

# [The Joy Luck Club](#)

Free Digital Software Notes on . . .

## ***THE JOY LUCK CLUB***

By

**Amy Tan**

[Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com)

**Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved**

The Joy Luck Club - MonkeyNotes

[Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com) Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

2

### **KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS**

#### **SETTING**

Though *The Joy Luck Club* takes place primarily in San Francisco in the United States, much of the novel occurs in flashbacks, set in China. The serene beauty of this Eastern country, marred by the violence of war, is evoked in the tale of Suyuan and her daughters. During the course of the flashbacks, the cities of Hong Kong and Shanghai, and the surrounding districts and towns, like Kweilin and Taiyuan, are portrayed in detail.

The Joy Luck Club, for which the book is named, is located in modern day San Francisco, where four Chinese mothers have made lives for themselves after leaving their native countries years earlier. A miniature of the old country has been recreated in San Francisco's Chinatown, where most of the immigrants live in the city. Their houses are replicas of homes in the motherland and are adorned with traditional Chinese furniture and decorations. Within Chinatown, the older inhabitants continue to follow their native customs and celebrate their important festivals. They also gather often to enjoy each other and to eat Chinese delicacies.

Although many of the younger generation Chinese descendants still live in Chinatown, they are very different from the older generation of immigrants. They have largely adopted the American way of life.

The novel includes anecdotes and stories from three generations of women, spanning a period of time that is sixty to eighty years in length and ending in the 1980s, when the book was published. The novel closes with a visit to China in the present day. This ending unifies the geographical and historical settings of the novel in a most fulfilling way.

#### **CHARACTERS**

##### **Major Characters**

##### **The Daughters**

**Jing-Mei "June" Woo** – the narrator who opens the novel. She introduces The Joy Luck Club of San Francisco. Although Jing-Mei is good-natured and large-hearted, she lacks ambition and is content to be a copywriter in a small advertising firm. She ends up in China, meeting her long lost half-sisters and fulfilling her mother's dying wish.

**Rose Hsu Jordan** – another daughter of the Joy Luck Club and the wife of Ted, a physician. Because Rose is timid and accepting, she is often taken for granted. When

The Joy Luck Club

[Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com) Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

3

Ted asks Rose for a divorce, her mother inspires her to stand up for herself. As a result, she refuses to let Ted walk all over her and take away her home.

**Waverly Jong** – another daughter of the Joy Luck Club. As a child, she was a prodigy at chess. As an adult, she is a successful tax-consultant and an ambitious, selfish, and strong-willed woman. She has a daughter, Shoshana, and is about to marry her second husband, Rich Shields. Waverly has confused ideas about her mother and her Chinese heritage; she is also afraid of her mother's disapproval.

**Lena St. Clair** – another daughter of the Joy Luck Club and the wife of a successful American businessman, Harold Livotny. He exploits her, refusing to share his wealth with her. Although she is a talented interior decorator, she suffers from her unhappy marriage, is anorexic, and feels she leads a hollow existence.

### **The Mothers**

**Suyuan Woo** - Jing-Mei's mother and the founder of the Joy Luck Club. As she tires to survive war-worn China, she abandons her twin infant daughters, hoping their lives will be spared. After she marries Canning Woo and comes to America, she desperately tries

to locate her daughters in China. At the opening of the novel, Suyuan has died, and Jing-Mei carries out her mother's goal in life – to find the twins.

**An-Mei Hsu** – Rose's mother and a member of The Joy Luck Club. An-Mei witnessed the sufferings of her own mother, who killed herself in an effort to insure her daughter's freedom. At a young age, An-Mei managed to escape to America, where she married and had seven children. She considers herself to be an independent and strong woman.

**Lindo Jong** – Waverly's mother and a member of The Joy Luck Club. As a young girl in China, Lindo was married off to an impotent husband. She manages to escape her husband and his mother and come to America, where she marries Tin Jong and has three children.

**Ying-Ying St. Clair** – Lena's mother and a member of The Joy Luck Club. Unlike her friends who came out of poverty in China, she hails from a wealthy Chinese family. When she was a young woman, she married and became pregnant. When her husband abandoned her, she aborted the baby. She later married an American named Clifford St.

Clair, whom she grew to love.

The Joy Luck Club - [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com) Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

4

### **Minor Characters**

**Canning Woo** - Suyuan's second husband and Jing-Mei's father. He asks his daughter to take the place of his wife in The Joy Luck Club and later accompanies her to Shanghai to meet his wife's lost twin daughters.

**Clifford St. Clair** - Ying-Ying's husband and Lena's father. He is a good-hearted man who loves his wife but does little to boost her morale.

**Tin Jong** - a Cantonese man who woos and marries Lindo while she works in a fortune cookie factory. An unassuming man, he remains in the shadow of his wife and daughter.

**Wu Tsing** - a wealthy, insensitive old merchant who rapes An-Mei's mother and forces her to become his fourth wife.

**Popo** - An-Mei's grandmother. She disowns her daughter for becoming Wu Tsing's concubine, not realizing her daughter had no choice. Popo acts as the guardian to An-Mei until her mother takes her away.

**Arnold** - an unattractive boy in the neighborhood. Lena is terrified she will one day

have to marry him. When he dies from the measles, Lena feels responsible for his death

and develops an eating disorder.

**Ted Jordan** - a medical student who marries Rose and then leaves her.

**Harold Livotny** - an architect who establishes his career with the support of his wife. He refuses to acknowledge her contribution, however, and obtusely insists on dividing their household bills down the middle. His wife comes to resent their mechanical life and tells him she is unhappy.

**Rich Shields** - a successful tax-accountant in a reputed firm. He loves and becomes engaged to Waverly Jong. He accepts her child, but makes many well-intentioned mistakes trying to impress her family.

## **CONFLICT**

### **Protagonists**

All four mothers and daughters are really the protagonists of their own stories. Each has

an individual struggle to overcome within the novel. Suyuan and Jing-Mei, however, seem to be the central figures whose story most closely unifies the plot. Suyuan is the founder of the Joy Luck Club, the tie that binds the stories, and Jing-Mei is the new representative of her family and her generation.

The Joy Luck Club - [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

5

On a secondary level, the protagonist is the Chinese culture and heritage, which struggles to survive and prosper in the American culture. Each of the stories of the mothers and daughters clearly depicts this struggle.

### **Antagonists**

Suyuan's antagonists are the war and other obstacles that prevent her from achieving her

dream of finding her lost twin daughters. When the Japanese invaded China, Suyuan was forced to leave her daughters behind and travel to safety in America. When she has

another daughter, she names her Jing-Mei and endows her with a legacy of purity and a

memory of her sisters who came before her. Upon Suyuan's death, the many friends she

has brought together in the Joy Luck Club impress upon Jing-Mei the importance of carrying on her mother's dreams. In the end, Jing-Mei travels to China and finds her lost

twin sisters.

The other women also struggle against opponents. Rose must fight Ted to retain the house even though he is divorcing her. Lena struggles with Harold and considers divorcing him. Waverly must fight her mother about getting remarried.

The Chinese culture fights for survival throughout the novel. The Americanized daughters of the Joy Luck Club resist their mothers and their histories without even fully understanding or knowing them. They seek to be a part of the American culture and want to be independent and different from their mothers. Most of them try to minimize their Chinese appearance and heritage.

### **Climax**

The main climax occurs when Jing-Mei decides to return to China to find her long-lost half-sisters, a trip that will fulfill her mother's dream and introduce her to the true Chinese culture. It is a victory of the old over the new and the mothers over the daughters.

There are additional climaxes for the other women in the book. Waverly finally tells her mother she is going to remarry. Rose refuses to give in to Ted's demands and let him have the house. Lena acknowledges the unhappiness in her marriage and tells Harold that their married life is dull and mechanized.

### **Outcome**

The plot ends in comedy, with the protagonist overcoming the antagonist in every case. During her trip to China, Jing-Mei fulfills her mother's dream and accepts her Chinese heritage as an important part of her true identity; she also accepts that her mother's proud Chinese spirit lives on in her sisters and herself.

Waverly begins to reconcile with her mother and reflect more on the culture from which she comes. Rose stands up for herself, gaining the strength to do so from her mother. Lena voices her disappointment with Harold and her marriage for the first time, realizing

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

6

that her mother's insight is truthful. In essence, each of the four young women begins to feel connected with her Chinese heritage, realizing that her mother's spirit lives on in her life.

### **PLOT** (Synopsis)

The novel opens with the parable of a Chinese woman who buys a duck that has stretched itself into a swan. She wants to take the swan to America, but immigration officials will not permit it. All she can keep is a feather from the swan. She treasures the feather and plans to present it to her future daughter, who will be born in America. She will only give the feather when the daughter can speak perfect English. The parable

is followed by four sections, each composed of four parts. Each part reveals part of a story about a Chinese mother and her Americanized daughter.

The first story is about Suyuan and her daughter, Jing-Mei (also called June). The story begins in the present and gives flashbacks to the past. Jing-Mei has just been asked to take her mother's place in the Joy Luck Club; it is a ladies group, meeting in San Francisco, that tries to promote the Chinese culture and form friendships among the Chinese women who have left their homeland to come to America.

Suyuan started the Joy Luck Club when she lived in China. When she comes to America as a refugee, she organizes another club in San Francisco. Her American born

daughter has never really never had an interest in or understanding of the Joy Luck Club.

Jing-Mei thinks of it as only a meeting of women who come together to talk in Chinese and play games.

When she visits the Joy Luck Club, Jing-Mei learns that the women in the club are bound by mutual tales of suffering and unhappiness in their native China. The club gives them comfort and friendship by sharing with others who have lived lives like their own. When Jing-Mei visits the club, the women tell her that Suyuan has twin daughters living in China; she had to abandon them many years ago during the

war. They also reveal that Suyuan has tried all her life to find these twins. After her death, her efforts pay off, for the twins are located. The ladies of the club want to pool their money to send Jing-Mei to China to meet her half-sisters and fulfill her mother's lifelong wish of a family reunion.

The narrative then shifts to the other members of the club. An-Mei Hsu talks about her childhood when she was under the care of her grandmother and forbidden to talk to her own mother, who had become a concubine to a wealthy merchant. When her

grandmother was dying, her mother returned and tried to save her estranged parent from death by severing her own flesh and preparing it in a broth. When she left, she took her daughter with her to the merchant's home.

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

7

Lindo Jong's story is different but reveals a similar predicament. Lindo had been engaged as a child to a wealthy boy in the neighborhood. She was sent to live with his family at the age of twelve and was treated like a servant until she turned sixteen.

When

she finally married, her life was miserable. She learned that her husband was impotence

and that her mother-in-law was an impossible, domineering woman. To escape her unhappiness, she came to America.

Ying-Ying St. Clair's childhood story involves a trip to the Moon Lady, a mysterious woman who grants wishes. Ying-ying has been thrown into the sea and rescued by strangers. Since he longs to be reunited with her family, she goes to see the Moon Lady

to make her wish.

These four narratives about the childhoods of the Chinese mothers constitute the first section of the novel. The second section begins with another anecdote. This one is about a mother who warns her daughter not to ride her bicycle away from home. The daughter does not obey her mother and rides away; but she falls off her bicycle before even reaching the corner. The narrative then splits into the four stories again, but this time the daughters' tell of their childhoods.

Waverly Jong remembers one Christmas when her brothers receive a chess set as a present. She is fascinated with the game and teaches herself to play; she soon becomes a

child chess prodigy and is even featured in *Life* magazine. Her Chinese mother is extremely proud of her daughter's accomplishment and spares no opportunity to boast about her. Waverly resents her mother's ambitious and proud nature and tries to run away from her, but is quickly caught. That night in bed, she plays mental chess against her mother, making up the moves for both of them.

Lena talks about her childhood and how her Chinese mother had tried to protect her from evil. Ying-Ying would constantly frighten Lena with stories about ghosts and devils; the moral of the stories was always that obedience pays. As a result, Lena often tries to revolt and be disobedient. Growing up in an apartment in San Francisco, Lena often heard the fighting of her neighbors, an Italian woman and her daughter. She assumed that the women hated one another until she met the daughter and learned that

the relationship was strong, though volatile. Lena envied the openness of the relationship, wishing she could talk to her mother with the same openness.

Unfortunately, she could not have such a relationship, for her own mother was slowly slipping into madness.

Rose Hsu Jordan remembers a time in her childhood when her parents left her in charge

of her brother, Bing. The two of them go to the beach, where Bing refuses to obey Rose.

Suddenly, he is swept out to sea and drowns. Bing's death causes Rose's mother to lose

her faith in God, and Rose has always felt guilty. Now Rose is losing something dear to

her. Her husband Ted has announced he is leaving her for another woman. Rose loses her faith in love.

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

8

Jing-Mei Woo remembers the time when her mother had tried to make her a prodigy to compete with the successes of Waverly. Suyuan first dreamed about making her daughter an actress. Then she tried making Jing-Mei a whiz kid. When Jing-Mei showed no enthusiasm to excel in either field, she was forced to become a pianist. She rebelled by playing badly and hurting her mother's feelings. The piano was abandoned until Jing-Mei turned thirty, when her mother made a gift of the piano to her. Jing-Mei did not try to play the piano until after her mother's death, when she discovered two things: she could play well, and her mother had selected music that had great meaning for both their lives.

The influence of the Chinese mothers on their children persists even after they become adults. Waverly is going to be married to an American colleague who also works as a tax-accountant in a reputed firm. Although she has become a polished and successful woman, she is still afraid to communicate her feelings to her mother. When she finally gathers courage to talk to Lindo, she is surprised at her mother's supportive reaction. Section III opens with an anecdote about a mother who is upset to find her daughter has

placed a mirror at the foot of her bed. When she cannot persuade the daughter to remove the mirror, which she believes is bad luck, she purchases another mirror for the head of the bed, to bring balance. Both women emerge happily from the situation. Lena has married Harold, a successful architect, and they have moved into a new home

with all the modern conveniences. Lena is very proud of her home and wants to show it off to her mother. She brings Ying-Ying to stay in the guestroom. Ying-Ying is not impressed with the house and sees flaws in everything, including the construction and the furniture. She also sees flaws in Lena's marriage. Her mother's presence makes Lena recall her childhood, when she feared that she would be forced to marry a boy she

did not like. In retaliation, she hated the boy and tormented him. She was also so fearful of being forced into a bad marriage that she refused to eat and developed anorexia. When the boy died unexpectedly, Lena was finally able to return to normal.

Lena admits to herself that her present marriage is not perfect. Her husband barely knows her and is not interested in her likes or dislikes. Although he has become successful and wealthy, he does not share with Lena. Though she supported him financially as he built his business, he now refuses to acknowledge her contribution. He also forces her to pay half of the bills. During her stay, Ying-Ying senses that the marriage is not a good one. She encourages Lena to stand up for herself. Taking her mother's advice, Lena tells Harold she is not happy, but she breaks down in tears when he expresses his surprise at her feelings.

