The Joy Luck Club

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AMY TAN

Amy Tan was born to Chinese immigrants, John and Daisy Tan, in Oakland, California. After her father and brother both passed away when she was 15, Tan moved to Switzerland with her mother and younger brother. During this time, she learned about her mother's first marriage to an abusive man in China, and the three daughters her mother had to abandon in Shanghai. This family history inspired her first novel, 1989's *The Joy Luck Club*, which became a bestseller and, later, film. Other novels, such as *The Kitchen God's Wife* and *The Hundred Secret Senses*, also received critical acclaim for their intimate portrayals of familial relationships. Tan currently lives in northern California with her husband, where she continues to write fiction, memoirs, and children's literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the novel, Suyuan flees China as a young woman, when Japanese forces invade the city of Kweilin. This reflects actual historical events in the Second Sino-Japanese War, which was fought between 1937 and 1945. During the eight-year war (which overlapped with World War II), Japan aggressively attacked mainland China, hoping to expand the Japanese empire onto the Asian continent. Over twenty million Chinese citizens were killed or displaced during the ground invasions. Japan succeeded in capturing many major Chinese cities until it became involved in World War II in 1941, fighting against the United States and other Allied countries. Japan surrendered to Allied forces in 1945, after the United States dropped two atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing millions of Japanese citizens. As part of the surrender agreement, China regained all its seized land in 1946.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Joy Luck Club is considered a classic text in contemporary Asian American literature, and praised for its nuanced and compassionate characterization of the Chinese immigrant experience and the generational tensions between immigrants and their American-born children. Similar works include Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies*. The Joy Luck Club has also been compared to Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, for its examination of racial and gender identities across multiple connected short stories.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Joy Luck Club*
- **When Written:** 1980s
- **Where Written:** California
- **When Published:** 1989
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** San Francisco, CA; China
- **Climax:** Suyuan's sacrifice of her twin babies on the road to Chungking.
- **Antagonist:** Various antagonists depending on storyline, including Japanese troops, Huang Taitai, Second Wife, and sometimes the Joy Luck Club mothers themselves.
- **Point of View:** First-person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Following In Her Footsteps. Just as June meets her Chinese half-sisters for the first time in *The Joy Luck Club's* final chapter, Amy Tan went to China to meet her three half-sisters in 1987 at the age of 32. Her mother was forced to leave them behind when she fled Shanghai before the Communist takeover in 1949.

Shared Names. Amy Tan's Chinese name is "An-mei," which translates to "a blessing from America." An-mei is also the name of one of her protagonists in *The Joy Luck Club*.

PLOT SUMMARY

The Joy Luck Club is divided into four parts of four stories each, totaling sixteen stories in all; in the beginning of each part, a short parable introduces a common theme, connecting the four stories that follow. Each story is told by one of the seven main characters, and these stories are all woven together into a larger narrative about the complex, and often misunderstood, connection between immigrant Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters.

A few months after her mother Suyuan's unexpected death, June Woo is asked to take her mothers seat at a weekly mahjong game that's been ongoing between four friends for almost forty years. The weekly meeting is known as "the Joy Luck Club," and the other members are An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair. The four women met in a San Francisco refugee center after emigrating from China to the United States during World War II, and bonded over both shared grief and resilience. Suyuan's particular grief related to the loss of her twin baby girls, whom she was separated from during the

Japanese invasion of Kweilin. Suyuan secretly searches for her two daughters for the rest of her life, unbeknownst to June.

With Suyuan gone, June is supposed to fill her mother's role in the group of friends, but June feels childish and out of place at the table of older women, especially when they start talking about their own daughters with whom June grew up. When the game night concludes, the three older women inform her that Suyuan's twin girls have been found as adults in China; it is up to June to travel to China and fulfill her mother's lifelong wish of reuniting the family. June worries that she doesn't know her mother's personal history well enough to communicate to her long-lost half-sisters, which the older woman strongly deny. This strong denial reveals these women's own fears: that *their* daughters would also be unable to articulate their Chinese heritages if asked).

