyed by her lack of decision. Measured by the *Wu-hsing* system, none of us has all the five character elements perfectly balanced, and therefore, every one of us is by nature flawed. This view of human imperfection may appear like the Greek idea of tragic flaw. But the Chinese view of character flaw has no interest in any unyielding defiance to fate. The wily Chinese wisdom and belief that heroes do not survive informs the disenchantment with conventional codes of defiance and heroism. While the Greek tragic heroes face their inevitable destruction with dignity and grace, the believers in *Wu-hsing* want to survive by amending the flaw through non-heroic small acts such as taking special names—the “rose” in Rose Hsu Jordan's name, for example, is supposed to add wood to her character.

Both Rose Hsu Jordan and her mother regard themselves as victims of circumstances, but, belonging to two different generations, they resort to different strategies in order to alleviate their fear of disaster. An-mei Hsu copes with everyday mishaps by preparing for the worst and by keeping faith in hope. Her faith in God, which she held for many years before her youngest boy was drowned, was less a religious belief for which she was ready to sacrifice herself than a survival strategy of keeping herself in hope. Although An-mei keeps telling her daughter to make her choice, or even to indulge in a fantasy revenge for the wrongs suffered by women, she is prepared to accept the worst thing that can happen to a woman: the fate of being a woman, “to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat my own bitterness” (241).

An-mei's faith in God, or, after the death of her boy, in hope, is to her American-made daughter only a fatalist's self-created illusion. “[My mother] said it was faith that kept all these good things coming our way,” Rose Hsu Jordan tells us with her tongue in cheek, “only I thought she said ‘fate,’ because she couldn't pronounce that ‘th’ sound in ‘faith.’” Rose has to be tempered by her own suffering before she will discover that “maybe it was fate all along, that faith was just an illusion that somehow you're in control” (128).

Instead of relying completely on her mother's advice, Rose, devastated by her broken marriage, goes to her psychiatrist. Psychiatry, for Rose the young Chinese-American, has played the role of modern successor to religion. In psychiatry, the religious relief for souls has given way to “mental hygiene,” and the search for salvation to the search for peace of mind. Rose tells her psychiatrist about her fantasy revenge against Ted, and feels like having “raced to the top of a big turning point in my life, a new me after just two weeks of psychotherapy.” She expects an illuminating response from her psychiatrist. However, just like her mother was forsaken by God, Rose is let down by her mundane saver: “my psychiatrist just looked bored” (211). It is only after her frustrating experience with her psychiatrist that Rose feels an accidental connection of a shared fate between herself and her mother. The mother and daughter are co-victims of a common threatening force over which they have no control. It is when Rose, in her dream, sees her mother planting trees and bushes in the planter boxes, adding wood to both of them, that she lets us get a close view of a mother-daughter relation that is defined neither by blood tie nor by material service, a relation that is neither Chinese nor American, but Chinese-American.

This mother-daughter relationship with a unique ethnic character is what we discern not only in the Hsu family, but also in the families of Woos, Jongs, and St. Clairs. The family tie between the mother and daughter in each of these Chinese-American families is no longer what determines the Chinese daughter's obligation or the Chinese mother's authority. Family features shared by mother and daughter in those Chinese-American families are not something to be proud of, but rather something that causes embarrassment on one side or the other, and often on both sides. However, neither does this mother-daughter relationship rest, as is common in the American family, on material service. The cross-generation relationship rests on a special service the mother renders to the daughter: the mother prepares the daughter for the extreme situations of life, gives her psychic protection whenever possible, and introduces her to resources she needs to survive on her

own. The mother does all this not in the capacity of a self-righteous mother, but as a co-victim who has managed to survive. The traditional role of a Chinese mother has been greatly curtailed in America. If formerly she represented an automatic authority, now she is unsure of herself, defensive, hesitant to impose her own standards on the young. With the mother's role changed, the daughter no longer identifies with her mother or internalizes her authority in the same way as in China, if indeed she recognizes her authority at all.

The loosened family tie and shaky continuity between the two generations represented in *The Joy Luck Club* account for the particular narrative form in which their life acts and events are told. These stories share no apparently recognizable pattern or fully integrated narrative structure. The character relations are suggested but never sufficiently interwoven or acted out as a coherent drama. Our attention is constantly called to the characteristics of fiction that are missing from the book. It is neither a novel nor a group of short stories. It consists of isolated acts and events, which remain scattered and disbanded. It has neither a major plot around which to drape the separate stories, nor a unitary exciting climax which guides the book to a final outcome.

Yet all these customary habitual ingredients have a place in *The Joy Luck Club.* The successions of events are fully timed and narrators of these events are carefully grouped in terms of theme as well as generation distribution (mothers and daughters). The book's sixteen stories are grouped into four sections: the two outer sections are stories by three mother-narrators, and Jing-mei Woo, who takes the place of her recently deceased mother; and the two inner sections are stories by four daughter-narrators. The stories in the first two sections are followed by successive denouements in the next two sections, leading to a series of revelations. All the energies set in motion in the first story of the book, which is told by the book's "framework" narrator, come to fruitful release in the book's last story told by the same narrator, Jing-mei Woo.

Just as the mah jong table is a linkage between the past and present for the Club Aunties, Jing-mei Woo, taking her mother's seat at the table, becomes the frame narrator linking the two generations of American Chinese, who are separated by age and cultural gaps and yet bound together by family ties and a continuity of ethnic heritage. It is Jing-mei Woo who tells the book's two frame stories, the first and the last. These two frame stories, ending with a family reunion in China, suggest strongly a journey of maturity, ethnic awakening, and return-to-home, not just for Jing-mei Woo, but metaphorically for all the daughters in the book. This experience is like a revelation—a sudden unveiling of the authentic meaning of being "Chinese." The ecstatic character of this experience is well expressed by Jing-mei Woo:

> The minute our train leaves the Hong Kong border and enters Shenzhen, China, I feel different. I can feel the skin on my forehead tingling, my blood rushing through a new course. My mother was right. I am becoming Chinese.

(306)

At this moment, she seems to come to a sudden realization that to be "Chinese" is a lofty realm of being that transcends all the experiential attributes she once associated with being a Chinese, when she was unable to understand why her mother said that a person born Chinese cannot help but feel and think Chinese.

> And when she said this, I saw myself transforming like a werewolf, a mutant tag of DNA suddenly triggered, replicating itself insidiously into a syndrome, a cluster of telltale Chinese behaviors, 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.
>
> But today I realize I've never really known what it means to be Chinese. I am thirty-six years old. My mother is dead and I am on a train, carrying with me her dreams of coming home. I am going to China.

(306–7)

The book has, for other daughters, other moments of revelation like this one experienced by Jing-mei Woo, though they are of a more subtle nature and of less intensity. It is at these moments of revelation, often after their own sufferings in life, that the daughters come to realize the value and reason of their mothers's survival mentality and the disenchanted heroism of mask and endurance, and begin to hear the rich and multiple meanings in their mothers's stories instead of mere dead echoes of past acts and events. They become less resistant to identifying with their mothers and more receptive to the humble wisdom of the previous generations. The change from resistance to acquiescence signifies simultaneously the growth of a mature self and the ethnicization of experience.

The need to ethnicize their experience and to establish an identity is more real and more perplexing to the daughters than to the mothers, who, after all, are intimate with and secure in their Chinese cultural identity in an experiential sense, in a way their American-born daughters can never be. The daughters, unlike their mothers, are American not by choice, but by birth. Neither the Chinese nor the American culture is equipped to define them except in rather superficial terms. They can identify themselves for sure neither as Chinese nor American. Even when they feel their identity of "Americanness" is an estrangement from their mothers's past, there is no means of recovering the Chinese innocence, of returning to a state which their experiential existence has never allowed them. They are Chinese-Americans whose Chineseness is more meaningful in their relationship to white Americans than in their relationship to the Chinese culture they know little about. The return to their ethnic identity on the part of the daughters is represented in *The Joy Luck Club* as realizable on a level where a real split between the existential self and the ethnic self is alluded to by a narrative rivalry between "tale of the past" and "tale of the present." Not only are the contrast and discontinuity between the two types of tales metaphorical of the split of self, but also their organizing narrator, Jing-mei, is symbolic of the split self of the daughters's generation.

The ethnicization of experience does not automatically mean an ethnic identity. The ethnicized and mature self acquiesces to the ethnic affiliation that fixes its patterns and meanings, but at the very point of acquiescence, registers discomfort with such constraints. Indeed the strange blending of acquiescence and resistance accounts for the fact that the return to the motherland in *The Joy Luck Club* is temporary and disillusioning, no more than a "visit." Such a visit is at once an assertion of "going home" and a painful realization of "going home as a stranger."

Therefore, the significance of the book's frame device of return-to-home and its satisfaction of the reader's formal expectations should not disarm our critical query as to whether the ethnic self really represents a higher form of self or self-awareness. The book's frame device suggests the split between the true but unrecognized self and the false outer being whose sense of self and identity is determined by the need to adjust to the demands of a fundamentally alien society. Such a dualist view of self offers the reassuring but problematic concept of ethnic reality as that which is familiar and recuperated, and which, in the homeland, loyally awaits our return even though we turn from it. It assumes that the "inner" or "true" self is occupied in maintaining its identity by being transcendent, unembodied, and thus never to be discovered until the moment of epiphany. Not only does this cozy view of return to the authentic self suggest a split between the existential self and the ethnic self, but also a fixed hierarchy of them, with the changing and trapped existential self at the bottom, and the essential and free ethnic identity at the top. However, this hierarchy is unstable: the ethnic self, just like the existential self, is neither free nor self-sufficient, and therefore, never an authentic or genuine self. Our ethnic experience, no less than our existential experience, depends on the mediation of others. We become aware of our ethnicity only when we are placed in juxtaposition with others, and when the priority of our other identities, such as individual, class, gender, and religious, give place to that of ethnicity. Like other kinds of identities, ethnic identity is not a fixed nature, or an autonomous, unified, self-generating quality. It is a self-awareness based on differentiation and contextualization. The self is not a given, but a creation; there is no transcendent self, ethnic or whatever else. Ethnic awareness is not a mysteriously inherited quality; it is a

measurable facet of our existence, whose conditions and correlates are the only context in which we can understand how we reconstitute feelings and inner knowledge of our own ethnic being.

Notes

1. Philosophers dealing with memory are typically concerned with its representative function, as capable of bringing to our mind "images" (St. Augustine and others), "presentation" (Aristotle), "impressions" (Aristotle and others), "ideas" (Locke and Hume), and the "immediate" or "present" objects in memory (A. D. Woozley and others). See, for example, Aristotle, "On Memory and Reminiscence," in R. McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York, 1941). Augustine, *Confessions.* Many translations and editions. Book X, 8–19; John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* 2 vols., ed. A. C. Fraser (Oxford, 1894), Book II, Ch. 10; David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature,* ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1888), Book I, Pt. I, Sec. 3 and Pt. III, Sec. 5; A. D. Woozley, *Theory of Knowledge* (London, 1949), Chs. 2–3. The psychological study of memory owes a substantial debt to Hermann Ebbinghaus, who singlehandedly moved memory from the domain of the speculative philosopher to the province of the experimental scientist. In the two-volume *Practical Aspects of Memory: Current Research and Issues* (Chichester, England: John Wiley and Sons, 1988), M. M. Gruneberg, P. E. Morris, and R. N. Sykes put together a whole variety of approaches and methods that are used today in experimental psychological studies of memory, such as eyewitnessing, autobiographical memory, maintenance of knowledge, etc.
2. Aristotle, St. Augustine, John Locke, David Hume, etc., op. cit.
3. See for example, H. Markus, "Self-schemata and Processing Information about the Self," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 35 (1977): 63–78; S. T. Fiske and S. E. Taylor, *Social Cognition* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1984); B. R. Schlenker, "Self-Identification: Toward an Integration of the Private and Public Self," in R. F. Baumeister, ed., *Public Self and Private Self* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1986), 21–62.
4. John Perry refers to this cognitive hermeneutic circle of memory, and the reciprocal reality between a person who remembers and the things that he remembers. He writes, "That my present apparent memory of a past event stands at the end of a causal chain of a certain kind leading from that event is not something I can directly perceive, but something believed because it fits into the simplest theory of the world as a whole which is available to me" (69).
5. This view was most representatively voiced by the nineteenth-century British philosopher Sir William Hamilton, who regarded memory as one of the undeniable conditions of consciousness. See, for instance, *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic,* ed. H. L. Mansel and John Weitch (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood and Sons, 1859–1860), "Lecture XI," 205. Identity is explained as constituting in the assurance that our thinking ego, notwithstanding the ceaseless changes of state, is essentially the same thing. What such a view fails to see is that in remembering, a person not only records what has happened to him but also strives toward a restitution of his own ego—a construction of a continuous, integrated sense of his real existence in relation to time, nature and society, cause and effect.
6. The Chinese proverb *weifu buren* suggests the incompatibility between "being rich" and "being benevolent."
7. In today's mainland China, the wearing of a political mask is still practiced as a gesture of self-preservation, and hopefully, of potential resistance.

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SOURCE: “Mothers and Daughters,” in *Images of Asian American Women by Asian American Women Writers,* Peter Lang, 1995, pp. 11–36.

[*In the following comparative essay on Maxine Hong Kingston's* The Woman Warrior *and Tan's* The Joy Luck Club, *Ghymn discusses the fable-like quality of* The Joy Luck Club *and studies how cultural expectations affect the mother-daughter relationships portrayed in the novel.*]

The images of Asian American mothers and daughters as drawn by Kingston and Tan are so similar that it seems they have created a new set of stereotypes. Strikingly different from the familiar Madame Butterflies and Suzy Wongs, the new images of dragons, tigers, swans, shadows, bones, and stairs are the newly created metaphors for Asian American mothers and daughters. As Tan remarks to Emory Davis, “It's the images that are so important to me. That's where the mystery of the writing and the beauty of the story is” (Davis, Vol 1. No. 1. p. 9). These new images define the Asian American woman as seen by the major Asian American women writers.

For Kingston and Tan the right image is not necessarily a realistic one, but one which fits into the moral of their stories and provides the right perspective. The right balance in form and message is achieved when the daughters realize that they are not alone in the universe; that the ties to their mothers and grandmothers will always keep them in balance; that life does not change from generation to generation despite shifts in space and time; that, in a sense, all characters are stereotypes in a universe where “each and all are the same.” As in the last line of Emerson's “Each and All” (“I yielded myself to the perfect whole”), the mothers and daughters in *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club* finally realize that they are all part of each other.

I

The Woman Warrior is a complex narrative of varied voices, songs, and images. It is a book about Anju's quest for self-identity. Born in Stockton, California, to an old Chinese couple, Anju finds it difficult to communicate at home and at school. Although born in the year of the dragon like her mother, she is at first characterized as quiet and fearful. These traits are not usually associated with those born with the most favorable zodiac sign. In China the dragon symbolizes strength and wisdom, and such traits are transformed into images and words such as “dragon,” “brave,” and “warrior” throughout the book. Thus, Anju's weaker qualities are inevitably replaced by images of inherent strength when she realizes true selfhood at the end of the novel.

Anju hates herself at school because she hates to talk. Her low self-image makes her hate the sound of her own voice: “It spoils my day with self-disgust when I hear my broken voice coming skittering out into the open. It makes people wince to hear it” (*The Woman Warrior,* p. 191). Her low self-esteem is heightened by her assumption that her mother thinks her ugly. Her mother does not give her the recognition that she craves. When Anju tells her mother, “I got straight A's, Mama,” her mother replies, “let me tell you a true story about

a girl who saved her village" (*The Woman Warrior,* p. 54). Communication between mother and daughter is at best difficult. When Anju tries to tell her mother about "three hundred things," her mother says, "Senseless babblings every night. I wish you would stop. Go away and work. Whispering, whispering, making no sense. Madness, I don't feel like hearing your craziness" (*The Woman Warrior,* p. 233). Her mother wants Anju to go to a typing school: "learn to type if you want to be an American girl." Anju refuses because she wants to do something better. She shouts to her parents, "I'm smart. I can do all kinds of things. I know how to get A's, and they say I could be a scientist or a mathematician if I want. I can make a living and take care of myself" (*The Woman Warrior,* p. 234).

Anju retreats and fantasizes about becoming a woman warrior. She wants to know how she can storm across the States and fight her own battles. She wonders how she can use this ancient warrior example in her contemporary life. But Anju is afraid to act. Kingston characterizes this fear by using ghostly images. Anju and her family see real people as ghosts. To them there are white ghosts, black ghosts, and Mexican ghosts. Feelings of fear are conceptualized into images of ghosts and shadows. Kingston typically uses contrasting images as the images of fear balance images of strength mentioned earlier. These images are parallel and interrelated, creating contrasting rhythms in this surrealistic novel form.

All Anju knows about China is what she has seen in the movies and what she has heard from her mother. What she has heard from her mother is the tale of the legendary Fa Mu Lan and the tale of the forgotten No Name Woman. Fa Mu Lan is a woman warrior who takes the place of her father in battle. As such, she is the metaphorical center of this novel and an extended metaphor of a sense of continuity in Asian women's lives. On the other hand, the No Name Woman is a disgrace, for an unmarried pregnant woman is considered very shameful in China. She commits suicide by drowning herself in the family well when the villagers come to punish her. Kingston's strategy is to create such contrasting characters clothed in different images.

These tales, however, make it difficult for the confused daughter to find her own identity. In frustration, Anju addresses the reader: "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (*The Woman Warrior,* p. 6). Anju analyzes herself as she compares herself to Fa Mu Lan and the No Name Aunt. The shifting back and forth from her imagination to reality enables the narrative to sublimate the distinction between them. In real life her mother, Brave Orchid, and Aunt Moon Orchid also serve as models. Brave Orchid is a strong woman who earned a medical degree in China but who struggles in the States with her husband at the steaming laundry day after day to feed their six children. Moon Orchid, on the other hand, is weak. She eventually ends up in a mental asylum as she is unable to cope with her disappointments in life which culminate in being rejected by her husband. Should Anju become strong like Fa Mu Lan and Brave Orchid, or should she become weak like the No Name Aunt and Moon Orchid? At the end Anju chooses the stronger models.

When mother and daughter cannot speak the same language to explain adequately the reasons and feelings behind the words, frustration is inevitable. The first words of the book are, "'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you'" (*The Woman Warrior,* p. 3). Anju thinks her mother wants to silence her so much that (in her fantasy) she cuts out her own tongue. The daughter, not understanding the real meaning behind her mother's broken English, screams, "And I don't want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up … You can't stop me from talking. You tried to cut off my tongue, but it didn't work" (*The Woman Warrior,* p. 235). Here Anju does not understand her mother's desire or her reply when she says, "I cut it to make you talk more, not less, you dummy!" (*The Woman Warrior,* p. 235). Although this remark is confusing, it reveals that the mother has a plan to motivate her daughter. Anju, in the meantime, struggles toward self-understanding.

The use of words is a major unifying thread that sews the novel together. “You must not tell anyone … what I am about to tell you” (*The Woman Warrior,* p. 3). The mother's admonition reflects her determination to control Anju. Anju resents and resists such control. She blames her mother for her own quietness, saying that her mother cut out her tongue. Although she hates quietness, Anju is unable to break out of it. Thus, going to school becomes a dreadful burden. In the first years of school she colors everything black to symbolize her dread. She notices that other Chinese girls also do not talk very much at school, so she associates being Chinese with silence. In particular there is one girl whom she hates for her quietness. This hatred erupts into violence when Anju beats her up one day.

On the other hand, Kingston wants to make it clear to the reader that speaking is properly associated with strength. For example, when the woman warrior prepares for battle, her father carves words of revenge on her back. Such pain is endured because it is only through such carving that the warrior becomes empowered to act. Each Chinese character etched in blood is worthy of a fighting warrior. The warrior says, “When I could sit up again, my mother brought two mirrors, and I saw my back covered entirely with words in red and black files, like an army, like my army” (*The Woman Warrior,* p. 42). It is as if the words empower her to act. Thus, words signify empowerment.

The mother/daughter relationship evolves through various stages until it reaches a reconciliation. As a child Anju follows her mother around the house singing the song of the woman warrior. The chanting makes her believe that she will also grow up to be a warrior. It seems that the singing is a source of inspiration and communication. Night after night the mother tells stories of the woman warrior. Perhaps the reason for telling the stories is that they give the mother a feeling of hope and power. As Nancy Walker points out, “Fantasy of the ‘woman warrior’ in Kingston's book, are (sic) at least empowering because they allow the characters to escape imaginatively the boundaries of their lives as ‘young women’—they permit images of freedom and power denied by the characters' immediate social context” (Walker, p. 115). Perhaps as a mother working in a laundry after earning a medical degree she needs to have a dream to instill in her daughter. Thus Brave Orchid inspires her daughter through songs and words.

It is also through words and singing that mother and daughter reconcile. As a child, Anju remembers how she followed her mother around the house singing about Fa Mu Lan and her victories in battle. At the end she joins her mother in singing about Poetess T'sai. “She brought her songs back from the savage lands, and one of the three that has passed down to us is ‘Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,’ a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments. It translated well” (*The Woman Warrior,* p. 243). This episode parallels Brave Orchid's situation, for like the poetess, Brave Orchid is in a foreign land. Her story is translated by Anju who becomes the narrator of these stories.

Reconciliation occurs at the end when Anju and her mother tell a story together. “Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending mine” (*The Woman Warrior,* p. 240). It seems that as the narrator grows older she also comes to “talk story.” The book begins with the mother talking and ends with the daughter speaking. Suzanne Juhasz points out that “at the core of the relationship between daughter and mother is identification” (Juhasz, p. 176). As Kingston says, “[critics] read the beginning and can't understand that things are resolved by the end. There is a lot of resolution—the mother and daughter come out okay, you know. But it's the price of a lifetime of struggle” (Yalom, *Women Writers of the West Coast* p. 14). Temporal displacement is replaced by generational continuity. By joining their voices they find their place in the community and continuity of women's spirits.

In Kingston's novel the cycle of mother and daughter conflict and recovery plays itself out poignantly. At the end Anju achieves a balanced and peaceful state of mind as she reconciles herself to her mother. For an Asian American girl who has grown up ashamed of herself and her Chinese heritage, this is a very positive conclusion, for many second generation Chinese Americans reject their parents and their culture for the white

majority culture and values. By selecting old Chinese legendary heroines as her role models and joining her mother in the singing, Anju clearly values herself as a Chinese American woman. *The Woman Warrior* is therefore a triumph not only for the individual woman but also for the Chinese heritage. This line from grandmother to granddaughter can be linear but also circular. Understanding of self produces understanding of mother, family, and society. Layer after layer of confusion is peeled off to arrive at the core of understanding.

These layers of confusion are structurally and aesthetically powerful as they underscore the struggles between mother and daughter. Although the novel seems disjointed at first glance, as I mentioned earlier, there is a definite pattern to Kingston's artistry. Marilyn Yalom argues that *The Woman Warrior* is an example of "modern aesthetics" with its various stylistic techniques (Yalom, "Postmodern Autobiography" p. 112). Like music, variation upon variation makes the work more exquisite. Joan Lidoff also comments on the complexity of Kingston's work: "In Kingston we don't get a single account of an incident; we are given alternative conjectures about the same 'fact.' … Memory and conjecture bracket all tellings of the past: fantasy is as real as incident, and any event has multiple interpretations" (Lidoff, p. 119). Indeed, to peel the outer layers of meanings is like untying a very complicated knot. However, if one looks closely there is a definite pattern or backbone to the novel, as parallel characters contrast with or complement each other. As mentioned earlier, for example, Fa Mu Lan and Brave Orchid are both depicted as strong characters. On the other hand, the No Name Woman and Moon Orchid are portrayed as similarly weak. The parallels between warrior and mother and the two aunts especially unify the book.

There are also decisive chapter endings which often point to the theme of mothers and daughters. The last paragraph in each of the five chapters helps the reader to arrive at each chapter's meaning. For example, at the end of chapter one, "No Name Woman," Anju writes, "My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not origamied into houses and clothes" (*The Woman Warrior,* p. 19). Again, at the end of chapter two, "White Tigers," Anju remarks, "The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words" (*The Woman Warrior,* p. 63). And again at the end of chapter three, "Shaman," Anju reflects, "I am really a Dragon, as she is a Dragon. Both of us born in dragon years" (*The Woman Warrior,* p. 127). This identification with her mother moves the novel towards final reconciliation between mother and daughter.

Mother and daughter both battle with real and imagined ghosts. Ghosts exist in old China as they do in Stockton, California. The use of ghosts also helps to unify the novel, for ghostly images are embedded throughout. The No Name Woman has become a ghost who has to fight other ghosts for food. As the dead aunt has no one to remember her on her memorial day, she must steal from other ghosts' tables. This allusion refers to the Asian tradition of preparing a special meal for one's dead relatives. As everyone is ashamed of the No Name Woman, no one would honor her on her memorial day by serving a special meal. Ghosts also represent fear. Like background music, the use of ghosts makes the reader understand the sense of fear which drives Anju to quiet and drives her aunt to insanity. The subtitle of the book is "Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts." Thus, images of ghosts—black ghosts, Mexican ghosts, and white ghosts—exist everywhere for Anju and her mother. The weaving of such images reinforces fear of the unknown throughout the novel.

For the Chinese American daughter, one must understand and accept one's own mother to find out about oneself. Barker Nunn points out that in China individuals are insignificant by themselves. Only in the context of their families do the women find significance. And it is not only the immediate family but the long line of women that goes back even to ancestors. To reinforce this point, Kingston repeats circular images. "The round moon cakes and round doorways, the round tables of graduated size that fit one roundness inside another, round windows and rice bowls—these talismans had lost their power to warn this family of the law: a family must be whole, faithfully keeping the descent line by having sons to feed the old and the dead, who in turn look after the family" (*The Woman Warrior,* p. 15). The repeated use of the word "round" and its synonyms underlines the concept of continuity. For the Chinese lineage triumphs over individualism, unity defeats isolation. Anju realizes this point at the end and stops struggling. As a Chinese American she finally accepts

the harmonious Chinese view of the universe and joins her mother in singing ancient tales. The emphasis is on collectivity as the voices of mother and daughter form a duet echoing the multiple voices of mothers, aunts, and sisters in the past. Kingston's telling reasserts the spirit of the women and their need to be articulate and to be heard. Matrilineal ancestry becomes life giving.

The title *The Woman Warrior* is therefore the central image of the book, an image which represents strong women like Brave Orchid. Kingston's work is not only about Fa Mu Lan but the concept of the woman warrior. The archetype of the woman warrior is an extended metaphor of a cultural ancestor. Anju realizes that she herself can be a word warrior; indeed, it is only by speaking and writing that she can become such a warrior. Anju's singing is an affirmation of her understanding. As one unravels all the threads in this novel it is clear that the moral fable is a call to action. One should use the power of the spoken or written word to overcome her own weaknesses. As Kingston says to Yalom, “The daughter becomes the inheritor of the mother‘s oral tradition, which subsequently becomes a written tradition. … I went through a time when I did not talk to people. It‘s still happening to me but not so severely. I‘m all right now but I do know people who never came out of it” (Yalom, *Women Writers of the West Coast,* p. 17). As I note in *The Shapes and Styles of Asian American Prose Fiction,* “Kingston's moral fable is existentialist in the most basic sense. Her call is for the reader to pick up his or her sword of knowledge” (Ghymn, p. 113). By carrying on the oral tradition, one is linked to the community of women and ancestral spirits. Community triumphs over individuality. This is an appropriate conclusion as it fits the Chinese philosophy of life.[1]

II

In *The Joy Luck Club,* the relationship between mothers and daughters starts with imbalance and finally ends with a definite balance. In this book, as in *The Woman Warrior,* the structure is the key through which the messages are to be deciphered. The daughters searching for their mothers' real pasts finally arrive at their own identities. The confusion or anger that they feel towards their mothers while growing up is dissolved. Tan explains that the key to the structure of her novel is finding the right balance: “The basic one in the book is a question about balance. Where is the part of balance that we're searching for in our lives? What throws our lives off balance and how can one restore balance?” (Davis, Vol. 1 No. 2, p. 7). As with Anju, the daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* have to find their own understanding through all the conflicts they have with their mothers. Tan says in an interview, “Part of my writing the book was to help me discover what I knew about my mother and what I knew about myself” (Henderson, p. 22). This understanding is achieved when, like Anju, the daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* realize the sameness in themselves and their mothers. Together mothers and daughters create a satisfying wholeness from generation to generation.