Waverly struggles with telling her mother, Lindo, that she is engaged to a man named Rich. She blames the failure of her first marriage on Lindo; and now she fears her mother's disapproval about her second marriage. She tries many ways to break the news

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

9

to Lindo, even taking her out to lunch in order to tell her; but fearing criticism, Waverly

always hesitates to tell her story. Later she brings her mother to the home she shares with her fiancé in order to break the news, but Waverly fails again. When she finally takes Rich with her to her mother's house, things go very badly, and Waverly still does not break the news. When she tells her mother she is engaged, Lindo responds surprisingly well.

Rose Hsu Jordan's life is also in turmoil. Her husband, Ted, has found another woman and wants a divorce. Unable to come to terms with her separation from Ted, she fails to pay heed to her mother's words of wisdom and drowns herself in self-pity and sleeping pills. Fortunately, she comes to her senses before it is too late. When Ted comes to collect the signed divorce papers and the agreement signing over the house to him, Rose

stands up for herself, as her mother has advised. She refuses to give the house to Ted. Jing-Mei reflects on the time her mother gave her a jade pendant on the Chinese New Year. To help in the celebration of the New Year, Suyuan invited the Jongs for dinner. To prepare for the meal, Jing-Mei and her mother shopped

for crabs. An-Mei carefully selected the best crabs, rejecting one with a missing claw, for to eat a maimed crab on New Year's is bad luck. The shopkeeper, however, gave An-Mei the crab for free. At dinner, Suyuan wound up with the maimed crab and refused to eat it, for she did not want bad luck. During the dinner party, Waverly Jong insulted Jing-Mei, hurting her feelings. Her mother noticed Jing-Mei's sadness. To cheer her up, she gave her a New Year's present after the guests had left. It was a lovely

jade pendant. Now that Suyuan is dead, Jing-Mei wears the pendant with a new sense of delight.

Section IV opens with the story of a laughing infant that is compared to the Buddha and the Queen Mother of the Western Skies. As the child's grandmother watches over the infant, she recalls the lost innocence of her daughter in contrast to the pure innocence of

the baby. She hopes that her daughter will be renewed and that the grandchild will grow up in happiness. Section IV then tells about the unhappiness that some of the Chinese women have endured.

In the first part of Section IV, Rose tells her mother, An-Mei, how unhappy she is in her marriage. Since her mother knows the pain of unhappiness, she encourages Rose do whatever it takes to be happy again. An-Mei reflects on the misery and sacrifices of her own mother, who had been raped and forced into sexual servitude to a wealthy merchant. Though the home of the merchant was grand and luxurious, life there was less terrible. An-Mei's mother was one of several wives, and she was the least respected. Knowing that she was unable to rise above her situation, she killed herself in the hopes of teaching An-Mei not to be slave to anything. An-Mei has tried to raise Rose to be independent. When she learns that her daughter is being divorced by her husband, Ted, she encourages Rose to stand up to him.

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

10

The second story of the fourth section returns to Ying-ying, who is still staying in the house with Lena and Howard. Concerned about her daughter's marriage, she thinks about her own past. She remembers her misery when her first husband deserted her, leaving her pregnant and alone. She also remembers that she could not, at first, love her

second husband because she had shut herself off from her emotions. Now she wants to

help her daughter free her own emotions in an effort to find happiness.

The third segment is about Waverly Jong and her mother, Lindo. As the segment opens,

Waverly is trying to plan her honeymoon. She would like to travel to China; however, she tells her mother that she is afraid that she will be mistaken for a Chinese citizen and

retained there. Her mother Lindo laughs at her daughter. She knows that Waverly is totally Americanized and very un-Chinese. No one in China would mistake her for a native. Lindo has been back to the homeland, and everyone teased her about being totally American. Lindo then recalls her immigration to America. People had told her to adopt American ways as quickly as possible, but she found it difficult at first, for she was working in a Chinese fortune-cookie factory. She also fell in love with a Chinese man.

The final segment closes the novel. Jing-Mei and her father travel to China, just as the women in the Joy Luck Club have encouraged them to do. They are reunited with their extended Chinese family, and Jing-Mei gets to know her twin half-sisters, whom her mother had been forced to abandon many years ago. For the first time in her life, she feels a true connection with her Chinese heritage. As the book ends, Jing-Mei is filled with Suyuan's spirit and a sense of peace.

## **THEME**

### **Major Theme**

The major theme of the novel is the difficulty of maintaining their native culture and a sense of their heritage when immigrants settle in America. They find that it is even more difficult to pass the culture and heritage down to their second-generation children, who are born and brought up in America. Although the Chinese mothers in the book struggle to retain their heritage, their Chinese-American daughters have little interest in things of the homeland. They want to be a part of the modern, liberal American society in which they have been raised; however, as they learn about their mothers' varied experiences in China, the daughters begin to understand and accept their dual heritage.

### **Minor Theme**

In developing the major theme, Tan develops and intertwines some important minor themes. The most important is the positive influence that a mother can have on her daughter. This is seen in the relationship between all four sets of Chinese women and

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

11

their Americanized children. There is also a conflict between appearance and reality and

a conflict between tradition and modernity.

## **MOOD**

Since much of the novel is written in flashback, the key mood of the book is nostalgic.

As the mothers reflect on their lives in China and their early days in America, they share their emotions with their daughters, hoping to teach them about their heritage. In giving the histories of the mothers, the narrative is often sad and tragic, as it details incidents of

rape, suicide, accidental death, and war.

The tales of the daughters also contain struggles for love, acceptance, and happiness.

In



spite of the predominance of sad emotions, there are many lights moments in the book, especially those having to do with language barriers and cultural gulfs. The mood of the book is also brightened by the hopes and dreams that the mothers have for their Chinese-

American daughters.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

### **Author Information**

Amy Tan, also known as An-Mei Tan, was born in Oakland, California, in 1952. She was the second of three children and the only daughter born to John and Daisy Tan. During her early years, Amy's family moved from place to place, finally settling down in Santa Clara, California. Amy's parents were quiet people, who kept largely to themselves. Amy, however, eagerly sought to mix and merge with the American society around her. She learned to resent her Chinese appearance, heritage, and customs, for she

felt they kept her from being in mainstream America. Throughout her youth, she struggled to erase her Chinese identity. Life grew even more difficult for her when her father and her brother, Peter, died of brain tumors when she was only fifteen years old. Her mother moved her and her remaining brother, John, to Switzerland. The move simply made Amy more rebellious.

Amy was always a good student. When she was eight years old, she won an essay contest, which marked the beginning of her desire to become a writer. Her mother, however, wanted her to become a concert pianist or a neurosurgeon. The independent Amy followed her own desires. After graduating from high school in 1969, Amy enrolled in Linfield College in Oregon to study medicine. The next year she returned to California and pursued her studies at San Jose City College, where she changed her major to English and linguistics and began to write in earnest. She later transferred to San Jose State University and received a Bachelor's degree in English and a Masters degree in Linguistics. Amy went on complete a doctoral program in Linguistics at the University of California, Santa Cruz. While still a student, she married Louis De Mattei, a tax attorney.

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

12

In 1976, Amy became a language-development consultant for the Alameda County Association for Retarded Citizens. Although she also spent time writing business publications, she wanted to write fiction. In 1986, after her mother was hospitalized following a heart attack, Amy wrote a short story called "End Game". The story deals with a child prodigy and her strained relationship with her mother. Later, Amy expanded the story into a collection of tales and named it *The Joy Luck Club*. In May 1986, the book was published and was received with overwhelming response, including rave reviews; it was soon on the best-seller list. For the book, Amy was nominated for the National Book Award for fiction and National Book Critics Circle Award. She was honored with the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for fiction and the Commonwealth Club Gold Award.

After the resounding success of her first novel, in 1991 Amy wrote *The Kitchen God's Wife*, which is based on the life of her mother. In 1992, Amy published *The Moon Lady*, a children's book expanding on an episode from *The Joy Luck Club*. Amy next wrote *China's Boxer Rebellion*; and *The Hundred Secret Senses* is her latest offering. Today she is acknowledged as one of the most successful writers in blending the old world and

the new world into effective fiction.

## **LITERARY/ HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

*The Joy Luck Club* is a masterpiece that blends aspects of autobiography, fairy tale, history, and religion. Amy Tan uses and expands upon events from her own life, from her mother's past, from Chinese tradition, from her religious upbringing, and from history to create her piece of fiction. She further adds elements of the fairy tale by the introducing the concepts of "good and evil" and "poetic justice" in stories like "The Red Candle," "The Moon-Lady" and the "Scar." Throughout the novel, there are also little parables and vignettes, included to teach a moral.

Amy's parents came to America in 1940 in order to escape war-torn China. Settling in California, they lived in a Chinese community, largely isolating themselves from real American society. When they had children, they wanted them to become Americanized, while retaining their Chinese culture and character. They also stressed the importance of

education, wanting their children to be successful. This upbringing is clearly captured in *The Joy Luck Club*. The Chinese mothers in the novel are very traditional themselves, but they want their daughters to be educated and successful. They also want them to possess a modern outlook and attitude, without abandoning their heritage. In essence, the mothers in the novel reflect the character of Daisy Tan, and the daughters exhibit the

rebellious attitude of Amy Tan.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND NOTES**

### **SECTION I - FEATHERS FROM A THOUSAND LI AWAY**

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

13

#### **The Parable**

The novel opens with a parable presented by a Chinese woman living in America.

While in

China she had purchased a "swan" from a vendor, who boasted that the animal was actually a

duck that had stretched itself out because of a strong desire to change. The woman bought the

"swan" to take with her to America because it represented her hope for a bright future in her

new country. On landing in America, the immigration officials took the swan from the woman. She managed to save one of the swan's feathers, which she hoped to give to a future

daughter.

As she had hoped, the Chinese woman had a daughter, who became very Americanized

and grew up to speak fluent English. Now the two of them are unable to really communicate, for the mother speaks little English, and the daughter does not know Chinese. Additionally, they cannot understand the each other's lifestyle. The daughter resents her mother's traditional Chinese ways, and the mother cannot understand why her daughter does not appreciate the suffering she has endured for her sake.

#### **Notes**

This is only the first of four parables in the book, for Amy Tan effectively uses a parable to introduce each of the four sections of *The Joy Luck Club*. This opening parable depicts America as a land of opportunity, where people can achieve greatness. As she sails to American, clutching her "lucky swan," the Chinese woman is filled with hope. She envisions a bright future for herself. She also envisions having a successful

daughter who speaks perfect English. The woman's wish for a daughter comes true. The symbol of the swan is very significant; desiring to be something better than it was,

the duck changed itself into the swan. As the Chinese woman leaves for America, she also wants to change herself into something better and believes her new country will offer her and her future daughter a wealth of opportunity. Upon landing in America, the woman quickly learns that all will not go smoothly or easily. Her treasured swan is stripped from her by immigration officials, and she is left with only a feather. She dreams of giving the feather to her future daughter. Ironically, the daughter becomes so Americanized that she cannot communicate with her mother, for the daughter speaks only English and the mother speaks only Chinese.

Language is not the only barrier between mother and daughter. The daughter has grown

up in America, where life has been relatively easy and sorrows have been relatively few.

The woman, on the other hand, has struggled greatly and remembers sorrow well. Her life has been shaped by a Chinese upbringing and a set of circumstances her daughter will never understand. The disparity of thoughts and experiences between mother and daughter is a theme that permeates the entire novel.

### **The Joy Luck Club - Jing-Mei Woo**

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

14

Suyuan, Jing-Mei Woo's mother, started the Joy Luck Club in San Francisco. It is composed of a group of Chinese women who come together to share their friendship and to play games. The real purpose, however, is to support one another and to save their Chinese culture and heritage.

At the beginning of this part of the book, Jing-Mei is thirty-six years old, and her mother, Suyuan, has suddenly died of a cerebral aneurysm. Jing-Mei's father asks his daughter to go to the Joy Luck Club in her mother's place, to honor her memory. Jing-Mei agrees to attend one of the meetings. She then tells the story of the Joy Luck Club. Suyuan had told Jing-Mei that she began the first Joy Luck Club back in Kweilin, China. Then, when Suyuan moved to America in 1949, she formed a Joy Luck Club in San Francisco. She had chosen members for the second club from the First Chinese Baptist Church; all of the selected women had undergone suffering, much like she. When Suyuan tried to tell her daughter all about the club, Jing-Mei never really listened. As a result, all she knows about the Joy Luck Club is that the ladies meet to play mahjong, to gossip, and to share gifts with one another.

Suyuan had also told her daughter about the soldier who had come to her house in Kweilin. He told her she must flee at once to avoid the atrocities of the Japanese invaders. She quickly packed a few belongings and left with her two small children. Little by little, she was forced to abandon her belongings. Eventually, she left her children behind as well, hoping they would be spared. Jing-Mei was shocked. She had never heard her mother's tragic story and had never known about her abandoned sisters.

Honoring her father's wish, Jing-Mei travels to An-Mei's house to attend a meeting of the Joy Luck Club. It begins with the reading of the minutes. Then as An-Mei prepares the food, the other women gossip. After supper, they play mahjong.

As she is about to leave, Jing-Mei is approached by some of the women in the group. They give her \$1200 to travel to China. They explain that her mother's lifelong dream had been to locate her lost twin daughters. Because of her efforts, the daughters have been located. They want Jing-Mei to go and meet them, for it would answer Suyuan's dream.

### **Notes**

This opening chapter is very significant, for it explains the meaning of the book's title

and introduces several of the themes. Jing-Mei explains how her mother, Suyuan, started the first Joy Luck Club in Kweilin, China. Then when she came to America in 1949, she began another Joy Luck Club in San Francisco. Although Jing-Mei knows little about the club, she states that the Chinese women who belong meet together to play

mahjong, gossip, share their oriental culture, and support one another.

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

15

Key themes are also established in this chapter. The first is the pain caused by lack of communication. Jing-Mei and her mother, Suyuan, often have difficulty communicating. Being very traditional, Suyuan is extremely proud of her Chinese heritage and fights to keep it in place. Jing-Mei, born and raised in America, does not understand or care about the old customs and is embarrassed by her mother's traditionalism and somber attitude. She thinks of herself as American and adopts the culture that surrounds her. The differences between mother and daughter make it hard for them to really communicate. Jing-Mei cannot understand the suffering her mother has endured; and Suyuan cannot understand the frivolity of Jing-Mei. When Suyuan finally tells her daughter about the twin daughters that she abandoned in China, Jing-Mei

is completely shocked.