In the first part of the novel, An-mei, Lindo, and Ying-ying relate how their traumatic childhoods in China affected their parental styles. An-mei was initially raised by her maternal grandmother, after her mother remarried in a dishonorable manner. When her mother returns a few years later to care for An-mei's dying grandmother, her mother cuts off a piece of her own arm to brew medicine that might save her grandmother. An-mei witnesses the sacrifice, which redefines her notion of a daughter's love. Lindo's life is decided for her by the time she's two, when a matchmaker arranges a future marriage between her and Tyan-yu, a wealthy but spoiled boy. Lindo moves to Tyan-yu's family's mansion when she's twelve and becomes an indentured servant to Tyan-yu's cruel mother, Huang Taitai. After she and Tyan-yu marry, Lindo takes fate into her own hands and concocts a plan to scare Huang Taitai into annulling the marriage. When Ying-ying is only four years old she falls off her family's boat during a Moon Festival and gets separated from them. She soon comes upon the Moon Lady performing on a stage and believes it to be the goddess who grants wishes, as her nanny taught her. However, when she goes to talk to the Moon Lady, Ying-ying is horrified to discover the actor is actually a man dressed as a woman. The fear of being lost finally sinks in, and Ying-ying relates at the end of her story that she is uncertain if she was ever completely found.

The second and third parts contain the stories of the older women's daughters: Waverly Jong, Rose Hsu Jordan, Lena St. Clair, and June again. These stories address their upbringings with immigrant mothers, and the way that maternal wisdom, derived from Chinese tradition, shaped them as adults. Waverly becomes a chess prodigy before she's ten years old, and thrives under the pressure of competition. Still, she gets irritated by her mother Lindo's boasting and self-congratulations, and the two have a fight that leads to Waverly quitting chess out of guilt. Lindo's ability to shake Waverly's confidence continues into Waverly's romantic life when she's an adult. Rose's stories involve her mother An-mei's faith to keep trying, despite fate's cruel circumstances. Rose's baby brother accidentally drowns while under Rose's supervision, and An-mei tries to rescue him by appeasing God and Chinese ancestral spirits with prayers and jewelry. Though unsuccessful, An-mei's attempt inspires Rose to take control of her own fate during her later divorce. Lena remembers her mother Ying-ying's unnerving ability to predict bad events, and highlights the ominous premonition about her mother's stillborn baby. Acting as an interpreter between her suffering Chinese mother and her bewildered white father, Lena fails to communicate Ying-ying's sorrow, leaving her mother bereft and without support. Ying-ying also predicts that Lena will marry a bad man, which comes true years later. Lena senses the impending divorce, but it takes Ying-ying's presence to help Lena acknowledge her husband's lack of support. June recalls Suyuan's desire to make June into a child prodigy like Waverly, which ultimately backfires. For most of her life, June believes her mother thinks she's a disappointment, until Suyuan holds a New Year's dinner party right before her passing. During the dinner of whole crabs, which represent good fortune for the next year, Waverly picks the best crabs for her and her family. By the time the plate reaches June and Suyuan, only one perfect crab remains. June tries to take a damaged crab so Suyuan can have the perfect crab, but Suyuan stops her. Later, Suyuan praises June for having such a generous heart when other people (like Waverly) only think of themselves.

The final section returns to the mothers' perspectives, and tries to reconcile the gap between Chinese and American cultures by offering solutions that appease both sets of values. Using old-fashioned superstition to manipulate her abusive husband, An-mei's mother controls the outcome of An-mei's fate. Her suicidal plan both acknowledges Chinese customs as well as a new spirit of self-agency. Similarly, Ying-ying identifies with the Chinese Tiger zodiac sign, even if its assigned traits don't always appear to others. The animal's resilience motivated Ying-ying to survive her life in China, and Ying-ying believes it can help Lena through her divorce; just because the idea is old-fashioned doesn't mean it doesn't apply to American situations. Lindo contemplates her daughter Waverly's upcoming marriage and the similarities between their life paths, despite growing up in different countries.