The first page of *The Joy Luck Club* lists the characters. Interestingly, the names of the mothers and daughters are set opposite each other as if the book were a chess game. Indeed, chess is an appropriate analogy for Tan's strategy. In a chess game when a pawn reaches the other side of the board she becomes a queen; likewise, daughters have to travel through many conflicts to achieve independence and self-understanding. Like such canonical figures as Ishmael and Huckleberry Finn, daughters have to journey into the unknown to find their own identities. To these second generation Chinese American women Emerson's “Know Thyself” is the motivating energy.

Images of doubles, ghosts, and shadows misdirect the daughters' journeys. The use of the double is an especially prominent structural device. The word “two” and its synonyms are used several times in chapter titles: “Half and Half,” “Two Kinds,” “Double Face,” “A Pair of Tickets,” and “American Translations.” Like Humbert and Quilty in *Lolita,* the characters serve as doubles for other characters. Images of ghosts and shadows fit that purpose as well. The total image pattern is that of a fable, which is typically defined as “a brief tale, either in prose or verse, told to point a moral. The characters are most frequently animals, but people and inanimate objects are sometimes the central figures” (Holman and Harmon, p. 197). Tan admits that she wanted to write such a fable. “In fairy tales and fables there's often a moral attached. I didn't want to

have something that was exactly the moral but I wanted to have something that was equivalent because I see an ending as a release of some type, and for me releases are always emotional" (Davis, Vol 1. No 1. p. 8). The "equivalent" in *The Joy Luck Club* is a growing up lesson and fairytale elements can be found throughout Kingston's and Tan's works.

In a comic book the violence seems amusing rather than frightening. Likewise the overall comic tone of *The Joy Luck Club* subdues the violent details of some of the scenes. Just as we can laugh rather than shudder when we watch Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck smash each other, so can we read Tan's novel. The flat characters are surrounded by mysterious forces, filled with fairytale elements of ghosts, animals, and magical objects. I believe that Tan deliberately used flat characters because she was writing a fable. Tan says, "When she [my mother] read the stories, the ones set in China, she laughed. She didn't see that they were anything like herself. There was one story in particular, 'The Moon Lady' that has nothing to do with her life. She did not live in that area, she never went out on a boat during the moon festival, she never fell into the water, and she never saw a shadow play" (Davis, Vol 1. No 2. p. 6). Thus we cannot really believe the stories that the mothers tell about themselves in *The Joy Luck Club.* Real people do not cut their mothers' flesh and cook it. Why then does Tan create such scenes? I think that she does so to make the stories more mysterious and entertaining. At one point Davis asks, "So the struggle in the writing process is to find the right image. The one that works for that story?" Tan replies, "The one that is the most mysterious" (Davis, Vol 1. No 1. p. 9). The mysterious images make Tan's story a modern fairytale. In the last section, the queen mother of "The Queen Mother of the Western Skies" is a fairy. Like Cinderella's fairy godmother, the queen mother provides essential wisdom. In the book's first section, "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away," Tan presents the stories of Jing-mei Woo and three mothers, Anmei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying Ying St. Clair. Jing-mei Woo's mother has already died, so Jing Mei speaks in her place. Jing Mei remembers that her mother's story is like that of a fairytale. "I never thought my mother's Kweilin story was anything but a Chinese fairytale" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 25). This statement seems to apply not only to Jing Mei's story but to all the mothers' stories.

The American-born daughter dismisses China as puzzling, Chinese customs and clothes as mysterious. Jing Mei Woo says, "These clothes were too fancy for real Chinese people, I thought, and too strange for American parties" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 28). To the daughters, the mothers are part of an unknown world, a world complicated by their own imaginations. "I imagined Joy Luck was a shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 28). Indeed, the mothers' worlds as seen by the daughters are unreal. "I used to dismiss her criticisms as just more of her Chinese superstitions, beliefs that conveniently fit the circumstances" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 31), Jing Mei reflects. "These kinds of explanations made me feel my mother and I spoke two different languages, which we did" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 33). Limited in American perception, language, and customs, the mothers can't understand that their daughters don't understand them. They say in unison, "Imagine, a daughter not knowing her own mother!" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 40). This is an ironical statement because it reveals the lack of understanding the mothers have towards their daughters in presuming that the daughters should understand them despite cultural and generational differences. Jing Mei starts to see things a little differently when she says, "And then it occurs to me. They are frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English" (*The Joy Luck Club,* pp. 40–41). Interestingly, the mothers see their daughters as "ignorant" and the daughters think their mothers are "stupid." As Marie Wunsch points out, "When conflicts arise the mothers and daughters seem only players in a world so personal, so foreign to the other, that any understanding of the other is impossible" (Wunsch, p. 139). To the daughters, the mothers are embarrassing, confusing, and humiliating; to the mothers, the daughters are rebellious, unyielding, and stubborn.

The four short prologues that introduce the four main chapters advance Tan's moral intentions by clarifying this generational conflict. The prologues suggest that Tan was deeply influenced by her father, a Baptist

minister. “He would tell these stories and I realize one of the things that was so amazing was that he could keep them simple so that they would reach everybody. He had an absolute belief in what these stories had to mean” (Davis, Vol 1. No 1. p. 6). Tan follows in her father's footsteps in using the form of the fable. The first prologue's fable is that of a mother bringing a swan to the States. Unlike Hans Christian Andersen's ugly duckling who becomes a beautiful swan, this Chinese swan is already grown. “She cooed to the swan: ‘In America I will have a daughter just like me … Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow!’” (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 17). The swan is taken away by the customs' officials. In this section the irony of the mothers' lack of American customs is revealed in a humorous way as Tan sets out to convey in English Chinese rhythms and idiomatic intonations.

In the second prologue, “26 Maligant Gates,” the mother warns her daughter by quoting from an old Chinese book: “Do not ride your bicycle around the corner.” The daughter replies, “You can't tell me because you don't know! You don't know anything!” (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 87). The girl runs outside, jumps on her bicycle, and falls before she reaches the corner. The message of this section is that the mother is always right. This juxtaposition of old Chinese proverbs with American reality, continued throughout the book, is without question purposeful. In this section the four daughters tell their own childhood stories. Waverly Jong becomes a national chess player by her ninth birthday, much to the delight of her proud mother. Waverly does not, however, feel equally proud of her mother. When Waverly talks back to her mother, her mother shouts, “‘Embarrass you be my daughter?’ Her voice was cracking with anger. ‘That's not what I meant. That's not what I said’” (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 99). Waverly's conversation with her mother reveals her growing resentment and also demonstrates the crucial misunderstandings between mothers and daughters.

As portrayed in this prologue the other daughters are no less anxious. Lena St. Clair is confused by what is real and what is unreal. She fantasizes about her neighbors, a mother and daughter whose loud voices often come through the thin walls. She sees the girl pull out a sharp sword and tell her mother, “Then you must die the death of a thousand cuts. It is the only way to save you.” After this ordeal the mother says that she has “perfect understanding” (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 115). The neighbor and her daughter act as doubles for Lena and her mother. Fighting voices, echoing through the walls, make Lena fantasize.

Rose Hsu Jordan's childhood is darkened by the death of her younger brother, Bing, for which she feels responsible: “I knew it was my fault. I hadn't watched him closely enough” (*The Joy Luck Club,* pp. 126–127). Jing Mei Woo also feels that she is to blame for her mother's disappointment. Her mother wants her to be a concert pianist, but Jing Mei feels that she will never make it: “It was not the only disappointment my mother felt in me. In the years that followed, I failed her so many times, each time asserting my own will, my right to fall short of expectations. I didn't get straight A's. I didn't become class president. I didn't get into Stanford. I dropped out of college” (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 142). Her feelings of guilt, rejection, and doubt haunt Jing Mei.

In the third prologue, “The American Translation,” the daughters are all grown up. Two have married Caucasian husbands despite their mothers' protests. However, their marriages do not go well. Lena and Harold are constantly battling about different budgets and thinking of divorce. Rose Hsu and Ted are in the process of getting a divorce. Rose says, “Over the years, I learned to choose from the best opinions. Chinese people had Chinese opinions. American people had American opinions. And in almost every case, the American version was much better. It was only later that I discovered there was a serious flaw with the American version. There were too many choices, so it was easy to get confused and pick the wrong thing” (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 191). Waverly Jong is not as unfortunate. She is dating Rich, a Caucasian, and although Rich and her mother have their misunderstandings, all three plan to visit China together. Jing Mei, still single, even achieves self-understanding. She thinks of her mother who has died: “And she's the only person I could have asked, to tell me about life's importance, to help me understand my grief” (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 197).

How does the third prologue correlate with the stories in this section? In the prologue, a daughter asks, “What is peach blossom luck?” “The mother smiled, mischief in her eyes. ‘It is in here,’ she said, pointing to the mirror. ‘Look inside. Tell me, am I not right? In this mirror is my future grandchild, already sitting on my lap next spring.’ And the daughter looked and haule! There it was: her own reflection looking back at her” (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 147). The use of the mirror is like that in “Cinderella” when the stepmother asks the mirror, “who is the fairest of them all?” The reflections of mother, daughter, and grandchild appear much the same and the daughters are revealed as the “American translations” of the mothers.

In the last prologue, “Queen Mother of the Western Skies,” the grandmother tells the baby, “Thank you, Little Queen. Then you must teach my daughter this same lesson. How to lose your innocence but not your hope. How to laugh forever” (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 213). The word “lesson” reinforces the fable elements while the word “laugh” adds a comic touch. The mother talks to the baby who has lived forever. The grandmother and baby seem to be one, just as the mother and daughter seem to be identical. The idea of wholeness again reminds us of “Each and All,” in which Emerson writes about the transcendent unity of the many and the one.

In this section the mothers unveil their pasts in China, but they are unreliable narrators. Their stories are unrealistic and exaggerated, mixed with the supernatural. As Janet Burroway notes, the unreliable narrator has become one of the most popular characters in modern fiction but “is far from a newcomer to literature and in fact predates fiction. Every drama contains characters who speak for themselves and present their own cases and from whom we are partly or wholly distanced in one area of value or another” (Burroway, p. 274). Tan chooses to make this section the most unrealistic, perhaps because the material is the most unfamiliar to her. For example, An-Mei Hsu tells her daughter, “This is how a daughter honors her mother. It is *shou* so deep it is in your bones. The pain of the flesh is nothing. The pain you must forget. Because sometimes that is the only way to remember what is in your bones. You must peel off your skin, and that of your mother, and her mother before her. Until there is nothing. No scar, no skin, no flesh” (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 48). The idea of peeling her mother's flesh and cooking it is unrealistic, of course. This violent scene is like Kingston's in *The Woman Warrior* when Fa Mu Lan's mother cuts the warrior's back with a knife engraving the list of wrongs to be avenged. Yet unlike apparently comparable scenes in *The Silence of the Lambs,* say, these scenes are not gruesome, but magical.

Limited by their cultural experiences, the mothers think and speak alike. One mother can easily substitute for another and seem to be characterized as mere Chinese-American abstractions. Ying Ying St. Clair says, “I think this to myself even though I love my daughter. She and I have shared the same body. There is a part of her mind that is part of mine. But when she was born, she sprang from me like a slippery fish” (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 242). Lindo Jong says, “And now I have to fight back my feelings. These two faces, I think, so much the same! The same happiness, the same sadness, the same good fortune, the same faults” (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 256). An-Mei Hsu says, “And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she came out the same way! Maybe it is because when she was born to me and she was born a girl. And I was born to my mother and I was born a girl. All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way” (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 215). Likewise, Anju in *The Woman Warrior* describes her mother looking out of her Chinese medical school graduation photo: “She stares straight as if she could see me and past me to her grandchildren and grandchildren's grandchildren” (*The Woman Warrior,* p. 68). The identification that the mothers feel with their daughters is not based on common interests or thoughts but on biological factors. Jing Mei Woo, a seeming spokeswoman for the daughters' side, also admits, “And now I also see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood. … Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish” (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 288). Reconciliation occurs when mothers and daughters realize the unbreakable bonds between them.

Indeed, the sameness of the daughters and mothers is the novel's central image. Thus the images of the mothers are conventionalized. The mothers do not appear as real women and some of their traits are especially exaggerated. It is true that there are moments of realistic portrayal, but these moments are intertwined with

fantasies such as the women carrying swans and a woman cooking a mother's flesh. While the daughters are characterized realistically, the mothers are depicted as unreal. Despite this difference, the mothers and daughters are described as physically alike as the central image takes precedence over realistic portrayal.

Although the activities described are gruesome, the audience does not feel disgust but a mild, amused shudder, because the treatment of these scenes seems to be in the tradition of the comic novel. As Booth points out, "In much of the great comic fiction, for example, our amusement depends on the author's telling us in advance that the characters' troubles are temporary and their concern ridiculously exaggerated" (Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction,* p. 175). Tan herself notes, "So with the stories in *The Joy Luck Club,* I often began with a frame, which was 'the reason' for telling the story" (Davis, p. 10). Thus, it would be inaccurate for anyone to see these images as those of real mothers struggling in the United States, though we do get glimpses of reality. In a way there is an element of "faking," as Frank Chin points out in *The Big Aiiieeeee*: "Kingston, Hwang, and Tan are the first writers of any race, and certainly the first writers of Asian ancestry, to so boldly fake the best-known works from the most universally known body of Asian literature and lore in history" (Chin, *The Big Aiiieeee,* p. 3). However, the fairytale elements in the stories make the serious and sad relationships interesting and light. Creating a light touch to handle heavy materials, the authors are able to amuse and entertain the reader even as they write about confusion and painful relationships.

In *The Joy Luck Club* four separate mother/daughter relationships are explored, but the struggles are really variations of each other. The mothers tell from their own points of view their stories in China while the daughters recount their stories of growing up. The four mothers seem to speak in similar voices, making it difficult for the reader to distinguish among them. Likewise, although the episodes are different, the daughters also seem to speak in similar tones. The daughters resist their mothers but somehow always seem vulnerable to their mothers' opinions. As Waverly says, "In her hands I always became the pawn. I could only run away. And she was the queen, able to move in all directions, relentless in her pursuit, always able to find my weakest spots" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 180). As in a chess game the daughter runs away until she reaches the far end of the board and then becomes a queen herself by being able to identify with her mother.

Realistically speaking, there is a wide gap between first generation mothers and second generation daughters. As Patrica Lin suggests, "The polarity between traditional Chinese and American values is felt with particular keenness by American-born Chinese women. Unlike their mothers, such women face conflicting demands from two opposing cultures. While American-born daughters are familiar with the cultural nuances of Chinese life, their dilemmas frequently stem from having to vacillate between 'Chinese-ness' and 'American-ness.' Their Chinese-born mothers, in contrast, are less plagued by the complexities of being Chinese, American, and woman" (Lin, p. 41). Jing Mei makes much the same point: "These kinds of explanations made me feel my mother and I spoke two different languages, which we did" (*The Joy Luck Club,* pp. 33–34). Despite their differences, however, the mothers and daughters are portrayed as equals. In fact, in *The Woman Warrior* both the mother and daughter are said to be dragons. In *The Joy Luck Club* Lena St. Clair as well as her mother, Ying Ying St. Clair, are born in the year of the tiger. Ying Ying St. Clair states, "I was born in the year of the Tiger. It was a very bad year to be born, a very good year to be a Tiger. … The bad spirit stayed in the world for four years. But I came from a spirit even stronger, and I lived. This is what my mother told me when I was old enough to know why I was so heartstrong in my ways. Then she told me why a tiger is gold and black. It has two ways. The gold side leaps with its fierce heart. The black side stands still with cunning, hiding its gold between trees, seeing and not being seen, waiting patiently for things to come" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 248). "Two ways" again underlines the idea of the double. The mother like a tiger is strong and shrewd. Her survival and character are attributed to being born in the year of a tiger. Literally, these animals are part of the Chinese zodiac; metaphorically, the image contributes to the work's fairytale atmosphere.

In China, women born in the year of the tiger or a dragon are considered too strong to be desirable mates. Women born in the year of the rabbit or pig are said to have gentler personalities, so they are selected before women born in the year of the tiger or dragon. It is interesting that Kingston and Tan have reversed the

culture-bound stereotypes of femininity. But then they are looking through American eyes. To them, strength, fierceness, and power are positive signs.

As depicted by Tan, the battle between mother and daughter is especially fierce because both possess equal strength. Both mother and daughter are depicted as tigers. The mother uses her experience to control the daughter but the daughter resists such control even if it is from her own mother. The daughters continue to resist until they realize the truth about the universe. The universe is one and harmonious. Thus both mothers and daughters are winners and losers. The opposing sides of nature complement and balance each other. Both yin and yang enforce the recurring pattern of life. Their combat does not end in a victor or victim; the daughters are not better or worse than their mothers. Holbrook explains this relationship in psychological terms: “The problem of woman is thus the problem of life and its secret. Woman can create us—by reflecting us—and enable us to seek meaning in existence, or, she can leave us without a created identity and in a condition of meaninglessness. No wonder she is feared and hated, as well as respected and loved” (Holbrook, p. 62). This explanation clarifies Waverly's reaction when she sees her mother lying quietly on the sofa. “And then I was seized with a fear that she looked like this because she was dead. I had wished her out of my life, and she had acquiesced, floating out of her body to escape my terrible hatred” (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 180). Waverly is relieved to find her mother just sleeping. When Lindo Jong awakens and calls her daughter by a childhood name, “Meimei-ah,” Waverly's anger dissolves and she feels “as if someone had unplugged me and the current running through me had stopped” (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 181). Likewise, Anju feels as if a “weight lifted from me” when her mother calls her “Little Dog,” an endearing term from childhood (*The Woman Warrior,* p. 127). And as in all fairy tales the stories end on a positive note when the daughters realize the truth about their world.

Motivated by ambition and fear, the mothers try to control their daughters. As Helen Bannan says,

> “immigrant women fought to survive, to preserve what they considered to be the essence of their cultural origins, and to pass on both survival skills and cultural traditions to their daughters. When the women of the second generation chose American survival over ethnic tradition, they sometimes brought the war home, but they were often following battle strategies for which their mothers had, perhaps unwillingly, performed the reconnaissance.”

(Bannan, p. 165)

Therefore, as Barker-Nunn notes,

> These painful episodes are a result of the difficulty mother and daughter have separating from one another; this is the darker side of connection. The daughters' resentment springs from what they see as a lack of willingness on their mothers' part to see them as they are, to accept them as having lives both different and separate from those of their own.

(Barker-Nunn, p. 59)

The degree to which the daughters' growing identities depend upon their unquestioning acceptance of their mothers is central to the novel's conclusion.

Tan invokes truly widespread, if not universal, patterns. According to Simone de Beauvoir, “real conflicts arise when the girl grows older; as we have seen, she wishes to establish her independence from her mother. This seems to the mother a mark of hateful ingratitude; she tries obstinately to checkmate the girl's will to escape; she cannot bear to have her double become an other … Whether a loving or a hostile mother, the independence of her child dashes her hopes. She is doubly jealous: of the world, which takes her daughter from her, and of her daughter, who in conquering a part of the world robs her of it” (Beauvoir, pp. 489–490).

Perhaps this is the reason why Tan's mothers attempt to control their daughters' lives.

Tan's mothers are very ambitious for their daughters. Jing Mei remembers her mother wanting her to be like Shirley Temple and starting her on a series of piano lessons despite Jing Mei's protests. At a talent show, she "played this strange jumble through two repeats, the sour notes staying with me all the way to the end" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 139). But it is the expression on her mother's face that truly affects her. "But my mother's expression was what devastated me: a quiet, blank look that said she had lost everything" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 140). Jing Mei does care deeply what her mother thinks of her. She feels that her mother has indeed lost everything and is haunted by a sense of failure. She explains, "And for all those years, we never talked about the disaster at the recital or my terrible accusations afterward at the piano bench. All that remained unchecked, like a betrayal that was now unspeakable. So I never found a way to ask her why she had hoped for something so large that failure was inevitable" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 142). In exasperation she shouts at her mother, "You want me to be someone that I'm not!. … I'll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be." The insensitive mother retorts, "Only two kinds of daughters. … Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind!" "Then I wish I wasn't your daughter. I wish you weren't my mother," Jing Mei replies (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 142). Real communication is blocked by language problems. The mother's inability to speak English well denies her the opportunity to explain her true thoughts and feelings to her daughter. In broken English the mother tries to teach her daughter by using her knowledge of old Chinese proverbs and chants. Frustration breaks out on both sides and the scene ends with shouting and ultimatums.

The ambition of Waverly Jong's mother is to make her daughter a champion chess player. "And my mother loved to show me off, like one of my many trophies she polished. She used to discuss my games as if she had devised the strategies" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 170). However, one day Waverly must respond, "I hated the way she tried to take all the credit. And one day I told her so, shouting at her on Stockton Street, in the middle of a crowd of people. I told her she didn't know anything, so she shouldn't show off. She should shut up" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 170). Her mother's loud Chinese voice cracking with broken English words is embarrassing. The mother doesn't behave the way a white mother behaves, not knowing any better, so she is a source of humiliation for the daughter. Likewise, a daughter telling her mother "to shut up" is a disgrace for the mother. And yet the mothers have a strong hold over the daughters. Waverly feels that "in her hands, I always became the pawn. I could only run away. And she was the queen, able to move in all directions, relentless in her pursuit, always able to find my weakest spots" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 180). Entrapped in her sensitivities, the daughter struggles and rebels.

Despite the daughters' rebellions, their sense of guilt, need for approval, and desire for reassurance tie them to their mothers' judgments. Yet their fears of being rejected make them hesitate. An Hsu hesitates about explaining her divorce to her mother. Waverly Jong wants desperately for her mother to approve her white boyfriend, Rich. She tells him, however, that her mother doesn't think anyone is good enough for her. When Waverly shows her mother her present from Rich, a mink coat, her mother replies, "This is not so good." "It is just leftover strips. And the fur is too short, no long hairs'" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 169). Waverly observes, "My mother knows how to hit a nerve. And the pain I feel is worse than any other kind of misery. Because what she does always comes as a shock, exactly like an electric jolt, that grounds itself permanently in my memory. I still remember the first time I felt it" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 170).

Just as the daughters hesitate, so too the mothers wait to reveal their pasts. Ying Ying St. Clair states, "My daughter does not know that I was married to this man so long ago, twenty years before she was even born" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 246). Jing Woo's mother dies before revealing her whole past to her. Jing Woo goes on a quest to find out more about her dead mother and to find her lost sisters. This lack of communication and honesty between daughter and mother is one of the major sources of conflict and misunderstanding. Only when the mothers start to reveal their true natures do the daughters begin to understand their mothers and themselves. Ying Ying St. Clair says, "All these years I kept my true nature hidden, running along like a small shadow so nobody could catch me. And because I moved so secretly now my daughter does not see me. She

sees a list of things to buy, her checkbook out of balance, her ashtray sitting crooked on a straight table. And I want to tell her this: We are lost, she and I, unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 67). The longer the mothers wait, the deeper become the misunderstandings.

Reconciliation occurs after a series of reversals and recognitions. The daughters realize that the mothers are just as sensitive as they are, that their mothers can be hurt just as they themselves are hurt. Waverly feels torn: "Oh, her strength! Her weakness!—both pulling me apart. My mind was flying one way, my heart another. I sat down on the sofa next to her, the two of us stricken by the other" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 181). At one point Lindo Jong says to her daughter, "Yes, but you said it just to be mean, to hurt me, to. …" And when her daughter responds with more abuse, she is horrified. "So you think your mother is this bad. You think I have a secret meaning. But it is you who has this meaning. Ai-ya! She thinks I am this bad!" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 181). And just as Waverly feels acutely her mother's remarks, so any rude remarks that Waverly makes give Lindo sharp pain. As Ling points out, "Tan's implication is clear: we all take our mothers (and motherlands) for granted. They are just there, like air or water, impossible really to know or understand because we are so intimate, and more often than not they have seemed a force to struggle against" (Ling, *Between Worlds,* p. 136).

Ying Ying believes that by revealing the secrets of her past she can help her daughter. "Now I must tell my daughter everything. … I will gather together my past and look. I will see a thing that has already happened. The pain that cut my spirit loose. I will hold that pain in my hand until it becomes hard and shiny, more clear. And then my fierceness can come back, my golden side, my black side. I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter's tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose. She will fight me, because this is the nature of two tigers. But I will win and give her my spirit because this is the way a mother loves her daughter" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 252). And when Lindo and Waverly Jong are at the beauty parlor, the mother thinks, "And now I have to fight back my feelings. These two faces, I think, so much the same! The same happiness, the same sadness, the same good fortune, the same faults" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 256). Likewise the daughter sees her mother as so weak and frail that she comes to a new understanding. "I saw what I had been fighting for: It was for me, a scared child, who had run away a long time ago to what I had imagined was a safer place. And hiding in this place, behind my invisible barriers, I knew what lay on the other side: Her side attacks. Her secret weapons. Her uncanny ability to find my weakest spots. But in the brief instant that I had peered over the barriers I could finally see what was really there: an old woman, a wok for her armor, a knitting needle for her sword, getting a little crabby as she waited patiently for her daughter to invite her in" (*The Joy Luck Club,* pp. 183–84). The clash of these wills is finally stilled in a moment's revelation.

At the end, when Jing Mei goes to China to find her two lost sisters, she is all but overcome: "And now I see [my mother] again, two of her, waving, and in one hand there is a photo, the Polaroid I sent them. As soon as I get beyond the gate, we run toward each other, all three of us embracing, all hesitations and expectations forgotten. 'Mama, Mama,' we all murmur, as if she is among us" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 287). Eager yet hesitant, happy but somewhat shy, Jing Mei embraces her lost sisters. When Jing Mei looks at the polaroid picture of herself and her two Chinese sisters, she realizes their perfect likeness: "The gray-green surface changes to the bright colors of our three images, sharpening and deepening all at one … Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish" (*The Joy Luck Club,* p. 288). The dim shadowy images give way to the sharply focused features underlined by the similar bone structures. These images of likeness break down the walls of resistance. As Holbrook notes, "The symbolic use of faces and eyes is found in fairy tales, as well as in the fantasies of C. S. Lewis, George MacDonald, Lewis Carroll, and others. Symbolism of the mother's body, of birth, and of play may also be found—associated with existence and development" (Holbrook, p. 64). This development is achieved when Jing Mei's search for the mother ends by finding her sisters.

Jing Mei's need to find her own identity is realized when she meets her sisters. Pearson notes that "women writers in particular emphasize the female hero's need, following her liberation from male definition, for

reconciliation with the mother. They also emphasize how inextricably bound together are the search for the mother and the search for the self" (Pearson and Pope, p. 197). The image of the mother superimposed on the sisters' reflections brings about this revelation. As Lazarre says, "It is the process of quiet, loving, insistent identification, the repeated testifying of one to the other that says, I am the same as you, that unlocks the doors and unravels the tangles" (Pearson and Pope, p. 203). Mirror images reflect the unbreakable bonds between mother and daughter.

Jing Mei's journey correlates with Holbrook's explanation of how fantasies work in stories by writers like C. S. Lewis and George MacDonald. "There is a journey, and during the journey something crucial has to be sought in the bleak world and brought back to restore meaning. This often is something shiny, magical, fruitful or potent. This quest is symbolic of the need of the individual who cannot complete mourning to find the dead mother—in the world of death—and to obtain from her the completion of reflection, thus restoring meaning to life. The loss has left the individual aware of the lack of meaning in his existence, consequent upon the insufficiency of the mother's creative reflection. Therefore, the individual must find her … or her magic attributes … to complete the existential process" (Holbrook, p. 65). When Jing Mei sees herself in the photo which serves as a magical mirror, she is restored. And the restoration she achieves is mirrored in the fates of her sisters, both Chinese and American.

Kingston's and Tan's images are more figurative and original than those of other, more conventional writers who tend to offer traditional images of the loving mother and dutiful daughter. Kingston's and Tan's images are more memorable and revealing of the problems of first generation Asian American mothers and their daughters. In *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club,* however, real separation never occurs, although the mother-daughter bond is problematic. Although at various times there is a tug of war, the bond between mothers and daughters is never broken. This concept fits in perfectly with the Chinese view of the universe. In the end the American-born daughters accept and affirm their Chinese heritage. In both *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club* resolution occurs when the daughters accept their mothers. They realize that despite differences of environment and culture they share a deep and unchanging bond with their mothers. Kingston's and Tan's philosophies truly fit Emerson's in "Each and All." Like the speaker in the last line of this poem, the mothers and daughters in *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club* finally yield themselves to the perfect whole.