The theme of lack of communication is developed throughout the novel. Each of the four mothers and daughters has difficulty really talking to and understanding one another. In addition, Amy Tan had the same problem with her mother, Daisy; their worlds were so different, it was difficult for them to really communicate. Like Suyuan, Daisy Tan also intentionally withholds information from her daughter. It is not until they are preparing to move to Switzerland that Daisy tells Amy that she has left three daughters behind in China. Amy is completely surprised at the news, just like Jing-Mei. In addition, Daisy has also suffered greatly in life, just like Suyuan, and Amy has trouble relating to her mother's past, just like Jing-Mei.

Suffering is another key theme of the novel. The Joy Luck Club was first started in Kweilin, China, to keep the women from thinking about the horrors of war surrounding them. It is, in essence, a club formed out of suffering. When Suyuan starts the second club in San Francisco, the women she seeks as members have all endured suffering, just

like she. As a result, there is an immediate bond between them, and a willingness to share with one another.

The Joy Luck Club is very important to Suyuan. It is not surprising that after Suyuan's death, her husband asks Jing-Mei to take the place of her mother at the club. While attending the meetings, Jing-Mei learns many things about her mother and the other Chinese women. She also sees the closeness of the members. When they learn that Suyuan's lost daughters have been located, they give Jing-Mei the money to travel to China to meet them, for they know this is what Suyuan would want.

This section also begins to develop some of the key characters of the book. It becomes obvious that Suyuan and her daughter are different in their nature and temperament. Suyuan is a very ambitious lady with an iron-will and strong determination. She wants the best for her daughter and is determined to make her succeed. Jing-Mei, however, lacks her mother's determination and falls short of her expectations. Suyuan is fiercely proud of her Chinese heritage and struggles to make Jing-Mei understand and appreciate

it. Jing-Mei, however, simply wants to be accepted as an American and is embarrassed

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

by her oriental background. These differences intensify the communication gap between mother and daughter.

### **An-Mei Hsu - Scar**

This chapter is about An-Mei Hsu, the hostess of the first Joy Luck Club meeting that Jing-Mei attends. Like Suyuan in the last chapter, An-Mei relates how she and her brother had suffered in China. Her mother had left the family to live with a wealthy merchant as his fourth wife and concubine; the family pretended that she was “dead.” Then when An-Mei’s father died, she and her brother went to live with their aunt, uncle, and grandmother. Hoping that her granddaughter would turn out better than her daughter, An-Mei’s grandmother, Popo, told her frightening stories that stressed the importance of morality and obedience. In one of her tales, she said that An-Mei and her brother came from the eggs of a useless goose. Being a young child, An-Mei literally believed the story and felt worthless and unimportant as a result.

When An-Mei was still a child, her mother unexpectedly came for a visit. An-Mei immediately noticed that she had a long neck, just like a goose; this observation reinforced the tale that Popo had related to her earlier. An-Mei was definitely convinced that she came from a goose egg. An-Mei also felt her mother looked strangely evil, with her haughty attitude, her strange clothes, and her high-heeled shoes. She seemed to be as

bad as Popo had always described her.

As Popo and An-Mei’s mother argued about whether she should take the children away with her, a pot of hot soup spilled on An-Mei. The burns were so serious that she nearly died from them. Everyone blamed her mother for the injury and sent her away. Popo, however, understood An-Mei’s emotions for her mother. Trying to encourage her recovery, Popo told the child that if she did not get well, her mother would forget who she was. Little An-Mei, not wanting her mother to forget her, listened to her grandmother and recovered from the burns; but she carries both physical and emotional

scars from the incident.

Later An-Mei’s mother partially redeemed herself. When Popo was dying, she attempted to save her life. Following an old Chinese custom, she severed part of her own flesh and put it in a “soup” that she created to heal her mother. As a result, An-Mei’s mother also bore a physical scar.

### **Notes**

This chapter again stresses a lack of communication and disconnection between mother and

daughter. An-Mei’s mother is disowned by her grandmother when she leaves her children to

live with a wealthy merchant. As a result, An-Mei has always been separated from her mother.

Popo, the grandmother, unwittingly makes the separation more painful when she tells An-Mei

that she came from a worthless goose and when she bombards her with stories about

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

disobedient children who are severely punished. Throughout her childhood, An-Mei is terrified; as a result, she carries emotional scars.

The physical scars that both An-Mei and her mother carry are very symbolic. An-Mei is

severely burned by boiling soup and carries a scar from the incident. An-Mei's mother cuts her own flesh to make a soup meant to heal her mother, Popo. Like her daughter, she also has a scar. The physical scar, however, is not nearly as painful as the underlying emotional scars caused by the separation of a daughter from her mother. The image of An-Mei's mother as a goose is also symbolic. Like the goose at the first of the book, who tries to change itself into a swan, An-Mei's mother also stretches herself into something different. Popo disclaims her as a result. She is so hurt by her daughter's immorality that she unknowingly punishes her granddaughter by telling her that she came from a worthless goose. In other words, An-Mei is made to feel like a goose egg, a useless being. After many years of sad confusion, An-Mei finally comes to understand her mother and accept that she is like her in many ways. Her own suffering has made her appreciate the suffering her mother endured. She states, "Not because she came to me and begged me to forgive her. She did not. She did not need to explain that Popo chased her out of the house when I was dying. This I knew. She did not need to tell me she married Wu Tsing to exchange one happiness for another. I knew that as well. Here is how I came to love my mother. How I saw in her my own nature. What was beneath my skin. Inside my bones." An-Mei further explains that to really know yourself, you have to deal with your past; you must peel away your own skin, and the skin of your mother, and the skin of your grandmother before her. It is a painful, but necessary, process in order to be in touch with your true self; but it is only when the scarred skin is peeled away that the healing can begin. Much of the book deals with past suffering, which causes a need for healing.

### **Lindo Jong - The Red Candle**

Lindo Jong's story is about familial obligations and honor. Following ancient Chinese custom, Lindo's parents promised their daughter, when she was only two years old, to eventually marry a boy named Tyan-yu. Though most people in China had adopted more modern concepts of marriage, Lindo's parents were from the old school. When her parents were forced to leave their home because of a flood, they had to leave Lindo behind. Even though she was only twelve years old, Lindo belonged to the family of her betrothed.

The Huangs, the family of Tyan-yu, were very wealthy and took little interest in Lindo. They made her stay in their servants' quarters and perform manual tasks, such as cooking, washing dishes, cleaning, and embroidering clothes. She was never accepted as a member of the family even though she would eventually become Tyan-yu's bride. When Lindo turned sixteen, the wedding took place. Lindo never thought of disobeying

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

18

the course set for her by her parents. She knew that the honor of her family depended on her obedience.

Lindo's marriage was miserable, for there was no love in it. Tyan-yu, feeling no emotion for his wife, would not touch Lindo. Matters were made worse when everyone wondered why Lindo did not become pregnant. Her mother-in-law even forced her to

stay in bed for a period of time, hoping she would become pregnant. Finally, when a servant girl in the house became pregnant by her own boyfriend, Lindo came up with a plan that would save her family's honor and free her from Tyan-yu. She told her mother-in-law that she had had a dream in which she discovered the servant girl was of imperial birth and was pregnant by Tyan-yu. Lindo also claimed that if she remained married to Tyan-yu, he would die. Huang Tai Tai believed her daughter-in-law and released her from the bond of marriage with no repercussions. After they were divorced,

Tyan-yu married the servant girl, and Lindo left for Peking. She later traveled to America, where she married Tin Jong. They had three children. After the birth of each child, her husband gave her a gold bracelet, made of twenty-four carat gold. Also, when she has extra money, Lindo buys herself bracelets made of pure twenty-four-carat gold. To her they are a symbol of her own purity – her refusal to be untrue to herself.

In the midst her story, Lindo interrupts herself to complain about her own daughter. She has so little sense of duty that she does not even come to dinner as promised. Lindo cannot understand her daughter's dishonorable behavior, for she sacrificed everything to

honor her parents and keep their word. She sees herself as twenty-four carat gold; her daughter, who does not understand honor and sacrifice, is only fourteen-carat.

### **Notes**

Lindo Jong's story is the story of sacrifice and survival in an old-fashioned world. Because her parents had promised her as a wife to Tyan-yu, Lindo was left with his family when she was only twelve years old. Since Lindo was an obedient child, she never rebelled even though the Huangs treated her poorly and even though she was forced to marry Tyan-yu when she was only sixteen years old. Lindo had been taught that family honor was extremely important, and she was willing to sacrifice her own happiness to uphold the family name.

Lindo's marriage was miserable, because there was no emotion in it. Tyan-yu refused to

touch his wife; but it was Lindo that was criticized for not producing children. Unable to bear her unhappiness, Lindo tricks her mother-in-law, saying that a servant girl is pregnant by Tyan-yu and that if he remains married to Lindo, he will die. Lindo's ability to fabricate this tale and convince Huang Tai Tai of its truth proves her creativity and determination. Also the fact that she manufactured an escape from the marriage without

dishonoring her family name reveals that she is sensitive and intelligent.

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

19

After escaping from the Huangs, Lindo traveled to America and married Tin Jong. They have three children, who are very Americanized. Much to Lindo's sadness, her own daughter does not have the same sense of honor and family loyalty that she had. The daughter often breaks her promises to her mother without showing real remorse. Lindo knows that her daughter is only fourteen-carat gold, while she herself is twenty-four carat gold, like the bracelets that she wears. Each of the bracelets was a present from her

husband when she delivered his baby.

The red candle of the chapter heading refers to the marriage candle, which is traditionally lighted at both ends and blown out by the bride and groom once their marriage is consummated. Lindo blows out both ends of her candle, since her marriage is a failure. The candle, therefore, becomes a symbol of her self-sufficiency and ultimate independence.

## Ying-Ying St. Clair - The Moon Lady

Ying-Ying St. Clair is the last mother to relate the tale of her past. Like An-Mei and Lindo Jong, memories of her childhood haunt her. As a young girl of four, she had gone out with her family during a magical celebration known as the Moon Festival, where everyone was expected to find the Moon Lady and ask her to grant a wish. While the others were celebrating, Ying-Ying watched in fascination as a servant gutted fish, chickens, and turtles. She then noticed that specks of blood covered her new outfit, which her mother had sewn for her for the festival. Wanting to cover up the specks and not knowing how, Ying-Ying rubbed more blood onto her clothes.

When her nursemaid saw Ying-Ying covered in blood, she shrieked in horror, believing the child to be harmed. When she realized what had happened, she felt relieved, but angry. She stripped Ying-Ying to her underwear and left her in the back of the boat by herself. In her excitement over looking out for the Moon Lady and watching the fireworks, Ying-Ying lost her balance and fell overboard into the river. She was rescued by some people on a boat and put ashore, but she could not locate her family; she felt lost, both from her parents and from her true self. She found the Moon Lady, however, and watched her performance with eagerness. After the play, Ying-Ying was eager to ask the Moon Lady to grant her wish. She ran backstage, where she was shocked to discover that the Moon Lady was actually a man. In her surprise, Ying-Ying forgot her wish. The traumatic experience completely changed Ying-Ying. Although she was eventually found by her parents, she never felt she was the same person.

Ying-Ying contemplates the fact that she has always been separated from her Americanized daughter by a seemingly insurmountable gulf. It is like they cannot communicate. As she thinks about the distance between the two of them, Ying-Ying remembers her forgotten wish: she wanted to be “found.” She now wonders if she and her daughter will ever really find each other.

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

20

### Notes

Ying-Ying’s story is centered on a traumatic moment in her life when she was punished for

getting blood on her clothes by being stripped to her underwear and left alone. Ying-Ying is so

crushed that she feels she has lost her true identity. The tiger outfit made especially for her to

wear to the festival has been taken away, and she is by herself on a boat wearing only nondescript

cotton panties. When she falls overboard, she feels like she has lost herself. She looks at a child on another boat, safely playing at her mother’s legs. Ying-Ying tries to believe that

the safe little girl is really herself.

Ying-Ying is rescued and taken ashore, but she cannot find her family. When she spies the

Moon Lady, she plans to make a wish; then Ying-Ying discovers that the Moon Lady is really

a man. She is so surprised at the discovery that she forgets to make her wish. Then in the

midst of thinking about how she and her own daughter are separated by a different lifestyle and

a communication gap, Ying-Ying suddenly remembers her wish from long ago. She wanted to



be found.

As this fourth part of the first section of the novel comes to a close, several themes and ideas have been developed and repeated. Each story has pointed out the difference between appearance and reality and the need to find one's true self. Just as the swan was really not a swan, the moon lady is not really a woman. Just as Ying-Ying wanted to find herself when she was lost, Lindo Jong had wanted to find herself outside of her miserable marriage to Tyan-yu.

## **SECTION II - THE TWENTY-SIX MALIGNANT GATES**

### **The Parable**

In this introductory part to the second section, the author presents a conversation between a mother and daughter. The mother forbids her child from riding her bicycle away from home. When the girl argues, the mother uses the book, *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates*, to warn her daughter of the dangers of leaving home. The girl asks to read the book, but her mother tells her it is written in Chinese and is, therefore, out of her grasp. The girl rebels by riding her bicycle down the street, as forbidden by her mother. Before she reaches the corner, she falls from the bicycle.

### **Notes**

This introductory passage introduces the themes of conflict and rebellion, which are carried throughout the second section of the novel. Like the girl who disobeys her mother, the daughters of the ladies in the Joy Luck Club fail to follow the rules set by their mothers and suffer the consequences of their actions.

### **Waverly Jong - Rules of the Game**

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

21

Waverly Jong is the daughter of Lindo Jong, the narrator from *The Red Candle*.

Waverly serves as the narrator of this chapter, recalling her childhood in Chinatown in San Francisco. She tells how she lived with her parents and her brothers in a modest apartment above a bakery. She also remembers loving the sights and sounds of Chinatown.

One Christmas, Waverly received a box containing twelve rolls of Lifesavers as a present. She was disappointed in the gift and believed that her brothers' presents were far superior. One of them received an intricate set of plastic building parts; the other brother received a chess set.

With intensity, Waverly watched her brothers play chess, teaching herself the rules in the process. When she began to play the game, she investigated strategies, did research

on plays, and carefully planned the moves necessary to defeat her opponents. Long after

her brothers lost interest in the game, she continued to play chess and became quite skilled. She enrolled in and won several tournaments. By the time she was nine years old, she was a national chess champion and was featured in *Life* magazine.

Waverly's mother became her cheerleader and coach, but she was also her disciplinarian. She taught her daughter "the art of invisible strength;" its lesson was that Waverly was in charge of her own destiny. If she was not successful, she only had herself to blame; if she were going to succeed, she would have to work hard. Waverly took her mother's lesson to heart and became determined to be successful at chess and in life.