In the last of the sixteen stories, June flies to China to meet her long-lost half-sisters. Immediately after touching down in Shanghai, June feels a sense of connection to the country, and to her mother, in a more immediate way than ever before. When she finally meets her sisters, Chwun Hwa and Chwun Yu, the three of them feel their mother's presence together and represent what Chinese heritage really is: a connection to family and a greater cultural legacy that transcends place and time.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jing-mei "June" Woo – June is the main narrator in *The Joy Luck Club*, as her vignettes specifically bridge the histories between mothers and daughters, and between childhood memories and present-day events. She also has the most stories in the novel – "The Joy Luck Club, "Two Kinds," "Best Quality," and "A Pair of Tickets" – since she represents both herself and her deceased mother, Suyuan. Suyuan tried to make June into a child prodigy, but June hated the pressure to succeed. Instead, she decided that being her "true self" meant having the right to be mediocre, which continues to color her adult life as she struggles with an unfulfilling career and social life. It isn't until the end of the novel that June understands that Suyuan's critique was actually her way of encouraging June to reach her full potential. June brings Suyuan's story to her long-lost half-sisters, and gains an even more profound understanding of who her mother was.

Suyuan Woo – Suyuan's death is what sets off the events of *The Joy Luck Club*. Therefore, unlike the other mothers and daughters in the novel, who actively narrate their histories through the novel, Suyuan is only experienced through stories told by her daughter June, her husband Canning, and her three Joy Luck Club friends. In 1944, Suyuan was forced to flee China, leaving both her husband (who was fighting as a Chinese Nationalist against both the Communists and the Japanese) and her two baby girls behind. Though she remarries in the United States and has June seven years later, Suyuan never stops searching for her children. Her sacrifice represents the willingness of all mothers to protect their children over their own well-being.

An-mei Hsu – An-mei is the narrator of "Scar" and "Magpies," and her stories revolve around the sacrifices of her disgraced mother. When she is four, An-mei's father dies and her mother is exiled from the family for remarrying and becoming a rich merchant's lowly fourth wife, rather than remaining a widow forever. An-mei's mother returns to take An-Mei to her second husband Wu Tsing's house after An-mei's grandmother, Popo, dies. At Wu Tsing's, An-mei and her mother are treated terribly by Second Wife, who controls the household. An-mei's mother eventually commits suicide on a date that frightens the superstitious Wu Tsing, giving power back to An-mei.

Rose Hsu Jordan – Rose is the narrator of "Half and Half" and "Without Wood." She has two sisters and three living brothers; her youngest brother Bing drowned when he was four years old while fourteen-year-old Rose was supposed to be watching him. As an adult, Rose is in the midst of a divorce from her husband, Ted Jordan. Their marriage was initially based on his attraction to her passivity, but he later became irritated by her constant indecision and deferral of opinion. Rose eventually learns how powerful her voice can be, following wise anecdotes from her mother, An-mei.

Lindo Jong – Lindo is the narrator of "The Red Candle" and "Double Face." She is a Horse in the Chinese Zodiac, which predetermines a strong and hardworking nature. At only two years old, Lindo is arranged to be married to a spoiled boy named Tyan-yu, based on their compatible zodiac signs. When she goes to live with Tyan-yu's family at the age of twelve, Tyan-yu's mother, Huang Taitai, abuses Lindo like an indentured servant. The marriage is short-lived, as Lindo ingeniously plans a way to get out of her marital contract. Lindo sees this ingenuity inherited in her daughter Waverly, but fears her daughter is too Americanized to ever appreciate her Chinese heritage.