Note

1. For a more detailed discussion of these unifying devices, see my book *The Shapes and Styles of Asian American Prose Fiction,* pp. 91–115.

Criticism: Wendy Ho (essay date 1996)

SOURCE: "Swan-Feather Mothers and Coca-Cola Daughters: Teaching Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club,*" in *Teaching American Ethnic Literatures,* University of New Mexico Press, 1996, pp. 327–45.

[*In the following essay, Ho argues that Tan accurately and realistically portrays the complicated lives of immigrant Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters and that these fictional portrayals are instructive, especially when placed in the context of the oppression of women in China.*]

A. ANALYSIS OF THEMES AND FORMS

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* is not a book in praise of "Oriental exotics" or passive victims. Nonetheless a number of critics and readers think that Amy Tan writes stories about a tantalizing, mysterious, and romanticized Old China or an exoticized Other. Some reviewers comment more about Tan than about the

book, referring to her as “the flavor of the month, the hot young thing, the exotic new voice” (Streitfeld, F8); others invoke stereotypes in their review of the book: “Snappy as a fortune cookie and much more nutritious, *The Joy Luck Club* is a jolly treatment of familiar conflicts” (Koenig, 82). Another critic asserts that the Joy Luck mothers' memories of China are not anchored in “actual memory,” but overtaken by “revery” for the China of their childhood past. He disappoints in encouraging readers to “dream” through the Old China sequences in Tan's book (Schell, 28). In *The Big Aiiieeeee!,* a groundbreaking anthology of Asian American literature, the writer-editors are highly critical of what they perceive as Tan's exoticization of China and the Chinese for a white mainstream audience. For them, her book simply resurrects racist images of an inscrutably corrupt East; of heartless, sexist (if not invisible) Chinese men; and of fragile, lotus-blossom women who appear to be too good for the decadent, ignorant society and culture from which they come (Chan et al.). Such one-dimensional Western representations are indeed destructive to the Asian American community. They are derived from the Orientalist school that Edward Said has so eloquently critiqued in his two books *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism.*

But contrary to what the above critics may say or think, Amy Tan is not out to resurrect shallow stereotypes or Chinese exotica in *The Joy Luck Club.* As teachers, we need to seek out new and empowering interpretive strategies for reading Tan's texts rather than appropriating to ourselves—consciously or unconsciously—ways of reading our emerging writers that are based on racist, sexist perspectives. In this regard, I think it is important for readers to do the hard work of carefully processing the new literary, talk-story texts as intimately anchored not only in the psychodynamic tensions between Chinese immigrant mothers and their Americanized daughters within different familial situations, but also in the concrete socioeconomic, cultural, and historical realities of a hybrid diaspora culture in the United States.

The Joy Luck mothers' imaginations are not so overtaken by “revery” that they cannot comprehend the intersecting struggles of their lives in China or America, or the sexism and racism that they and their families must deal with in their lives. Tan resurrects women's untold personal stories of daily survival and resistance as a form of countermemory: Their multiple stories counter, rather than support, the monolithic imperialist, patriarchal gaze and narratives that have denied them agency, complexity, and visibility in not only their own ethnic communities but also in the dominant Western culture in the U.S. Through her semiautobiographical fiction, Amy Tan advocates the value of reclaiming and understanding these Chinese women's neglected stories in China and America and of preserving and reimagining their Chinese heritage even as they tell of their bewildering new dilemmas as Chinese women in the United States. (For the semiautobiographical nature of her book, consult personal interviews by Seaman; Somogyi and Stanton; Tan, 1990.) Her book is dedicated to her mother, Daisy Tan: “To my mother and the memory of her mother. You asked me once what I would remember. This and much more.” From these mother roots, daughter-writers such as Tan draw strength to survive, adapt, and create new stories and myths, new definitions of self-in-community, new strategies for cultural/historical survival that will honor their mothers and communities as well as their Chinese pasts. (See Friedman on the importance of group identity in the discussion of self in the writings of women, minorities, and many non-Western peoples.) Such links of the self in new and old communities will sustain them in the dangerous minefields of Anglo American life and culture.

Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* is structured around four central mirroring pairs of mothers and daughters: Suyuan Woo and Jing-mei “June” Woo; An-mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan; Lindo Jong and Waverly Jong; and Ying-ying St. Clair and Lena St. Clair.[1] In *The Joy Luck Club,* the stories of these four pairs are interwoven in four major segments, with the mothers and daughters telling their stories of how it is they came to be where they are in life. Each of the four major segments of the book opens up with a vignette, which is followed by four chapters. The first and last segments involve the Joy Luck mothers' individual stories (“Feathers from a Thousand Li” and “Queen Mother of the Western Skies”). These two mother segments figuratively embrace the two middle segments (“The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates” and “American Translation”) in which their daughters speak as second-generation Chinese women in America. In an interesting twist, Jing-mei, the daughter who has reluctantly assumed the place of her deceased mother Suyuan at the mah jong table at the

beginning of the book, tells her mother's story in the final chapter, "A Pair of Tickets." She fulfills her mother's dream of returning to China to see her twin daughters—Jing-mei's lost sisters. She finally begins the process of re-identifying with a mother whom she had long neglected—whom she had often dismissed as an exotic Other. The daughter's recognition and reclamation of the intimate bonds with her mother is in counterpoint to the cultural and institutional images and definitions of women as mirrored in patriarchal/imperialist discourse. There is an impending change of guard at the end of the book which suggests the potential for continuity and transformation of mother-and-daughter bonding among a new generation of Chinese American women.

Tan's multiple pairings of mother-daughter stories mirror the strong links between the individual mothers and daughters as well as among all the women of the Joy Luck Club. Rather than focusing on a single primary mother-daughter relationship, Tan gives the reader a sense of the diversity of mother-daughter bonds within Chinese American families. As Tan says, "And when you talk to 100 different people to get their stories on a situation, that's what the truth is. So it's really a multiple story" (Seaman, 256). The links between these mothers and daughters in America are further complicated by the bonds between the Joy Luck mothers and their mothers (and foremothers) in China. Tan enriches the reader's understanding of a single woman's history and of these Chinese American mother-daughter pairs by extending the resonances to the past and to the spidery links to mother-daughter bonds embedded in Chinese culture and society. For example, we witness Lindo Jong's sad separation from her beloved mother and the development of her feisty and clever private self in an arranged marriage—a self that is reflected in a complicated relationship with her own strong-willed daughter. In An-mei Hsu's story, we explore the roots of her frustrations and anger as a woman in the telling of her mother's oppressive life and death as a concubine in feudal China. We begin to understand the links between her personal liberation and the revolutionary changes in China—of a woman and a nation finding a new voice. Tan links Hsu's personal-political struggles with a sociohistorical awareness and participation in her people's struggle for justice and equality. Through the book's intersecting storylines, the reader is exposed to the rich variations and interconnections in the relationships and communications between Chinese mothers and daughters in China and/or in America as they attempt to talk out the silences and distances and to process what is really being described and felt by each other as women.

In *The Joy Luck Club,* the mothers and daughters continually struggle not only to reclaim and speak their stories, but also to "talk back" as complex subjects. But in order to speak up in the larger community and to transform women's lives in a sexist, racist society, Tan's mothers and daughters have to learn to be friends and allies to each other. For women, one important place to begin this primary, necessary work is in the problematic relationships and communications between mothers and daughters. (For an introduction to mother-daughter writing, see, for example, Hirsch.) In *The Joy Luck Club,* mothers and daughters find a compelling need to set the record straight on the specific actualities of their lives in China and America; but they find it difficult to articulate their honest intentions, emotions, and experiences to each other. Jing-mei Woo's mother gives her an heirloom jade pendant—her life's importance—by which she will know her mother's meaning. But as Jing-mei notes, it seemed that she and other jade-pendant wearers were "all sworn to the same secret covenant, so secret we don't even know what we belong to" (198). Much miscommunication takes place between the mothers and daughters. It is a tricky and risky task for them to dredge up and decipher each other's personal stories—these palimpsests that are shrouded in layers of silence, secrecy, pain, ambiguity, collusion, and prohibition within the varied discourses, institutions, and power relations in a society.

However, this is precisely the work that Tan takes up. Each woman has her story of hopes and ambitions, of failure, of survival and resistance. The mothers, for example, must confront the personal archive of tragedy, alienation, suffering, and loss in their own lives; they must negotiate the shame and guilt of leaving country, family, home, and mother. Each woman must wrestle with what to tell the other amid the false images and narratives that obscure or silence their personal stories as Chinese American women. They must overcome the sense that their daughters often look upon them as outcasts, as Other, in America. Jing-mei thinks of her

mother's mah jong gatherings as “a shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war” (28). In this less than hospitable context, Suyuan Woo struggles continually to translate her tragic war stories to a resisting daughter. Tan does not neglect to portray the serious dilemmas and ironies that these mothers confront in creating and maintaining a protective environment, a material, cultural and psycho-political bastion, for themselves or their families in America.

Nevertheless, the Joy Luck mothers work painfully to decipher and speak the buried, bittersweet pain of their lives in order to reclaim their own stories and to protect their bewildered daughters from similar pain and oppression as women in America. Through their personal recall, they begin to recognize the insidious links between their pasts and present struggles in America and between their pasts and their daughters' present lives. It is important to read these women's stories as the complicated physical, psychological, cultural, and sociohistorical positionings for personal and communal survival and resistance in the Chinese diaspora communities of the United States. In this light, these stories record not detached reveries or myths about China but, rather, daily heroic actions of many of the Joy Luck mothers, who struggle to raise children under stressful political and sociohistorical conditions.

Like their mothers, daughters must overcome their personal anger, resentment, guilt, and fear toward their mothers. Tan demonstrates how the daughters tend to stereotype their mothers—to freeze them in time as old-fashioned ladies; they do not often give their mothers the space to particularize themselves or to cross over into their lives. They are second-generation, English-speaking Chinese American women, who are located or positioned in an Anglo American homeland that has a long history of oppressing Asian Americans. In living in America, the daughters assimilate certain stereo-typical and racist views of the Chinese that alienate them from their own mothers and heritage. They find it distasteful to be identified with their mothers or their stories; with speaking the Chinese language, or with keeping the old ways and customs. Joy Luck daughters often fail to recognize the difficult but vital work and nurture of their working-class, immigrant Chinese mothers. Yuppie Waverly Jong, for example, makes up jokes to tell her friends about her mother's arrival in America and about her parents meeting and marriage. She trivializes their stories of struggle and joy. Waverly does not know the true story about the difficulties of her feisty immigrant mother; the poignant story of how her parents courted by surmounting ethnic and linguistic difficulties; or the story of how her name was chosen to express her mother's love and hopes for her.

Within this problematic framework, the Joy Luck women struggle to maintain vital communication with each other and to piece together the fragmented memories and talk-story of their actual lives. In *The Joy Luck Club,* it is a struggle, with varying successes and failures, for the mother-daughter pairs to know and love each other for their own strengths, weaknesses, and contexts. As we see in the individual stories, it is easy for mothers and daughters to get lost in the intense psychodynamic love—hate struggles within themselves and with each other. Both can be nurturing and suffocating, protective and negligent, trusting and distrustful, arrogant and humble, powerful and weak, affiliative and competitive toward each other. Each Joy Luck mother-daughter pair attempts to articulate positions that are rooted in their intertwined needs for individuation, mutual respect, and attachment to each other and their communities.

In addition, these psychodynamic tensions are embedded in particular socioeconomic and historical circumstances in China and in America that further complicate their relationship and communications with each other; that is, internal tensions between mothers and daughters are exacerbated and even generated by external factors. In *The Joy Luck Club,* mothers and daughters often have a difficult times smoothly negotiating the great sociohistorical expanses of their specific *weltanschaung.* For example, mothers and daughters are separated by historical time, cataclysmic natural disasters and wars, generations, classes, sociocultural systems and values, and languages. The traumatic translation of devalued and ambitious Chinese-speaking immigrant mothers from their motherland to an unfriendly and alien country and the assimilation of their second-generation, English-speaking Chinese daughters into mainstream America cause serious fractures in their relationship and communication with each other.

For the Joy Luck women to communicate with each other and to speak up as women against the invisibility—the distorted images and stereotypes of women in China and America—is to begin to imagine the histories that have been left out. (For instance, see Kim, especially 3–22, on stereotypes of Asian American people in literature, media, and society.) As some of their own mothers struggled to teach them, Joy Luck mothers want to teach their daughters how to acknowledge and deal with pain; how to know true friends; how to trust that their mothers know them inside and out; how to be free of confusion; how to survive under tricky and marginal circumstances with grace and joy luck. Some of the mothers especially desire to pass on to their daughters a sense of *shou,* a respect and honor for their mothers; *nengkan,* an ability to accomplish anything they put their mind to; and *chuming,* an inner knowing of each other as women. Most desire to reclaim their daughters by fighting for their hearts and minds and by responsibly educating them to survive and to subvert the oppressive systems in which they live. Joy Luck mothers teach their daughters that personal and cultural identity need to be maintained not only through the preservation of Chinese heritage but also through a continually active, fluid, multidimensional agency that can negotiate the fluctuations of oppressive social, cultural, and historical processes.

On the one hand, Asian American women have suffered under imperialist and patriarchal power structures. To deny these oppressive factors in any culture—whether in China or America—is, as Frank Chin likes to say, to live in the "fake world," not the "real world." The Asian American mothers and daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* are struggling subjects and agents encountering a not very perfect world in China and in America. Sometimes they lose their battles in the oppressive systems in which they live and position themselves; they comply, negotiate, and/or betray themselves and others in their search for sheer survival or status within systems of power. Tan shows us the complicity and compromise that can mire her female characters as they struggle to come to consciousness and voice about their lives and circumstances. For example, women are complicit in destroying Anmei's mother through the patriarchal power arrangements of family and society. Wu Tsing's childless Second Wife arranges to entrap An-mei's mother as a concubine for her husband. As a rich woman, Second Wife uses the borrowed class, wealth, and power of her husband to oppress and manipulate other women. This oppression of the other wives is her attempt to guarantee her own tenuous position and status in Wu Tsing's competitive female household. Tan is not out to valorize or privilege all women's language and actions. She paints a painfully problematic picture of women's complicity not only in another woman's oppression, but in their own continuing oppression in and maintenance of male-dominated culture.

On the other hand, Asian women are not always or simply powerless, passive, exploited dupes and sexual objects, domestic drudges, illiterates, and/or traditional women in patriarchal or imperialist systems (see Mohanty). In teaching this book, one must not neglect to take into account that Tan shows us how ordinary women, located in the specific context of their own times and personal circumstances, have challenged and subverted the socioeconomic and political systems under which they have lived and are living in many different ways. At the same time that their lives bespeak oppression and tragedy, the Joy Luck mothers do not neglect to pass on empowering interventions to their daughters. These resistances counter the patriarchal and imperialist systems that they are exposed to in China and America, which have forced them to speak, see, think, and act often in disempowering terms.

Such communication provides vital entry into the past, present, and future. The mothers' life-stories are the valuable maps not only of the powerlessness, servility, frustration, defeat, and compromise, but also of the powerful strategies of intervention and subversion that help women survive with a certain amount of grace, anger, strength, connectedness, and love. Mothers and daughters come to realize their fierce love and respect for each other as friends and survivors. They come to realize that there are rich challenges and meanings embodied even in the silences, fragments, tensions, and differences.

Doing the work of talk-story as a way to resist oppressive, monolithic patriarchal and imperialist institutions and metanarratives can lead to the inscription of new and fluid woman-centered spaces for women. In *The Joy*

Luck Club, we learn just how vital it is for mothers and daughters to continually talk-story—not to wait, for instance, to speak only until spoken to or given authority to do so or till one can speak perfect American English. It can be personally and politically empowering and heroic for women to tell their stories and attend to each other—not to be decentered objects whose stories are continually co-opted or translated for them or to them by those in power. In this way, women can be empowered to challenge society. During the Chinese Revolution, Chinese women learned to stand up and speak against not only their landlords but also their husbands and fathers. The slogan for this emancipation of people was *fanshen,* which meant "to stand up and overturn the oppressing classes." Women learned to speak the bitterness in their daily lives. Within their consciousness-raising women's groups in the countryside and cities, women learned, first of all, to speak up about the poverty, the hunger, the physical and psychological abuse and fear, the socioeconomic and political inequities. (See description of *suku,* or the "indictments of bitterness," in Ono, 170–75.) Women had access to each other's true feelings and contexts in an affiliative, nurturing environment. In this way, they learned they were not alone, separate from other women or other oppressed groups. Many Chinese women were empowered to speak and act together in transforming their lives and society. Likewise, Tan's mothers want to teach their daughters how to read situations clearly and how to stand up and fight for themselves. They want their daughters to be bolder, more self-assured women; to be independent from their husbands; to have status and voice on their own merit. As the critic bell hooks has powerfully stated, talking back is a way of speaking up for one-self as a woman, boldly and defiantly. It is "not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such it is a courageous act—as such, it represents a threat. To those who wield oppressive power, that which is threatening must necessarily be wiped out, annihilated, silenced" (8).

Like Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan is a daughter-writer, who has come to realize that locating, defining, and reporting women's stories and the crimes against women and community are part of the constructive, articulated anger and revenge against the narratives and institutions that oppress them. To recover multiple histories and to talk back as women united is to do real battle against oppression in their personal and communal lives. In reading Tan, one becomes acutely aware that this is serious, painful, complicated excavatory work; it is also subversive, creative, freeing, and responsible work for mothers and daughters who wish to connect as women-allies.

B. TEACHING *THE JOY LUCK CLUB*

An understanding of the Joy Luck mothers' (and their foremothers') Chinese past can help make the problematic interactions with their second-generation Americanized daughters—how they perceive and treat them and why—more accessible to readers. Teachers can assign introductory background readings on women in Chinese and Chinese American history.[2] The mother-and-daughter relationships cannot be fully understood as simply personal, internal problems to be worked out between Chinese mothers and their daughters. The bonds are problematized or complicated, in part, by their embeddedness in the particular psychological, socioeconomic, cultural, and historical realities of a traditional Confucian society that socialized and oppressed women in China.

As Julia Kristeva notes, Confucianists saw women as small human beings (*hsiao ren*) to be categorized with babies and slaves (Ling, 3). Women were not suited by nature for the intellectual life of a scholar or a statesman. Women's lives were to revolve around the Three Obediences and Four Virtues:

> The Three Obediences enjoined a woman to obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her eldest son after her husband's death. The Four Virtues decreed that she be chaste; her conversation courteous and not gossipy; her deportment graceful but not extravagant; her leisure spent in perfecting needlework and tapestry for beautifying the home.

(Ling, 3)

These delimiting societal prescriptions for women's gender roles and for a “true” Chinese womanhood can permit the physical and psychological abuse of women. The Joy Luck mothers experience their mothers' as well as their own difficult compromises and failures in a restrictive patriarchal culture and society. For example, An-mei Hsu learns the lessons that attempt to strain and destroy her relationship with her mother. Both An-mei and her mother live in traditional familial and societal structures, which often deny their personal needs, sufferings, and struggles and ask them to conform to a male-dominated culture against their own individual and common interests as women. An-mei grows up with stories, which attempt to break the spirit of strong-willed girls, the disobedient types—like her hidden self. These patriarchal stories are powerful forms of socialization into her proper and public roles in traditional Chinese society as a daughter, wife, mother, woman. The film version of Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (Wayne Wang) dramatically depicts the tragic experiences of the mothers in China and its parallels and consequences in the lives of their daughters in the United States. A viewing of the film—a real tearjerker—could provide another way to access the psychodynamic tensions between the mother-daughter pairs in the book. For a view of women's lives in prerevolutionary China, students can read the Chinese novel *The Family* by Pa Chin. The film *Small Happiness* (Carma Hinton and Richard Gordon) can provide a sense of women's lives in a specific Chinese context. In exploring the impact of a Chinese Confucian system on women's socialization into gender roles and identity, students can better understand the relationships of the Joy Luck mothers to their own mothers in China. In addition, this information can help students to understand the complex interactions between the Joy Luck mothers and their own daughters in America.

The historical events and natural disasters in China also play a role in shaping the Joy Luck mothers. They and their mothers before them, in one way or another, experience a range of horrific wars and chaos, evacuations, deaths, economic turmoil, revolutionary changes, poverty, floods, and famines that seriously impinge on their personal relationships and communications with their daughters. In the 1800s to middle 1900s, there were horrendous wars for colonial dominance over China waged by imperialist powers such as England, the United States, and Japan. There was bloody civil war between the Chinese Communist Party (Mao Zedong) and the Guomindang (Chiang Kai-shek) rumbling through China (see Ono). Chinese women suffered the terrible consequences of these chaotic events, especially the toll they took on the socioeconomic and political situations in their daily lives. For instance, Suyuan Woo's life, fears, and ambitions are clearly influenced by the chaos and brutalities of war, separation from family, death of a husband, and loss of her baby daughters. Suyuan's abandonment of her twin daughters during her escape from the invading Japanese is vividly portrayed in the film version of *The Joy Luck Club.* Young Lindo Jong remembers the painful, lonely separation from her beloved mother: she is sent to her boy-husband's household after disastrous floods, famine, and poverty make it difficult for the family to keep a “useless” daughter. Ying-ying St. Clair's concerns for her daughter's safety and her own fears at being sexually harassed on an Oakland street by a stranger could be rooted in her own bitter experiences as a lone married woman migrating from the poor countryside to Shanghai, a city notorious for its foreign decadence and the murder, rape, kidnapping, and prostitution of Chinese women in the early to middle 1900s. However, it was also a significant revolutionary period of change, not only in terms of women's rights but also for the Chinese nation. Students need to keep in mind that the Joy Luck mothers are the products of these revolutionary times. They are women of old and new China.

Besides an understanding of the Joy Luck mothers' Chinese roots, it is important to consider their traumatic translation to the United States. The mothers are excited by the potential opportunities in America for themselves and their families. But they are also socialized into silence by American racism and haunted by the history of immigration policies that have excluded Asians from entry into America. Before the arrival of the Joy Luck mothers in 1949, America already had a long and ugly record of discriminatory attitudes and policies aimed not only against successive groups of Asians, but also specifically against the Chinese (see S. Chan, Daniels, and Wong). Besides numerous Chinese immigration exclusionary laws enacted between 1882 and 1904, there were also a number of immigration policies that specifically deterred the immigration of Chinese women to America (such as the 1875 Page Law and the 1924 Immigration Act). These restrictive

forms of social and legal legislation affected the numbers of Asian women entering the country and the subsequent formation of Asian families in America. Racist/sexist stereotypes portrayed Chinese women as lewd and immoral women, who were unfit to enter the country. Sensational news-media coverage on the evils of Chinese prostitution created the long-standing stereotype of Chinese women as prostitutes. As audiovisual resources, films such as *Slaying the Dragon* (Deborah Gee) and *New Year* (Valerie Soe) can provide a visual introduction to the many stereotypes of Asian American women/people. With this long history of racism and sexism in the United States, Tan shows us why it is not difficult to understand the Chinese immigrant mothers' fear of the police, deportation, and backlash from white Americans based on their race and gender.

Despite all her years in America, An-mei Hsu lives with fears of deportation. An-mei's fears are well grounded, especially if one remembers America's severe anti-communist paranoia of the 1950s. Likewise, Ying-ying St. Clair is forced to invent a fictive self that is oriented to her present and future life in America, but which does not account for her frightening past life. In this foreign and suffocating space, she feels numb, off balance, and lost, living in small houses, doing servant's work, wearing American clothes, learning Western ways and English, accepting American ways without care or comment, and raising a distant daughter. Upon her arrival in America, Ying-ying is processed at Angel Island Immigration Station, where agents try to figure out her classification: war bride, displaced person, student, or wife. She is renamed Betty St. Clair; she loses her Chinese name and identity as Gu Ying-ying and gains a new birthdate. In the Chinese lunar calendar, she is no longer a tiger but a dragon. It takes her a long time to recover and pass on her tiger spirit to her daughter Lena.

In contrast to the mothers, the daughters, born and raised in contemporary America, have assimilated more easily into the dominant society. But Tan portrays the great cost of assimilation in the miscommunications between the Joy Luck mothers and daughters. Under such circumstances, how can mothers tell their stories to their insider/outsider daughters? How can the Joy Luck mothers articulate their stories fully if they feel they must hide or deny their past? their language in America? How can Americanized Chinese daughters begin to understand the fractured narratives that surface, made up, as they are, of so many lies and truths, so many protective layers set up against the outsiders' *chuming,* an inner knowing, of them? What are the advantages and disadvantages of assimilation for these mothers and daughters? How can these women learn to be friends and allies to each other? How are language and strategies for survival and resistance passed from mothers to daughters? She demonstrates how many intertwined dilemmas can impede or frustrate clear access by daughters to their mothers and to the full stories of their mother's and family's life and history in China and America. Nevertheless, Tan's text emphasizes that this difficult work of recovery is vital to women's well-being and solidarity with each other.

Another way of accessing Tan's book is to analyze her use of traditional Chinese legends (for example, the Moon Lady story) and images to articulate the concerns of Chinese American women. For instance, the Joy Luck mothers want their daughters to turn into beautiful swans—perfect, happy, successful, and independent women. In traditional Chinese stories, swans symbolize married, heterosexual love. Tan subverts and re-interprets the traditional image of swans by applying it to the silenced and intimate pairings between women. In this case, a mother and her daughter. The traditional symbols and narratives are being appropriated, reconstructed, or ruptured by writers like Tan (and Maxine Hong Kingston) who do not wish to focus on the master narratives of patriarchy, but to focus instead on the powerful stories of love and struggle between mothers and daughters, between women in China and in America. The stories in *The Joy Luck Club* give voice to the desires and experiences of female characters who have not had the advantage to write or tell their stories as men have had. It is their neglected stories that they tell and attempt to transmit to their daughters in the oral traditions of talk-story. These hybrid talk-story narratives challenge those who would deny or lessen the power, beauty, value, and pain in these women's lives. This is what Maxine Hong Kingston spent a lot of time learning in her memoir *The Woman Warrior*: “The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words” (63). The personal stories of the Joy Luck mothers do battle through gossip, circular talking, cryptic messages/caveats, dream images, bilingual language, and talk-story

traditions—not in the linear, logical, or publicly authorized discourse in patriarchal or imperialist narratives. This is talk that challenges the denial of Asian American women's voices and identities—denials not only by a male-dominated Chinese society and a Eurocentric American society but also by their very own daughters who have become so Americanized that they can barely talk-story with their mothers. In many ways, Tan's book can be fruitfully compared with *The Woman Warrior.* As heroic paper daughters in quest of their mothers' stories, Tan and Kingston empower not only their mothers but also themselves and their racial/ethnic communities through a psychic and oral/literary birthing that keeps alive the intimate, ever-changing record of tragedies, resistances, and joy luck for all people.

In the following section, I have included a number of additional discussion and paper topic questions that would be useful in teaching Tan's *The Joy Luck Club.*

1. What are the experiences most remembered by the mothers? Where is “home” for them? How do the experiences of the mothers resonate in the lives of their daughters? Can one see parallels in the daughters' lives? What expectations do individual mothers have for their daughters? and vice versa? What are the obstacles—social, economic, psychological, cultural, historical—that impact on the communications between the mothers and daughters? How does assimilation into dominant Anglo American culture affect their relationship? Is it important for daughters and mothers to communicate with each other? Why? How do mothers and daughters specifically find ways to survive and resist their multiple oppressions as Chinese American women?

2. Discuss how Tan portrays the acquisition of gender identity and roles in the early childhood of the Joy Luck mothers in stories such as “The Moon Lady,” “The Scar,” or “The Red Candle.” How does Tan convey through the language and images the particular conflicts and tensions within the different women? Do they simply adjust to the repression of their own private desires and dreams? How do they negotiate or resist patriarchal/imperialist oppression? Do they succeed and/or fail in their attempts?

3. Discuss the style or structure of Tan's text—for example, her use of a first-person point of view in the text. Or why and how does Tan use and/or transform the Chinese talk-story tradition or the images and legends in her own Chinese American stories? In regard to these topics, students could expand the discussion by comparing and contrasting two other Chinese American mother-daughter literary texts—Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945) and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1977).