Waverly's mother was excessively proud of Waverly's success. During Saturday shopping trips, Lindo paraded her daughter about like a living trophy. Waverly hated

her mother's outrageous pride and boasting. One day she became so frustrated that she ran away from her, hiding almost the entire day. When she finally returned home, her mother and the rest of her family ignored her, acting as if she did not exist. Waverly went to her room and imagined herself engaged in a life-sized game of chess, where she fought the invisible opponent – her mother. In truth, however, Lindo is not really her opponents. She is the one who has taught Waverly the “art of invisible strength,” a method of believing in oneself and succeeding in life.

### **Notes**

*Rules of the Game* is actually a chapter about the rules of chess, as well as the rules of life.

Waverly is the product of an ambitious mother who always pushed her only daughter.

At an

early age, Lindo taught Waverly that she was in charge of her own destiny; by working hard,

she could be successful in life. Following her mother's advice, Waverly works hard at anything she undertakes. When she teaches herself to play chess, she learns the rules, researches strategies, and carefully plans her moves. She is so successful at chess that she is

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

22

featured in *Life* magazine. Lindo Jong is excessively proud of her daughter and takes credit for

her success.

One morning Waverly has had enough of her mother's boasting about her and runs away for

the rest of the day. When she returns home, her mother and the rest of the family ignore her, as

if she did not exist. Waverly is so frustrated that she goes to her room and imagines herself

engaged in a game of chess against “two angry black slits” that represent her mother's angry

eyes. In this game of mental chess, Waverly has the ability to control the moves of both her

mother and herself. She enjoys defeating her mother in the game of chess; but she knows that

she cannot defeat her in life, Waverly she has been entirely shaped by Lindo Jong. This theme

of parental influence on their children is developed throughout the novel.

### **Lena St. Clair - The Voice from the Wall**

Lena St. Clair is the narrator of this chapter. She is the sheltered and over-protected daughter

of Ying-Ying, the narrator from *The Moon Lady*. Lena recalls how her mother constantly warned her about the dangers in life. Ying-Ying told her not to talk to strangers, warning her

about bad men who would take her away and rape her. She also told Lena that a bad man lived

in their basement, for she wanted to make certain that Lena did not go down there and hurt

herself. Because of her mother's fearful teachings, Lena admits that she grew up fearing strange men and horrible acts of violence. Lena also remembers that she was haunted by a story about her grandfather sentencing a man to die. As a child she imagined all kinds of horrible torture that the man endured. Ying-Ying told her daughter that the manner of the man's death was not important. Lena, however, thought it was very important. If you imagined the worst kinds of things that could happen, the young Lena felt like it could help you to avoid them. Now, however, Ying-Ying's sinking into madness is the worst thing that could happen to Lena, but she can do nothing to prevent it.

Ying-ying was a war bride, who came to America speaking no English. Since her groom spoke no Chinese, he renamed her Betty, communicated for her, and controlled her life. At immigration, he even subtracted two years from Betty's age. Lena explains that her mother is still at times unable to speak without her husband's help.

Ying-Ying has never been really happy in America. When her husband was promoted and moved the family into a new apartment, Ying-Ying did not like it. She complained that it was poorly constructed and that the walls were so thin that she could hear the neighbors fighting. When she lost a baby, her mental state deteriorated even further. She began to talk about another baby she "killed" back in China. In truth, Ying-Ying had been seduced as a young girl. Since she was pregnant, the man married her, but soon deserted her. Her miserable youth has contributed to her madness.

Lena thinks about the neighbors from that childhood apartment. She remembers that the

voice from the wall was really an Italian mother and daughter who lived together in fiery

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

23

and constant conflict. The shouting was so severe at times that Lena thought one of them had killed the other. One day she spoke to the daughter and learned that the outbursts of emotion were actually ties that bound the mother and daughter together. Suddenly, Lena became envious of the dynamic relationship between the Italian mother and daughter. She longed to have the same kind of open interaction and expression with her own mother.

At the end of the section, Lena despairs over her mother's madness. She longs for a solution and wonders if there is any sacrifice she could make to restore Ying-Ying's sanity.

### **Notes**

Having a Chinese mother and an English-Irish father, Lena is the product of two cultures. She herself is light skinned, like her father, but she has her mother's slanted eyes. At times she feels like a lost person, not fitting into either culture. Lena longs to be close to her mother, but since she has sunk into madness, she knows the closeness will probably never happen.

Many factors have contributed to the madness of Lena's mother. While she was a young

girl in China, Ying-Ying was seduced by a man. Since she was pregnant, the man married her, but soon deserted her. When Ying-Ying lost the baby, she blamed it on

herself. In an effort to erase her past, Ying-Ying comes to America as a war bride. Her husband, who speaks only English, changes her name to Betty and allows the immigration officials to subtract two years from her age. Ying-Ying feels like her true identity has been lost.

Since Ying-Ying cannot speak English, she and her husband never really communicate. Instead, he speaks for her, never allowing her to be herself. As a result, she feels alienated and isolated. When her husband moves her and the family into a new apartment, Ying-Ying hates it. She complains that it is located too far up on a hill and is poorly built. Her dissatisfaction contributes to her madness. Then when she loses a baby, her mental state deteriorates further, for it brings back memories of her horrid past.

The entire chapter highlights the theme of "Appearance vs. Reality." Ying-Ying, being a frightened woman herself, makes life appear fearful to her young daughter. She warns

Lena about talking to strangers and tells her that there is a bad man who hides in their basement. Believing the tales of her mother to be real, Lena grows up fearful of strangers and basements.

The new apartment up on the hill is also filled with the conflict of Appearance vs. Reality. Lena's father believes he is doing something significant for his family by moving them across the river to a better place. In truth, the apartment contributes to

The Joy Luck Club [Freeditgitalsoftware.com](http://Freeditgitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

24

Ying-Ying's madness; she never likes the place and complains about it constantly. It is also the place where she loses her baby. The apartment also introduces Lena and her mother to the Italian mother and daughter who live next door. Since they constantly scream and fight with each other, it appears that these two women hate one another. In truth, they have a warm, close relationship, one like Lena longs to have with her own mother. It is ironic that the apartment of the next-door neighbors is filled with verbal conflict, but warmed by deep love; in contrast, Lena's apartment is quite peaceful, but it is totally lacking in love.

Another irony is that Lena would be willing to make a sacrifice to restore her mother's sanity. She remembers that her grandmother had actually sacrificed a piece of her body to try and restore Popo's health (as told earlier in the novel). Now Lena wants to do the same for Ying-Ying. Unfortunately, she can think of no way to help her mother; she can only dream that some day she will again be whole.

It is important to notice the use of wind in this chapter. In the last chapter, the wind was seen as a thing of strength. Lindo Jong taught her daughter, Waverly, to harness the wind to give her power. Ying-Ying's view of the wind is entirely different. She sees the wind, which blows constantly at the top of the hill, as a bad thing. She believes it strips you of your power and sends all your strength down the hill. In truth, Ying-Ying cannot marshal the wind or any other power to give her strength. Stripped of her identity, she has become a broken, mad woman.

### **Rose Hsu Jordan - Half and Half**

Rose, the narrator of this chapter, is the daughter of An-Mei, who narrated *Scar*. Although Rose and her husband are on the verge of a divorce, she dreads telling her mother. Even though her mother has disapproved of Rose's marriage to an American, Rose knows that An-Mei will encourage her to try and save it. Rose, however, knows that there is nothing to salvage.

Rose's dread over facing her mother makes her recall a painful memory from her past when she dreaded to face An-Mei. Twenty years ago Rose was a happy child living in the midst of a loving family. One day the family took a trip to the beach, and Rose was

given the responsibility of looking after her younger brothers, named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Bing. She had some trouble controlling her youngest brother, Bing, who wanted to go far out into the waves. Rose warned him not to go any further, but he did not listen. When she took her eyes off him for a minute, Bing was swept away by a wave and tragically drowned. An-Mei could not believe that Bing was gone. She was convinced that he would soon be returned to them alive and well. Her mother's emotions only made Rose feel more guilty.

An-Mei had many reactions to Bing's death. Being religious, she prayed to God for his safe return to her. She then tried to defy fate by throwing her own mother's ring into the

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

25

sea, thinking it might bring back her drowned son. When Bing did not come back, An-Mei lost faith in God. As a result, she never again read the Bible; instead, she used it under a table leg as a support. Eventually, however, An-Mei accepted Bing's death.

Rose returns to her present situation. She knows that her mother has never approved of

her marriage to Ted since he is American rather than Chinese. She met Ted at the University of California, some seventeen years ago. Rose fell deeply in love with Ted, largely because he was so different than the Chinese boys she knew. After dating, they decided to marry before Ted started medical school.

From the beginning of their marriage, Ted insisted upon controlling things. Rose was helpless to do anything about it. Now she is miserable because he wants a divorce.

Unable to do anything about the situation, she feels as helpless as when she watched her

brother drowning. She compares her loss of faith in love to her mother's loss of faith in God.

### **Notes**

Rose's chapter titled *Half and Half* is a story in two halves: one half from her childhood and one half from her adulthood. When Rose thinks about losing her husband and her faith in love, she remembers her past when her mother lost her son and her faith in God.

She tells the story of how her youngest brother, Bing, drowns and explains An-Mei's reaction to the loss.

"Half and Half" also applies to the relationship between Rose and her husband. In their marriage, Rose is the Chinese half and Ted is the American half. Both their mothers oppose the unions. Ted's mother opposes it because she does not believe in racial mixing and feels her son is marrying beneath his social status. Rose's mother knows that two very different heritages will not blend, and she fears that Rose will stop being Chinese.

Finally, "Half and Half" refers to the state of the Hsus before and after the drowning of Bing. In fact, Tan described the beach where the boy dies as "a giant bowl, cracked in half, the other half washed out to sea." Prior to Bing's death, An-Mei and her children were a happy and close-knit family. An-Mei was a pillar of strength. A very religious person, she carried the Bible around and read it for support and encouragement. After Bing's death, An-Mei abandoned her religion and placed the Bible as a support for the leg of the kitchen table. She was angry at God for not returning Bing to her; her anger negatively affected the entire family.

In this chapter, two themes are further developed. As with the other Chinese daughters, there is a huge gap in communication and thinking between Rose and An-Mei. The daughter has become very Americanized, especially after her marriage to Ted, an

heritage is emphasized in the chapter. An-Mei totally resents Rose's abandonment of her Chinese self.

### **Jing-Mei Woo - Two Kinds**

Jing-Mei is the daughter of Suyuan, the recently deceased mother who was introduced in

Section I as the founder of The Joy Luck Club. Before her death, Suyuan had always seen America as a land of hope and fulfillment. Wanting her daughter to have every advantage in this land of opportunity, she gave her various lessons, such as piano and acting, and encouraged her to apply herself in school so she could have intellectual excellence. Jing-Mei resented her mother's interference and insistence on excellence. It was difficult for Suyuan to save the money to buy a used piano for Jing-Mei. To pay for Jing-Mei's piano lessons, she cleaned the teacher's house. Although Suyuan insisted

that her daughter practice hard to become a concert pianist, Jing-Mei showed no real talent or drive to excel at the piano. Her first recital was a flop, and she refused to play any more. When her mother protested, Jing-Mei shouted that she wished she were dead,

just like her mother's two lost babies in China. Sadly, her mother put the piano up and never mentioned it again until Jing-Mei was an adult.

On Jing-Mei's thirtieth birthday, Suyuan asked her if she would like to have the piano; but Jing-Mei had no interest in it. Ironically, after Suyuan's death, Jing-Mei claimed the piano and began to play again. Surprisingly, she found out that she had some talent and

that she could still play some of the old songs she had learned in her youth. The first piece she remembered was appropriate called "Pleading Child;" the second piece was called "Perfectly Contented."

### **Notes**

Once again the chapter highlights the conflict between the aspirations of a mother and the feelings of resistance from a daughter. Suyuan, having lost two daughters in China, wants the best for Jing-Mei. She gives her a variety of lessons, wants her to excel in her

studies, and tries unsuccessfully to make her a concert pianist. Unfortunately, Suyuan pressures her daughter to the point of rebellion. Jing-Mei takes no interest in the piano and refuses to practice as her mother wants. She convinces herself that she does not have to do what her mother desires.

Suyuan believes in the American Dream. With hard work, she feels that Jing-Mei can be anything she wants to be in this great country. After all, her daughter will never suffer the kind of deprivation and tragedies that she had to endure in China. Jing-Mei, however, takes America for granted. A product of American culture, she is independent and resistant to Chinese heritage and traditions. She has no desire to prove herself or excel in any field. She wants to take life as it comes. In her words, "I did not believe I could be anything I wanted to be. I could only be me." Although Suyuan allows her

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

daughter to choose her vocation, Jing-Mei is not really interested in any field. She studies, but without dedication. Her resistance is the result of a clash of cultures; Jing-Mei resists what she thinks is the restrictive influence of her oriental background.

Amy Tan has appropriately titled this chapter as “Two Kinds.” Suyuan and Jing-Mei are opposites in their natures and attitudes. The title also refers to two pieces of music on the piano. As a child, Jing-Mei had considered the two parts to be separate pieces, neither of which she could master. After her mother’s death, however, she takes up the piano again and discovers that the pieces are two parts of a whole. She discovers the same thing about herself. Although she is American, she is also Chinese – the product of her mother. The first two piano pieces that Jing-Mei plays as an adult are significant, for she has evolved from a “Pleading Child” to a “ Perfectly Contented” woman who can understand the two cultures that have shaped her.

### **SECTION III -AMERICAN TRANSLATION**

#### **The Parable**

This section, like the other sections, begins with an anecdote. A mother is shocked to find that her daughter has placed an armoire with a large mirror facing the foot of her bed; the mother is convinced that the mirror will bring her daughter bad luck. Her daughter, who is modern in her thinking and does not share her mother’s superstitious beliefs, refuses to alter the position of the mirror. To rectify the wrong, the mother places another mirror at the head of the bed to nullify the ill effect of the mirror at the foot of the bed. She believes the new set-up will bring her daughter luck. The anecdote throws light on the traditional views of a mother clashing with the modern outlook of a daughter. What the daughter considers fashionable and modern offends the mother’s sense of propriety and luck. But the mother is sensible. She cannot change her daughter’s mind about removing the mirror, so she corrects the imbalance by purchasing a new mirror. This way both the mother and the daughter are happy.

#### **Lena St. Clair - Rice Husband**

Lena is nervous because her mother, Ying-ying, is coming to visit her and Harold in their new home. Lena is afraid that her mother will criticize the house and her marriage to Harold. When the chapter opens, Lena and Harold are in the midst of an argument over who should pay for the cat’s treatment for fleas. Lena’s life with Harold has degenerated into one of mechanics. Years ago Lena worked hard to provide Harold with the financial support he needed to start his own architectural

firm. Now that Harold is a successful businessman, he shamelessly refuses to share his success with his wife. Even though Lena earns a small percentage of what Harold makes, he insists that they split their bills in half, right down to the fifty cents each pays

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

28

for ice cream. Even though Harold does not appreciate Lena and takes advantage of her,

she does not like to acknowledge it. She knows, however, that her mother will.

