



## LITERARY IDENTITY OF “THE JOY LUCK CLUB” BY AMY TAN

Shamuratova Malika Shadjalilovna

English Teacher Tashkent State Transport

University Department of Foreign Language

Normirzaeva Dildora Mirabitovna S.

English Teacher Tashkent State Transport

University Department of Foreign Languages

### Abstract

There are many of Chinese American authors who did great contribution to the literature but among them Chinese American writer Amy Tan plays an important role. Her works mostly explore mother-daughter relationships. Moreover, the connection of the past and the present is typical of Tan's style. “The Joy Luck Club” is one of her the most famous novels which focuses on the relationship between an immigrant Chinese mother and her American-born daughter.

**Keywords:** Immigrant mother, mah jong, living ghost, stereotype, marriage.

### Introduction

The aim of this article describes and analyzes the main tendencies in mother-daughter relations in “The Joy Lock Club” the theoretical discussion about concepts of identity and belongs in Asia America, as well as their reflection in literature. Special attention will be paid to the Amy Tan’s novel “The Joy Luck Club” from the standpoint of a traditional culture, values and rituals in Chinese culture.

In order to accomplish this aim, we have put forward the following tasks:

- To study up the phenomenon of Chines American literature and its development
- To identify main themes and motifs in Chinese American literature
- To find out the essence of Amy Tan and literary specificity of her works.
- To reveal mother-daughter relationships in the novel “The Joy Luck Club”

The Joy Luck Club is a 1989 novel written by Amy Tan. It focuses on four Chinese American immigrant families in San Francisco who start a club known as The Joy Luck Club, playing the Chinese game of mahjong for money while feasting on a variety of foods. The book is structured somewhat like a mahjong game, with four parts divided into four sections to create sixteen chapters. The three mothers and four daughters (one mother, Sycuan Woo, dies before the novel opens) share stories about their lives in the form of vignettes. Each part is preceded by a parable relating to the game.

In 1993, the novel was adapted into a feature film directed by Wayne Wang and starring Ming-Na, Lauren Tom, Tamely Tomita, France Nguyen, Rosalind Chao, Kiel7 Chinch, Tsai Chin, Lisa Lu, and Vivian Wu. The screenplay was written by the author Amy Tan along with Ronald Bass. The novel was also adapted into a play, by Susan Kim, which premiered at Pan Asian Repertory Theatre in New York.



The Joy Luck Club consists of sixteen interlocking stories about the lives of four Chinese immigrant mothers and their four American-born daughters. In 1949, the four mothers meet at the First Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco and agree to continue to meet to play mah Jong. They call their mah Jong group the Joy Luck Club. The stories told in this novel revolve around the Joy Luck Club women and their daughters. Structurally, the novel is divided into four major sections, with two sections focusing on the stories of the mothers and two sections on the stories of the daughters.

The first section, *Feathers from a Thousand Li Away*, introduces the Joy Luck Club through daughter Jing-Mei Woo, whose late mother Suyuan Woo founded the Joy Luck Club, and focuses on the four mothers. Jing-Mei relates the story of how her mother Suyuan was the wife of an officer in the Kuomintang during World War II and how she was forced to flee from her home in Kweilin and abandon her twin daughters. Sycuan later found out her first husband died, remarried to Canning Woo, and immigrated to the United States where Jing-Mei was born. Sycuan and Canning attempted to find Sycuan's daughters, and Canning assumed that Sycuan had given up hope. Jing-Mei, who has been asked to take her mother's place in the Joy Luck Club, learns from the other mothers that her half-sisters are alive. They ask that Jing-Mei go to China and meet her sisters, and tell them about Sycuan's death. The other three mothers relate the stories of their childhood. An-Mei Hsu's story relates how her mother left her family to become the fourth concubine of Wu Tsing, a rich merchant, while An-Mei was raised by her maternal grandmother. Her mother returns only to cut off a piece of her flesh to cook a soup in hopes of healing An-Mei's grandmother, though An-Mei's grandmother still dies. Lindo Jong explains how in childhood she was forced into a loveless marriage and was pressured by her mother-in-law's desire for Linda to produce grandchildren. Through her own ingenuity, Linda fabricates a convincing story to annul her marriage and immigrate to the United States. The final story of the first section follows Ying-Ying St. Clair, who tells the story of how she fell into a lake during the Zhongqijie festival when she was only four. After being rescued by a group of fishermen, she realizes that she is lost. This experience emotionally traumatizes her, and she is dropped at the shore, and wanders into an outdoor performance featuring the Moon Lady, said to grant wishes. But when Ying-Ying approaches the Moon Lady after the play to wish to be returned to her family, she discovers the Moon Lady is played by a man. The second section traces the childhoods of the Joy Luck children. In the first story, Waverly Jong talks about how she started playing chess, first with her brothers and then with old men in the playground near her school. At the age of nine, she becomes a national chess champion. She is embarrassed when her mother, Lindo introduces her to everyone she meets, showing her off like a trophy and seeming to take the credit for her daughter's brilliance. This leads to an angry confrontation between the two of them. Lena relates the stories her mother told her when she was younger (her great grandfather sentenced a beggar to die in the worst possible manner). Lena's family moves to North Hill from Oakland. Her mother, who seems restless, delivers an anencephalic child who dies at birth. In Lena's eyes, her mother becomes a 'living ghost'. The story of their neighbors and the relationship between the mother and the daughter of the neighboring household is also mentioned. Rose Hsu Jordan wishes to tell her mother that she plans to divorce her husband Ted. She reflects on their relationship. She then goes on to relate an incident in which her family (her parents and six siblings) go to the beach.