Waverly Jong – Waverly is the narrator of "Rules of the Game" and "Four Directions." Her stories center on her experiences as a child chess prodigy, and the tension between her and her mother, Lindo, who often assumes credit for Waverly's successes. Waverly treats her mother as the ultimate opponent, rather than a guiding figure, which antagonizes their relationship up into Waverly's adulthood. While seeking Lindo's approval before her second marriage, it is revealed that Waverly believes that Lindo poisoned her confidence as a child, so that Waverly is unable to trust her own instincts over love, parenting, and life in general. She has a young daughter, Shoshana, from a previous marriage.

Ying-ying St. Clair – Ying-ying is the narrator of "The Moon Lady" and "Waiting Between the Trees." Though outwardly appearing as the quietest and most meek of the Joy Luck Club members, Ying-ying identifies as a Tiger in the Chinese Zodiac, meaning she has a fierce and cunning nature. She loses her Tiger spirit following the end of her first marriage and a vengeful abortion; by the time she meets and marries Clifford St. Clair, she is barely a shadow of her former spirited self. As an adult, Ying-ying is a distant mother to Lena, until she sees her daughter approaching a divorce and believes she can help her.

Lena St. Clair – Lena is also a Tiger in the Chinese Zodiac, like her mother Ying-ying. She grew up in a biracial household with two languages, and subsequently acted like an interpreter between her white father and Chinese mother. The role led her to feel guilty about not always perfectly translating important conversations, affecting the family's relationships. Lena also has a difficult marriage as an adult, with her husband Harold, who is oblivious to her sensitivities. Lena tries to maintain an equal partnership between them, but loses track of what equality actually looks like in a marriage, and finds herself disillusioned and silenced in his presence.

Canning Woo – Suyuan's second husband and June's father. He insists that June take over Suyuan's spot in the Joy Luck Club, sparking the novel's chain of events. He is aware of Suyuan's first family and shares more of Suyuan's history with

June while they visit China, believing it's important for June to know her mother's legacy.

Clifford St. Clair – Ying-ying's husband and Lena's father. He is an American of English and Irish descent, who meets Ying-ying in China while completing military service. He barely speaks Chinese, which creates a large emotional barrier between them throughout their marriage. Clifford dies of a heart attack a few years before the beginning of *The Joy Luck Club*.

Popo – Popo is An-mei's maternal grandmother, who raises her from ages four to nine. She warns An-mei to never speak of An-mei's mother, and tells her frightening bedtime stories that scare her into obedience. When An-mei turns nine, Popo becomes deathly ill and An-mei's mother returns home to care for her, even going so far as to slice off some of her arm in an effort to make a healing brew. Unfortunately, the attempts to nurse Popo back to health aren't enough, and Popo dies without ever reconciling with An-mei's mother.

An-mei's mother – An-mei's mother is forced to leave the family home by her own mother, Popo, after her first husband dies and she (shamefully in the eyes of the community) becomes the unimportant fourth wife to a rich merchant named Wu Tsing. As the young widow of An-mei's father, An-mei's mother was expected to honor his life forever by never remarrying. An-mei doesn't learn the full story of An-mei's mother's tragic life until she goes to live with her mother following Popo's death. At Wu Tsing's mansion, An-mei's mother must submit to his second wife, who dominates the household with her manipulative personality. Second Wife even takes An-mei's baby brother as her own to be the official mother of Wu Tsing's heir. An-mei learns that her mother was raped by Wu Tsing, and her mother had no choice then but to marry him rather than live with the dishonor. An-mei's mother finally takes power by killing herself on the most spiritually superstitious day of the year, forcing Wu Tsing to honor An-mei so as to not enrage An-mei's mother's unsettled spirit.

Wu Tsing – A rich merchant who rapes An-mei's mother and forces her to marry him rather than have a shameful pregnancy out of wedlock. He is very superstitious, and An-mei's mother has her revenge by killing herself on the Lunar New Year and cursing him with furious **ghosts** if he doesn't care for An-mei.