When Ying-ying arrives, she is not pleased with the house, just as Lena has feared.

She

feels it has a lack of balance, is too expensive, and is not well built. Her criticisms remind Lena of an incident from her childhood. When she was a child and did not finish her rice, Ying-ying would frighten her into eating the rice by telling her she would one day marry a man who had as many pock marks on his face as the rice particles left on her plate. The young Lena knew a boy, Arnold, who was terribly pockmarked. Horrified at the thought that she would one day marry him, she ate all of her rice. Still fearing that

she might have to marry Arnold, Lena began to hate him and torment him. She was also so upset about Arnold that she refused to eat. Then one day her father read her the news about Arnold's death. Feeling miserable and guilty, Lena convinced herself that she was responsible for his death because of her hatred and her refusal to eat. In retaliation, she stuffed herself with ice cream until she got sick. This incident was the beginning of Lena's true anorexia and her distaste for ice cream. During her mother's visit, Harold discovers for the first time that Lena does not eat ice cream. He is horrified by the thought that he might be insensitive to his wife's likes and dislikes. Ironically, he is not sensitive to anything about Lena. As a result, she tells him that she is unhappy with their life together, which she views as nothing more than a planned and systematic existence. Harold is puzzled and confused by his wife's confession. Ying-ying, however, understands her daughter's unhappiness and warns Lena to mend her life before it breaks down.

### **Notes**

This chapter again emphasizes the communication gap that exists between a Chinese mother and her Americanized daughter. At the beginning of the chapter, Lena is dreading her mother's upcoming visit, for she is sure that Ying-ying will criticize the new house that she and Harold have bought. She knows that she will also criticize her marriage to Harold, for Ying-ying has never liked him since he is not Chinese.

This chapter also exposes the communication gap that can exist between modern couples. The relationship between Lena and Harold has become distant and strained because he gives all his time and energy to his work in order to be successful. Unfortunately, he does not remember that Lena was the one who made sacrifices and worked to help him start up his architectural firm. Now he is selfish with her, making her pay one-half of all the bills even though she makes much less money than he. Harold is so preoccupied with being successful that he has never even realized that his wife does not eat ice cream. This, however, is just one of many things that he does not realize about Lena. When Lena complains about the routine of their existence and

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

29

expresses a desire to change the pattern of their lives, Harold is taken aback. He cannot understand that she could possibly be unhappy.

The fancy table placed in the guest room is symbolic of the life led by Lena and Harold. Harold made the rickety, poorly constructed table while he was in school. Lena, aware of the fragility of the table, has repeatedly tried to convince Harold to make it stronger; he, however, has seen no need to fix it. Similarly, Lena is aware of the hollowness of her wedded life and wants to correct it. Like the rickety table, her marriage is fragile and may break down unless it is repaired. When she tells Harold of her unhappiness and her desire to fix it, Harold does not see what needs to be changed in their marriage.

This chapter again points out the contrast between traditional Chinese culture and the modern mechanical world. Ying-ying belongs to the past where customs and traditions play an important part of life. She had always lived together with members of a huge



family, where people lived truthfully and shared their joys and sorrows. In contrast Lena's world is fashionable, modern, and mechanical; but her family life is hollow and meaningless. Waverly tries to stand up to Harold and express her true feelings, but since she lacks self-confidence, she cannot convince her insensitive husband of the mechanical nature of their existence. Lacking the strength to bring about change in herself or her situation, Waverly can only disintegrate into tears. Ironically, her traditional Chinese mother sees the problem and advises her daughter to fix the situation, even if it means divorce.

### **Waverly Jong - Four Directions**

Waverly Jong is in a predicament. Though she is an intelligent adult, she still fears her mother's disapproval. She has been unable to bring herself to tell Lindo that she is about to remarry, for she does not want to see her mother's reaction. Lindo never liked her first husband, and Waverly indirectly blames her for the failure of the marriage. Now Waverly is afraid that her mother's disapproval of Rich Shields will poison this second marriage as well.

Waverly makes many plans about ways to break the news to Lindo. She takes her to a restaurant called "Four Directions," where she plans to tell her about her upcoming marriage. Lindo, however, occupies the conversation by criticizing the food and the waiters. Since her mother is already in a negative frame of mind, Waverly decides not to tell her about her marriage plans. Later, she invites her mother to the house she shares with Rich, hoping that her mother will see the unmistakable signs that they are living together and question Waverly about her future plans. Her mother comes for the visit, but makes no comments; an astonished Waverly remains silent. Next Waverly takes Rich with her to her mother's house for dinner. Rich tries to please the family, but fails miserably, for his actions appear contrary to Chinese customs. He seems oblivious to his mistakes, but Waverly is upset by them and filled with irritation for 30

Rich. Finally, on the day after the dinner party, Waverly tells her mother she plans to marry. To Waverly's surprise, Lindo is kind and supportive, causing Waverly to burst into tears.

Within the chapter, Waverly recalls a time when she tried to rebel against her mother's control of her life. She tried to upset her by giving up chess. The plan, however, backfired, for it was Waverly who missed the game. Before long, she was playing again, but she never was as successful. Finally, she feared that she had lost her talent and she permanently gave up playing chess competitively.

### **Notes**

"The Four Directions" is really a follow-up to "The Rules of the Game." In the earlier episode, Waverly mastered the game of chess and succeeded in becoming a champion.

In this chapter, she relives the past when she lost interest in the game and gave up her title of a champion. To rebel against her mother's control of her life, Waverly quit practicing chess. She thought she was getting even with Lindo, but her mother appeared

unaffected by Waverly's decision; it was the daughter who missed the game terribly. Waverly, who has always been a sensitive and defensive female, is the perfect example

of a self-fulfilling prophet. She fears things so much that she nearly makes them happen. She married the first time against her mother's will. When the marriage failed, she indirectly blamed Lindo for it. Now Waverly is afraid to tell her mother that she is

about to remarry. Although she loves Rich, she also fears her mother's disapproval. She

makes several attempts to break the news to Lindo, but they all fail. Then when she senses that Rich is not meeting her mother's high expectations, she finds herself irritated

with him for little flaws. It is clear that Waverly is strongly influenced by Lindo, like all of the other Chinese American daughters in the book.

The title of this chapter, "Four Directions," carries more than one meaning. The most obvious is that it is the name of the restaurant where Waverly takes Lindo in order to tell her the news about Rich. When Lindo occupies the conversation with varied criticisms of the food and the waiters, Waverly is unable to tell her mother about her plans to remarry. More importantly, "Four Directions" refers to Waverly's life, which is pulled in many directions. Even though Waverly is a successful tax accountant with a good position, she lacks self-confidence, especially in dealing with her mother. Her insecurity and indecisiveness make her a bundle of nerves. She always fears the worst will happen

with Lindo, to the point that she often causes bad things to happen. She reads wrong meanings into her mother's words and creates a barrier between herself and Lindo, leading to needless misunderstanding and tension between them. When she finally gains

the courage to tell Lindo about her plans to marry Rich, she realizes that she has misjudged her mother. In truth, her mother loves her deeply and wants her daughter to be happy; as a result, she is very supportive of her plans to remarry.

31

It is clear that Mrs. Jong is a sensible woman, even though she is uneducated and rooted

in Chinese tradition. When Waverly was a champion chess player, Lindo did not know the rules, but she could still give her daughter wise and helpful suggestions based upon her keen observations and common sense. In a like manner, she is able to sense the correctness of the relationship between Rich and Waverly and blesses their plans to marry. Since Lindo did not approve of Waverly's first marriage, which ended in failure, it is obvious that Lindo's common sense estimate of it was correct; she knew that her daughter was marrying the wrong man, for the wrong reason, to spite her mother.

The themes of mother-daughter conflict and the importance of Chinese heritage are further developed in this chapter. From the time of her youth, Waverly has feared the disapproval of her mother. Since Lindo expected so much from her, she was afraid to show her true self to her mother. When she rebelled as a youth, giving up the game of chess to hurt her mother, the plan backfired, for Lindo did not seem to mind; it was Waverly who greatly missed playing chess. As an adult, Waverly still seeks Lindo's approval, but silently rebels against her. Although she knows that her mother disapproved, she married her first husband. She also lives with Rich before they are married, even though she knows Lindo does not approve.

Like the other Chinese American daughters in the book, Waverly desires to hide her Chinese side and enhance her American character. Ironically, Shoshana, her daughter from her first marriage, possesses the best of both cultures. She emerges confident and

cheerful, proud of being a Chinese American.

### **Rose Hsu Jordan - Without Wood**

Rose reflects on her impending divorce from Ted. She is shattered, for she is still in love with him, and seeks the help of a psychiatrist. Her mother, An-Mei, pleads with her

to talk to family, not to a psychiatrist. Rose, however, has always found it difficult to talk with An-Mei. As a child, she was often frightened by her mother's stories of ghosts and Old Chou, the man who guarded the door to dreams. She remembers dreaming about being in Mr. Chou's garden, where he shouted warnings to her about listening to and minding her mother. An-Mei is still trying to make her daughter mind and listen. Upset by having received the divorce papers to sign, Rose takes sleeping pills and falls asleep, dreaming of Old Chou. When she wakes, she receives phone calls from her mother, her psychiatrist, and Ted. Her husband wants her to sign the divorce papers at once so that he can remarry; he also states that he wants the house for himself. Rose is

horrified to learn that Ted is leaving her for another woman and wants to take the house as well. She asks him to come over to discuss things. When Ted arrives, Rose takes him out to the overgrown gardens of their home. In the past, Ted had meticulously tended the gardens, which Rose loved. She felt that the beautiful and healthy flowering plants were symbolic of the love between Ted and herself. In truth, the gardens were just another of Ted's obsessions. He controlled the plants by planting them and pruning

32

them, just as he controlled Rose's life. Now she accepts that both the plants and her marriage have gone to ruin. In accepting this, Rose reaches inside herself to find strength that has never been there before. She hands Ted the unsigned divorce papers and tells him she will not leave the house. For the first time in her life, Rose has acted with certainty rather than timidity. She is no longer a fragile flower (Rose), but a tough weed that will survive. In time, she will grow into a woody plant, capable of standing alone.

At the end of the chapter, Rose looks forward to going to bed. It is no longer an escape from reality for her, but a time for her to be in touch with her inner self. When she peacefully falls asleep, she has another dream about Mr. Chou, but it is not a frightening

nightmare this time. Instead, she dreams that An-Mei is walking with Mr. Chou in a garden, and they are planting weeds. Rose now understands that her mother has planted

her to survive.

### **Notes**

This chapter reinforces the idea that the solution to one's problems lies within oneself and not outside. Fortunately, Rose realizes this before she loses everything. Although Ted is divorcing her for another woman, she will not allow him to also have the house. For the first time in her life, she stands up for what she knows is right. She refuses to sign the divorce papers until he agrees that Rose will keep the house.

Being a typical Chinese mother steeped in tradition, An-Mei has always tried to impose her will on Rose, often frightening her daughter into obeying her commands. In the past, she warned Rose about ghosts and evil men who might snatch her away. She also

told Rose that she was "born without wood," being pulled in too many directions and never taking a stand. An-Mei really wants Rose to listen to her, for she thinks that she has her daughter's best interests at heart; she also wants Rose to make her own decisions. As a result, when she hears that her daughter is going to a psychiatrist, An-Mei is horrified. She begs Rose to talk to the family about her problems, not to some stranger. Rose, however, cannot talk to her mother, for she fears her disapproval. Ironically, An-Mei's words of wisdom help Rose to resolve her dilemma, while the words of the psychiatrist only confuse her.

Like the other Chinese mothers in the book, An-Mei does know what is best for her daughter. Rose tends to listen to other people rather than listening to her own conscience. An-Mei tries to teach her to have strength of character and trust in herself, rather than acting like a creature “without wood.” Because of An-Mei’s help, Rose is finally able to stand up for herself and tell Ted that he cannot have the house.

33

The imagery of the weeds in this chapter is significant. Like her overgrown garden, Rose has been mistreated in life because she did not stand up for herself. An-Mei had earlier told Rose that “a girl is like a young tree. You should stand tall and listen to your mother standing next to you. That is the only way to grow strong and straight. But 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.” Throughout her life, Rose has listened to people other than her mother. They tended to misuse and abuse the sensitive Rose, especially Ted. In the end, Rose listens

to her mother and has “wood” enough to stand tall and refuse to give in to Ted’s demands.

### **Jing-Mei Woo - Best Quality**

One Chinese New Year just before Suyuan’s death, Jing-Mei joined her family for a celebration. Her mother gave her a fancy jade pendant to wear around her neck. Although Jing-Mei accepted the pendant, she thought it was too big and gaudy and did not understand its meaning. Later, she meets someone else wearing the same pendant;

he tells her it was a gift from his mother and that he, too, does not know its meaning. That Chinese New Year had been an unhappy occasion for Jing-Mei. Her mother had invited the Jongs to her house for the celebration. Jing-Mei accompanied her mother to the market to buy crabs. Suyuan carefully selected the crabs, rejecting one with a severed claw, for it would bring bad luck; the shopkeeper, however, threw in the maimed crab for free. After the guests arrived, Suyuan realized that she had forgotten to

count Shoshana, Waverly’s daughter, in the number of guests. As a result, she added the

maimed crab to the pot that was cooking. At dinner, Waverly served Shoshana first, selecting for her the best crab. In contrast, Suyuan took the last portion, which was the crab without a claw. She did not eat a bite of the crab, for she did not want to have bad luck.

During the meal, Waverly insults Jing-Mei by criticizing her hair stylist, calling him gay and suggesting he probably has AIDS. Jing-Mei responds with a subtle insult about Waverly’s business, which has failed to pay Jing-Mei for some copywriting she did for them. Waverly responds that Jing-Mei’s work is sub-standard. This criticism brings tears to Jing-Mei’s eyes. Knowing that Jing-Mei has been hurt by Waverly, Suyuan tries to comfort her daughter after the guests leave. She calls Waverly a crab, who walks crooked and states that Jing-Mei is a much better and more honest person. She then gives Jing-Mei the jade pendant, which is of the best quality. She also tells her the pendant represents her “life’s-importance.”

The entire chapter is punctuated with Suyuan’s complaints about the neighbors and their

cat. Jing-Mei feels that her mother is making something out of nothing. When the cat disappears, both the neighbors and Jing-Mei suspect that Suyuan has poisoned the

34

animal. After Suyuan's death, Jing-Mei is cooking for her father, for he has not been eating right. When she is in the kitchen, she notices the loudness of the neighbors and realizes her mother's complaints have been valid. She also sees the neighbor's missing cat and is relieved to know that her mother did not poison it.