4. (a) For a broader analysis of Asian American mother-daughter interactions, compare/contrast *The Joy Luck Club* with Tan's second novel *The Kitchen God's Wife,* which focuses on the difficult relationship and revelations between the immigrant mother Jiang Weili and her Chinese American daughter Pearl. *The Joy Luck Club* can also be used with Faye Myenne Ng's first novel *Bone,* which reveals the trauma and grief of a San Francisco Chinatown family attempting to deal with the suicide of one of their three daughters. Tan's book also works well with Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* or Hisaye Yamamoto's *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories.* Both writers deal with the multiple tensions between immigrant mothers and their second-generation daughters in the Japanese American community before, during, and after World War II. There are also a good selection of essays, short stories, and poems by other Asian American writers on this topic in Asian American anthologies listed in section C, “Related Works,” below.

(b) Other mother-daughter writing that can be used with Tan's book include Kim Chernin's *In My Mother's House: A Daughter's Story,* Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory,* Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name,* and Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones.* For example, Paule Marshall's novel, set in Brooklyn during the period of the Depression and World War II, depicts the struggles of a Barbadian immigrant family as it confronts poverty and racism in the United States. In the story, Selina Boyce, a young daughter searching for identity, must confront and resolve the contradictory feelings she has toward her hardworking, ambitious mother. Possible questions to help promote discussion around these novels include

the following: What personal, cultural, and sociohistorical struggles do women encounter in their families and mixed cultures in the United States? In what ways do they attempt to construct multiple selves, subjectivities, or positionings that have value against the meaninglessness, oppression, and violence (psychic and physical) that they encounter in their lives? Do they succeed and/or fail in their attempts? How do women empower or destroy other women? How do these diverse writers find innovative ways to rupture racist/sexist language and institutions through their creative use of language and/or narrative strategies? Are there similarities and/or differences in their writing strategies/tactics, stories, experiences? What type of identification and valorization of a women's culture is portrayed in the texts?

5. To provide for more inclusive and personal participation in the discussion of the book, students can compare their own relationships with their mothers and families and how they are situated and constructed in specific and diverse racial/ethnic, social, cultural, and historical contexts. This can be done in small group discussions, journal entries, and/or an oral history project.

6. (a) Students might wish to see the film version of *The Joy Luck Club* and discuss how the film might significantly differ from the book. What stories were left out? which ones kept? and why? Were there any modifications in the stories portrayed in the film? Why? How are men depicted in the book and film? Are the issues of racism and sexism in the United States discussed or left invisible in the film? Why and/or why not?

(b) Compare/contrast the portrayals of the mother-daughter relationship in *The Joy Luck Club* with another film directed by Wayne Wang, entitled *Dim Sum,* which also portrays the daily interactions between an immigrant Chinese mother and her daughter. What are the similarities and/or differences in the representations of Chinese Americans and their experiences in these two films? What were the production contexts (such as funding, decision-making process, studio, writing, and directing) for these two films by Wayne Wang? How do these institutional contexts impact on the final aesthetic product that is produced? Who are the audiences for these two films?

Notes

1. Note that mirror imagery is pervasive in Tan's book. For instance, Lindo Jong looks into the mirror and discovers a private self. Waverly also looks into the hairdresser's mirror. Jing-mei looks into the mirror to discover her secret "prodigy" self. There are many references to mothers as mirrors and to the placement of mirrors in rooms. Tan attempts to break down the binary polarizations that patriarchy demands and the separation between one woman and another. Before the freeing bonds between mother and daughters can be re-membered, the miming/doubling in the false mirror of patriarchy and imperialism must be ruptured.
2. On the important roles played by Chinese women in peasant strikes, silk-factory communities, labor movements, and uprisings in pre-and post-revolutionary China, consult Ono and Wolf and Witke. For Chinese American women's history, consult S. Chan, Wong, and Yung.

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SOURCE: “Self and Identity among Aging Immigrants in *The Joy Luck Club,*” in *Journal of Aging and Identity,* Vol. 3, No. 2, June, 1998, pp. 59–66.

[*In the following essay, Delucchi seeks to demonstrate how literature's “fictionalized life histories” contribute to social science by reading* The Joy Luck Club *as an account of aging and identity formation.*]

This article uses George Herbert Mead's theory of symbolic interaction to examine self and identity among aging immigrants in Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). Social scientists have largely bypassed analysis of fictional accounts of the Asian diaspora. My motivation for employing Mead's theory is to extend social scientific analysis to novels on aging and ethnicity. By examining self-narratives in fictional representations of the aging immigrant experience, I assess how identity develops out of particular social conditions and is achieved through social, psychological processes. Despite some limitations, symbolic interaction offers insights into the process whereby the present brings reinterpretation of the past and individuals are compelled to assign meaning to their life histories.

This essay examines aging and identity in Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) as it develops out of particular social conditions and is achieved through social psychological processes. Specifically, I explore the contribution of George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionist perspective to the analysis of aging and self among older immigrants. I address how immigrant identity formation is socially negotiated and how the self extends to encompass events from the past. To accomplish this, I seek textual evidence of the sociological processes underlying the narrative of aging.

BACKGROUND

The autobiography and the novel are similar in that both invite the reader to experience vicariously the life and culture of the characters. Novels are different from autobiographies in that they attempt by definition, to present to the reader the connection between biography and history—that is, the link between the characters' lives and their historic times and places (Fitzgerald 1992). Although many autobiographies provide similar insight, they are not bound to do so. Therefore, the novel, in telling a story, presents the culture and the way its members define reality.

Although the idea of using literature in the social sciences is not new, researchers have largely resisted analysis of literary accounts of aging and ethnicity for two reasons. First, the use of novels is constrained by the relative absence of a theoretical framework that can be used for interpretation of fictionalized life histories. Second, novels are recognized as "metaphors of self" and this inhibits their use as objective sources of data. Nevertheless, recent scholarship has identified literary works on aging as an important component of gerontological research (Combe and Schmader 1996; Deats 1996; Holstein 1994). Moreover, social psychologists now recognize the value of autobiographical literature for purposes of analyzing self-narratives and identity formation (Bielby and Kully 1988). However, few studies combine social psychological research on identity with fictionalized accounts of the aging immigrant experience. By examining the process of self-narrative construction, the novel, can be explored for insights into how individuals are compelled to assign meaning to their lives in old age.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A central argument of George Herbert Mead's (1932) symbolic interactionist perspective is that although the present implies a past and a future, individuals always experience the past and future through the present. The process by which life material is reviewed by the individual is interpreted within a (present) social context. Consequently, the meanings attached to events, and thus the significance of events, is subject to much variation, depending upon the circumstances of the present. While Mead recognizes the existence of unalterable historical facts, he argues that their subjective interpretation may vary, depending upon the existing present.

This essay explores the utility of Mead's conceptual framework to an analysis of Amy Tan's (1989) *The Joy Luck Club* in particular and novels in general. Mead (1932) describes a process whereby the present is used to reconstruct the past, as one through which individuals assign meaning to their lives. Personal continuity is maintained through an interaction of present events with selected meaningful past events.

I employ two dimensions of Mead's theory of the past as identified by Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich (1983). The first, the social structural past, is that which objectively influences the past and "thus structures and conditions the experiences found in the present" (Maines et al. 1983, p. 163). The second, the symbolically reconstructed past, is central to Mead's analysis of the past. This dimension clarifies the process by which individuals in the present selectively draw from past events so the present may be understood and the future anticipated.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Amy Tan's novel, *The Joy Luck Club,* details the lives of four Chinese women immigrants in San Francisco. It chronicles their bewilderment at American culture and their struggles to instill in their daughters remnants of their Chinese heritage. The novel is presented as sixteen interlocking stories that form two generations of mothers and daughters. For purposes of illustration, I limit my analysis to a single character, Lindo Jong, mother of Waverly Jong. I examine her life by focusing upon two components of the social construction of self-narratives, i.e., the social structural past and the symbolically reconstructed past.

In the analysis presented below, I explore Lindo Jong's life for elements of discontinuity and analyze how she assigns meaning to these experiences. I examine several aspects of her self-narrative, including: 1) social origins; 2) personal tragedies and triumphs; 3) unfulfilled ideals or goals; and 4) unresolved conflict. While not inclusive of all sources of disruption in Lindo's life, they encompass both societal and individual level elements.

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURAL PAST

According to Maines et al. (1983), the social structural past establishes micro-level probabilities for experience in the present, which in turn affects perceptions about the past and expectations about the future. While influential, this past is not completely deterministic, but merely predisposing. Lindo Jong begins her narrative with this awareness as indicated by her vivid observations of the structural elements of her childhood. We see a childhood devoid of choices for women. Reflecting on her arranged marriage she notes, "But even if I had known I was getting such a bad husband, I had no choice, now or later. That was how backward families in the country were. We were always the last to give up stupid old-fashioned customs" (pp. 44–45).

After her family promises Lindo to the Huangs's son for marriage, she gives particular attention to family dynamics. "… my own family began treating me as if I belonged to somebody else. My mother would say to me when the rice bowl went up to my face too many times, 'Look how much Huang Taitai's daughter can eat'" (p. 45). Separated from her family at the age of twelve to live with the Huangs, Lindo begins a self-directed quest for her freedom. "It was really quite simple. I made the Huangs think it was their idea to get rid of me, that they would be the ones to say the marriage contract was not valid" (p. 59).

Lindo's observations illustrate that many familial elements of her social structural past resonate throughout her perceptions of two fundamental issues in her life, worth and autonomy. "And every few years … I buy another bracelet. I know what I'm worth" (p. 63). "I remember the day when I finally knew a genuine thought and could follow it where it went. That was the day I was a young girl with my face under a red marriage scarf. I promised not to forget myself" (p. 63). Thus, her past was never fully resolved in the present, and as a result, the present was continuously resonating throughout the past, seeking resolution for the future.

SYMBOLIC RECONSTRUCTION OF THE PAST

Making the most of one's opportunities was a recurring passion in Lindo Jong's life. Indeed, she was drawn to the belief in unrestricted upward mobility in the United States. "If you are born poor here, it's no lasting shame. You are first in line for a scholarship. In America, nobody says you have to keep the circumstances somebody else gives you" (p. 289). She is disappointed, however, to discover that the values associated with upward mobility in the United States undermine her Chinese identity. "It's hard to keep your Chinese face in America. At the beginning, before I even arrived, I had to hide my true self" (p. 294).

While she does not reject the American Dream, Lindo does adjust her conviction in what it represents, based upon her present situation. Indeed, Lindo attributes her struggles with her daughter to the opportunities and sacrifices demanded by American culture. The impetus of this shift is that as a parent, her mission appeared to be unsuccessful. "It is my fault she is this way. I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these two things do not mix?" (p. 289).

Through Lindo's relationship with her daughter, we are able to uncover discontinuities that hasten Lindo's reassessment of American culture. She comments:

> I taught her how American circumstances work. She learned these things, but I couldn't teach her about Chinese character. No, this kind of thinking didn't stick to her. She was too busy chewing gum, blowing bubbles … Only that kind of thinking stuck.

(pp. 289–90)

Clearly, Lindo sought from her daughter commitment to family, characteristic of Chinese culture, while simultaneously she encouraged Waverly to take advantage of America's opportunities for upward mobility. Due to family circumstances, in interacting with the demands of American culture, Lindo was unable to achieve an easy integration of the two. "So now I think, What did I lose? What did I get back in return? I will

ask my daughter what she thinks" (p. 305).

Continuities are dependent upon tacit agreement with one's social interactants (Gergen and Gergen 1983). Situational meanings must be negotiated and accepted by significant others. Moreover, significant others must willingly participate in the social interaction; if withdrawn, there is nothing to negotiate. Lindo's realization that her daughter did not share her desire for Chinese character led Lindo to retreat into her Chinese beliefs:

> I wanted you to have the best circumstances, the best character. I didn't want you to regret anything. And that's why I named you Waverly. It was the name of the street we lived on. And I wanted you to think, this is where I belong. But I also knew if I named you after this street, soon you would grow up, leave this place, and take a piece of me with you.

(p. 302)

Here, we clearly see the symbolic reconstruction of the past. Lindo does not go as far as to deny past faith in America, but she does announce and accept a shift in her belief in what she can accomplish as a parent based upon her present relationship with her daughter. Once discontinuity emerged, Lindo's quest for solutions came to rest on the ideology of her past—Chinese culture and beliefs. According to Mead (1932), when experience yields perceptible discontinuity in the chain of events, the past must be reinterpreted considering the present, so that progress to the present can be understood and intention for the future discerned.

DISCUSSION

I have sought evidence for the sociological processes underlying the social construction of identity among aging immigrants, with particular attention to its manifestation in fictional accounts of individual lives. My primary interest in employing Mead's theory of symbolic interaction is to extend social scientific thinking about narrative accounts (i.e., the effect of the present on the remembered past) to literature on aging and the immigrant experience. I explored the utility of two dimensions of Mead's theory through the fictionalized life narrative of Lindo Jong. By comparing her public behavior with her private thoughts, I have uncovered evidence in support of Mead's social structural past and the symbolically reconstructed past.

The theory of symbolic interaction illustrates how identity is socially negotiated and how identity extends to encompass events from the past. Since behavior in our culture is expected to be consistent across time, as well as purposive, we seek explanations of past behavior that in some cases involve reconstruction, and sometimes reinterpretation of the past (Bielby and Kully 1988). The more public our identity, the more consistency is expected from individuals we interact with, and in response, the more continuity we seek. Even individuals leading ordinary lives have audiences to whom they are accountable, even if it is only one's daughter. Whatever the size or importance of one's audience, the self-narrative still has to be negotiated. The challenge to social scientists is uncovering the event being reconstructed and the occasion that precipitated the renegotiation of the past (Bielby and Kully 1988).

Mead's theory also clarifies the origin and purpose of meaning to an individual's life account. All self-narratives, and especially protagonists in novels, seek links across previous events to establish continuity in lines of conduct. Meaning lies between what actually happened in the past and what continuity the author is compelled to assert, given that it is the protagonist's "present" that needs explanation (Bielby and Kully 1988). For example, Lindo's perception of her relative success as a parent required that she publicly portray faith in the American Dream, even when it was not so obvious to herself.

Mead provides an insightful explanation of the process whereby the present brings reinterpretation of the past, but under what conditions does this happen? Mead (1932) suggests that a break in continuity in the succession of events to the present precipitates reinterpretation or reconstruction of the past. Without novelty itself,

continuity could not be discernable, particularly in establishing one's identity (Bielby and Kully 1988). Lindo's narrative portrays this juxtaposition. On several occasions, she realized that her expectations were going unfulfilled: her faith in America, her relationship with her daughter. “I think about our two faces. I think about my intentions. Which one is American? Which one is Chinese? Which one is better? If you show one, you must always sacrifice the other” (p. 304). In each situation, we see an emerging awareness, often in the form of dissatisfaction, with the trajectory of her life. The break in continuity brought with it the realization that the events she had experienced were not progressively moving her toward the goal to which she aspired.

Self-narratives that reconstruct the past in light of the present require acquiescence among interactants for them to be successful. Self-narratives are public accounts of identity, and their construction requires social negotiation. If interactants are unwilling participants, as is true of unresolved conflict where interactants are at an impasse, then one's identity is not accepted as established across time, at least with that individual. That is, in an ongoing relationship, significant others must agree to one's interpretation (Bielby and Kully 1988).

CONCLUSION

Mead (1932) offers a sophisticated elaboration of a process in which identity is achieved through use of the past in the present. Through my application of his theory, using Lindo Jong as a case study, I find limitations in its use that center around the social construction of self-narrative, notably of the aging immigrant experience. I offer the following suggestions to address these limitations.

First, there is need for systematic examination of the kinds of events around which the process of modification of the past occurs and an investigation as to whether there are distinct patterns for immigrants. I suggest that one should be able to observe integration and reinterpretation through scrutiny of the same life event reflected upon by the same individual at different times. I believe a comparative approach across personal documents will help account for intrapersonal distinctiveness. Second, there is need for systematic examination of how the process of integrating the past with the present varies depending upon the culture from which the individual has emigrated. While I believe that one ought to be able to observe degrees of candor over time regarding a specific event, interpretations also may vary as a function of culture.

Analyses such as the one presented here have implications for Mead's theory of symbolic interaction. While my analysis of Amy Tan's novel produces constructive results, I recognize the limitations of its use when evaluated against positivist concerns regarding evidence. In conclusion, however, by recognizing how meaning is achieved in self-narratives, I have begun a systematic search for the sociological processes underlying the construction of self-narratives of the aging immigrant experience.

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Criticism: David Leiwei Li (essay date 1998)

SOURCE: “Genes, Generation, and Geospiritual (Be)longings,” in *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent,* Stanford University Press, 1998, pp. 111–17.

[*In the following essay, Li discusses the emphasis in Tan's works, including* The Joy Luck Club, *on female familial relationships.*]

Tripmaster Monkey and *Jasmine*'s narrative claiming of America is almost entirely overshadowed by the meteoric success of Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* (1989).[1] A book about mother-daughter relationships and cultural displacement and recuperation, *The Joy Luck Club* harks back to the familial rifts and reconciliations of *The Woman Warrior* and departs from Kingston and Mukherjee's preoccupation with Asian American integration. If her fellow writers choose to substantiate the individual in terms of the national, situating their protagonists in the reimagined community of the United States, Tan manages to limit the trials and tribulations of her characters to the genealogical family, apparently independent from the larger society.

The focus on the filiality of the “club” rather than the consent of the “country” is an amazing act of narrative “privatization.” In identifying family breakdown as the source of all forms of social disarray, and family unity as the floating signifier “for all manner of social ties,” *The Joy Luck Club*'s treatment of female familial experiences exemplifies Tan's active participation in the dominant privatization of social problems (Stacey 1994: 67, 54). Once the biological family is privatized as the essential unit of social coherence and the exclusive locus of her narrative, Tan also finds a common affective denominator that can effectively appeal to her targeted audience of white female “baby boomers,” who may not otherwise identify with her Asian characters (Somogyi and Stanton 1991: 29). Although the privileging of the family serves to appropriate both the dominant neoconservative discourse and the white reading community, Amy Tan will have to address the questions that the specific ethnic content of her book raises: whether the Asian values of her book are exemplary of American values, and whether her Asian American families are a metaphor for the national community at large. In approaching these issues of cultural intelligibility and membership, *The Joy Luck Club* both implicitly engages Kingston and Mukherjee's nationalist claiming of America and anticipates Frank Chin

and David Mura's diasporic revision in “Whither Asia.”

I

The structure of *The Joy Luck Club* reflects Amy Tan's conceptions of the family. The novel's sixteen chapters of first-person female narrative are divided into four sections with four stories each. Except for the first and last stories, in which Jing-mei Woo substitutes her own voice for her mother Suyuan Woo's, the American daughters' stories are neatly sandwiched by the autobiographical tales of the novel's Chinese mothers. This maternal enclosure of the daughters' stories is strengthened with local framing by a vignette at the beginning of each section. There, in a quasi-language of myth and fable, the mothers would impart their life lessons to the daughters, whose American ears, for the moment, seem deaf to Chinese accents. At a practical level, the symmetry of Tan's narrative scheme seems intended to fit a cluster of short stories into the novel form, but it also serves thematically to anchor the foundational categories of Tan's family. If its diachronic “mother-daughter plot” echoes *The Woman Warrior* and invokes the feminist fictional alternative to Freud's Oedipal “family romance” (Hirsch 1989), *The Joy Luck Club*'s woman-centered family trope is also juxtaposed with the synchronic movements of the East and the West, China to America and vice versa. Gender, generation, and geography are thus interwoven and transcoded to exemplify Amy Tan's ideation of an Asian American family amid the familial relations of ethnicity and nation at large.

The novel's opening vignette, “Feathers from a Thousand *Li* Away” illustrates Tan's method. Elaborating on a classic Chinese idiom, which literally translates, “Sending a goose feather from a thousand *li* [about 0.5 km] afar, the gift is light while the affection is heavy,” Tan writes:

> The woman and the swan sailed across an ocean many thousands of *li* wide, stretching their necks toward America. On her journey she cooed to the swan: “In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow. … Now the woman was old. And she had a daughter who grew up speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than Sorrow. For a long time now the woman wanted to give her daughter the single swan feather and tell her, “This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions.” And she waited, year after year, for the day she could tell her daughter this in perfect American English.

(Tan 1989: 17)[2]

The vignette is both deeply moving and troubling. Tan speaks effectively of the pain of familial incomprehension, the loss of the “mother-tongue,” and the unarticulated desire for generational understanding. But the geocultural gap between China and America creates such a division of social spaces that it immediately revives the figment of orientalist imagination with an apparent Chinese authenticity. In an extraordinary demonstration of Tan's artistic ingenuity, the mother in the vignette concocts a “familiar” saying about the worth of a Chinese woman that is found nowhere in Chinese idiom.[3] China, the readers are led to believe, is replete with male chauvinist pigs whose pot bellies rest on their wives' empty stomachs, while in bountiful America those who speak English are automatically well fed and respected. The invention of the authentic-seeming idiom not only effortlessly implies that the Chinese culture has consecrated its sexism in language, it has also erased, through the Coca-Cola and Sorrow contrast, gender inequality from the civilized liberties of America. It is small wonder that the barbarous and backward East should stretch its neck toward the progressive and blissful West.

Helena Michie has concisely argued that “dominant metaphors of feminist critiques of society are familial in origin; the word ‘patriarchy’ itself … locates power in literal and metaphorical fatherhood and defines the

family as the scene, if not the source, of women's oppression. … The struggle of *many* sisters with a *single* father. … disrupt[s] the Oedipal triangle … by the introduction of politics and community as they enter onto the familial stage embodied severally as 'sisters'" (1991: 58). Although Michie's analysis suffers from a universal conception of both patriarchy and its feminist alternative, it is precisely to this conception that *The Joy Luck Club* appeals. The narrative's explicit attempt at mother-daughter communication is an implicit attempt to enter the community of white women readers. To this end, the gallery of Asian and Asian American women in the novel must provide points of identification for white female generational anxieties, while the group of Asian and Asian American male characters must function as textual "pawns," not only "for bringing up the conflicts between the mothers and daughters," as Tan puts it, but to so particularize patriarchy as well (Somogyi and Stanton 1991: 29).[4]

Since the majority of the men in the novel are Chinese and its baby-boomer audience is largely white, the racial and geocultural specificity of Amy Tan's gender references are unambiguous. As the oppressor of women, the Asian male begins to epitomize the Eastern origin of patriarchy, which is of course genetically transmittable only to Asian American men. The move has both racialized gender oppression to read exclusively Asian and deflected attention from the practice of domestic sexism. It significantly downplays the important contribution of Asian American feminism, which recognizes the dominant cultural differentiation of Asian American gender roles within the racial hierarchies of the United States (E. Kim 1990: 68–75). What appears to be a frontal assault on the patriarchal system finds a figurehead father either in the remote Orient or the distant ethnic ghetto, leaving the white American patriarch unscratched and unscathed.

Tan's racialization of Asian sexism helps figuratively invoke white women's experience with patriarchy but ultimately precludes any geopolitical solution to it. Likewise, the novel's characterization of Asian American mother-daughter experience helps foster affective bonds among women of different backgrounds while deferring the question of transracial female solidarity. This effect is achieved through a double maneuver. As is evident in the novel's structural arrangement of mother-daughter conflict as a China-America split, generational difference is diagnosed first and foremost as a geocultural chasm. But just as sexism is biologized, both generation gap and geocultural fissure can be miraculously synchronized with genes. The novel masterfully executes this maneuver by elaborating the maternal fables of oriental wisdom and oriental suffering in the vignettes and extending these generational lessons into the main chapters.

Rose Hsu Jordan's doomed marriage, for example, is traced not just to her neglect of her brother but also to the fate and failure of her grandmother's widowhood and concubinage (130, 215). "Even though I taught my daughter the opposite," An-mei Hsu reflects, "still she came out the same way! All of us [mothers and daughters] are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way" (215). Similarly, daughter Lena St. Clair's marital woes are attributed to her mother Ying-Ying's abuse in her first marriage and the loss of her tiger spirit in the second. Until Ying-Ying recovers her "fierceness," Lena will "ha[ve] no *chi,*" the spirit to stand on her own. "I will gather together my past … and hold [my] pain … to penetrate my daughter's tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose," Ying-Ying decides; "I will win and give her my spirit, because this is the way a mother loves her daughter" (165, 252). As Lena becomes the beneficiary of Ying-Ying's spirit, daughter Waverly Jong absorbed her mother Lindo's "invisible strength" but rejected "[her] Chinese ways" when she started school (89, 253). It was in the mirror of a beauty parlor, right before Waverly's second marriage, that mother and daughter chanced to "look at each other," both awed by the moment of mutual recognition. "These two faces," Lindo Jong concludes, "[are] so much the same! The same happiness, the same sadness, the same good fortune, the same faults" (256).

Using the mixed language of blood and kinship, superstition and tradition, these chapters attractively express the pedagogical authority of the mother and transform the daughterly articulation of maternal silence into a powerful maternal determination of daughterly identity (Hirsch 1989: 15–16).[5] But strikingly, the maternal lessons are all derived from a pre-immigration and pre-American era. As faithful daughters of China, the mothers may mature and age in America, but their minds and memories are forever mummified in their

ancestral land. Unlike *The Woman Warrior,* which engages in an uneasy negotiation between a mother and daughter who share a U.S. history, *The Joy Luck Club* is the narrative of a one-way passage of irrefutable generational destiny. It is predictable that the artificial conflict between generations will find its natural resolution in the genetic fusion of geocultural gaps and historical discrepancies.

In the final chapter, Amy Tan indeed reverses the novel's opening image of the swan stretching its neck toward America by sending Jing-mei, its narrator, back to China. Although the body of *The Joy Luck Club* repeatedly emphasizes Jing-mei's ignorance about her mother's past, an entirely different scenario unfolds some two hundred pages later. The repressed maternal murmur surfaces to reclaim Jing-mei's body and soul: “The minute our train leaves the Hong Kong border and enters Shenzhen, China, I feel different. 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” (267). What might be her mother's longing for her birthplace is now Jing-mei's natural emotional inheritance, and where this psychological transfer occurs is also of great importance. Jing-mei's becoming Chinese happens within minutes of departing Hong Kong for mainland China. Faithful to the geopolitical borders of the sovereign and colonial China, and more so to the conceptual and symbolic boundaries of East and West, Tan does not consider the then British colony of Hong Kong to be the true China. The miracle island of capitalistic and technological savvy is a principally Western conservatory of Chinese impurity, while the People's Republic is the real good earth of ancient tradition and magical wisdom. It is in the authentic China that Jing-mei is finally home: “‘Some day you will see,’ said my mother. ‘It [Chinese-ness] is in your blood, waiting to be let go.’ And when she said this, I saw myself transforming like a werewolf, a mutant tag of DNA suddenly triggered, replicating itself insidiously into a *syndrome,* a cluster of telltale Chinese behaviors” (267).

By the time Jing-mei reaches Shanghai and embraces her newfound half-sisters, her mother's prophecy has come true. “And now I also see what part of me is Chinese,” she enthuses, sounding like her mother (267). And later, “It is my family. It is in our blood. After all these years, it can finally be let go” (288). As the Polaroid picture of the three sisters develops, as their image sharpens and deepens, Jing-mei sums up the feeling for all: “Although we don't speak, I know we all see it. Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish” (288). With identical visage, identical feelings, and identical attachment to the land of origin, the mother-daughter discord eventually evaporates without a trace of historical justification. China is not only the origin of Suyuan's immigration; it is also, by Amy Tan's reckoning, both the genetic locus of Jing-mei's affective ease and the narrative climax of her symbolic repatriation. The return of the Asian American native to her Asian geopolitical origin is complete.[6]

This chromosomal cohesion of generations, though hinting at the repression of ethnicity, naturalizes both the voluntary removal of Asian Americans from the United States and the essential purity of its European American construction. The genetic integration of the mother and daughter promulgates the filiality of the family and the descent base of the nation, leaving troubling implications for both feminist and multiculturalist reconstructions. Since a plot based on genes is a plot of irreversible lineage, the native-born Asian American women cannot but inherit the inclinations of their immigrant progenitors. Since a plot based on genes is also about ancestral origin, it demands a geocultural allegiance unaffected by personal experience, political history, or place of residence. And since Asian American women are differentiated by both their genetic heritage and their geocultural immutability, the struggle of many sisters against a single father on the familial stage, to echo Michie, is not viable, as the Asian American place in the family of U.S. women itself becomes questionable. Although Asian American women exemplify the kind of mother-daughter tension all women share, Tan appears to say, they actually prefer a separate womanhood. The kind of Asian-American-turned-obedient-Asian-female subjectivity in the course of *The Joy Luck Club* thus proves felicitous in dissolving the contradiction between the universal and the particular. A transracial American gender solidarity is finally accomplished upon the withdrawal of Asian American women and their displacement onto an Other nation.