Her youngest brother, Bing, drowns. She returns along with her mother A Mei to search for Bing, but in vain. The last story is that of Jing Mei Woo and the pressure that her mother puts on her to perform exceedingly well in some field (to be a child prodigy). She begins to learn to play the piano but doesn't perform well in a concert and stops playing. This disappoints her mother because she wanted her to be a great pianist and Jing-Mei shows no interest in being anything else but herself. Around her 30th birthday, Suyuan presents her an old piano which she used to play as a child. Although Jing-Mei admits she had forgotten how to play the piano, Sycuan encourages her to try again. She admits to Jing-Mei that she still has the talent to be a great pianist, but self-doubt holds her back.

The third section follows the Joy Luck children as adult women, all facing various conflicts. In Lena's story, she narrates her troubling marital problems and how she fears being inferior to her husband, but does not realize he has taken advantage of her both at home and at work, where he is also her boss and earns much more than her. Ying-Ying is very much aware of this and encourages Lena to stop being passive and stand up to her husband or nothing will change. Waverly Jong worries about her mother's opinion of her white fiance, Rich, and recalls quitting chess after becoming angry at her mother in the marketplace (believing that her mother still has absolute power over her and will object to her forthcoming marriage to Rich). After a disastrous attempt at a dinner party to tell her mother of their wedding, Waverly confronts her mother the morning afterwards and realizes that her mother has known all along about her relationship with Rich and has accepted him. Rose Hsu Jordan learns that Ted intends to marry someone else after divorcing her, she realizes through her mother's advice that she needs to fight for her rights and refuses to sign the conditions set forth by his divorce papers. She hires a good lawyer and wins possession of the house, forcing Ted to take her more seriously. In Jing-Mei's story, Jing-Mei has an argument with Waverly at a Chinese New Year's dinner the year before the story begins. Realizing that Jing-Mei has been humiliated, Sycuan gives her a special jade pendant called "life's importance," which Jing-Mei rues that she never learned the meaning of the pendant's name. She also confronts Sycuan with the belief that she had always been disappointed in Jing-Mei and admitted she could never live up to her high expectations. Jing-Mei believes that because she has never finished college, doesn't have a good career and remains unmarried are reasons that she is seen as a failure in her mother's eyes. Sycuan eventually reveals her true meaning; that while Waverly has style, she lacks the kind and generous heart that Jing-Mei has. She also tells Jing-Mei that she understands the frustrations of never being good enough in her eyes and admits she is proud of Jing-Mei.

The final section of the novel returns to the viewpoints of the mothers as adults dealing with difficult choices. An-Mei reveals what happened after her grandmother died; she accompanied her mother back to where she lived as the abused fourth concubine of Wu Tsing, whose second concubine manipulates and controls the household and has taken An-Mei's half-brother as her son. An-Mei learns how her mother was forced into accepting her position after Wu Sting's second wife arranged for An-Mei's mother to be raped and shamed. When she came to her family for help, they cruelly turned their backs on her mother and telling her to leave. An-Mei finds her mother has poisoned herself two days before Chinese New Year, knowing that Wu Sting's superstitious beliefs will ensure An-Mei will grow in favorable conditions. During the funeral, she takes her younger half-brother and forces Wu Sting to



honor both them and their deceased mother out of fear of him being haunted by the mother's ghost. When the Second Wife attempts to discredit her, An-Mei quickly makes an example of her by destroying the fake pearl necklace that she originally gave to her, which exposes her cruelty and manipulation. This causes the Second Wife to realize that she has lost control of the household and brought trouble on herself that she backs down. Fearing bad karma on the way, Wu Sting honors both An-Mei and her brother as his children and their mother as his favorite 1st wife. Ying-Ying St. Clair reveals how her first husband, a womanizer, abandoned her and how she married an American man she did not love after relinquishing her sense of control in her life. She later took back her sense of control when she finally had a talk to Lena and convinced her to leave Harold. Linda Jong relates how she arrived in San Francisco and met An-Mei Hsu when they both worked at a fortune-cookie factory, which eventually gave her the means to plant the idea of marriage in her boyfriend's head. The novel's final episode returns to Jing-Mei and her mother's desire to find her lost twin daughters. Jing-Mei and her father fly to China, where Jing-Mei meets her half-sisters and embraces her Chinese heritage. In doing so, she was finally able to make peace with Sycuan. The Joy Luck Club has received criticism for perpetuating racist stereotypes about Asian Americans.

Literary figures such as Chinese American author Frank Chin have noted that the novel contains fabricated Chinese folk tales that depict "Confucian culture as seen through the interchangeable Chinese/Japanese/Korean/Vietnamese mix (depending on which is the yellow enemy of the moment) of Hollywood." Novelist Nancy Willard, in a somewhat positive critique, said that "Amy Tan's special accomplishment in this novel is not her ability to show us how mothers and daughters hurt each other, but how they love and ultimately forgive each other."

## Conclusion

Chinese Americans have been contributing to U.S. literature for over a century, but their role did not gain recognition in mainstream culture or academia until the 1970s. Since then, over 50 Chinese American studies programs, centers, and institutes have been established on university campuses, and organizations such as Undemand and the Chinese American Writers' Workshop, presses, and journals have helped to further cultivate Asian American literature. As a result, Asian American writers may no longer feel compelled to write in particular traditional or protest modes or represent the external cultural labels pressed upon them. Chinese American writers have captured the power of the past but have ventured into new territories and discovered, created, and revealed new voices and styles. While doing this article we have learnt how to collect the related information, how to analyze it, how to work on information and how to arrange it. Furthermore, we have learnt how to use research methods. We have improved my reading, writing skills and critical thinking abilities. To conclude, Chinese American literature has managed to embark on a successful voyage, and as the numbers of newly published fiction and non-fiction books show, it will continue its important work. As a consequence, this article is very essential in discovering a body of American literature as it plays an important role in the history of it.



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