### **Notes**

Jing-Mei, who opened the novel by taking her mother's place in the Joy Luck Club, narrates this chapter entitled *Best Quality*. The title is a clear reference to the jade pendant that Suyuan gave Jing-Mei, for it is of the best quality. More importantly, Jing-Mei during the chapter begins to realize the best qualities of Suyuan and herself. Through most of her life, Jing-Mei does not value herself, judging that she is less than best quality. Suyuan constantly tries to improve her daughter's self-worth.

When Suyuan gives Jing-Mei the pendant, she tells her that it reflects "life's importance." At first Jing-Mei does not understand the meaning of the pendant; it is not until after Suyuan's death that she realizes the true worth of the gift. By giving her the precious necklace, Suyuan indicates to Jing-Mei that she worthy of jade of "best quality." Through the gift she has, therefore, boosted the confidence of Jing-Mei, who has always been extremely hard on herself. With the pendant, Suyuan makes Jing-Mei realize her own worth. The pendant also symbolizes the importance of passing down Chinese heritage from one generation to the next.

The New Year party reveals the real natures of Suyuan and Jing-Mei, who are selfless and humble. They serve themselves last, taking the leftover crabs. They also swallow the insults heaped on them by the Jongs with dignity. While Lindo jokes about Suyuan's gaudy dress, Waverly criticizes Jing-Mei's gay hair stylist and unacceptable copywriting skills. Jing-Mei is helpless to really strike back. Since Waverly is a successful tax accountant and she is a lowly copywriter, Jing-Mei feels totally inferior.

### **SECTION IV: "QUEEN MOTHER OF THE WESTERN SKIES"**

#### **The Parable**

This parable is about a grandmother who observes her grandchild laughing. She wishes

that she could laugh like the child, but she is aware that it is impossible for her to again have such childish innocence. Having tasted the harsh realities of life, the grandmother has become bitter. As she looks at the smiling face of her grandchild, she regrets her attitude. She hopes that the child will cause her mother (the grandmother's daughter) to laugh and live with hope.

#### **Notes**

The old lady describes the laughter of the child by comparing it with a "Laughing Buddha" and "The Queen Mother of the Western Skies." The laughing Buddha is

35 uninhibited in expressing his emotion; in a similar manner, the child laughs spontaneously, without inhibition. The child's laughter is also pure and clear like the reigning queen of the western skies. The laughter symbolizes the uncorrupted innocence

of childhood in comparison to the corrupted bitterness of the grandmother, who now regrets her negative attitude. She hopes that her own daughter, the child's mother, will be able to laugh and live with hope because of the child. This final parable serves as a kind of thematic umbrella for the entire novel, for all of the Chinese mothers have experienced terrible things during their life times, and now expect to find evil everywhere they turn. As a result, they border on bitterness like the grandmother in the parable; and like the grandmother, they want their own daughters to have a better life -- to laugh and live with hope. In the final chapters remaining in the novel, the mothers'

viewpoints will again be seen.

### **An-Mei Hsu - Magpies**

In the first part of this chapter, An-Mei refers to the story of an old turtle that lives in a pond drinking the tears shed by people. Out of those tears he creates greedy magpies, crows that make merry at the expense of others. An-Mei believes that her mother's first husband, the evil Wu Tsing, and that her daughter Rose's husband, Ted Jordan, are magpies, who flourish on the tears of those they hurt. At the end of the chapter, An-Mei again makes reference to the magpies that destroy the crops tended by the farmers. When the birds become unbearable, the farmers kill them, beating them to death. Within the chapter, An-Mei reflects on her daughter Rose and her troubled marriage. She is particularly upset for Rose seems unable to do anything about the situation except

to shed tears. An-Mei knows that tears solve nothing; instead, they are usually lapped up in pleasure by someone else, just like the turtle lapped up the human tears. An-Mei realizes that Ted is lapping up Rose's tears.

An-Mei is also concerned about Rose's visits to a psychiatrist and thinks that her daughter needs to assert her true identity, rather than assume one handed to her by a professional. Thoughts of her daughter make An-Mei remember her distant past. She thinks about how her own mother endured suffering and then sacrificed her life, hoping to give An-Mei a brighter future.

An-Mei's mother, the "fallen woman" who severed her own flesh to save her dying mother, had actually been a victim of circumstances. After she became a widow, she lost her status in society and grew insecure. While she was in mourning over her husband's death, a lecherous merchant raped her and forced her to become his fourth wife. Her family did not accept that she had no choice in marrying the merchant and thought of her as the fallen woman.

After the death of An-Mei's grandmother (with whom An-Mei had been living), her mother took her back to the merchant's house with her. At first An-Mei was thrilled

The Joy Luck Club [Freeditigitalsoftware.com](http://Freeditigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

36

over the grandiosity of the place; but she quickly realized the misery of her mother's life there. The other wives looked down on her mother, who, as the fourth wife, was last in her husband's affections. To end her misery, An-Mei's mother took an overdose of opium. Her dying words to An-Mei were that she had killed herself to give An-Mei a stronger spirit and a better life.

An-Mei admits that her mother taught her to stand up against the suffering that one inevitably endures in life. An-Mei would like Rose to have the same strength, but she does not know how to empower her fragile daughter.

### **Notes**

An-Mei believes that both Wu Tsing and Ted were magpies; they used their women and did not care what happened to them. Since An-Mei's mother and An-Mei's daughter did not complain about their situations in life, they were easily exploited. In an effort to make certain that An-Mei could escape the merchant's house and have a future, her mother killed herself. As a result of her early hardships, An-Mei grew up knowing about how to survive in spite of the struggles of life. She wishes she could find a way to empower Rose with the same strength.

In this chapter, Amy Tan is extremely critical of the status of women in China. Abused by their husbands, the Chinese women resigned themselves to their situations and suffered silently. In contrast, modern Chinese-American women are free to control their lives; the irony is that they frequently fail to do so. Rose is a perfect example; she lacks the courage to assert herself even though she lives in a culture that respects her status.

Tan's story about An-Mei's mother has many autobiographical elements. Tan's grandmother had married a scholar. After his death, she too became the victim of a lecherous man who made her his concubine. As a result, society shunned her, and her family turned their backs on her. Suffering as a helpless victim of circumstances, she committed suicide by consuming a rice cake stuffed with opium.

The chapter highlights two themes: the abuse of power, especially between the sexes, and appearance versus reality. Both Wu Tsing and Ted abuse their power by exploiting women who are too weak to resist. Both men also hide behind the cloak of appearances.

The glamorous world of the rich merchant, with his grandiose mansion, hides a world of sin. However, when An-Mei is taken there as a child, she immediately sees through the appearances and senses that something is terribly wrong in this wealthy world where her

mother is treated so poorly. Ted also hides behind appearances. For a long time, he is involved in an affair although he pretends that his marriage is intact. When Rose learns the truth about her husband, she is crushed by the reality.

The theme of appearance vs. reality is further developed through the second wife of Wu Tsing, who lives in a world of pretension. Though she cannot biologically bear a child, she feigns to be the mother of An-Mei's half-brother. She also gifts An-Mei with pearls

that look real and enchanting; in reality, they are made of inexpensive glass. When An-Mei crushes the cheap imitation pearls, she is asserting her independence. Now she wants her daughter, and all the other oppressed women of the world, to rise up and stand

against their oppressors.

### **Ying-Ying St. Clair - Waiting Between the Trees**

This chapter revisits many of the same events told in *Rice Husband*, but from a different perspective. Ying-ying the mother tells this story; Lena, the daughter, told the *Rice Husband* tale. Amy Tan uses this technique of varied points of view throughout the book. It helps to unify the whole novel. It also emphasizes the lack of communication between the Chinese mothers and their Americanized daughters. Since the daughters never seem to know the whole story, they are forced to live in a world of appearances, since the reality has been hidden from them.

When Ying-ying visits Lena and Harold in their new home, she judges it to be overpriced and poorly built. Though Ying-ying is put in a fashionable guest bedroom, she is upset because the room is small; the Chinese custom is to give the guest the best

room in the house. Ying-ying is also upset because she thinks the house is about to fall apart. She is entirely unimpressed by the modern conveniences and architectural wonders that her son-in-law likes so much.

During her visit, Ying-ying sees quite clearly that her daughter is unhappy in her marriage. She also realizes that Harold is too busy and self-centered to notice Lena's misery. Ying-ying knows that her daughter is suffering a fate that she suffered many years, for she also had a miserable marriage. She admits to the reader that she was a rebellious girl from a wealthy family. She compares her youthful self to a tigress -- full of fire and heat; she was "waiting between the trees" to pounce on something she liked. As a young girl of sixteen, Ying-ying attended the wedding of her aunt and met the man who was soon to become her husband. He was drunk, and in his drunkenness, he tried to attract Ying-ying by plunging a knife into a watermelon. The crude act was suggestive of the piercing of a young girl's virginity. When the man wooed her with

words of love and flattery, the young Ying-ying fell for his charms completely. Shortly afterwards, Ying-ying married him. When her husband learned she was to have a baby, he left her for another woman. Ying-ying was devastated. She felt she had no choice but to have an abortion. She then went to Shanghai to live with her cousins and spent ten years in poverty. She finally left the squalor of her cousins, moved to the city, and worked as a shop assistant, trying to erase her past. While working in Shanghai, she met

an American, Clifford St. Clair. He courted her for many years, but Ying-ying would not marry him. Then when she heard that her first husband was dead, she consented to Clifford's proposal and moved to America with him. She soon gave birth to Lena.

38

Just as Harold is blind to Lena, she is blind to her mother. Completely unaware of her mother's past, Lena does not know about the wealth, the first marriage, or the abortion; instead, she knows only that her father rescued her mother from an unhappy life. Lena also does not know that for many years her mother did not even love her father, for she did not have the emotional strength to care for a man.

### **Notes**

In this chapter Ying-ying presents another point of view of the story narrated by Lena in *The Rice Husband*. In that chapter Lena commented on her mother's ability to see things before they happen. In this chapter, Ying-ying admits, "I know a thing before it happens." She explains that even in her youth she could sense something before it came

to pass. During her visit with her daughter, Ying-ying admits that she knows and understands much more about Lena's unhappy marriage than Lena is willing to tell her. The modern and affluent life-style of Lena fails to make a favorable impact on Yingying. Although Lena and Harold have spent a fortune in converting a barn into a fashionable and artistic house, Ying-ying feels like they spent too much money; she also

believes that house is so poorly constructed that it is about to fall down. In addition, Ying-ying feels insulted that she was given the small guestroom in which to stay. Chinese tradition is to give the best room to the guest.

Like other mothers of *The Joy Luck Club*, Ying-ying had experienced pain and anguish in China before coming to America. Early in life, she had committed the mistake of marrying in haste and regretting it later. When she became pregnant, her husband left her for another woman. Ying-ying felt she had no choice but to abort the baby. But the abandonment by her husband, followed by the abortion, has left Ying-ying with deep emotional scars. She does not want Lena to have the same kind of scars, and she knows

that if she does not do something about her miserable marriage, she will be scarred. The title of the chapter, *Waiting Between the Trees*, refers to Ying-ying as a youth, as well as Ying-ying today. As a youth, she described her self as a fiery tigress waiting to pounce on something she desired. When the drunk, lecherous man at the wedding flirts with her, Ying-ying, feeling ready to pounce, falls for his charms. She soon marries the man and experiences great misery when he abandons her. Now as an old woman, Yingying

feels she is again "waiting between the trees." This time she wants to pounce on an opportunity to provoke some positive action in her daughter. She cannot bear to see Lena living in such misery.

### **Lindo Jong - Double Face**

Waverly Jong expresses a desire to go to China for her second honeymoon, for being



Chinese has become a trendy asset. She tells her mother, however, that she fears she will be forced to stay in China since she looks so Chinese. Her mother laughingly

39

convinces Waverly that she is too Americanized, and no one in China will mistake her for a native. In spite of her mother's explanation, Waverly is still not entirely convinced.

Waverly takes her mother to get her hair done, for Lindo is about to meet Waverly's future in-laws. It is Lindo's first visit to Rory, Waverly's hair stylist. While they are there, Waverly allows Rory to think that her mother does not speak English. When the hairdresser comments on the remarkable resemblance between mother and daughter, Waverly is humiliated, but her mother is delighted. As Lindo compares their features in the mirror, she remembers that as a child she was proud to look like her own mother. Lindo remembers when she came to America long ago. A well-wisher had advised her to quickly find a Chinese-American husband and have children at once. After arriving in American, Lindo went to work in a fortune cookie company, where she met An-Mei. The two of them had wonderful fun reading the fortunes aloud in broken English. Lindo met Tin Jong, a Cantonese by birth. She was not interested in him at first, for being Cantonese, he was very different. Since their dialects were not alike and their English was poor, they communicated to each other in sign language and with the aid of

the fortunes from the cookies. In spite of their communication difficulties, they fell in love. After their marriage, they had three children: Wilson, Vincent, and Waverly.

Lindo always wanted the best for her children; she wanted them to have all the advantages of America, while retaining their Chinese traditions and character. Since her

children are all very Americanized, she feels like she has failed. Lindo is especially upset that Waverly lacks the qualities of courtesy, respect, obedience, and humility – traits that are very important in the Chinese culture. Lindo cannot believe that Waverly shows her mother no respect and argues with her about anything and every thing. Lindo thinks it is humorous that her daughter fears being mistaken for a native Chinese in China. When Lindo, who appears much more Chinese than Waverly, returned home for a visit, she tried to fit in and look like a native; but it was obvious to everyone in China that she had become an American. Lindo knows that Waverly does not stand a chance of being mistaken for Chinese, especially since she speaks Chinese very badly.

### **Notes**

The theme of appearance vs. reality is central to this chapter, as indicated by the title "Double

Face." Both Waverly and her mother wear two faces – one Chinese and one American. In

truth, Waverly has become fully Americanized. Born and raised in the United States, she

speaks little Chinese and has few of the mannerisms of a properly trained Chinese girl. Ironically, because of her appearance, Waverly seems Chinese in America. She also fears that

she will appear so Chinese in China that they will not allow her to return home. Lindo, who

knows how Americanized Waverly has become, thinks her daughter's fears are humorous. It is

also ironic that Waverly has spent most of her life denying her Chinese heritage. Now,

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

40

however, it has become trendy to be oriental, and Waverly has come to accept her Chinese identity. As a result, Waverly is eager to visit the land of her roots. She plans to honeymoon in China.

Lindo, Waverly's mother, has also struggled with her identity in life, but she has always sought to maintain her Chinese heritage. She worries, however, that she has become so

Americanized that she has lost her real self. Though she befriended and then married Tin Jong, a Cantonese, they had trouble communicating because their dialects were so diverse. Although it appears to Americans that Lindo and Tin are simply Chinese, in reality, they come from very diverse Chinese backgrounds.