Such voluntary national leave-taking is, not paradoxically, Amy Tan's simultaneous partaking of historical Anglo-American nationalism and orientalism wherein the legitimacy of Asian American membership is always suspect. Her genealogical construction of kinship is also attuned to the 1980s discourse of family values, a neoconservative legacy that the center too has come to embrace (Stacey 1994: 55). In her reading of Eric Hobsbawm, Angelika Bammer has tried to convince us that in the era of the "'post' …, the nation … is no longer the guarantor of social coherence or cultural authority, [as] ethnicity steps into the breach to provide a new identificatory locus." The "family, in the more literal (domestic) or community/clan sense," should, in her view, become the nation's alternative (94). Amy Tan's affirmation of the private nature of Asian Americans as both filial and parochial is synchronous with this premature definition of a nation's obsolescence. By accentuating the natural and perpetual forms of allegiance and feelings of affinity, *The Joy Luck Club* miraculously merges the neoconservative rhetoric of "tribalism" (M. Baker 1981) with poststructural and multicultural celebrations of diasporic subjectivity that overlook the interconnection of race and nation. Moreover, it has revived the Asian American literary desire to return to Asia.

Notes

1. The book's commercial and critical success—275,000 hardcover copies sold, million paid for paperback rights, and finalist for both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle award (Holt 1989:2; Simpson 1991:66)—was unprecedented for a first-time author. The book is reported to have sold 4.5 million copies by 1996 (Nguyen 1997: 49).
2. This and all further quotations from *The Joy Luck Club* are taken from the edition listed in the bibliography.
3. Cultural invention or misrepresentation that passes for truth is central to Tan's narrative deployment (Sau-ling Wong 1995).

   Since much of *The Joy Luck Club*'s aesthetic appeal lies in "the legendary quality" of "the stories from China" (Seaman 1990: 256), the "*recherches* to old China" that sweep the audience off its feet to be "borne along as if in a dream" (Schell 1989: 28), the relation between its representational mode and its intended audience must be duly noted. Tan's style of narration is akin to the whole genre of explorer accounts whose main motif, according to Marcus and Fischer, is "the romantic discovery by the writer of people and places unknown to the reader" (1986: 129). The concoction of the Chinese idiomatic milieu, the conflation of Chinese festivals, and the calculated use of a vacation topography roughly based on the "scenic wonders of China" all seem to satisfy the voyeuristic inclinations of the armchair reader/traveler. This becomes Tan's trademark, as her later books demonstrate.
4. When the question of her relation to the Asian American community comes up, Tan repeatedly disavows any deliberate connection and emphasizes either the haphazard nature of her character choice ("happening to be Chinese") or their universal significance ("human nature") (see Morris 1994: 219). This universalizing impulse must be appreciated with two facts in mind, however. First, as a former business writer for AT&T, IBM, and other Fortune 500 companies, Tan prides herself on "a real strong batting average on proposals … geared to … CEOs of major corporations" (Somogyi and Stanton 1991: 27). Second, as Zill and Winglee point out, today's consumers of literature are overwhelmingly white and female.
5. The mother-daughter plot as a model of feminist bonding tends to ignore lesbian desire and identification and accept heterosexual forms of family as the norm. See Eve Sedgwick's call for "disarticulating … the bonds of blood, of law, of habitation, of privacy, of companionship and succor—from the lockstep of their unanimity in the system called 'family'" (1993: 6).
6. The remarks of Tan's characters may reveal the relationship between the author's choice of geography and the configuration of her audience. As Lindo Jong comments in *The Joy Luck Club,* "But now she [Waverly] wants to be Chinese, it is so fashionable" (253), Helen of *The Kitchen God's Wife,* Tan's second novel, will point out, "Hard life in China, that's very popular now" (Tan 1991: 80). Given these self-referential statements, it is not difficult to see Tan's dual accommodation of orientalism,

first in her affirmation of China as the natural homeland of Chinese Americans, and second in her inflation of the China stock on the orientalist marketplace.

Criticism: Patricia L. Hamilton (essay date Summer 1999)

SOURCE: "Feng Shui, Astrology, and the Five Elements: Traditional Chinese Belief in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club,*" in *MELUS,* Summer, 1999, pp. 125–45.

[*In the following essay, Hamilton demonstrates how Tan uses the concepts of feng shui, astrology, and the Five Elements to enhance the characters in* The Joy Luck Club.]

A persistent thematic concern in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* is the quest for identity. Tan represents the discovery process as arduous and fraught with peril. Each of the eight main characters faces the task of defining herself in the midst of great personal loss or interpersonal conflict. Lindo Jong recalls in "The Red Candle" that her early marriage into a family that did not want her shaped her character and caused her to vow never to forget who she was. Ying-ying St. Clair's story "Waiting between the Trees" chronicles how betrayal, loss, and displacement caused her to become a "ghost." Rose Hsu Jordan recounts her effort to regain a sense of self and assert it against her philandering husband in "Without Wood." Framing all the other stories are a pair of linked narratives by Jing-mei Woo that describe her trip to China at the behest of her Joy Luck Club "aunties." The journey encompasses Jing-mei's attempts not only to understand her mother's tragic personal history but also to come to terms with her own familial and ethnic identity. In all the stories, whether narrated by the Chinese-born mothers or their American-born daughters, assertions of self are shaped by the cultural context surrounding them. However, there is a fundamental asymmetry in the mothers' and daughters' understanding of each other's native cultures. The mothers draw on a broad experiential base for their knowledge of American patterns of thought and behavior, but the daughters have only fragmentary, second-hand knowledge of China derived from their mothers' oral histories and from proverbs, traditions, and folktales.[1] Incomplete cultural knowledge impedes understanding on both sides, but it particularly inhibits the daughters from appreciating the delicate negotiations their mothers have performed to sustain their identities across two cultures.

Language takes on a metonymic relation to culture in Tan's portrayal of the gap between the mothers and daughters in *The Joy Luck Club.* Jing-mei, recalling that she talked to her mother Suyuan in English and that her mother answered back in Chinese, concludes that they "never really understood one another": "We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more" (37). What is needed for any accurate translation of meanings is not only receptiveness and language proficiency but also the ability to supply implied or missing context. The daughters' inability to understand the cultural referents behind their mothers' words is nowhere more apparent than when the mothers are trying to inculcate traditional Chinese values and beliefs in their children. The mothers inherited from their families a centuries-old spiritual framework, which, combined with rigid social constraints regarding class and gender, made the world into an ordered place for them. Personal misfortune and the effects of war have tested the women's allegiance to traditional ideas, at times challenging them to violate convention in order to survive. But the very fact of their survival is in large measure attributable to their belief that people can affect their own destinies. In the face of crisis the mothers adhere to ancient Chinese practices by which they try to manipulate fate to their advantage. Their beliefs and values are unexpectedly reinforced by the democratic social fabric and capitalist economy they encounter in their adopted country. Having immigrated from a land where women were allowed almost no personal freedom, all the Joy Luck mothers share the belief along with Suyuan Woo that "you could be anything you wanted to be in America" (132).

Ironically, the same spirit of individualism that seems so liberating to the older women makes their daughters resistant to maternal advice and criticism. Born into a culture in which a multiplicity of religious beliefs

flourishes and the individual is permitted, even encouraged, to challenge tradition and authority, the younger women are reluctant to accept their mothers' values without question. Jing-mei confesses that she used to dismiss her mother's criticisms as “just more of her Chinese superstitions, beliefs that conveniently fit the circumstances” (31). Furthermore, the daughters experience themselves socially as a recognizable ethnic minority and want to eradicate the sense of “difference” they feel among their peers. They endeavor to dissociate themselves from their mothers' broken English and Chinese mannerisms[2] and they reject as nonsense the fragments of traditional lore their mothers try to pass along to them. However, cut adrift from any spiritual moorings, the younger women are overwhelmed by the number of choices that their materialistic culture offers and are insecure about their ability to perform satisfactorily in multiple roles ranging from dutiful Chinese daughter to successful American career woman. When it dawns on Jing-mei that the aunties see that “joy and luck do not mean the same to their daughters, that to these closed American-born minds ‘joy luck’ is not a word, it does not exist,” she realizes that there is a profound difference in how the two generations understand fate, hope, and personal responsibility. Devoid of a worldview that endows reality with unified meaning, the daughters “will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation” (41).

Tan uses the contrast between the mothers' and daughters' beliefs and values to show the difficulties first-generation immigrants face in transmitting their native culture to their offspring. Ultimately, Tan endorses the mothers' traditional Chinese worldview because it offers the possibility of choice and action in a world where paralysis is frequently a threat. However, readers who are not specialists in Chinese cosmology share the same problematic relation to the text as the daughters do to their mothers' native culture: they cannot always accurately translate meanings where the context is implied but not stated. Bits of traditional lore crop up in nearly every story, but divorced from a broader cultural context, they are likely to be seen as mere brushstrokes of local color or authentic detail. Readers may be tempted to accept at face value the daughters' pronouncements that their mothers' beliefs are no more than superstitious nonsense. To ensure that readers do not hear less than what Tan is actually saying about the mothers' belief systems and their identities, references to Chinese cosmology in the text require explication and elaboration.

Astrology is probably the element of traditional Chinese belief that is most familiar to Westerners. According to the Chinese astrological system, a person's character is determined by the year of his or her birth. Personality traits are categorized according to a twelve-year calendrical cycle based on the Chinese zodiac. Each year of the cycle is associated with a different animal, as in “the year of the dog.” According to one legend, in the sixth century B.C. Buddha invited all the animals in creation to come to him, but only twelve showed up: the Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Ram, Monkey, Cock, Dog, and Pig. Buddha rewarded each animal with a year bearing its personality traits (Scott). In addition to animals, years are associated with one of the Five Elements: Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water. Metal years end in zero or one on the lunar calendar; Water years end in two or three; Wood years end in four or five; Fire years end in six or seven; and Earth years end in eight or nine. Thus, depending on the year in which one is born, one might be a Fire Dragon, a Water Dragon, and so on. The entire animal-and-element cycle takes sixty years to complete.

Tan draws on astrology in *The Joy Luck Club* in order to shape character and conflict. Lindo Jong, born in 1918, is a Horse, “destined to be obstinate and frank to the point of tactlessness,” according to her daughter Waverly (167). Other adjectives that describe the Horse include diligent, poised, quick, eloquent, ambitious, powerful, and ruthless (Rossbach 168). At one point or another in the four Jong narratives, Lindo manifests all of these qualities, confirming her identity as a Horse. In accordance with tradition, Lindo's first husband is selected by his birth year as being a compatible partner for her. The matchmaker in “The Red Candle” tells Lindo's mother and mother-in-law: “An earth horse for an earth sheep. This is the best marriage combination” (50). At Lindo's wedding ceremony the matchmaker reinforces her point by speaking about “birthdates and harmony and fertility” (59). In addition to determining compatibility, birth years can be used to predict personality clashes. Waverly notes of her mother Lindo, “She and I make a bad combination, because I'm a Rabbit, born in 1951, supposedly sensitive, with tendencies toward being thin-skinned and skittery at the first

sign of criticism” (167). Lindo's friend Suyuan Woo, born in 1915, is also a Rabbit. No doubt the Joy Luck aunties have this in mind when they note that Suyuan “died just like a rabbit: quickly and with unfinished business left behind” (19). The friction between Horse and Rabbit mentioned by Waverly suggests why Lindo and Suyuan were not only best friends but also “arch enemies who spent a lifetime comparing their children” (37)[3]

Adherents of Chinese astrology contend that auspicious dates for important events can be calculated according to predictable fluctuations of *ch'i,* the positive life force, which is believed to vary according to the time of day, the season, and the lunar calendar. Thus, the matchmaker chooses “a lucky day, the fifteenth day of the eighth moon,” for Lindo's wedding (57). Later, Lindo picks “an auspicious day, the third day of the third month,” to stage her scheme to free herself from her marriage. Unlucky dates can be calculated as well. Rose Hsu Jordan recalls that her mother An-mei had a “superstition” that “children were predisposed to certain dangers on certain days, all depending on their Chinese birthdate. It was explained in a little Chinese book called *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates*” (124). The problem for An-mei is how to translate the Chinese dates into American ones. Since the lunar calendar traditionally used in China is based on moon cycles, the number of days in a year varies. Lindo similarly faces the problem of translating dates when she wants to immigrate to San Francisco, but her Peking friend assures her that May 11, 1918 is the equivalent of her birthdate, “three months after the Chinese lunar new year” (258). Accuracy on this point would allow Lindo to calculate auspicious dates according to the Gregorian calendar used in the West. In a broader sense, Lindo's desire for exactness is a strategy for preserving her identity in a new culture.

Tan uses astrology to greatest effect in the life history of Ying-ying St. Clair, who does not fare at all well in the matter of translated dates or preserved identity. Ying-ying is a Tiger, born in 1914, “a very bad year to be born, a very good year to be a Tiger” (248). Tigers are typically passionate, courageous, charismatic, independent, and active, but they can also be undisciplined, vain, rash, and disrespectful (Jackson; Rossbach 167). Tiger traits are central to Ying-ying's character. As a teenager she is wild, stubborn, and vain. As a four-year-old in “The Moon Lady,” she loves to run and shout, and she possesses a “restless nature” (72). According to Ruth Youngblood, “As youngsters [Tigers] are difficult to control, and if unchecked, can dominate their parents completely.” Ying-ying's Amah tries to tame her into conformity to traditional Chinese gender roles: “Haven't I taught you—that it is wrong to think of your own needs? A girl can never ask, only listen” (70). Ying-ying's mother, too, admonishes her to curb her natural tendencies: “A boy can run and chase dragonflies, because that is his nature. But a girl should stand still” (72). By yielding to the social constraints placed on her gender and “standing perfectly still,” Ying-ying discovers her shadow, the dark side of her nature that she learns to wield after her first husband leaves her.

Long before adulthood, however, Ying-ying experiences a trauma regarding her identity. Stripped of her bloodied Tiger outfit at the Moon Festival, she tumbles into Tai Lake and is separated from her family for several hours. Ying-ying's physical experience of being lost parallels her family's suppression of her active nature and curtailment of her freedom. Whenever she wears her hair loose, for example, her mother warns her that she will become like “the lady ghosts at the bottom of the lake” whose undone hair shows “their everlasting despair” (243). After Ying-ying falls into the lake, her braid becomes “unfurled,” and as she drifts along in the fishing boat that picks her up, she fears that she is “lost forever” (79). When one of the fishermen surmises that she is a beggar girl, she thinks: “Maybe this was true. I had turned into a beggar girl, lost without my family” (80). Later she watches the Moon Lady telling her tragic story in a shadow play staged for the festival: “I understood her grief. In one small moment, we had both lost the world, and there was no way to get it back” (81). Even though Ying-ying is eventually rescued, she is afraid that her being found by her family is an illusion, “a wish granted that could not be trusted” (82). The temporary loss of her sense of security and belonging is so disturbing that her perception of her identity is forever altered. She is never able to believe her family has found “the same girl” (82).

Ying-ying's traumatic childhood experience prefigures the profound emotional loss and identity confusion she experiences as an adult. Looking back on her experience at the Moon Festival, she reflects that "it has happened many times in my life. The same innocence, trust, and restlessness, the wonder, fear, and loneliness. How I lost myself" (83). As an adult she is stripped of her Tiger nature once again when she immigrates to America. Since there is no immigration category for "the Chinese wife of a Caucasian citizen," Ying-ying is declared a "Displaced Person" (104). Then her husband proudly renames her "Betty St. Clair" without seeming to realize he is effacing her Chinese identity in doing so. The final stroke is his mistakenly writing the wrong year of birth on her immigration papers. As Ying-ying's daughter Lena puts it, "With the sweep of a pen, my mother lost her name and became a Dragon instead of a Tiger" (104). Unwittingly, Clifford St. Clair erases all signs of Ying-ying's former identity and, more importantly, symbolically denies her Tiger nature.

The belief that personality and character are determined by zodiacal influences imposes predictable and regular patterns onto what might otherwise seem random and arbitrary, thereby minimizing uncertainty and anxiety. In this light, the anchor for identity that astrology offers Ying-ying is beneficial. Over the years she comes to understand what her mother once explained about her Tiger nature: "She told me why a tiger is gold and black. It has two ways. The gold side leaps with its fierce heart. The black side stands still with cunning, hiding its gold between trees, seeing and not being seen, waiting patiently for things to come" (248). The certainty that these qualities are her birthright eventually guides Ying-ying into renouncing her habitual passivity. The catalyst for this decision is her perception that her daughter Lena needs to have her own "tiger spirit" cut loose. She wants Lena to develop fierceness and cunning so that she will not become a "ghost" like her mother or remain trapped in a marriage to a selfish man who undermines her worth. Ying-ying expects resistance from Lena, but because of the strength of her belief system, she is confident about the outcome: "She will fight me, because this is the nature of two tigers. But I will win and give her my spirit, because this the way a mother loves her daughter" (252). Tan uses the Chinese zodiacal Tiger as a potent emblem of the way culturally determined beliefs and expectations shape personal identity.

Another element of Chinese cosmology that Tan employs in *The Joy Luck Club* is *wu-hsing,* or the Five Elements, mentioned above in conjunction with astrology.[4] The theory of the Five Elements was developed by Tsou Yen about 325 B.C. As Holmes Welch notes, Tsou Yen "believed that the physical processes of the universe were due to the interaction of the five elements of earth, wood, metal, fire, and water" (96). According to eminent French sinologist Henri Maspero, theories such as the Five Elements, the Three Powers, and *yin* and *yang* all sought to "explain how the world proceeded all by itself through the play of transcendental, impersonal forces alone, without any intervention by one or more conscious wills" (55). Derek Walters specifies how the Five Elements are considered to "stimulate and shape all natural and human activity":

> The Wood Element symbolizes all life, femininity, creativity, and organic material; Fire is the Element of energy and intelligence; Earth, the Element of stability, endurance and the earth itself; Metal, in addition to its material sense, also encompasses competitiveness, business acumen, and masculinity; while Water is the Element of all that flows—oil and alcohol as well as water itself, consequently also symbolizing transport and communication.

(29)

The Elements correspond to certain organs of the body and physical ailments as well as to particular geometric shapes. An extended array of correspondences includes seasons, directions, numbers, colors, tastes, and smells (Lam 32). In the physical landscape the Elements can be placed in a productive order, in which each Element will generate and stimulate the one succeeding it, or a destructive order, in which Elements in close proximity are considered harmful. To avoid negative effects, a "controlling" Element can mediate between two elements positioned in their destructive order.

Suyuan Woo subscribes to a traditional application of the theory of the Five Elements in what Jing-mei calls her mother's “own version of organic chemistry” (31). As Ben Xu has observed, the Five Elements are “the mystical ingredients that determine every person's character flaw according to one's birth hour.” *Wu-hsing* theory posits that “none of us has all the five character elements perfectly balanced, and therefore, every one of us is by nature flawed” (Xu 12). Accordingly; Suyuan believes that too much Fire causes a bad temper while too much Water makes someone flow in too many directions. Too little Wood results in one bending “too quickly to listen to other people's ideas, unable to stand on [one's] own” (31). Jing-mei, who does not understand how Suyuan's pronouncements tie to a larger belief system, associates her mother's theories with displeasure and criticism: “Something was always missing. Something always needed improving. Something was not in balance. This one or that had too much of one element, not enough of another.”

According to *wu-hsing* theory, flaws can be amended and balance attained by symbolically adding the element a person lacks. Xu points out that “the ‘rose’ in Rose Hsu Jordan's name, for example, is supposed to add wood to her character” (12). Conversely, elements can be removed to create an imbalance. When Lindo Jong does not become pregnant in her first marriage, the matchmaker tells her mother-in-law: “A woman can have sons only if she is deficient in one of the elements. Your daughter-in-law was born with enough wood, fire, water, and earth, and she was deficient in metal, which was a good sign. But when she was married, you loaded her down with gold bracelets and decorations and now she has all the elements, including metal. She's too balanced to have babies” (63). Although Lindo knows that the direct cause of her failure to become pregnant is not her having too much metal but rather her husband's refusal to sleep with her, she accepts the matchmaker's reasoning about the Five Elements. Years later Lindo comments: “See the gold metal I can now wear. I gave birth to your brothers and then your father gave me these two bracelets. Then I had you [Waverly]” (66). The implication here is that the gender of Lindo's male children corresponds to her natural deficiency in Metal. Adding Metal back into her composition through the bracelets causes her next child to be female.

More significantly, Lindo, like Suyuan, believes that the Elements affect character traits: “After the gold was removed from my body, I felt lighter, more free. They say this is what happens if you lack metal. You begin to think as an independent person” (63). Tan suggests that Lindo's natural “imbalance” is key to her true identity, the self that she promises never to forget. As a girl she had determined to honor the marriage contract made by her parents, even if it meant sacrificing her sense of identity. But on her wedding day she wonders “why [her] destiny had been decided, why [she] should have an unhappy life so someone else could have a happy one” (58). Once Lindo's gold and jewelry are repossessed by her mother-in-law to help her become fertile, Lindo begins to plot her escape from the marriage. Her feeling lighter and more free without Metal corresponds to her assertion of her true identity. Destiny is not so narrowly determined that she cannot use her natural qualities as a Horse—quickness, eloquence, ruthlessness—to free herself from her false position in the marriage. Because Lindo has secretly blown out the matchmaker's red candle on her wedding night, she has in effect rewritten her fate without breaking her parents' promise. Rather than restricting her identity, her belief in astrology and *wu-hsing* gives her a secure base from which to express it.

As with astrology, Tan uses the theory of the Five Elements not only for characterization but also for the development of conflict in *The Joy Luck Club.* “Without Wood” deals with the disastrous effects of Rose Hsu Jordan's not having enough Wood in her personality, at least according to her mother An-mei's diagnosis. An-mei herself has inspired “a lifelong stream of criticism” from Suyuan Woo, apparently for bending too easily to other's ideas, the flaw of those who lack Wood (30–31). An-mei admits to having listened to too many people when she was young. She almost succumbed to her family's urgings to forget her mother, and later she was nearly seduced by the pearl necklace offered to her by her mother's rival. Experience has shown An-mei that people try to influence others for selfish reasons. To protect her daughter from opportunists, An-mei tells Rose that she must listen to her mother if she wants to grow “strong and straight.” If she listens to others she will grow “crooked and weak.” But Rose comments, “By the time she told me this, it was too late. I had already begun to bend” (191).

Rose attributes her compliant nature to the strict disciplinary measures of an elementary school teacher and to the influences of American culture: "Chinese people had Chinese opinions. American people had American opinions. And in almost every case, the American version was much better" (191). Not until much later does she realize that in the "American version" there are "too many choices," so that it is "easy to get confused and pick the wrong thing." Rose, emotionally paralyzed at fourteen by a sense that she is responsible for the death of her four-year-old brother, grows into an adult who not only listens to others but lets them take responsibility for her so that she may avoid committing another fatal error. Her husband, Ted, makes all the decisions in their marriage until a mistake of his own brings on a malpractice suit and shakes his self-confidence. When Ted abruptly demands a divorce, Rose's lack of Wood manifests itself: "I had been talking to too many people, my friends, everybody it seems, except Ted" (188). She tells a "different story" about the situation to Waverly, Lena, and her psychiatrist, each of whom offers a different response. An-mei chides Rose for not wanting to discuss Ted with her, but Rose is reluctant to do so because she fears that An-mei will tell her she must preserve her marriage, even though there is "absolutely nothing left to save" (117).

Contrary to Rose's expectations, her mother is less concerned that she stay married than that she deal with her inability to make decisions. An-mei wants her daughter to address the personality deficiencies that are the cause of her circumstances. Believing that Rose needs to assert her identity by acting on her own behalf, An-mei admonishes: "You must think for yourself, what you must do. If someone tells you, then you are not trying" (130). An-mei's advice is embedded in the broader context of her Chinese world-view. When Rose complains that she has no hope, and thus no reason to keep trying to save her marriage, An-mei responds: "This is not hope. Not reason. This is your fate. This is your life, what you must do" (130). An-mei believes life is determined by fate, by immutable celestial forces. But like Lindo Jong, she sees fate as having a participatory element. Earthly matters admit the influence of human agency. Consequently, her admonition to Rose is focused on what Rose must "do."

As a child Rose observes that both her parents believe in their *nengkan,* the ability to do anything they put their minds to. This belief has not only brought them to America but has "enabled them to have seven children and buy a house in the Sunset district with very little money" (121). Rose notes that by taking into account all the dangers described in *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates,* An-mei has "absolute faith she could prevent every one of them" (124).

However, An-mei's optimism about her ability to manipulate fate is challenged when her youngest child, Bing, drowns. An-mei does everything she can to recover her son, but she realizes she cannot "use faith to change fate" (130). Tragedy teaches her that forethought is not the same thing as control. Still, she wedges a white Bible—one in which Bing's name is only lightly pencilled in under "Deaths"—beneath a short table leg as a symbolic act, "a way for her to correct the imbalances of life" (116). Although An-mei accepts that her power over fate is limited, she continues to believe that she can positively influence her circumstances. The idea of balance she is enacting is a fundamental element of *yin-yang* philosophy; according to which two complementary forces "govern the universe and make up all aspects of life and matter" (Rossbach 21). As Johndennis Govert notes, "to remove an obstruction to your happiness, regain a state of health, or create a more harmonious household, *yin* and *yang* must be in balance." (7). An-mei may use a Bible to balance the kitchen table, but she rejects the Christian beliefs it represents. Rose notes that her mother loses "her faith in God" after Bing's death (116). The belief system that governs An-mei's actions is Chinese, an amalgam of luck, house gods, ancestors, and all the elements in balance, "the right amount of wind and water" (122).

In contrast to her mother, Rose lacks a means by which she can delineate or systematize her notions of causality and responsibility. Moreover, she eschews any real sense that people can have control over their circumstances. As a teenager Rose is appalled to discover she is powerless to prevent little Bing from falling into the ocean as she watches. Later Rose thinks "that maybe it was fate all along, that faith was just an illusion that somehow you're in control. I found out the most *I* could have was hope, and with that I was not

denying any possibility, good or bad" (121). When her husband Ted wants a divorce, Rose compares the shock she receives to having the wind knocked out of her: "And after you pick yourself up, you realize you can't trust anybody to save you—not your husband, not your mother, not God. So what can you do to stop yourself from tilting and falling all over again?" (121). Added to her sense of helplessness is the suspicion that whenever she is forced into making a decision, she is walking through a minefield: "I never believed there was ever any one right answer, yet there were many wrong ones" (120). Rose's lack of any sort of a belief system fosters a crippling passivity characterized by a fear that whatever she chooses will turn out badly. Her inability to make even the smallest decisions becomes the equivalent, in Ted's mind at least, of her having no identity.

Ironically, once Rose realizes that Ted has taken away all her choices, she begins to fight back. She seizes on the metaphor An-mei has used to explain the lack of Wood in her personality: "If you bend to listen to other people, you will grow crooked and weak. You will fall to the ground with the first strong wind. And then you will be like a weed, growing wild in any direction, running along the ground until someone pulls you out and throws you away" (191). Inspired by the weeds in her own neglected garden that cannot be dislodged from the masonry without "pulling the whole building down" (195), Rose demands that Ted let her keep their house. She explains, "You can't just pull me out of your life and throw me away" (196). For the first time in her life she stands up for what she wants without soliciting the advice of others. After her assertion of selfhood, Rose dreams that her "beaming" mother has planted weeds that are "running wild in every direction" in her planter boxes (196). This image, which suggests that An-mei has finally accepted Rose's nature instead of trying to change her, is consistent with the desires the Joy Luck daughters share regarding their mothers. Each one struggles to feel loved for who she is. In part the younger women's insecurity stems from having a different set of cultural values than their mothers. The older women try to encourage their daughters but do not always know how to cope with the cultural gap that separates them. As Lindo states: "I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these two things do not mix?" (254). But Rose's dream-image submerges the fact that Rose has finally acted on her mother's admonition to speak up for herself. An-mei has guessed that Ted is engaged in "monkey business" with another woman, and it is at the moment when Rose realizes her mother is right that she begins to move intuitively toward standing up for her own needs and desires. As it turns out, An-mei is correct in wanting Rose to listen to her mother rather than to her bored and sleepy-eyed psychiatrist in order to be "strong and straight." Ultimately, An-mei's belief that one's fate involves making choices instead of being paralyzed as a victim is validated by Rose's assertion of her identity.