The scene at the hairdresser is filled with appearance vs. reality. Rory assumes that Lindo is a recent immigrant who cannot speak English. Waverly does not tell him the truth. When Rory comments that Waverly looks like her mother, she is not pleased, for she does not want to look so Chinese. Lindo, however, is delighted to think that Waverly looks like her. She is sad, however, that Waverly has her crooked nose.

Ironically, Waverly likes their noses, for it makes them both look devious and determined, which Waverly feels will help them get what they want in life. Lindo knows, however, that it is only inner strength that will help a person succeed.

The entire chapter points out the many contrasts between Lindo Jong and her daughter,

Waverly. Although Lindo is shrewd, strong-willed, and perceptive, she is also humble and honest. She speaks out her mind and asserts her viewpoints; but she is willing to give in to Waverly's wishes when they do not interfere with her principles. As a result, she allows herself to be led to Rory's to have her hair styled in the manner that Waverly wants it, for Waverly hopes that Lindo will impress her future in-laws. In contrast to her mother, Waverly appears brave; but in reality Waverly hides her insecurity beneath her haughty manner. Inside, she lacks the strength of character of her mother.

The chapter contains several humorous anecdotes. The reading of the fortunes from the

cookies by both An-Mei and Lindo are amusing, for they cannot fully understand the English. They think that the saying, "To the victor goes the spoils," means that if you win, your clothes will get dirty." No wonder the women reject the fortunes as foolish.

The way Tin Jong and Lindo communicate is also amusing. Tin tries to reveal his feelings for Lindo by doing pranks, play-acting, and using fortunes from the cookies. When he tries to propose, he presents her with a fortune that says, "A house is not a home when a spouse is not at home." He then asks her, "Will you spouse me?" Verbal humor is keen in this chapter and elsewhere in the pages of the novel.

### **Jing-Mei Woo - A Pair of Tickets**

Jing-Mei and her father have purchased "a pair of tickets" and are on their way to China to meet the lost twins, which will fulfill Suyuan's dream. As they near the country of their heritage, Jing-Mei begins to feel pensive, sentimental, and strangely Chinese. She

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

41

thinks about her mother's passing remarks about the twins and her own shock when she

learned that they had been located. She also thinks about the fact that she could not bring herself to write and tell the twins that Suyuan was dead. Instead, she asked the ladies of the Joy Luck Club to write the twins about her death.

In China, the first stop for Jing-Mei and her father is at Guangzhou to meet Jing-Mei's

grand aunt. The old lady and her family come to meet them at the station and give them a rousing welcome. The affection and warmth that they display touch Jing-Mei deeply. She quickly makes friends with her cousins and poses for photographs with them. At the hotel, everyone shares their memories, filled with joy and sorrow.

Later that night, Canning Woo tells Jing-Mei all about Suyuan's painful escape from war-torn China and the manner in which she had to abandon the twins. Suyuan walked for days, trying to outrun the invading Japanese. Feeling miserable, hungry, and exhausted and with bleeding feet and hands from the journey, Suyuan felt she could not

go on. Concerned for the welfare of her daughters, she tried to give the twins to someone who would protect them, but no one would help her. Finally she stuffed her few valuable possessions into the clothing of the infants and left them by the road while she went in search of food. The weak and feverish Suyuan passed out along the way; when she woke up, she was in the back of a truck filled with refugees and missionaries. The little girls were not with her, and she would not see them again. Later, when she met

and married Canning Woo, they returned to China to find the girls, but were unsuccessful.

A poor country couple found the twins on the side of the road and raised them. They, too, had often tried to find the girls' parents, but were not successful. It was not until after Suyuan's death that the connection was finally made. Canning also tells Jing-Mei that her name has special meanings. Jing-Mei literally means that she is pure and that she is a younger sister. Suyuan chose the name so that her lost sisters would be a part of

her. He also explains that the name Suyuan has a special meaning; it literally translates as "long-cherished wish" or "long-cherished grudge." Suyuan's wish had always been to find the twins in order to explain what had happened to her so that they would not have a grudge. Now Canning and Jing-Mei are on their way to make the wish come true.

Jing-Mei and her father next head to Shanghai to see the twins. On the airplane, Jing-Mei feels tense and apprehensive. Upon their arrival, they are greeted by Jing-Mei's two older sisters. Jing-Mei immediately sees her mother in them. Then when she looks at the pictures of all three of them together, she realizes Suyuan's spirit is in all three, bonding them together. Jing-Mei feels complete, connected, and in touch with her heritage at last.

## Notes

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

42

This chapter is a fitting conclusion to the novel. Although Suyuan is not reunited with her lost daughters before her death, she passes on the desire to meet them to Jing-Mei.

As a result, she and her father travel to China for a reunion with her older sisters. On the

journey, Jing-Mei understands and accepts the importance of her Chinese heritage. She

also realizes that Suyuan is a strong bond that holds her and her two sisters together. Recalling the opening parable of the story, this chapter shows that the "swan" has been passed on from mother to daughter. Even though Jing-Mei has changed into a different appearance, becoming Americanized, her Chinese heritage is finally important to her.

The concluding chapter is also a fitting finale in other respects. Jing-Mei opens the novel and closes it. In the beginning she has suffered a loss – the death of Suyuan. In

the conclusion, she is made whole again by meeting her mother's other daughters and realizing the importance of what Suyuan had tried to teach her -- there is strength and value in being Chinese. During the course of the novel, the other daughters (Lena, Rose, and Waverly) learn this same lesson.

The chapter presents a vivid contrast between modernized America and traditional China. Throughout the book, Amy Tan has shown America as a modern world filled with magnificent high-rise buildings, a fast pace, and a love of money and what it buys. She also indicates that American people are in such a hurry to get ahead that they abandon tradition and ignore relationships. Waverly Jong, Lena St. Clair, Rose Jordan, and Jing-Mei Woo are all affected by this American lifestyle.

In contrast, Amy Tan presents China as a complete opposite in this chapter. She describes the quaintness of the place with its "scores of little shops, dark inside, lined with counters and shelves. And then there is a building; its front laced with scaffolding made of bamboo poles held together with plastic strips. Men and women are standing on narrow platforms, scraping the sides, working without safety straps or helmets." China is neither imposing nor technologically perfect, but the Chinese people are not in a rush to get ahead, like the people in America. They take time to be warm and friendly, as seen when they "clasp each other's hands" and when the relatives greet Jing-Mei and

her father at the station. Seemingly unconcerned about appearances, the Chinese express their emotions openly and display their affection spontaneously.

This closing chapter also serves to tie together the loose ends of Suyuan's history. Both Jing-Mei and her father remember episodes from Suyuan's past that have not been related earlier. Jing-Mei gives information that she has learned about the twins through their correspondence, and Canning Woo relates the pathetic plight of Suyuan as she left

Kweilin and lost the twins. It is a touching tale of a young woman trying to do the best thing for her children.

The autobiographical element of the entire novel is also finalized in this closing chapter. Amy Tan traveled to China to meet her own half-sisters. The only difference is that her trip was made when her mother was still alive, but terribly ill. The reunion with her sisters was extremely touching, and Amy explained that she felt as if she had found what

43

she had been searching for all along. In her words, "It was instant bonding. There was something about the country that I belonged to. I found something about myself that I never knew was there." Jing-Mei, like Amy, understands herself and her heritage better after visiting China.

In truth, the final chapter reads like a fairy tale. For the first time the reader learns the details of Suyuan's abandoning her infants on the road. The reader also learns of their rescue by a godly couple and their final reunion with their sister, fulfilling Suyuan lifelong wish. It is a dramatic and poignant ending to a marvelously sensitive novel about Chinese mothers and their Americanized daughters.

### **SUMMARY OF RELATIONSHIPS AND STORIES**

I. Jing-Mei Woo (The Joy Luck Club, Two Kinds, Best Quality, A Pair of Tickets)

A. Mother: Suyuan Woo

B. Father: Canning Woo

II. Lena St. Clair (The Voice from the Wall, Rice Husband)

A. Mother: Ying-ying St. Clair (Moon Lady, Waiting Between the Trees)

- B. Father: Clifford St. Clair
- C. Husband: Harold Livotny, who ignores and abuses her
- III. Rose Hsu (Half and Half, Without Wood)
  - A. Mother: An-Mei Hsu (Scar, Magpies)
  - B. Father: George Hsu
  - C. Husband: Ted Jordan, who asks for a divorce
  - D. Brothers: Matthew, Mark, Luke, Bing
  - E. Sisters: Ruth, Janice
- IV. Waverly Jong (Rules of the Games, The Four Directions)
  - A. Mother: Lindo Jong (The Red Candle, Double Face)
  - B. Father: Tin Jong
  - C. Brothers: Winston, Vincent

## **OVERALL ANALYSES**

### **CHARACTERS**

#### **The Daughters**

##### **Jing-Mei Woo**

Jing-Mei Woo is the narrator who opens and closes the novel. While she is only one of four young women whose stories constitute the novel, the positioning of her story makes

her seem to be the primary character, especially since her tales strongly develop the theme and plot of the entire book. Jing-Mei's journeys are also complete within the

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

44

novel. By the end of the book, she comes to understand her mother and her Chinese heritage, *and* she travels to China to fulfill her deceased mother's dream. Among all the daughters in the novel, Jing-Mei is the one who best realizes her true identity, for she retains her Chinese values along with her American character.

As a person, Jing-Mei is simple in her tastes and manners. She is happy leading the life of a middle class woman and pursuing the career of a copywriter. She neither aims high nor envies others who hold high positions in life. Like her mother, she believes in "simple living and high thinking." She also possesses her mother's goodness and generosity. She is courteous to everyone and respects the wishes of her elders. When her father asks her to take the place of her mother in the Joy Luck Club, she agrees to do

so. Later, when An-Mei persuades her to undertake the journey to China to fulfill Suyuan's dream, Jing-Mei consents.

Although Jing-Mei is sensible, she is also sensitive. When Waverly Jong insults her in front of every one, she is devastated and can barely hold back her tears. Later in China, when she witnesses the reunion of her father and his aunt, she bites her lips "trying not to cry." Then when she meets her half-sisters in Shanghai, they laugh and wipe "the tears from each other's eyes."

During the course of the novel, Jing-Mei transforms herself from an immature young girl who tries to assert her rights by defying her mother to a responsible woman who takes the place of her mother in the Joy Luck Club. As a child Jing-Mei had rebelled against her mother, who wanted her to be a brilliant student or a concert pianist. Jing-Mei, however, just wanted to be herself. Although her mother saved to buy her daughter

a piano, Jing-Mei refused to practice. After she made a miserable performance at her recital, she never played the piano again. Only as an adult does she take an interest in the piano once again.

When Jing-Mei learns that her mother had left behind two infant twin daughters in China, she was shocked. Not understanding how much Suyuan suffered over the incident, Jing-Mei treats the situation lightly. Later, after her mother's death, Jing-Mei learns from the women at the Joy Luck Club and from her father, Tin, the whole story of her mother's sufferings in China. The knowledge helps to appreciate all that Suyuan has

done for her. It also teaches her to appreciate her Chinese heritage. As a result, when she learns that the twins have been located, she is willing to go to China and meet them

in order to share Suyuan's story with them. The journey to her native land makes Jing-Mei proud to be a Chinese.

By the end of the book, she lives up to the meaning of her name; she has become the "pure essence" of goodness and Chinese values that her mother had longed for her to be.

### **Waverly Jong**

Unlike Jing-Mei who finds maturity and peace within the novel, Waverly constantly struggles. As a child, she became a chess prodigy and champion, who is featured in *Life*

45

*Magazine*. She gave up the game, however, to spite her mother, who seemed overly proud of her daughter's accomplishments. Surprising, Lindo Jong does not seem to mind that Waverly no longer wins at chess; Waverly, however, misses the game terribly and begins to play again. Once she ceases to win all the time, Waverly finally quits the game forever.

Throughout life, Waverly has been a driven woman. Intelligent, ambitious, proud, arrogant, and sometimes cruel, she commands attention. Because she is a successful tax

accountant, she becomes wealthy. She wears fashionable clothes and patronizes fancy salons; but she laughs at those beneath her. She is cruel to Jing-Mei at dinner when she

criticizes her hair stylist and her copywriting skills. It is like she has to put down others to lift herself up.

Waverly always struggles with her Chinese heritage. She tries to make herself act very American and look less oriental. She often seems embarrassed by her mother, Lindo, and refuses to adopt the traits of humility and respect Lindo has tried to teach her.

Concerned about appearances, Waverly takes her mother to see Rory, her hair stylist, so

that Lindo's hair can be properly styled when she meets the family of her fiancé, Rich Shields. At the hairdresser, Waverly becomes upset when Rory says that she looks like Lindo, for she does not want to appear Chinese.

Although Waverly projects a tough exterior, it is clear that she has some insecurities.

Although she constantly argues with her mother and refutes her traditional Chinese views and values, Waverly also seeks her approval. She dreads telling Lindo that she is going to marry Rich, but she desperately wants her mother's blessing. When her mother

gives her approval, Waverly is greatly relieved.

Although Waverly struggles internally through most of the novel, she is developed as one of the most powerful characters, who has a zest for living, a drive to succeed, and a

commanding personality. Completely opposite in nature from her mother, Waverly does

come to understand Lindo better and fear her less by the end of the novel. She even begins to appreciate some of the Chinese heritage that her mother has tried to instill in her.

### **Lena St. Clair**

Lena is a fragile character. Throughout her life she has lacked the drive to assert herself; instead, she thinks and reacts according to what she believes others will think about her, especially her mother. As a result, Lena emerges as a mere shadow of Ying-ying St. Clair and is often characterized by a word like "ghost." In truth, Lena is a portrait of fear in control.

In her childhood, Lena was commanded, controlled, and overprotected by Ying-Ying, who told her terrible tales of the consequences of disobedience. In turn, Lena developed into a meek and humble youth and a passive adult, who still submits to the wishes of her

46

mother and husband. Fearful of censure, Lena never states her opinion or protests a decision, even when there is a strong need to do so.

Lena worked hard to help Harold, her husband, set up his business. Now that he is a successful businessman, he gives her no credit or appreciation. In fact, he makes her pay

one-half of all the bills, even though he makes many times more than she does. Lena is too weak to protest the unfair treatment. In a like manner, she allows Harold to design and decorate the house that they have purchased and are redoing. She does not criticize

him, even though she knows that the house is out of proportion and the furniture is too delicate. She is content to remain in Harold's shadow, just as she has always been in Ying-ying's shadow.

Lena fears her mother's visit to the new house. She knows that her mother will openly criticize everything about it. More importantly, Lena knows that Ying-ying will see the misery of her marriage to Harold and criticize it as well. Her mother's visit, however, encourages Lena to talk to Harold. She expresses a desire to change the pattern of their

dull, mechanized life. The insensitive Harold is amazed to hear his wife voicing an opinion and cannot believe that she could possibly be unhappy with him or their life together.

At the end of the novel, Lena still seems fragile. There is hope, however, that she will become less timid. Encouraged by her mother, she makes an attempt to express herself

and stand up for her beliefs. She has a long way to go before she will become that pillar of strength that Ying-ying would like to see, but the mother and the reader are encouraged by Lena's small steps towards knowing who she is and standing up for herself.

### **Rose Hsu Jordan**

Rose Jordan is an educated woman with a mind of her own, but she lacks the courage to

assert her identity. Like Lena, she is taken for granted by a selfish husband, who eventually leaves her for another woman. When Ted serves her the notice for a divorce,

Rose breaks down, indulging in self-pity. Feeling helpless and depressed, she can barely function. She goes to see a psychiatrist to try and relieve her distress, but she always leaves his office feeling more confused. An-Mei, Rose's mother, knows that her daughter needs to have more inner strength and wishes she could find a way to give it to her.

An-Mei does encourage Rose to stand up against Ted. As a result, she bravely tells her husband that she will not sign the divorce papers and that she will not let him take the house from her. It is the bravest things that Rose has ever done. As a result, at the end of the novel, An-Mei and the reader feel encouraged about Rose, just as Ying-ying and the reader felt encouraged about Lena.

## **MOTHERS**

47

### **Suyuan Woo**

Suyuan is the mother of Jing-Mei and the wife of Canning Woo. By the beginning of the novel, Suyuan has passed away, but her presence throughout the book is incredibly strong and vibrant. As the founding member of both the Chinese and the San Francisco branches of the Joy Luck Club, Suyuan is the thread that connects all the characters in the novel. She is the force in San Francisco's Chinatown that has brought all the mothers together and sought to keep their Chinese heritage alive. As a result, her spirit lives on after her death.

Suyuan represents the silent, suffering woman who rises above her circumstances to carve a niche for herself in society. As a young girl, she had been married to an army officer and burdened with twin daughters. She had the responsibility of running the house while her husband was away fighting on the battlefield. To divert her mind from the dull routine of her life and her fears about the war, she started a Joy Luck Club and invited other women to join with her. The only requirement was that they had to have experienced sufferings and/or sorrows.

While Suyuan's husband was away fighting, the Japanese invaded her native city of Kweilin, forcing her to flee from her home with her infant twins. She walked for days, seeking shelter and security. Along the way she left behind the possessions that she carried. Finally, feverish, starving and bleeding from hands and feet, she left the twins on the side of the road in order to go and find some food. She passed out on the way and

was rescued by a missionary truck; but her twins were permanently separated from her. Suyuan came to America, where she gave birth to another daughter, Jing-Mei. She also founded a second Joy Luck Club. She shared the story of her past with the other women

in the club and disclosed to them that her one wish in life was to be reunited with her lost daughters. Her faith that she would one day find the missing twins transformed her from a bitter and unhappy victim of war to a vibrant mother and friend, who was liked by everyone. Suyuan's wisdom, hope, spirit, and belief in Chinese tradition are developed throughout the novel and help to unify it into a whole. After her death, Jing-Mei takes Suyuan's place in the Joy Luck Club. The women of the club give her the money to travel to China to meet her half-sisters, who have finally been located. In making the trip, Jing-Mei finally comes to fully understand her mother's Chinese spirit and strength of character.

### **An-Mei Hsu**

An-Mei is the friend of Suyuan, the mother of Rose Jordan, and the wife of George Hsu.



She is intelligent, perceptive, and sensible. She has always understood her position in life and acted according to her conscience. Like Suyuan, she suffered greatly in her earlier life in China. As a child, she had been taken by her mother to the house of Wu Tsing, where her mother was a concubine. Not wanting An-Mei to experience a similar

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

48

life, her mother kills herself to set An-Mei free. Her death instills courage and strength in An-Mei. She is able to assert her identity and raise her voice against exploitation. When she comes to America, An-Mei works in a fortune cookie factory, marries George Hsu, and has seven children. Although An-Mei suffers personal loss in her life, she does

not turn bitter. When her son, Bing, drowns, she loses faith in God, but not in herself. Because she believes in herself, An-Mei is always willing to reach out a helping hand to others. She helps Lindo Jong to establish herself in America and encourages Jing-Mei to undertake a journey to China to fulfil her mother's wish. An-Mei also tries to give Rose a similar strength of character to her own. When she sees her daughter suffering because of her husband, she persuades Rose to confront Ted and assert her rights. Although An-Mei is a scarred woman, she is never defeated. Repeatedly through the book, she shows her strength of character.

### **Lindo Jong**

Lindo Jong is the mother of Waverly and the wife of Tin Jong. In all aspects, she is a combination of the old and the new. Although she is a traditionalist, determined to preserve her Chinese heritage, she is also individualistic and encourages her children to

be the same. Like Suyuan and An-Mei, Lindo suffered in her early life in China. At a young age, she was married off to a man she did not know or love. Although she was treated poorly by her husband and his family, she was an obedient girl and never contemplated running away from her horrid situation, for she would not want to dishonor the name of her parents. In the end, she concocts a story that allows her to honorably get out of the marriage, which was never consummated.

A natural thinker, Lindo Jong is intelligent, enterprising, and practical. When she escapes to America, she finds a husband and quickly has three children so she can insure

her American citizenship. As a devoted mother, she wants her children to have the best of both the old world and the new. She encourages Waverly to be the best she can be and is pleased when she becomes a chess prodigy. Her expectations for her daughter are

so high that Waverly resents Lindo and her interference, but she longs for her approval and blessing. When Waverly decides to marry Rich Shields, she fears telling Lindo about her plans, but she knows she must have her mother's approval. To Waverly's surprise, Lindo blesses the union and even tries to impress Waverly's future in-laws, in order to please her daughter.

In every way, Lindo proves she is a wise and determined woman and a devoted mother.

### **Ying-Ying St. Clair**

Ying-ying is the mother of Lena Livotny and the wife of Clifford St Clair. During the course of the novel, she evolves from a wild youth to a cautious and disillusioned woman. Growing up in a wealthy Chinese family, she admits that she was a tiger in search of its prey. She married the wrong man at a young age. When she became pregnant, he deserted her for another woman, causing her to become disillusioned and

49

bitter. She aborts her unborn child and goes to live in poverty and squalor with her cousins. Her body is alive, but her spirit is dead.

Ying-ying marries Clifford St. Clair even though she does not love him for many years. When she has a daughter, she overprotects her because she feels insecure. As a result,

Lena grows up and is unable to stand up for herself. She also fears her mother's disapproval. As an adult, she dreads her mother coming for a visit, for she knows that Ying-ying will be critical of her new home and her shallow marriage. In truth, Ying-ying is critical because she wants something better for Lena than what she has experienced herself. She knows what it is like to endure unhappiness, and she wants more for her daughter. As a result, she encourages Lena to stand up to her insensitive husband and tell him that she is not happy with their dull, mechanized marriage. In the end, Lena understands and appreciates her mother's spirit.

### **PLOT** (Structure)

The plot of *The Joy Luck Club* is both loose and complex. It is really a group of separate

stories woven around the members of a ladies' club, located in San Francisco's Chinatown. The disparate stories are held together by the fact that all four of the women

have daughters of approximately the same age and background. Although each of the daughters is Chinese by heritage, they were all born in the United States and have become very Americanized. Each of the mothers has difficulty trying to understand her modernized daughter and struggles to instill in each of them Chinese traditions and values. In addition, each of the four mothers in the novel suffered greatly in their previous life in China and feels bonded to each other by the struggles. Each, however, handles the suffering in a different way.

The novel, which is about four mothers and their four daughters, is appropriately divided

into four sections, each of which is divided into four parts. Each of the sections is introduced by a parable that relates to the four parts that follow it. Then each of the four parts is told by a different mother or daughter. The parts (or chapters) are always narrated in first person in the present tense; but each part is filled with flashbacks. The mothers usually look back to their experiences in China, and the daughters reflect on their childhoods.

Since the book is really a series of stories, the plot is not unified by time, place, or character. Since much of the book consists of flashbacks, the time of the novel spans several decades. Although the current tale is all set in or around San Francisco, there are

diverse locations, including the homes of the mothers and their adult daughters. The setting also encompasses China, for the flashbacks are often set there, and Jing-Mei and

her father travel there in the last chapter of the book. Additionally, the book is not unified by character. Instead, it is a complex tale of four mothers and four daughters, most of whom narrate at least two of the chapters; therefore, even the point of view changes throughout the book.

50

In spite of the looseness of the plot, Amy Tan does a marvelous job of weaving the separate stories into a whole. The book begins and ends with Jing-Mei telling the story

of her mother, Suyuan; she also narrates two additional chapters within the novel. Jing-Mei's story becomes related to all the others in the novel, for she takes the place of Suyuan in the Joy Luck Club and learns about the past of An-Mei, Ying-ying, and Lindo. Jing-Mei also knows the other daughters. In fact, when Jing-Mei was a young girl, Suyuan constantly held Waverly up to her as a model to emulate.

The novel is further unified by theme. Each of the mothers strives to instill in her daughter their Chinese heritage and customs. Each of the daughters, who want to be Americans, resists being Chinese. By the end of the novel, however, Jing-Mei, Waverly, Lena, and Rose all have a better appreciation of their mothers and the tradition

in which they were raised. The similarity of their experiences is the final unifying factor that holds the loose plot together into a complex whole.

## **THEME ANALYSIS**

### **Major Theme**

The major theme in the novel is the difficulty of preserving one's heritage and culture when

one immigrates to a foreign country. Although all four of the mothers (Suyuan, Ying-ying,

An-Mei, and Lindo) have terrible experiences in China, they love their native land even after

they come to America. When they have children, they try to teach them about China and its

customs and traditions. The children, however, are not really interested in the past.

Born in

America, Jing-Mei, Lena, Rose, and Waverly all want to minimize their Chinese appearance

and heritage. They all want to look like and be accepted as Americans. During the course of

the novel, each of the daughters realizes the strength and dignity of her mother and, to differing

degrees, learns to appreciate her Chinese heritage.

The four mothers all want the best for their daughters. They want them to have all the advantages that America has to offer, but they also want them to live their Chinese heritage and exemplify the Chinese values. All four mothers, however, feel that their daughters have become so Americanized that they have lost their ways. The mothers realize that the daughters struggle with who they are because they have never had to fight or suffer. Life has been easy for them; as a result, they have not built the strength or character that Suyuan, An-Mei, Ying-ying, and Lindo were forced to build because of what they endured in China and what they had to endure as first generation immigrants to America.

The mothers finally tell their daughters about their suffering in hopes of inspiring them and giving them strength. When the daughters begin to appreciate the spirits of their mothers and their Chinese heritage, they become stronger and happier women. In accepting their past and blending it with their present identity, Jing-Mei, Waverly, Lena, and Rose all become more whole people.

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

51

### **Minor Theme**

Appearance vs. reality is the main minor theme of the novel. All the daughters appear educated and enlightened, completely Americanized; but underneath the appearance, each of them is incomplete and unfulfilled. Although they appear to be happy and

content, the reality is that they are all unhappy. Jing-Mei is unmarried and works at an unfulfilling copywriting job. Waverly is divorced from her first husband and is planning to soon remarry. Lena and Harold live together as husband and wife, but he is totally insensitive to her and displays no affection or love. Rose's husband, Ted, has announced

that he wants a divorce, for he is in love with another woman. All of them lead lives that are somewhat shallow. They also live artificial lives as they try to downplay their Chinese appearance and heritage.

Because the daughters want to appear American rather than Chinese, there is conflict between them and their mothers. Suyuan, An-Mei, Lindo, and Ying-ying all want their daughters to be proud of their Chinese heritage and practice their values and traditions. When the daughters refuse, the mothers are frustrated and appear to be failures. In reality, each of the mothers teaches her daughter a great deal about the Chinese way of thinking and living. By the end of the book, Jing-Mei, Waverly, Lena, and Rose have all successfully blended some part of their mother's Chinese spirit into themselves.

### **QUESTIONS**

When and why and by whom was the first Joy Luck Club formed? Compare and contrast it to the second Joy Luck Club.

What is the significance of the parable at the beginning of each section?

Which one character seems to be the main protagonist of the novel and why?

What is her antagonist? Explain if she overcomes her antagonist.

On a larger scale, what is the protagonist of the novel? What is the antagonist?

Suyuan dies at the beginning of the book, and during the novel, Jing-Mei takes her place

in several ways. Explain the ways in which she serves as her mother's replacement.

Explain how the novel is autobiographical.

Compare Rose and Lena as examples of women who suffer from their own weakness of

character. How can they learn from their mothers' stories? Do they?

Contrast Jing-Mei to Rose, Lena, and Waverly.

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

52

Explain how Jing-Mei's story forms the structural arc of the novel.

What specific things does each daughter learn about her mother during the course of the

novel?

Explain the sufferings of each of the mothers in China.

Waverly Jong sometimes comes across as unkind and/or cruel. Give examples and explain why you think she behaves in such a way.

Who do you think is the most likeable mother in the novel, and why?

Who do you think is the most likeable daughter and why?

Discuss the symbolism of chess in Waverly Jong's stories.

Discuss the symbolism of the garden in Rose's stories.

Discuss the symbolism of jade in Jing-Mei's stories.

Discuss the symbolism of architecture in Lena's stories.

Explain how *The Joy Luck Club* is a novel of culture, identity, and family.

What are the key themes of the novel and how are they developed?

Why does the novel end in comedy?

Explain the use of flashback in the novel, giving at least four examples.

How is this book of separate stories unified into a whole?

## COMMENT ON THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

The study of literature is not like the study of math or science, or even history. While those disciplines are based largely upon fact, the study of literature is based upon interpretation and analysis. There are no clear-cut answers in literature, outside of the factual information about an author's life and the basic information about setting and characterization in a piece of literature. The rest is a highly subjective reading of what an author has written; each person brings a different set of values and a different background to the reading. As a result, no two people see the piece of literature in exactly the same light, and few critics agree on everything about a book or an author. In this set of Monkey Notes for a well-known piece of literature, we at PinkMonkey.com have tried to give an objective literary analysis based upon the information actually found in the novel, book, or play. In the end, however, it is an individual

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved

53

interpretation, but one that we feel can be readily supported by the information that is presented in the guide. In your course of literature study, you or your professor/teacher may come up with a different interpretation of the mood or the theme or the conflict. Your interpretation, if it can be logically supported with information contained within the piece of literature, is just as correct as ours. So is the interpretation of your teacher or professor. Literature is simply not a black or white situation; instead, there are many gray areas that are open to varying analyses. Your task is to come up with your own analysis that you can logically defend. Hopefully, these Monkey Notes will help you to accomplish that goal.

The Joy Luck Club [Freedigitalsoftware.com](http://Freedigitalsoftware.com), Inc. Copyright © 2000, All Rights Reserved