A third element of traditional belief in *The Joy Luck Club* is *feng shui,* or geomancy. The most opaque yet potentially the most important aspect of Chinese cosmology to Tan's exploration of identity, *feng shui* plays a pivotal role in Lena St. Clair's story "The Voice from the Wall," which chronicles her mother Ying-ying's gradual psychological breakdown and withdrawal from life. Ten-year-old Lena, having no knowledge of her mother's past, becomes convinced that her mother is crazy as she listens to Ying-ying rave after the death of her infant son. Even before Ying-ying loses her baby, however, her behavior appears to be erratic and compulsive. When the family moves to a new apartment, Ying-ying arranges and rearranges the furniture in an effort to put things in balance. Although Lena senses her mother is disturbed, she dismisses Ying-ying's explanations as "Chinese nonsense" (108). What Lena does not understand is that her mother is practicing the ancient Chinese art of *feng shui* (pronounced "fung shway"). Translated literally as "wind" and "water," *feng shui* is alluded to only once in the book as An-mei Hsu's balance of "the right amount of wind and water" (122). Although the term "*feng shui*" is never used overtly in conjunction with Ying-ying St. Clair, its tenets are fundamental to her worldview.

Stephen Skinner defines *feng shui* as "the art of living in harmony with the land, and deriving the greatest benefit, peace and prosperity from being in the right place at the right time" (4). The precepts of *feng shui* were systematized by two different schools in China over a thousand years ago. The Form School, or intuitive approach, was developed by Yang Yun-Sung (c. 840–888 A.D.) and flourished in Kiangsi and Anhui

provinces. Practitioners focus on the visible form of the landscape, especially the shapes of mountains and the direction of watercourses. The Compass School, or analytical approach, was developed by Wang Chih in the Sung dynasty (960 A.D.) and spread throughout Fukien and Chekiang provinces as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan (Skinner 26). The analytic approach is concerned with directional orientation in conjunction with Chinese astrology. As Walters notes, Compass School scholars have traditionally "placed greater emphasis on the importance of precise mathematical calculations, and compiled elaborate formulae and schematic diagrams" (10). Geomancers using this approach employ an elaborate compass called the *lo p'an,* astrological charts and horoscopes, numerological data, and special rulers.

According to Susan Hornik, the beliefs encompassed by *feng shui* date back 3,000 years to the first practice of selecting auspicious sites for burial tombs in order to "bring good fortune to heirs" (73). As Skinner explains, "Ancestors are linked with the site of their tombs. As they also have a direct effect on the lives of their descendants, it follows logically that if their tombs are located favourably on the site of a strong concentration of earth energy or *ch'i,* not only will they be happy but they will also derive the power to aid their descendants, from the accumulated *ch'i* of the site" (11). By the Han dynasty (206 B.C.), the use of *feng shui* was extended to the selection of dwellings for the living (Hornik 73). The basic idea is to attract and channel *ch'i,* or beneficial energy, and "accumulate it without allowing it to go stagnant" (Skinner 21). Since *ch'i* encourages growth and prosperity, a wise person will consider how to manipulate it to best effect through *feng shui,* the study of placement with respect to both natural and man-made environments. As a form of geomancy *feng shui* is "the exact complement of astrology, which is divination by signs in the Heavens" (Walters 12), but it is based on a different presupposition. Whereas the course of the stars and planets is fixed, the earthly environment can be altered by human intervention through *feng shui.* The practice of *feng shui* offers yet another variation of the belief that people have the power to affect their destiny.

Thus Ying-ying St. Clair's seemingly idiosyncratic actions and their nonsensical explanations in "The Voice from the Wall" are grounded in a coherent system of beliefs and practices concerned with balancing the environment. Since Ying-ying feels her surroundings are out of balance, she does everything she can to correct them. For instance, she moves "a large round mirror from the wall facing the front door to a wall by the sofa" (108). *Ch'i* is believed to enter a dwelling through the front door, but a mirror hung opposite the entrance may deflect it back outside again. Mirrors require careful placement so as to encourage the flow of *ch'i* around a room. Furniture, too, must be positioned according to guidelines that allow beneficial currents of *ch'i* to circulate without stagnating. Through properly placed furniture "every opportunity can be taken to correct whatever defects may exist, and to enhance whatever positive qualities there are" (Walters 46). Hence, Ying-ying rearranges the sofa, chairs, and end tables, seeking the best possible grouping. Even a "Chinese scroll of goldfish" is moved. When large-scale changes are impossible, *feng shui* practitioners frequently turn to symbolic solutions. Strategically placed aquariums containing goldfish are often prescribed for structural problems that cannot be altered, in part because aquariums symbolically bring all Five Elements together into balance (Collins 21). In Ying-ying's case, a picture is substituted for live goldfish, which represent life and growth.

Ying-ying's attempt to balance the living room follows a *feng shui* tradition: "If beneficial *ch'i* are lacking from the heart of the house, the family will soon drift apart" (Walters 42). But Ying-ying is also compensating for negative environmental and structural features that she cannot modify. The apartment in the new neighborhood is built on a steep hill, a poor site, she explains, because "a bad wind from the top blows all your strength back down the hill. So you can never get ahead. You are always rolling backward" (109). In ancient China the ideal location for a building was in the shelter of hills that would protect it from bitter northerly winds. However, a house at the very base of a sloping road would be vulnerable to torrential rains, mudslides, and crashes caused by runaway carts. Ying-ying's concern with psychic rather than physical danger is consistent with modern applications of *feng shui,* but her notion of an ill wind sweeping downhill is based on traditional lore. In addition to the unfortunate location of the apartment building, its lobby is musty, a sign that it does not favor the circulation of *ch'i.* The door to the St. Clairs' apartment is narrow, "like a neck

that has been strangled" (109), further restricting the entrance of beneficial energy. Moreover, as Ying-ying tells Lena, the kitchen faces the toilet room, "so all your worth is flushed away." According to the Bagua map derived from the *I Ching,* the ancient Chinese book of divination, every building and every room has eight positions that correspond to various aspects of life: wealth and prosperity; fame and reputation; love and marriage; creativity and children; helpful people and travel; career; knowledge and self-cultivation; and health and family (Collins 61–62). Heidi Swillinger explains the problem of a dwelling where the bathroom is located in the wealth area: "Because the bathroom is a place where water enters and leaves, and because water is a symbol of wealth, residents in such a home might find that money tends to symbolically go down the drain or be flushed away."[5] Even if the St. Clairs' bathroom is not actually in the wealth area, *feng shui* guidelines dictate that it should not be placed next to the kitchen in order to avoid a clash between two of the symbolic Elements, Fire and Water.

In light of the bad *feng shui* of the apartment, Ying-ying's unhappiness with it is logical. Once she finishes altering the living room, she rearranges Lena's bedroom. The immediate effect of the new configuration is that "the nighttime life" of Lena's imagination changes (109). With her bed against the wall, she begins to listen to the private world of the family next door and to use what she hears as a basis for comparison with her own family. It is not clear whether Lena's bed has been moved to the "children" area of the room, which would enhance her *ch'i,* but certainly the new position is more in keeping with the principles of good *feng shui,* which indicate a bed should be placed against a wall, not a window (Walters 53). From this standpoint, Ying-ying's inauspicious positioning of the crib against the window appears to be inconsistent with her other efforts. Lena notes, "My mother began to bump into things, into table edges as if she forgot her stomach contained a baby, as if she were headed for trouble instead" (109). Since according to *feng shui* theory protruding corners are threatening (Collins 47), Ying-ying's peculiar neglect toward sharp table edges along with her placement of the crib suggest that her efforts at generating good *feng shui* are suspended with regard to her unborn baby.

When the baby dies at birth, apparently from a severe case of hydrocephalus and spina bifida, Ying-ying blames herself: "My fault, my fault. I knew this before it happened. I did nothing to prevent it" (111). To Western ears her self-accusation sounds odd, for birth defects such as spina bifida are congenital, and nothing Ying-ying could have done would have prevented the inevitable. However, her Eastern world-view dictates that fate can be manipulated in order to bring about good effects and to ward off bad ones. Ying-ying believes that her violation of good *feng shui* principles constitutes negligence, causing the baby to die. She is accusing herself not merely of passivity but of deliberate complicity with a malignant fate.

The burden of guilt Ying-ying carries over an abortion from her first marriage is the root of her disturbed mental state during her pregnancy. Her bumping into table edges may even be a form of self-punishment. In any case, whether she has subconsciously tried to harm the fetus or has merely failed to fend off disaster through the use of *feng shui,* in blaming herself for the baby's death Ying-ying is clearly wrestling with her responsibility for the death of her first son. In her mind the two events are connected: "I knew he [the baby] could see everything inside me. How I had given no thought to killing my other son! How I had given no thought to having this baby" (112). Instead of finding any resolution after the baby dies, Ying-ying becomes increasingly withdrawn. She cries unaccountably in the middle of cooking dinner and frequently retreats to her bed to "rest."

The presence of *feng shui* in the story suggests that however displaced, demoralized, and severely depressed Ying-ying may be, she is not "crazy," as Lena fears. Ying-ying's compulsion to rearrange furniture does not presage a psychotic break with reality but rather signals that, transplanted to a foreign country where she must function according to new rules and expectations, Ying-ying relies on familiar practices such as *feng shui* and astrology to interpret and order the world around her, especially when that world is in crisis. Lena, of course, is locked into a ten-year-old's perspective and an American frame of reference. She shares Jing-mei Woo's problem of being able to understand her mother's Chinese words but not their meanings. Whereas Clifford St.

Clair's usual practice of "putting words" in his wife's mouth stems from his knowing "only a few canned Chinese expressions" (106), Lena's faulty translation of her mother's distracted speech after the baby dies reflects a lack of sufficient personal and cultural knowledge to make sense of Ying-ying's references to guilt.

Ying-ying's story, "Waiting between the Trees," traces the origins of her decline to a much earlier time. At sixteen Ying-ying is married to a man who impregnates her, then abandons her for an opera singer. Out of grief and anger, she induces an abortion. However, after this defiant act she loses her strength, becoming "like the ladies of the lake" her mother had warned her about, floating like "a dead leaf on the water" (248–49). Unfortunately, Ying-ying's Tiger characteristic of "waiting patiently for things to come" (248) turns from easy acceptance of whatever is offered into listlessness and acquiescence over a period of fourteen years: "I became pale, ill, and more thin. I let myself become a wounded animal" (251). She confesses, "I willingly gave up my *chi,* the spirit that caused me so much pain" (251). Giving up her vital energy is tantamount to giving up her identity. By the time Clifford St. Clair takes her to America, she has already become "an unseen spirit," with no trace of her former passion and energy. Nevertheless, she retains her ability to see things before they happen. Her prescience stems from her trust in portents, which constitutes another facet of her belief system. When she is young, a flower that falls from its stalk tells her she will marry her first husband. Later on, Clifford St. Clair's appearance in her life is a sign that her "black side" will soon go away. Her husband's death signals that she can marry St. Clair.

Years later, Ying-ying can still see portents of the future. She knows Lena's is "a house that will break into pieces" (243). Ying-ying also continues to think in terms of *feng shui.* She complains that the guest room in Lena's house has sloping walls, a fact which implies the presence of sharp angles that can harbor *sha,* malignant energy signifying death and decay. With walls that close in like a coffin, the room is no place to put a baby, Ying-ying observes. But it is not until Ying-ying sees her daughter's unhappy marriage that she accepts responsibility for the fact that Lena has no *ch'i* and determines to regain her own fierce spirit in order to pass it on to her daughter. Ying-ying knows she must face the pain of her past and communicate it to her daughter so as to supply Lena with the personal and cultural knowledge of her mother's life that she has always lacked. By recounting her life's pain, Ying-ying will in essence reconstruct her lost identity. To set things in motion, she decides to topple the spindly-legged marble table in the guest room so that Lena will come to see what is wrong. In this instance Ying-ying manipulates her environment in a literal as well as a symbolic sense, drawing on her traditional Chinese worldview once more in order to effect the best outcome for her daughter's life.

Unlike her mother, Lena has no consistent belief system of her own. She inherits Ying-ying's ability to see bad things before they happen but does not possess the power to anticipate good things, which suggests that Lena has merely internalized "the unspoken terrors" that plague Ying-ying (103). According to Philip Langdon, "second-or third-generation Chinese-Americans are much less likely to embrace *feng shui* than are those who were born in Asia" (148). Not only is Lena a second-generation Chinese-American, she is half Caucasian, which makes her Chinese heritage even more remote. Nonetheless, Lena is profoundly affected by Ying-ying's way of perceiving the world. As a child Lena is obsessed with knowing the worst possible thing that can happen, but unlike her mother, she has no sense of being able to manipulate fate. Thus, she is terrified when she cannot stop what she supposes to be the nightly "killing" of the girl next door, which she hears through her bedroom wall. Only after Lena realizes that she has been wrong about the neighbor family does she find ways to change the "bad things" in her mind.

Lena's muddled notions of causality and responsibility persist into adulthood. In "Rice Husband," she still views herself as guilty for the death of Arnold Reisman, a former neighbor boy, because she "let one thing result from another" (152). She believes there is a relation between her not having cleaned her plate at meals when she was young and Arnold's development of a rare and fatal complication of measles. She wants to dismiss the link as ridiculous, but she is plagued by doubt because she has no philosophical or religious scheme by which to interpret events and establish parameters for her personal responsibility: "The thought

that I could have caused Arnold's death is not so ridiculous. Perhaps he was destined to be my husband. Because I think to myself, even today, how can the world in all its chaos come up with so many coincidences, so many similarities and exact opposites?” (154). Whereas Ying-ying's belief system affords her a sense of certainty about how the world operates, Lena's lack of such a system leaves her in confusion.

It is Lena's uncertainty about causality together with her failure to take purposive action that leads Ying-ying to believe her daughter has no *ch'i.* Lena tells herself, “When I want something to happen—or not happen—I begin to look at all events and all things as relevant, an opportunity to take or avoid” (152). But Ying-ying challenges her, asking why, if Lena knew the marble table was going to fall down, she did not stop it. By analogy she is asking Lena why she does not resolve to save her marriage. Lena muses, “And it's such a simple question” (165). It is unclear whether Lena has already decided not to rescue the marriage or whether she is simply confused about her capacity to act on her own behalf. But the fact that Lena cannot answer her mother's question quietly privileges Ying-ying's perspective on the situation, much as An-mei's viewpoint of Rose's predicament is validated in “Without Wood.”

Marina Heung has pointed out that among works which focus on mother-daughter relations, *The Joy Luck Club* is “remarkable for foregrounding the voices of mothers as well as of daughters” (599). However, Tan goes further than “foregrounding” the mothers; she subtly endorses their world-view at strategic points in the text. Whereas Rose, Lena, and Jing-mei are paralyzed and unable to move forward in their relationships and careers and Waverly is haunted by a lingering fear of her mother's disapproval, Suyuan, Lindo, An-mei, and even Ying-ying demonstrate a resilient belief in their power to act despite having suffered the ravages of war and the painful loss of parents, spouses, and children. Out of the vast range of Chinese religious, philosophical, and folkloric beliefs, many of which stress self-effacement and passivity, Tan focuses on practices that allow her characters to make adjustments to their destinies and thereby preserve and perpetuate their identities. Suyuan Woo is most striking in this regard. She goes outside of conventional Chinese beliefs to make up her own means of dealing with fate. Suyuan invents “Joy Luck,” whereby she and her friends in Kweilin “choose [their] own happiness” at their weekly mah jong parties instead of passively waiting for their own deaths (25). Joy Luck for them consists of forgetting past wrongs, avoiding bad thoughts, feasting, laughing, playing games, telling stories, and most importantly, hoping to be lucky. The ritualistic set of attitudes and actions that Suyuan and her friends observe keep them from succumbing to despair. When the war is over, Suyuan holds on to the main tenet of her belief system—that “hope was our only joy”—by refusing to assume a passive role in the aftermath of tragedy. She never gives up hope that by persistence she may be able to locate the infant daughters she left in China. When Suyuan says to Jing-mei, “You don't even know little percent of me!” (27), she is referring to the complex interplay among the events of her life, her native culture and language, and her exercise of her mind and will. These things constitute an identity that Jing-mei has only an elusive and fragmentary knowledge of.

The references in *The Joy Luck Club* to traditional beliefs and practices such as astrology, *wu-hsing,* and *feng shui* emphasize the distance between the Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters. Tan hints through the stories of Lindo and Waverly Jong that a degree of reconciliation and understanding is attainable between mothers and daughters, and she indicates through Jing-mei Woo's journey that cultural gaps can be narrowed. In fact, Jing-mei Woo starts “becoming Chinese” as soon as she crosses the border into China (267). But overall, Tan's portrayal of first-generation immigrants attempting to transmit their native culture to their offspring is full of situations where “meanings” are untranslatable. The breakdown in communication between mothers and daughters is poignantly encapsulated in “American Translation,” the vignette that introduces the third group of stories in the book. A mother tells her daughter not to put a mirror at the foot of her bed: “‘All your marriage happiness will bounce back and turn the opposite way’” (147). Walters notes that mirrors are “regarded as symbols of a long and happy marriage” but also that “care has to be taken that they are not so placed that they are likely to alarm the soul of a sleeper when it rises for nocturnal wanderings” (55). According to *feng shui* principles, a mirror “acts as a constant energy reflector and will be sending [a] stream of intensified power into the space over and around [the] bed, day and night. It will be a perpetual

cause of disturbance” during sleep (Lam 105). The daughter in the vignette is “irritated that her mother s[ees] bad omens in everything. She had heard these warnings all her life.” Lacking an understanding of the cosmological system to which her mother's omens belong, the daughter simply views them as evidence that her mother has a negative outlook on life.

When the woman offers a second mirror to hang above the headboard of the bed in order to remedy the problem, she is seeking to properly channel the flow of *ch'i* around the room. The mother comments, “this mirror see that mirror—*haule!*—multiply your peach-blossom luck.” The daughter, however, does not understand her mother's allusion to peach-blossom luck, which “refers to those who are particularly attractive to the opposite sex” (Rossbach 48). By way of explanation, the mother, “mischief in her eyes,” has her daughter look in the mirror to see her future grandchild. She is acting in accordance to the ancient Chinese belief that the “mysterious power of reflection” of mirrors, which reveal “a parallel world beyond the surface,” is magical (Walters 55). The daughter, unfortunately, can only grasp literal meanings: “The daughter looked—and *haule!* There it was: her own reflection looking back at her.” The mother is incapable of translating her worldview into “perfect American English,” so the daughter's comprehension remains flawed, partial, incomplete. Whether or not she apprehends, from her literal reflection, that she herself is the symbol of her mother's own peach-blossom luck is ambiguous. In the same way, the uneasy relations between the older and younger women in *The Joy Luck Club* suggest that the daughters understand only dimly, if at all, that they are the long-cherished expression of their mothers' Joy Luck.

Notes

1. For a discussion of existential unrepeatability and the role of memory in *The Joy Luck Club,* see Ben Xu, “Memory and the Ethnic Self: Reading Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club,*” *MELUS* 19.1 (1994): 3–18. An interesting treatment of language, storytelling, and maternal subjectivity in Tan's novel can be found in Marina Heung, “Daughter-Text/Mother-Text: Matrilineage in Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club,*” *Feminist Studies* 19.3 (1993): 597–616.
2. Jing-mei Woo thinks her mother's “telltale Chinese behaviors” are expressly intended to embarrass her, including Suyuan's predilection for yellow, pink, and bright orange (143, 267). When Jing-mei arrives in China, she notices “little children wearing pink and yellow, red and peach,” the only spots of bright color amidst drab grays and olive greens (271). Tan seems to suggest through this detail that Suyuan's color preferences reflect not only her personal taste but Chinese patterns and traditions. According to Sarah Rossbach, yellow stands for power, pink represents “love and pure feelings,” and orange suggests “happiness and power” (46–47). In this light, Lindo Jong's criticism of Suyuan's red sweater in “Best Quality” is ironic since it is Lindo who provides evidence that red is regarded by the Chinese as an auspicious color connoting “happiness, warmth or fire, strength, and fame” (Rossbach 45). In “The Red Candle” Lindo mentions not only her mother's jade necklace and her mother-in-law's pillars, tables, and chairs but also her own wedding banners, palanquin, dress, scarf, special eggs, and marriage candle as being red.
3. Jing-mei Woo, born in the same year as Waverly (37), is a Metal Rabbit, and like Waverly, she exhibits a “Rabbit-like” sensitivity to criticism, especially when it comes from her mother.
4. The Chinese system of astrology has Buddhist origins, while the theory of the Five Elements derives from Taoist thought. Holmes Welch observes that “there was little distinction—and the most intimate connections—between early Buddhism and Taoism” (119).
5. Similar reasoning obtains in “Rice Husband” when Ying-ying tells Lena that a bank will have all its money drained away after a plumbing and bathroom fixtures store opens across the street from it (149). Lena comments that “one month later, an officer of the bank was arrested for embezzlement.”

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The Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan: Further Reading

CRITICISM

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Souris uses dynamic reader models to illustrate how readers are challenged to find the interconnections in The Joy Luck Club.

Additional coverage of Tan's life and career is contained in the following sources published by the Gale Group: *Asian American Literature*; *Authors and Artists for Young Adults,* Vol. 9; *Bestsellers,* Vol. 89:3; *Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography Supplement*; *Contemporary Authors,* Vol. 136; *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series,* Vol. 54; *Contemporary Novelists*; *Contemporary Popular Writers,* Vol. 1; *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Vol. 173; *DISCovering Authors 3.0*; *DISCovering Authors Modules: Multicultural, Novelists,* and *Popular Fiction and Genre Authors Modules*; *Feminist Writers*; *Literature Resource Center*; *Major 20th-Century Writers,* Edition 2; *Novels for Students,* Vol. 9; *Reference Guide to American Literature*; *Short Stories for Students,* Vol. 9; *Something About the Author,* Vol. 75; and *St. James Guide to Young Adult Writers.*

Analysis: The Joy Luck Club

In a brief story that opens *The Joy Luck Club*, a woman leaves Shanghai for America, carrying with her a beautiful swan which she is determined to give one day to her yet unborn daughter, as a symbol of her high aspirations for her in the new land. At the immigrations office amid a confusion of forms and foreign sounds, the swan is confiscated, leaving the woman with only one loose feather and a now dazed conviction about why she had even wanted to come to America. Nevertheless, she saves the worthless-looking feather, still planning to hand it someday to her daughter, in hopes that it will carry some of the good intentions for her offspring that had originally launched her on her way. *The Joy Luck Club* is about those things handed down from Chinese-born mothers to their American-born daughters; like the swan's feather, this legacy carries with it a mixture of both hope and disappointment, pain and love. More than only a record of the cultural transition from the old world to the new, *The Joy Luck Club* asks a universal and penetrating question: What exactly is it that daughters, in any culture, inherit from their mothers?

Eight women, each of four mother-daughter pairs, narrate the novel. Their common link is the Joy Luck Club, a weekly mah-jongg party, formed in San Francisco in the 1940's by four Chinese emigrants as a way to erase

the tragedies left behind in war-torn China and to foster new hopes for their futures. As the novel begins, in the 1980's, one of the members of the club, Suyuan Woo, has just died; her Americanized daughter June is expected to take her mother's place at the mah-jongg table. The rituals of the evening's game are at once familiar and mystifying to June, calling into relief the powerful cultural dissonance between the two generations and reminding June of all those qualities in her mother which she had intimately known yet never fully understood. Toward the end of the evening the aunties spring a surprise on June: The two daughters her mother had borne from a previous marriage and that she tragically had to abandon have, after a years-long search by her mother, finally been located, sadly, within weeks of her mother's death. The aunties have arranged for June to go to China and meet these women, so she can tell them all she can about the mother they never knew. "What will I say?" June wonders, "What can I tell them about my mother? I don't know anything." Dismayed but not surprised at June's response, the aunties see in her their own Americanized daughters,just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English. They see that joy and luck do not mean the same to their daughters, that to these closed American-born minds "joy luck" is not a word, it does not exist. They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation.

Semi-autobiographical, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* becomes itself the means by which this connecting hope can be passed on to future generations. Tan, an American-born daughter of a Chinese-born mother, was moved to write the book after her mother's heart attack. Even when Tan was a child her mother complained how little her daughter knew and understood of her. In the dedication Tan replies, "You asked me once what I would remember. This, and much more."

In the novel, June resolves to go to China and tell her half-sisters all she knows of her mother; the aunties eye her warily. So the text begins, a shared text, with each mother and each daughter weaving her own interior meditation on this generational gulf and the struggle toward connection. The book is divided into four sections, comprising four chapters each. June is the only narrator appearing in all four sections; the mothers speak in the first and fourth sections, while the daughters narrate the second and third. The device of eight narrators works somewhat like a liquid house of mirrors, a series of reflecting pools simultaneously reflecting and not so much distorting as remaking images and events. What is seen through one pair of eyes is played back through another's; each time more is learned. Sometimes it is the same incident that is seen from different sides, other times it is an oblique reverberation, as when June receives a jade pendant from Suyuan, echoing the gift of the feather described on the opening page.

The story of the swan's feather sounds out the hopes and intentions of the giver of the gift, while the account of the necklace amplifies the bewilderment, even ingratitude, of its recipient. Says June,The pendant was not a piece of jewelry I would have chosen for myself. It was almost the size of my little finger, a mottled green and white color, intricately carved. To me, the whole effect looked wrong: too large, too green, too garishly ornate. I stuffed the necklace in my lacquer box and forgot about it.

The necklace is emblematic of the broken communication between mother and daughter—and the sharp pain that tears beneath the surface of this relationship. What one values, the other derides. The daughters sneer at their mothers' stinginess, their haggling with shopkeepers, their foolish superstitions, their belief that danger lurks around every corner, their broken English, their garish clothes. The mothers sit in judgment on their daughters' foolish choices, their wasted opportunities, their love affairs with useless modern objects, and their incomprehensible alliances with Caucasian men.

Though their cultural differences make this rift particularly acute, the gulf that Tan describes is fairly universal. It is not only among Chinese-American mothers and daughters that there is so much mutual disappointment, so many hidden resentments, as well as such a profound yearning for a greater love that can transcend the pain. June still feels the sharp pangs of her mother's disappointment in her as a child, when she

never quite materialized into the child prodigy that her mother hoped would bring June an appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show," as well as all the boasting rights Suyuan could have then enjoyed among her friends. Yet a few months before her death, after a dinner party where June is sorely one-upped by her rival Waverly, Suyuan takes June aside and bestows the gift of the jade pendant, calling it her "life's importance." June accepts this as a deep expression of her mother's love, despite the fact the intricate carvings are opaque to her, carrying secrets she supposes she will never understand. After her mother's death she wears the necklace all the time, in hopes that she might absorb her mother's meaning through her skin.

The mothers' hope is that their daughters will grow to combine all the best of Chinese character with all the best of American circumstances and opportunities. Their pain is that much of the Chinese character seems to have gotten lost in the translation. It is a Chinese custom for daughters to honor and listen obediently to their mothers, but American freedom infiltrates and distorts this tradition. As a child, Waverly Jong exhibits a remarkable skill at chess. Disturbed at the way her mother swells up with pride and takes credit for her own tournament victories, Waverly publicly humiliates her. Years later, Lindo Jong still burns under her daughter's disregard when at the hairdresser's, Waverly discusses Lindo with the stylist as though she were not even there. Nevertheless, Waverly's narrative reveals how much power her mother still holds over her. For weeks she tries to confide in her mother that the man she is currently seeing will soon become her husband; she lives in terror of her mother's response. Inside she acknowledges that Lindo has the power to ruin completely her love affair, by pointing out some flaw in her fiancé that, once seen, will make him seem irretrievably small in her eyes. The American-born daughters may seem to speak a new language of disrespect, but the psychic hold their Chinese mothers wield is unquestionably strong.

To the degree that the daughters fear their mothers' disapproval, the mothers fear they will slip from their daughters' lives unseen, unremembered, the precious thread of connection severed by their sour-faced daughters' cool American disregard. It is difficult, however, to hold the daughters accountable for those secrets which their mothers have never shared. In the narratives of An-mei, Lindo, and Ying-ying lie the keys which would unlock the grim-faced behaviors that have hurt and mystified their daughters Rose, Waverly, and Lena. The mothers' narratives reveal a legacy of pain, abandonment, humiliation, and loss that somehow clarifies those tendencies which their daughters have grown to hate and fear. It also becomes clear that each mother in her own way has had a troubled relationship with her mother, dating the legacy of hurt and misunderstanding farther back than this one generation. What emerges from the mothers' narratives is a portrait of remarkable survivors; their daughters do not fully understand, but for that they can hardly be blamed.

Given that so much has gone unexpressed, what then does get passed on from mother to daughter? "You can see your character in your face," Lindo tells her daughter. In the hairdresser's mirror Waverly studies her cheeks, her nose; they are the same as her mother's, and, Lindo notes, they are the same as her own mother's before her. The flesh carries the memory, and if the nose gets passed on, something of the spirit does too. What clearly emerges from the narratives are the intangible, unspoken legacies each girl has received. Waverly has Lindo's cunning, her gift of strategy, her competitiveness, and her sharp tongue. Rose, like An-mei, has "too little wood"; each bends too easily to others' opinions and must learn to speak her own mind. Lena, like Ying-ying, must find her tiger spirit and fight her tendency to slip invisibly into the background. June finds herself growing territorial, hissing at the neighbors' cat just as her mother had done. The similarities between mother and daughter gradually take shape, much like the slowly developing Polaroid photo of June and her two half-sisters taken at the Shanghai airport. They watch as their images become clear; not one of them is exactly like their mother, but taken together their likenesses conjure up Suyuan's as well. As An-mei tells June, "Your mother is in your bones."

The Joy Luck Club is Amy Tan's first novel. Though it is common for first novels to exhibit some unevenness, particularly in characterization, Tan's characters are fully and beautifully drawn. Her language is graceful, her eye for detail is strong. If there is a flaw in the novel, it is that the eight different narrators and

their filial connections are sometimes difficult to keep straight, but the richness of the book makes it well worth the effort to do so.

Analysis: Form and Content

The Joy Luck Club is a story cycle told by seven voices. It consists of four sections, each divided into four separate stories. The first and last sections present four mothers' stories, and the middle sections are devoted to the stories of their daughters. In each section, however, one story is narrated by June Woo, who, now that her mother is dead, must sit at her mother's place at the mah-jongg table—"on the East, where things begin"—and relate not only her own stories but also those of her mother.

Suyuan Woo, June's mother, started the San Francisco version of the Joy Luck Club, a regular social affair organized around a game of chance, in 1949, after she and the other Chinese "aunties"—the mothers of the book—had immigrated to the United States. The club originated, as they did, in China, as a means of raising the spirits of four women (Suyuan and three other nonrecurring characters) during the Japanese assault on Kweilin. Decades later and in another country, the aunties continue their social gatherings as a means of hanging onto their identities under the assault of yet another foreign culture.

It is through their American-born daughters that these women most experience this sense of loss—either because the daughters are too much like them, too "Chinese," or because the daughters have become so assimilated as to forget their origins. For all the young women but June, who remains single, the primary source of conflict with their mothers seems to arise from their marriages. Waverly Jong, whose first marriage to her childhood sweetheart was ruined in part by her mother's criticisms of her Chinese American husband, is fearful now of what Lindo will say about her daughter's engagement to the all-American Rich Shields. Lena St. Clair finds herself at odds with her mother because of the alienation wrought by her marriage, now breaking apart, to a selfish American. When Rose Hsu Jordan informs her mother that her marriage to yet another selfish American man has already broken down, An-Mei muses:. . . I was raised the Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat my own bitterness. And even though I thought my daughter the opposite, still she come out the same way! Maybe it is because she was born to me and she was born a girl. And I was born to my mother and I was born a girl. All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way.

The Joy Luck Club, continuity between generations is at once a blessing and a burden.

Analysis: Places Discussed

***San Francisco**

*San Francisco. Northern California city that is home to most of the novel's characters. Three of the four families of the Joy Luck Club settled in Chinatown on their arrival in America, seeking the comforts of a place with an established Chinese community, one filled with the fragrances of familiar foods, such as fried sesame balls; familiar landmarks, such as herb shops and fish markets; and people like them. Indicative of their mothers' drive to assimilate, Waverly Jong is even named after her parents' home on Waverly Place.

As these immigrant families became successful, they moved into upper-middle-class neighborhoods, such as Ashbury Heights. However, for Ying-Ying St. Clair, the move from Oakland, across the Bay, to San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood remains unsettling. Her attempt to use *feng shui* to create a harmonious spiritual balance fails when the child she conceives in the new home miscarries.

San Francisco mirrors the emotional conflicts of the characters. It is a place where a Bank of America building and a McDonald's restaurant rise up next to the shops and apartment buildings of Chinatown, threatening to tower over them, just as the mothers worry about the impact of American culture on their daughters' Chinese heritage.

***Kweilin**

*Kweilin (KWAY-lin; Guilin in Pinyin). City in China to which Suyuan Woo was evacuated after the Japanese invasion in 1937. She had no eyes for the beauty of the city; to her its fabled mountains merely looked like fish heads, behind which lurked an advancing enemy. Its caves provided shelter from air raids pounding the beleaguered town. The city teemed with refugees from all corners of China, and misery abounded. To preserve hope, Suyuan formed her first Joy Luck Club there.

***Kweilin-Chungking road**

*Kweilin-Chungking road. While fleeing Kweilin for Chungking as the Japanese were invading, Suyuan had to abandon her twin baby daughters along the road, which was choked with refugees. The despair of the refugees was echoed by the overcrowded road, the sides of which were littered with discarded possessions. Most refugees trekked through this bleak apocalyptic landscape on foot, while a fortunate few escaped in trucks.

The road holds the mystery of Suyuan's babies, which is the novel's framing device. When her American-born daughter, Jing-mei, first learns what her mother had done, she seems callous to her. However, after Jing-mei reaches China and learns the full story of her half-sisters' abandonment, she can forgive her mother.

***Wushi**

*Wushi (wew-shee; Wuxi). Chinese city one hundred miles northeast of Shanghai at the shores of large and beautiful Tai Lake that was the site of Ying-Ying St. Clair's privileged youth. While living in San Francisco, she nostalgically remembers the splendor of the Moon Festival on the lake. Yet the lake also represents danger, for she nearly drowned there. Later, she fell in love with her husband on the lake.

***Shanghai**

*Shanghai. Great Chinese port city to which Ying-Ying went after learning of her husband's infidelity in Wushi. Taking advantage of the city's opportunities, Ying-Ying worked in a clothing store, where she met and married Clifford St. Clair. Like the friends she later finds in San Francisco, she leaves behind a China that holds bitter memories.

***Tientsin**

*Tientsin (TEEN-tseen; Tianjin). Bustling Chinese port city south of Beijing. One of China's "treaty ports," where foreigners had their own enclaves exempt from Chinese law. An-mei Hsu was amazed by the city's colorful life when she arrived there with her mother from their hometown of Ningpo, near Shanghai. Yet the city's sparkle and the splendors of their palatial, Western-style home quickly wore off when An-mei learned that her mother was forced to be a concubine.

***Taiyuan**

*Taiyuan (TAY-ywan). Capital of China's Shanxi province that contains major parts of the Great Wall. Surrounded by rough mountains, the Fen River runs through it. Lindo Jong grew up there in a low-lying peasant house, which was inundated by a flood, while the house of her future husband was built on richer, higher ground and remained intact. After getting out of her arranged marriage, Lindo left Taiyuan for Beijing and later America.

Jordan house

Jordan house. San Francisco home of Rose Hsu and her husband, Ted Jordan. After her husband announces that he wants a divorce, Rose refuses to let him have the house; her refusal signifies her newly discovered sense of self-worth.

Analysis: Form and Content

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* is a narrative mosaic made up of the lives of four Chinese women and their Chinese American daughters. Because of its structure, the book can only loosely be called a novel. It is composed of sixteen stories and four vignettes, but like many novels, it has central characters who develop through the course of the plot. The daughters struggle with the complexities of modern life, including identity crises and troubled relationships, while the mothers reflect on past actions that were dictated by culture and circumstance. The lives of the older women are bound together through their similar situations as immigrants and their monthly mah-jongg games at Joy Luck Club meetings.

Each of the stories is a first-person narration by one of the Joy Luck Club's three mothers or four daughters. Each narrator tells two stories about her own life, except for Jing-mei (June) Woo, who stands in for her deceased mother, telling a total of four stories. The tales are arranged in four groups, with a vignette preceding each group. The first group is told by mothers (plus June), the second and third groups by daughters, and the fourth by mothers. Jing-mei's final story, in which she learns her mother's history, concludes the book.

Since *The Joy Luck Club* is concerned with the relation of the present to the past, many stories take place in more than one time period. For example, in the last group of stories, the mothers begin their narration in the present time of the 1980's but then recall incidents that occurred when they were girls or young women: An-mei's mother's death, Ying-ying's first marriage, and Lindo's immigration to the United States. The narratives of the daughters are set in the 1960's, the time of their youth, or in the 1980's, with flashbacks to various earlier times. The first group of daughters' stories focuses on significant childhood experiences, while their second stories explore issues that they are experiencing as adults.

The daughters' tales are all set in the San Francisco Bay area, whereas the mothers' stories span two countries, China and the United States. Both rural and urban scenes in prewar China are depicted, and details related to festivals, customs, dress, housing, and food provide a rich backdrop to the central events in the narratives. June's final story, "A Pair of Tickets," takes her to a more modern China, where she finds Western capitalistic influences making inroads after nearly forty years of Communist Party rule.

The book examines a number of sociological issues from a woman's perspective: the death of parents, husbands, and children; marriage, adultery, and divorce; childbirth and abortion; and aging. The exploration, however, is often indirect. Situations are presented and later their consequences are shown. For example, Ying-ying's guilt over aborting her first child haunts a later pregnancy, and her daughter Lena's bulimic episode as an adolescent affects her eating habits as an adult. Exotic touches are added to the book's realistic rendering of emotions and incidents by means of references to Chinese folklore and superstition. Tan balances Eastern and Western points of view in her portrayal of the significant events of life.

Analysis: Context

The Joy Luck Club highlights the influence of culture on gender roles. The Chinese mothers in the book, all born in the 1910's, grew up in a hierarchical society in which a woman's worth was measured by her husband's status and his family's wealth. When they were young, the women were taught to repress their own desires so that they would learn to preserve the family honor and obey their husbands. The difficulties in marriage encountered by Lindo and Ying-ying as well as by An-mei's mother emphasize how few options were open to women in a tightly structured society in which their economic security and social standing were completely dependent on men.

Consequently, when the mothers immigrate to the United States, they want their daughters to retain their Chinese character but take advantage of the more flexible roles offered to women by American culture. The postwar baby-boomer daughters, however, are overwhelmed by having too many choices available. They struggle to balance multiple roles as career women, wives or girlfriends, and daughters. The materialistic focus of American culture makes it difficult for the daughters to internalize their mothers' values, particularly the self-sacrifice, determination, and family integrity that traditional Chinese culture stresses.

In addition to gender roles, mother-daughter relationships are an important focus of the book. Mothers are shown to have profound influence over their daughters' development, yet their influence is constrained by the surrounding culture. As girls, the Chinese women wanted to be like their mothers, whereas the American-born daughters are estranged from their mothers. This contrast is consistent with a difference between cultures: Americans expect their children to rebel against parental authority, while the Chinese promote obedience and conformity. The daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* think that their mothers are odd because they speak broken English and miss the subtleties of American culture pertaining to dress and social behavior. They also tend to see their mothers as pushy. Waverly and June rebel against their mothers' expectations without understanding that Lindo and Suyuan are trying to give their daughters the opportunities that they never had themselves. As adults, Waverly and June struggle with the conflicting desires of pleasing their mothers and developing their own individuality. Because they perceive their mothers' guidance as criticism, they are slow to understand the depth of their mothers' love and sacrifice for them.

Despite such generational and cultural gaps, the author suggests that daughters resemble their mothers in character as well as in appearance. Waverly possesses Lindo's shrewdness, and Rose shares An-mei's passivity in the face of suffering. By developing four central mother-daughter relationships rather than only one, Tan reveals that the factors which shape family resemblance, both negative and positive, are varied and complex.

Analysis: Historical Context

Historical China
While *The Joy Luck Club* was published in 1989, it is set in pre-World War II China and contemporary San Francisco. The two settings strengthen the contrast between the cultures that Tan depicts through her characters and their relationships. Pre-World War II China was a country heavily embroiled in conflict. San Francisco, however, offered freedom and peace. In writing the novel, Tan wanted to portray not only the importance of mother/daughter relationships but also the dignity of the Chinese people.

China's history covers years of tradition, yet also decades of change. While the Chinese people consistently honor the personal qualities of dignity, respect, self-control, and obedience, they have not so continually pledged allegiance to their leaders. The first documented Chinese civilization was the Shang dynasty (c. 1523-c. 1027 BC). Various dynasties ruled over the years, ending with the Manchu dynasty in 1912. The dynasties saw peace, expansion, and technological and artistic achievement as well as warfare and chaos.

Foreign intervention, particularly by Japan, created instability in the country, and internal struggles often prevented the Chinese from uniting. The area of Manchuria in northeast China, while legally belonging to China, had many Japanese investments, such as railways, and as such was under the control of the Japanese. This led to anti-Manchu sentiment and an eventual revolution. After civil war and additional strife, the Nationalists and Communists fought the Japanese in the second Sino-Japanese War and won when Japan was defeated by the Allies of World War II in 1945.

It is just before this victory that the mothers' stories start. Japanese aggression led to a foreign military presence on Chinese soil, and Suyuan's story in particular details the flight from the invading Japanese that was made by many Chinese. After World War II, with Japan preoccupied in recovering from their defeat, China once again became embroiled in a civil war between the Nationalists, who had been in power for several years, and the Communists, who wished to establish a new form of government. The civil war ended in 1949 with the formation of the People's Republic of China, and the Communists have held power in China since then.

Chinese Immigration to America
After the United States abolished slavery after the Civil War, freeing many of the African Americans who had worked in fields and farms, there arose a great need for manual laborers. Migrants from China filled a large part of this need, especially in the West, where rapid expansion required people to build railroads and towns. Although greatly outnumbered by white immigrants from European nations, the number of Chinese arriving in America alarmed white settlers in the West. In 1882 Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers to the United States. Although there were less than 300,000 total Asian immigrants to the U S. in the years between 1880 and 1909, immigration restrictions on Chinese and other Asians were tightened in 1902 and again in 1917. These laws were repealed in 1943, and in 1965 Congress passed a law which abolished immigration quotas based on national origin. In the 1980s and 1990s, China has placed in the top ten countries sending legal immigrants to the U.S. (illegal immigration is a growing problem), with almost 39,000 immigrants admitted in 1992.

Chinese immigrants often faced considerable prejudice in their new country. In the early part of the century, Chinese immigrant children attended segregated schools in the "Chinatowns" where they lived. During World War II, when Japanese Americans faced hostility and internment because of Japan's involvement in the war, Chinese Americans also encountered prejudice from people who mistook them for Japanese, although they were not deprived of property by the government. This struggle for acceptance is reflected in the novel as both mothers and daughters wish to excel in "American" society. Just as the United States has learned to value contributions of Americans of various backgrounds, the daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* learn to value their own Chinese heritage.

Analysis: Literary Techniques

Like the four sides of the mah-jong table, the book is structured with an almost classical balance: four mothers' stories, four daughters' stories; then four more daughters' stories, four more mothers' stories, climaxing with a visit to China and the discovery of things long lost.

Tan speaks with authentic voices, both the American voices as heard in the next apartment ("You break your legs sliding down that bannister, I'm gonna break your neck"), and voices of Chinese mothers, such as comments about a handmade table: "What use for? You put something else on top, everything fall down. *Chumvana chihan*."

Analysis: Social Concerns

The Joy Luck Club achieves much of its power by tapping into aspects of myth. It deals with things lost and things found, with masks and unmasking, with reuniting, climbing, deceit, and discovery. It does this, not by retelling ancient myths, but by gradually revealing the real life stories of Chinese women and their Chinese-American daughters. The book is structured around the meetings of a longstanding mah-jong club in San Francisco. Jing-Mei Woo has been invited to replace her mother, Suyuan Woo, who died two months earlier. The club is the American version of a similar club, also named *The Joy Luck Club*, formed by Suyuan Woo in Kweilin, China, during the difficult time shortly before that city's fall to the Japanese.

Each of the sixteen chapters is a story told by one of the eight main characters: four mothers, four daughters; two stories each. The mother-daughter relationships, complicated by the great differences in the worlds in which the mothers and daughters grew up, create the dynamic tension. Which tensions are based upon these differences, which grow out of universal mother-daughter conflicts, neither the reader nor the characters involved can determine. But as these women tell their stories, a gradual awareness develops of how much of the past cannot be retrieved, and yet how pervasive it is in the present, and how it gives emotional shape and color to the present. That which is inherited from the past is shown in these stories to be the key to the survival, meaning, and value of these lives.

The mothers' values are a part of this past. As the daughters attempt to separate themselves, and search for their own way, they find in their identity with their mothers' pasts much to hold onto. For their own part, the mothers worry about not being able to communicate the past to their daughters, which may result in losing contact with them. Even language, which is very much a concern of this book, proves to be a barrier between mothers and daughters. One mother says, "And because I remained quiet for so long now my daughter does not hear me." Another, says the epigraph, waited in vain, "year after year, for the day she could tell her daughter this in perfect English."

Analysis: Compare and Contrast

1930s and 1940s: The Japanese occupied China. Full war erupted in 1945 in Beijing between the Chinese and Japanese. After the war, civil war breaks out and Communists take over the government in 1949, led by Mao Zedong.

Today: In 1989, a pro-democracy demonstration by Chinese university students in Beijing's Tiananmen Square is put down by the Communist government. While a 1993 constitutional revision does not reform the political system, it does call for the development of a socialist market economy.

1930s and 1940s: Various religions thrived in China, particularly Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

Today: Once discouraged by Mao Zedong, religious practice has been revived to some degree. In addition to the traditional religions—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism—there are also smaller groups of Muslims, Catholics, and Protestants.

1930s and 1940s: After a period from 1882 to 1943 that restricted Chinese immigration to the U.S., a new 1943 law extends citizenship rights and permits an annual immigration of 105 Chinese. Many refugees from the Sino-Japanese war flee to the United States.

Today: National origin quotas were abolished in 1965, and the 1990 Immigration Act raised the immigrant quota and reorganized the preference system for entrance. Nearly 39,000 Chinese immigrants enter the U S. in 1992, while almost 30,000 obtain visas to study at American universities.

Analysis: Topics for Further Study

In an interview with Elaine Woo for the *Los Angeles Times* (March 12, 1989), Amy Tan said that her parents wanted their children "to have American circumstances and Chinese character." Write an essay that explains what her parents may have meant. Give specific examples to illustrate the "circumstances" and "character."

Trace the history of Chinese immigration into our country. When did the Chinese begin arriving in our country? For what reasons do the Chinese come here? Where do they choose to settle? Why do they settle there?

The Joy Luck Club was published in 1989. That same year saw a major uprising by Chinese university students in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Investigate these 1989 demonstrations. Why were these students demonstrating? How did their country react? How did our country react? What were the effects on the Chinese who were studying in the United States at the time?

What was the history of the "Joy Luck Club?" How did it get its name? What was its significance? Why did the Chinese-American women feel the need to have a Joy Luck Club in America?

Compare and contrast pre-World War II China with China today. Discuss such aspects as living conditions, government, cultural aspects, education, etc.

Investigate the psychological aspects of either generational conflict or mother/daughter relationships. Write an essay that describes your own experiences in relation to what you've learned from your research.

Analysis: Literary Precedents

Tan credits Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984), a set of interwoven tales about Indian life, as a formative influence on her writing. *The Joy Luck Club* also is inevitably and frequently compared with its predecessors, Maxine Hong Kingston's three varied books: *The Woman Warrior* (1976), *China Men* (1980), and *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989). Tan's book is less determinedly historical than *China Men*, less political than *Tripmaster Monkey*; it can be most productively compared with *The Woman Warrior* in its transformed amalgam of family history and myth, and it holds its own well in such a comparison.

Tan also credits a literary heritage of sermons by her Baptist minister father, family stories, Chinese fairy tales, and parables for influence on her work.

Analysis: Related Titles

The Kitchen God's Wife (1991) relates the story of Jiang Weili from the time she was six years old in the China of 1925 through the present, in which she is Winnie Louie, the widowed matriarch of an extended Chinese family living in San Francisco. Much like *The Joy Luck Club*, this novel feels as if Tan's ancestors are speaking through her as she transcends herself to triumph over ancestral ghosts. The theme of forgiveness, and the importance of understanding the miseries of others, continue here in Tan's second novel.

The Hundred Secret Senses (1995) is about a Chinese-American woman, Olivia, and her Chinese half-sister, Kwan, alternating between Kwan's stories of the past and Olivia's more modern story of a troubled marriage in which Olivia's husband is still attached to his first wife who was killed seventeen years earlier. Kwan believes she can communicate with ghosts, and in reincarnation. The two women return to China together, raise the specters of their respective pasts, and make their peace with their pasts.

Analysis: Adaptations

Tan reads from *The Joy Luck Club* on audio tape by Dove.

In 1993, the motion picture version of *The Joy Luck Club* was released. It was directed by Wayne Wang, who has built a good reputation with motion pictures about Chinese-American life. Tan cowrote the screenplay with Ronald Bass. The female leads — Kieu Chinh, Tsai Chin, France Nuyen, and Lisa Lu — turn in good performances. Although it did well at the box office, critics found it confusing, especially when it flashed back to China. Even so, those who enjoy the novel are likely to enjoy the motion picture.

Analysis: Media Adaptations

An abridged sound recording of *The Joy Luck Club* is three hours long, available on 2 cassette tapes. Published in 1989 by Dove Audio, the book is read by its author, Amy Tan.

The movie version of *The Joy Luck Club* was released by Hollywood Pictures in 1993. While it does not include all the novel's stories, the film does a good job of presenting the most important scenes. The adaptation was written by Amy Tan and Ronald Bass and directed by Wayne Wang. Produced by noted filmmaker Oliver Stone, the film starred such actresses as Frances Nuyen, Rosalind Chao, MingNa Wen, and Lauren Tom. It is rated R, available from Buena Vista Home Video.

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Manna Heung argues that Tan's mother-daughter text is unique in its foregrounding of the mothers' voices.

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The author again relies on female relationships in this story of a Chinese-Amencan, her Chinese half-sister, and the girls' belief in ghosts and communication with the dead. The reviewer feels that Tan spends too much time telling the story of Miss Banner but has positive words for the depiction of the Chinese sister's eccentncities and the bond between the two girls.

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Glona Shen explores "the narrative strategy employed in *The Joy Luck Club* and the relationships between the Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters."

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Analysis: What Do I Read Next?

The Kitchen God's Wife, published in 1991 by Putnam of New York, was Tan's second novel. While many predicted that Tan would not be able to achieve the success of her first novel, this work received many accolades. It, too, deals with mother/daughter themes but also hints that male-centered social traditions hinder women's relationships with each other. Set in pre and post-World War II China, the story portrays a woman's struggles in an abusive relationship. In writing this book, Tan tells a story that is very similar to her mother's.

In a children's picture book entitled *The Moon Lady*, Amy Tan extends the story from the chapter of the same title in her first novel. Published in 1992 by Macrmllan, *The Moon L*ady appeals to pre-teens as an introduction to Tan's themes and style. *The Moon Lady* is about a seven-year-old girl who attends the autumn moon festival and encounters the lady who lives on the moon and grants secret wishes.

Published in 1995, *The Hundred Secret Senses* by Amy Tan is a story about American-born Olivia and her Chinese half-sister, Kwan. When she comes to America to live with three-year-old Olivia, Kwan is eighteen and full of stories about having "yin eyes." She convinces Olivia that she can see and communicate with the dead. The story follows the girls through adulthood and tells of the strong bond that forms between them.

In her 1976 memoir *The Woman Warrior Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, Maxine Hong Kingston, an American writer born of Chinese immigrant parents, blends myth and legend with history and autobiography.

Growing out of stories that Kingston's mother told her as "lessons to grow up on," the book has several parallels with Tan's most famous novel, such as profiling Kingston's mother Brave Orchid and the author's description of the difficulties she encountered as a second-generaration Chinese American.

"The Intersections of Gender, Class, Race, and Culture On Seeing Clients Whole" is an article that discusses identity formation in terms of race, culture, and class. The article can be found in the *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, Vol. 21, No. 1, January, 1993, pp. 50-58.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Feathers from a Thousand Li Away, Vignette Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. Where had the woman purchased the swan?

2. According to the market vendor, what was the swan originally?

3. What is a *li*?

4. How was a woman's value determined in China?

5. What are three hopes the woman has for the daughter she dreams of?

6. Why doesn't the woman have the swan any more?

7. Why has the woman forgotten "why she had come and what she had left behind"?

8. What symbol represents the woman's good intentions?

9. To whom does the woman wish to give this symbol?

10. Why hasn't she done so?

Answers

1. She purchased it in the market in Shanghai.

2. The swan was a duck that tried to become a goose and became a swan instead, "too beautiful to eat."

3. A li is about one-third of a mile.

4. If her husband belched loudly, it meant he had eaten a great deal, presumably because his wife was a good cook. Her ability to meet his needs determined her value.

5. First, her daughter will be valued for who she is. Second, she will speak perfect English, suggesting a good education, and no one will look down on her. Third, she will be happy, "too full to swallow any sorrow!"

6. The immigration officials took it away.

7. She had to fill out too many forms; she was caught up in routine activities.

8. The swan feather symbolizes her good intentions.

9. She wants to give it to her daughter.

10. The mother wants to be able to explain herself “in perfect American English.”

Short-Answer Quizzes: The Joy Luck Club Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Why did Suyuan organize the first Joy Luck Club?

2. What are *dyansyin* foods?

3. According to Suyuan’s story, what happened to her twin daughters?

4. With whom did Suyuan compare Jing-mei?

5. According to Suyuan, what is the difference between Jewish and Chinese mah jong?

6. Auntie An mei had gone to China “three years ago,” according to the story. Tell at least two things that went wrong on the trip.

7. What motivates the aunties to give Jing-mei money for a trip to China?

8. What do the aunties want Jing-mei to tell her sisters in China about?

9. Jing-mei comments on the English of her mother and the other members of the Joy Luck Club, calling it “halting” and “fractured.” How does this relate to the old woman of the vignette, who wants to speak “perfect American English”? What does it suggest about Suyuan, An-mei, Lindo, and Ying-ying?

10. List four examples of breakdown in communication between Suyuan and Jing-mei.

Answers
1. Suyuan organized the first Joy Luck Club to fight discouragement during the war.

2. *Dyansyin* foods are supposed to bring good luck. They include dumplings shaped like ingots, rice noodles, boiled peanuts, and oranges.

3. Suyuan does not say. We only know that she arrived in Chungking without them.

4. Suyuan compared Jing-mei with Lindo’s daughter, Waverly, who was one month younger.

5. In Jewish mah jong, players focus on their own tiles. In Chinese mah jong, players also note what their opponents are playing and use strategy.

6. First, her brother’s family was not impressed with her gifts of candy and cheap clothing. Second, they took advantage of her by bringing along extended family members and some people who weren’t even related and manipulating her into providing meals and lodging at an expensive hotel for everyone, three gifts for each relative, and a loan that was never repaid.

7. The aunties are generous women who feel a strong loyalty to the friend who brought them together.

8. The aunties want Jing-mei to tell her sisters about their mother. They specifically mention Suyuan's success, her intelligence, kindness, care of her family, hopes, and cooking.

9. Suyuan, An-mei, Lindo, and Ying-ying, as mothers, want their daughters to understand them. However, language problems may get in the way.

10. A) Jing-mei does not remember whether her mother said black sesame-seed soup and red bean soup were *chabudwo*, almost the same, or butong, not the same thing at all.

B) Jing-mei does not understand why her mother was so critical of her own friends.

C) Suyuan has trouble explaining the difference between Jewish and Chinese mah jong to Jing-mei.

D) Suyuan told Lindo that Jing-mei was returning to college when Jing-mei had only said she would "look into it" and did not really intend to.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Scar Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Who is Popo and how did she affect both An-mei's mother and An-mei herself?

2. How does An-mei describe the house in Ningpo?

3. In what ways does Popo demonstrate that she loves An-mei and her brother?

4. In addition to remarrying, what had An-mei's mother done that indicated a lack of respect for her family?

5. What caused An-mei's smooth-neck scar?

6. Popo recognizes the seriousness of An-mei's injury and tries to give her the will to live. What does she say to An-mei that helps her recover?

7. Why do Popo and Auntie speak badly of An-mei's mother?

8. Why does An-mei's mother return to Uncle and Auntie's house?

9. In what way does An-mei's mother demonstrate "shou so deep it is in your bones"?

10. In the last several paragraphs, An-mei makes several references to "what is in your bones." What does she mean?

Answers
1. Popo is An-mei's maternal grandmother. She forced An-mei's mother to leave the house and leave her children behind because she had remarried after her husband's death. She made An-mei feel unlucky to have such a bad mother. She took good care of An-mei in other ways, though, and An-mei knew she loved her.

2. An-mei mentions "cold hallways and tall stairs." She also says "our house was so unhappy." A portrait of her father, "a large, unsmiling man" hangs in the main hall.

3. Popo tries to keep the ghosts from stealing the children. She tells them stories to teach them right from wrong. She takes care of An-mei's burn, including telling her things to give her the will to live. Even her decision to disown An-mei's mother is an effort to do the right thing from her point of view.

4. An-mei's mother had gone to her new home without taking the furniture from her dowry, without taking 10 pairs of silver chopsticks, and without visiting her husband's grave or the other family graves.

5. An-mei's smooth-neck scar is the result of a bad burn. A pot of boiling soup spilled on her when she was four.

6. First Popo tells An-mei that the family is prepared for her death. If she dies, her funeral will be simple and her family will not mourn her very long. Second, and more important to An-mei, Popo tells her that her mother has left and will forget all about her if she dies.

7. Popo and Auntie speak badly of An-mei's mother because she disgraced her family. Instead of remaining a widow, she married a wealthy man who already had three wives; and she left without showing respect to the family ancestors.

8. An-mei's mother returns to Uncle and Auntie's house because Popo is dying. She is the oldest daughter and wants to show respect.

9. An-mei's mother demonstrates shou when she makes a soup of herbs and medicines and cuts a piece of flesh from her own arm. Then she feeds the soup to her dying mother, hoping to save her life. She does this even though her mother had disowned her and forced her to leave without her children.

10. By "in your bones" An-mei refers to people's true nature, who they are when stripped of all artificiality.

Short-Answer Quizzes: The Red Candle Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. According to Chinese thinking, what is the difference between 14-carat and 24-carat gold?

2. Lindo relates a movie plot in which a promise is broken. Describe the plot.

3. What qualities would a Chinese mother expect of her daughter-in-law?

4. Describe Lindo as a child.

5. Why does Lindo move in with the Huangs four years before she marries Tyan-yu?

6. What final gift does Lindo's mother give her?

7. What are some ways in which Tyan-yu and Huang Taitai are unkind to Lindo?

8. On her wedding day Lindo compares herself to the wind. In what ways does she say they are alike?

9. How is Lindo able to leave her marriage honorably?

10. Lindo claims the ancestors have given signs that her marriage to Tyan-yu should end. What are the three signs?

Answers
1. The Chinese accept only 24-carat gold, “pure inside and out,” as real gold. Fourteen-carat gold isn’t gold.

2. In the movie, an American soldier promises to come back and marry a girl he wants to sleep with. She gives in, but he abandons her and later marries another.

3. The mother would expect her daughter-in-law to raise sons, to take care of her husband’s parents when they were old, and to show respect to the family ancestors.

4. As a child, Lindo was physically attractive, healthy and strong, and obedient.

5. A flood destroys the farm and home of Lindo’s family, forcing them to move to another part of China. Lindo is old enough to stay with the Huangs. She will marry Tyan-yu to fulfill the marriage contract.

6. Lindo’s mother gives her a *chang*, a necklace made with a piece of flat red jade.

7. Tyan-yu complains about Lindo’s cooking, creates a mess for her to clean up, interrupts her meal with demands to wait on him, and complains about the expression on her face. Huang Taitai criticizes her constantly. She insists that Lindo be trained in how to wash rice, to smell a chamber pot to make sure it’s clean, to do laundry, embroider, and attend to Huang Taitai’s personal needs.

8. Both the wind and Lindo have power; both are strong and pure.

9. First, Tyan-yu’s end of the marriage candle went out on their wedding night. Second, Lindo made the Huangs think it was their idea for her to leave. Her family would not lose face.

10. The three signs are a mole on Tyan-yu’s back, which Lindo claims will grow and eat away his skin; a tooth missing from her own mouth; and a servant who is pregnant with a child who is supposedly Tyan-yu’s.

Short-Answer Quizzes: The Moon Lady Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Who is Amah? Baba?

2. What plans has the family made to celebrate the Moon Festival?

3. What does Ying-ying describe as “this dark side of me that had my same restless nature”?

4. Why does Amah say Ying-ying’s mother will banish them both to Kunming?

5. What does Ying-ying mistake for a swimming snake, one of the Five Evils?

6. How do her rescuers know that Ying-ying is from a wealthy family?

7. According to Chinese tradition, why does the Moon Lady live apart from her husband?

8. Where is Ying-ying as she watches the play?

9. Ying-ying is unable to remember what her wish was until when?

10. What was her wish?

Answers
1. Amah is Ying-ying's nanny. Baba is Ying-ying's father.

2. The family has rented a large boat on Tai Lake and has made arrangements for special foods. A ceremony will take place during the evening.

3. She describes her shadow this way.

4. Ying-ying had ruined her special new clothes by smearing blood all over them.

5. Ying-ying thinks the fishing net that rescues her is one of the Five Evils.

6. The woman notices Ying-ying's pale skin and soft feet, like one who had led a pampered, indoor life.

7. Chang-o, the Moon Lady, lives in the moon as a consequence of stealing and eating the peach of immortality, which was intended for her husband, the Master Archer.

8. She is hiding in the bushes on shore, near the stage.

9. Ying-ying remembers her wish when she is an old woman, on the day of the Moon Festival, as she tells this story.

10. She wanted her family to find her.

Short-Answer Quizzes: The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates, Vignette Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. How old is the daughter?

2. What does the mother tell the daughter not to do?

3. Why does the mother tell her this?

4. What is *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates*?

5. Why does the daughter want to see the book?

6. Why won't the mother show her daughter the book?

7. When the mother refuses, what does the daughter demand?

8. How does the mother respond to the demand?

9. What does the daughter accuse her mother of?

10. Where is the daughter when she falls off her bicycle?

Answers
1. The daughter is seven.

2. She tells her not to ride her bicycle around the corner.

3. She wants to be close by if her daughter gets hurt.

4. *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates* is a Chinese book that lists dangers children can get into.

5. She doesn't believe her mother.

6. The mother says the book is written in Chinese and the daughter would not understand it.

7. The daughter wants to know what the 26 bad things are.

8. She says nothing.

9. The daughter says her mother doesn't know what the 26 things are and that she doesn't know anything at all.

10. She is not even at the corner.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Rules of the Game Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. When Waverly wants the salted plums, what does her mother tell her?

2. What was the inspiration for Waverly's name?

3. How does Lindo react when Waverly asks her what Chinese torture is?

4. What gift does Waverly receive for Christmas?

5. Where does Waverly meet Lao Po?

6. How does Waverly manipulate her mother into letting her compete in a local chess tournament?

7. In what ways does Lindo encourage Waverly?

8. To whom does Lindo brag about Waverly's success?

9. When Waverly says she wishes Lindo wouldn't tell everyone she is her daughter, what does Lindo think she means?

10. How does Lindo "bite back her tongue" in the closing scene?

Answers
1. Lindo says, “Bite back your tongue” in the store. Later she adds, “Strongest wind cannot be seen.”

2. Waverly was named after the street on which the family lives; but her family calls her “Meimei” or “Little Sister,” because she is the youngest and the only girl.

3. She asks where Waverly has heard the expression. When Waverly says “some boy” at school said it, Lindo calmly replies that Chinese people are involved in all kinds of professions; they are not lazy like Americans. She also says Chinese people do the best torture there is.

4. Waverly receives a box of Life Savers.

5. She meets him in the playground at the end of the alley.

6. Waverly pretends she does not want to compete because she will lose. Lindo then insists that she try.

7. Lindo gives Waverly her *chang*, displays her trophies, offers advice on playing chess, lets he compete in tournaments farther and farther from home, makes her two new dresses, makes her brothers do her chores, makes her brothers sleep in the living room, does not insist that she clean her plate, and brags about her.

8. Lindo tells everyone she sees about Waverly’s success.

9. Lindo thinks Waverly is ashamed or embarrassed to be her daughter.

10. When Waverly returns from running away, Lindo does not lecture or scold her. She ignores her, saying that if Waverly doesn’t care about her family, her family will not care about her.

Short-Answer Quizzes: The Voice from the Wall Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. What is the death of a thousand cuts?

2. Why does Lena see danger everywhere?

3. Why doesn’t Lena look Chinese?

4. Who changes Ying-ying’s name to Betty?

5. Why is communication so difficult at the St. Clair household?

6. Where is the family’s new apartment?

7. Why does Ying-ying’s baby die?

8. How does Ying-ying react to the loss of her baby?

9. Why does Teresa come to the St. Clairs’ apartment?

10. Near the end of the story, why does Lena cry when she hears Teresa and her mother yelling at each other at night?

Answers
1. In the death of a thousand cuts, a man's body is sliced away little by little until he dies.

2. Lena sees danger everywhere after she falls down the basement stairs, and Ying-ying makes up a story about an evil man who lives in the basement.

3. Lena's father is English-Irish.

4. Lena's father, Clifford St. Clair, changes her name to Betty.

5. Communication is difficult because Ying-ying speaks poor English, St. Clair speaks poor Chinese, and Lena understands what her mother says in Chinese but not what she means.

6. The family moves to an Italian neighborhood in San Francisco, North Beach.

7. The baby dies because of a severe birth defect.

8. Ying-ying becomes unable to function; she is very depressed.

9. Teresa wants to climb out Lena's bedroom window onto the fire escape, so she can climb in her own bedroom window.

10. Lena is happy to be wrong about Teresa.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Half and Half Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. How does Rose describe her mother's skill as housekeeper?

2. What word does An-mei use to describe Ted when she meets him?

3. What nationality does Mrs. Jordan believe Rose is?

4. Describe Rose and Ted's relationship.

5. What event causes a change in their relationship?

6. What is *nengkan*?

7. Why doesn't Bing play with Matthew, Mark, and Luke at the beach?

8. What symbols does An-mei use to try to bring Bing back?

9. How does An-mei react when Rose announces her divorce?

10. What evidence suggests that An-mei never completely abandons hope that Bing will return?

Answers
1. Rose says, “My mother is not the best housekeeper in the world.”

2. An-mei calls Ted a waigoren, a foreigner.

3. She thinks Rose is Vietnamese.

4. Rose is all yin and Ted is all yang. Before they are married, she is always “the damsel in distress,” and he is “the knight in shining armor.” After the marriage the pattern continues, with Rose always passive and Ted always making decisions.

5. When Ted loses the malpractice lawsuit, he is the weak one in need of Rose’s support. Rose does not realize this because it has never happened before. He begins to insist she make decisions.

6. Nengkan is the ability to do whatever you put your mind to, absolute self-confidence.

7. The older boys think Bing will ruin their sand castle because he is so much younger.

8. An-mei uses the white leatherette Bible, sweetened tea and a sapphire ring, and an inner tube.

9. An-mei tells Rose to try to save her marriage.

10. First, Bing’s name is written in the Bible so it will be easy to erase. Second, the Bible is very clean, even though it has been on the floor more than 20 years, and An-mei is not the best of housekeepers.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Two Kinds Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Suyuan wants Jing-mei to be a prodigy, just like what two people?

2. Where does Suyuan get ideas to test for Jing-mei’s ability?

3. Why can’t “Old Chong” tell when Jing-mei is playing badly?

4. Why does Jing-mei rebel against her mother’s hopes for her musical ability?

5. Who says, “You aren’t a genius like me”?

6. To what two kinds of daughters does Suyuan refer?

7. How does Jing-mei end the argument about her piano lessons?

8. What other disappointments does Jing-mei mention that she caused Suyuan?

9. When does Suyuan give Jing-mei the piano?

10. In what way does Jing-mei describe “Pleading Child” and “Perfectly Contented”?

Answers
1. The two model prodigies are Lindo’s daughter, Waverly, and Shirley Temple.

2. Suyuan reads articles about gifted children in the magazines of the houses she cleans.

3. “Old Chong” is deaf, and Jing-mei deliberately deceives him.

4. Jing-mei overhears Suyuan bragging to Lindo about Jing-mei’s talent.

5. Waverly says this to Jing-mei after the talent show.

6. She refers to obedient and disobedient daughters.

7. She says she wishes she were dead like Suyuan’s twin daughters in China.

8. She didn’t get straight A’s, didn’t become class president, didn’t get into Stanford, and didn’t finish college. Each time she insisted she had the right to be less than her best.

9. The piano is a gift for her thirtieth birthday.

10. They are two halves of the same song.

Short-Answer Quizzes: American Translation, Vignette Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. What is a “mirrored armoire”?

2. Where is the armoire?

3. According to the mother, why shouldn’t the mirror be at the foot of the bed?

4. Why does the daughter refuse to move it?

5. Why is the daughter irritated?

6. How does the mother solve the problem?

7. What is the mother’s housewarming present?

8. What is “peach-blossom luck”?

9. What does the mother see in the mirror?

10. What does the daughter see in the mirror?

Answers
1. An armoire is a cupboard or wardrobe (8 feet or taller) used before homes had built-in closets. This one has a mirror on it.

2. The armoire is at the foot of the bed in the bedroom of the daughter’s new condominium.

3. The mother says the marriage happiness from the bed will bounce off the mirror and become its own opposite.

4. The armoire won’t fit anywhere else.

5. The daughter has heard dire predictions all her life.

6. The mother says to place another mirror at the head of the bed.

7. Her housewarming gift is a gilt-edged mirror from the Price Club.

8. “Peach-blossom luck” means having children.

9. The mother sees her grandchild.

10. The daughter sees her own reflection.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Rice Husband Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. What omen told Ying-ying that her husband would die?

2. Where do Lena and Harold live?

3. What do Lena and Harold argue about just before Ying-ying comes to visit?

4. Why did Arnold die?

5. How did Lena and Harold meet?

6. Designing restaurants around a theme made Livotny & Associates very successful. Whose idea was this?

7. In her relationship with Harold, what is Lena afraid of?

8. Why does Harold insist they split expenses 50-50?

9. Why doesn’t Lena eat ice cream?

10. What does the Chinese expression chunwang chihan mean?

Answers
1. A plant her husband had given her died even though she had watered it carefully.

2. They live in Woodside, in a renovated barn on four acres of land.

3. They argue about who should pay for exterminating the cat’s fleas.

4. Arnold died of delayed complications from measles. Lena believed he died because she stopped eating her rice and other foods in hopes of not marrying him.

5. They both worked for Harned Kelley & Davis, an architectural firm.

6. Lena thought of this.

7. Lena is afraid Harold might leave her after seeing all her flaws.

8. Harold claims they will be sure of their love if they keep money out of the relationship.

9. After Arnold died, Lena felt guilty and ate ice cream until she vomited. She never ate it again.

10. Chunwang chihan means literally, "If the lips are gone, the teeth will be cold." Figuratively, it means "one thing is the result of another."

Short-Answer Quizzes: Four Directions Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Why does Waverly invite Lindo to lunch?

2. How does Lindo respond to the evidence that Rich and Waverly live together?

3. After their argument, when does Lindo start treating Waverly normally again?

4. Why does Waverly worry about Lindo's criticism of Rich?

5. Who is Marvin Chen?

6. How does Waverly manipulate her mother into inviting Rich over for dinner?

7. What are three of Rich's gaffes during his visit with the Jongs?

8. When does Waverly tell Lindo about her engagement?

9. What does Waverly realize during their conversation?

10. Where will Waverly and Rich travel for their honeymoon?

Answers
1. Waverly wants to announce her engagement to Rich Schields.

2. She ignores it.

3. Lindo returns to her old self when Waverly has chicken pox.

4. Waverly is afraid that Lindo will find a real flaw that will affect Waverly's feelings for Rich.

5. Marvin is Waverly's first husband and Shoshana's father.

6. When she thanks Suyuan for dinner, she adds that Rich said it was the best Chinese food he had ever eaten. She knows Suyuan will repeat this to Lindo and that Lindo will want to prove that she is the better cook.

7. Rich brings French wine and drinks too much of it; he uses chopsticks and drops his food into his lap; he eats too much of some things and not enough of others; he criticizes Lindo's cooking by pouring soy sauce all over the serving platter; he addresses Waverly's parents with the wrong name and too informally.

8. She tells her the day after the dinner party.

9. Waverly realizes she has been hiding needlessly from her mother for years.

10. They will honeymoon in China.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Without Wood Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. Who is Old Mr. Chou?

2. What does An-mei suspect of Ted?

3. What do *hulihudu* and *heimongmong* mean?

4. How does Rose's psychiatrist respond to her feelings?

5. Why is Rose hurt when Ted sends her a check for $10,000?

6. According to An-mei, how can a girl become as strong as a tree?

7. According to Rose, what is the flaw with American ideas?

8. What clue suggests to Rose that Ted had been planning to leave her?

9. Why is Ted in a hurry to get the divorce over with?

10. Who does Rose see in her dream at the end of the story?

Answers

1. The guardian to the gate of dreams, Old Mr. Chou is the equivalent of the Sandman.

2. An-mei thinks Ted is having an affair.

3. *Hulihudu* means "confused"; *heimongmong* means "dark fog." They imply troubled feelings and not knowing where to turn for help.

4. He seems sleepy and bored; he does not offer any help or insight.

5. Ted wrote the check with a pen that was a gift from Rose. He said he would only use it for important papers.

6. An-mei says she must listen to her mother.

7. American ideas allow too many choices.

8. Ted had neglected the garden where he used to spend hours.

9. Ted wants to remarry.

10. Rose sees Old Mr. Chou and her mother.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Best Quality Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. What is a life's importance?

2. Why does Jing-mei shop with her mother in Chinatown?

3. What complaints does Suyuan have against her tenants? What complaints do they have against her?

4. Why does Suyuan tell Jing-mei to put the eleventh crab back in the tank? Why do they buy it?

5. Waverly gives Shoshana the best crab on the platter. How does Shoshana react?

6. The party is ruined when Waverly and Jing-mei argue. What do they argue about, and who starts it?

7. Why doesn't Suyuan use the dishes Jing-mei gave her?

8. How does Suyuan describe Waverly?

9. Why is Jing-mei fixing her father a spicy dish?

10. In what ways does Jing-mei show she identifies with her mother rather than competes with her?

Answers
1. It is a jade pendant that is elaborately carved with symbols.

2. They are buying crabs for that night's Chinese New Year dinner.

3. Suyuan says the tenants use too much water, sometimes bathing twice a day, and that they put out too much garbage. The tenants claim that Suyuan poisoned their cat.

4. The eleventh crab is missing a leg, and that is bad luck on Chinese New Year. The manager makes them buy it because they are responsible for the missing leg.

5. Shoshana whines that she doesn't like crab.

6. The argument starts when Waverly implies that Jing-mei's beautician might have AIDS and that Jing-mei goes to him because it's all she can afford. Then they argue about what to do with her advertising copy, which Waverly says isn't good enough for their firm.

7. Suyuan says she forgot she had them. She was saving them for a special occasion.

8. During dinner Suyuan says Waverly was born sophisticated. Afterwards she says Waverly is like a crab that always walks sideways and crooked.

9. Suyuan believed spicy foods restore the spirit and good health. Jing-mei enjoys fixing this particular dish, and her father likes it.

10. In the final scene she takes her mother's place in her kitchen. She has the same complaints as Suyuan about the tenants' using too much water. She fixes a meal for her father. She tries to shoo the cat away and is equally unsuccessful.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Queen Mother of the Western Skies, Vignette Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Who are the two characters in this vignette?

2. What reason does the grandmother give for the baby's laughter?

3. What is the relationship between the grandmother and the baby's mother?

4. Why had the grandmother given up her innocence?

5. Why might the grandmother wonder if she has done the right thing?

6. Who is Syi Wang Mu?

7. Why would Syi Wang Mu know the answer to the grandmother's question?

8. Who else needs to know this answer?

9. What will people be able to do as long as they still have hope, according to this vignette?

10. In what way does this vignette differ from the other three?

Answers
1. The two characters are the grandmother and her granddaughter.

2. The grandmother says Buddha is teaching her to laugh for no reason. She also says the baby is free and innocent.

3. The grandmother is the mother of the baby's mother.

4. The grandmother needed to protect herself from the evils of the world. To do that, she had to gain experience. She could not go through life blindly.

5. The grandmother knows that her daughter will raise this baby the same way she was raised.

6. Syi Wang Mu is the Queen Mother of the Western Skies.

7. Syi Wang Mu has lived forever, through many lifetimes.

8. The baby's mother, the grandmother's daughter, needs to know this answer.

9. They will always be able to laugh.

10. In this vignette the grandmother learns from the child, instead of the other way around.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Magpies Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. What do magpies represent?

2. The turtle tells An-mei's mother to swallow her tears. What was the turtle's reason?

3. Who is Yan Chang?

4. At first, An-mei is very happy at Wu Tsing's. What factors contribute to her happiness?

5. An-mei describes the clock in her mother's room in great detail and says she learned something from it. What did she learn?

6. Why does An-mei's mother break one of the pearls in the necklace Second Wife gives An-mei?

7. How had Second Wife arranged for An-mei's mother to become Wu Tsing's fourth wife?

8. What weakness of Wu Tsing does Second Wife exploit?

9. Who is Syaudi?

10. Why was the timing of An-mei's mother's suicide so important?

Answers
1. Magpies are birds of joy.

2. The turtle said one person's sadness makes another person happy.

3. Yan Chang is An-mei's mother's personal servant. She helps take care of An-mei.

4. An-mei is happy because she is with her mother, because she is surrounded by new and amazing things, and because she is living amid great wealth.

5. She learned not to pay attention to meaningless things.

6. An-mei's mother wants An-mei to see Second Wife as the fraud she is. She does not want An-mei to give her loyalty to the woman who has caused so much pain.

7. First she invited An-mei's mother for dinner. The next night she invited her to play mah jong and then to stay the night. During the night she left the bed they were sharing and let Wu Tsing in. After he raped An-mei's mother, Second Wife spread the rumor that An-mei's mother had seduced him. No one else would have anything to do with her, so she was forced to marry him.

8. Second Wife knows that Wu Tsing is afraid of ghosts. Whenever she pretends she is about to become one, she gets what she wants.

9. Syaudi is An-mei's half brother, the son of her mother and Wu Tsing. Second Wife, however, has claimed him as her own.

10. The Chinese believed a dead person's ghost returns on the third day after death. The ghost of a woman can get revenge for a bad marriage by destroying the man's good fortune. They also believed all debts must be paid on the first day of the lunar new year. By making sure that she died two days before the lunar new year, An-mei's mother makes Wu Tsing acutely aware of the debt he owes her, a debt he can repay only by treating An-mei and Syaudi with great respect. He promises to raise them as if they were the children of First Wife and to revere her as if she had been First Wife. In doing this, he elevates both An-mei and Syaudi to a status above Second Wife, a position An-mei exploits at once.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Waiting Between the Trees Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. When Ying-ying wore her hair down, what did her mother say she looked like?

2. Ying-ying did not appreciate what she had as a child. What object best symbolizes that statement?

3. When did Ying-ying's husband's business trips start becoming longer and more frequent?

4. How did Ying-ying feel about her pregnancy?

5. What do the two colors of the tiger symbolize?

6. Although Ying-ying did not throw herself into the lake after her husband left her, in what ways did she become like one of the lady ghosts of the lake?

7. Where did Ying-ying meet Clifford St. Clair?

8. How did Ying-ying's first husband die?

9. What aspect of Lena causes Ying-ying to be ashamed?

10. What does Ying-ying do to summon her chi and bring both her black and gold sides back?

Answers
1. Her mother said Ying-ying looked like a "lady ghost at the bottom of the lake," a woman who became pregnant without being married and drowned herself to hide her shame. Later, her ghost would haunt the homes of living people with her hair undone.

2. A jade cigarette jar symbolizes her lack of appreciation. She took it, threw away the cigarettes, and played in the mud with it.

3. He was gone more after she became pregnant.

4. She was very happy at first, but after her husband abandoned her, she was so angry that she had an abortion and told the nurses to throw the baby into the lake.

5. The black represents yin—patient and cunning. The gold is yang—powerful and forceful.

6. Ying-ying was very depressed. She covered her mirrors so she could not see her grief; she left her hair down because she was too weak to pin it up; and she went to live with some cousins in the country, where she did nothing for 10 years.

7. They met in Shanghai where she worked in a dress shop.

8. When he tried to leave his last mistress, she stabbed him with a sharp knife.

9. Ying-ying is ashamed that Lena has no spirit, no chi.

10. Ying-ying remembers the events of her life that have caused her pain. She must accept the pain rather than hide from it in order to regain her spirit.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Double Face Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Waverly wonders whether she will look Chinese when she goes there on her honeymoon. Lindo assures her that everyone in China will know she is a foreigner. What will give her away?

2. Lindo wanted her children to have American circumstances and Chinese character. What was wrong with that?

3. Why has Waverly brought Lindo to Mr. Rory?

4. In what ways does Waverly show that she is ashamed of Lindo?

5. What kind of life did Lindo's mother predict on the basis of her facial features?

6. What made Lindo's nose change from being straight and smooth to crooked? What is wrong with having a crooked nose?

7. Who introduced Lindo and Tin?

8. Language is a barrier to Lindo and Tin at first. What problem does Lindo especially mention? How do they get around it?

9. Why did Lindo name her daughter after a street?

10. Lindo decides she will ask Waverly's opinion of what she has lost and gained in America. What does this decision tell us about their relationship?

Answers
1. Lindo says the way she walks and the expression on her face will give her away, even if her clothing and makeup do not.

2. The two don’t mix.

3. Waverly is marrying Rich, and she wants her mother to look nice.

4. She talks about Lindo in front of her, and she treats her as if she can’t speak English, make her own decisions, or hear well.

5. She will recognize opportunity, have a long life without becoming a burden, and be clever; but she will also have troubles early in her life. She would be a good wife, mother, and daughter-in-law.

6. Lindo bumped her nose on a bus. A girl who has a crooked nose will also have troubles.

7. An-mei Hsu introduced them.

8. She and Tin can’t tease or scold one another while they are dating because they speak different dialects of Chinese and both have poor English. She misses the teasing because that’s how she could tell if the relationship were serious. They get around it by writing in Chinese and by acting out what they mean. Eventually they learn enough English and enough of each other’s dialects to scold and tease.

9. Lindo wanted Waverly to know she belonged somewhere, so she named her after the street on which they lived.

10. Lindo has come to value Waverly’s opinion. The reconciliation they began in “Four Directions” has apparently worked out.

Short-Answer Quizzes: A Pair of Tickets Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Why have Jing-mei and Canning gone to China?

2. Why did Lindo tell the twins that Suyuan would come to see them when Suyuan had been dead three months? Why did Jing-mei ask her to write a second letter?

3. How did Suyuan know that her entire family had been killed in the bombing?

4. What aspects of China surprise Jing-mei?

5. What does Jing-mei’s name tell us about Suyuan’s hopes?

6. Why had Suyuan abandoned her babies?

7. What happened to the girls after Suyuan left them?

8. Why did Canning refuse to come to China with Suyuan when she suggested it?

9. Why does the first sister remind Jing-mei of Suyuan?

10. What was Suyuan’s long-cherished wish?

Answers
1. They will visit his aunt and her twin half sisters.

2. Lindo was reluctant to put such sad news in a letter; she said the twins should hear it from a member of their family. Jing-mei wanted her sisters to know before she arrived so that they wouldn't be disappointed and hate her and so that they wouldn't think Suyuan had died because of her neglect.

3. In the debris of the house Suyuan found a doll that a niece always carried with her. If the niece was in the house when the bomb fell, then her parents and the rest of the family must also have been there.

4. She is surprised that Guangzhou is a modern city, that an elegant hotel is so inexpensive, and that the room contains Western items such as German beer, Coke, and Cadbury's chocolate.

5. Jing means "essence" or "best quality." Mei means "little sister." She represents the essence of the other two sisters, a constant reminder that Suyuan hopes to see them again.

6. Suyuan thought she was about to die from dysentery, and she didn't want her babies to die with her.

7. They were adopted and raised by a childless couple who lived in caves not far from the road where Suyuan left them. Later they came to Shanghai.

8. Canning misunderstood what Suyuan wanted. He thought she just wanted to be a tourist.

9. The first sister has pressed her hand against her mouth the same way Suyuan did when Jing-mei crawled out from under the bed after being gone all afternoon.

10. Suyuan wanted to see all her daughters together.