Second Wife – The second wife of Wu Tsing, who despises An-mei's mother for being younger and more beautiful than she is. She forcibly takes An-mei's mother's new baby boy from her and adopts him, making Wu Tsing believe Second Wife gave him his heir, not An-mei's mother. When An-mei's mother commits suicide to give An-mei power over Wu Tsing, Second Wife is relegated to a position of unimportance in the family.

Tyan-yu – Lindo's former husband. They are betrothed when Tyan-yu is only one year old. Incredibly spoiled by his mother, Tyan-yu grows up to be an immature, underdeveloped adolescent who wants nothing to do with Lindo or their expected marital activities. This leads to Lindo view her young husband as a brother figure, but also to want nothing to do with the marriage.

Amah – Ying-ying's childhood nanny. Amah does the majority of parenting when Ying-ying is young, as Ying-ying's wealthy parents spend their time in leisure. Though she affectionately cares for Ying-ying, she's also aware that her job is in jeopardy whenever the girl misbehaves, causing her to be extra angry when Ying-ying sneaks off.

Rich Schields – Waverly's fiancé. He is very romantic in their relationship, and believes in the power of love despite Waverly's hesitation to remarry after a failed first marriage. Rich reveals how ignorant he is about Chinese culture during an awkward dinner with Lindo and Tin, but eventually wins Waverly's parents over with his enthusiasm.

Wang Chwun Yu – One of Suyuan's twin daughters from her first marriage. She is rescued between the cities Kweilin and Chungking in 1944, after Suyuan places her and her twin on a busy road. Suyuan, fearing that she's dying, believes her daughters will be saved if they seem orphaned. Chwun Yu grows up in China and reunites with her half-sister June at the end of the novel.

Wang Chwun Hwa – One of Suyuan's twin daughters from her first marriage. She is rescued between the cities Kweilin and Chungking in 1944, after Suyuan places her and her twin on a busy road. Suyuan, fearing that she's dying, believes her daughters will be saved if they seem orphaned. Chwun Hwa grows up in China and reunites with her half-sister June at the end of the novel.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Tin Jong – Lindo's second husband and Waverly's father. He meets Lindo while working in an American factory, though they initially can't communicate since he speaks a Cantonese dialect and she speaks Mandarin.

Huang Taitai – Lindo's former mother-in-law. Huang Taitai is haughty and cruel to Lindo, and overly doting to her son, Tyan-yu. Lindo tricks her into believing bad omens foretell a doomed marriage between Lindo and Tyan-yu, and convinces her to let her out of the otherwise unbreakable marriage contract.

Bing Hsu – An-mei's youngest son and Rose's little brother. He drowns when he's four years old during a family trip to the Pacific Ocean. An-mei sacrifices expensive **jewelry** to the ocean in exchange for giving him back, but his body is never recovered.

Ted Jordan – Rose's ex-husband. He believes Rose is incapable of making decisions and taking equal responsibility in their marriage, which leads to his unexpected demand for a divorce. Rose later learns that Ted has been having an affair during his frequent business trips to medical conferences.

Harold Livotny – Lena's estranged husband and her boss at an architectural firm. At first, he and Lena try to split all expense evenly, despite mismatched incomes. Later, she grows resentful of the division and feels powerless compared to him.

Shoshana Chen – Waverly's daughter. Waverly reveals that she originally planned to abort Shoshana, but changed her mind when she learned the baby had already started developing limbs inside her. Shoshana is energetic and curious, but slightly spoiled by Waverly and Lindo.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS

The main focus in *The Joy Luck Club* is the complex relationship between mothers and daughters, and the inherent bond that's always between them despite generational and cultural conflicts. The novel follows June Woo's search to understand her deceased mother Suyuan's life, supplemented by stories from her mother's three best friends, Lindo, An-mei, and Ying-ying. June's memory of her mother is complicated by the revelation that Suyuan had twin baby girls during World War II, but had to leave them in China for their own safety during the Japanese invasion. June questions whether she ever truly knew her mother, but the three older women insist that Suyuan exists deep in June's bones. The novel, in fact, suggests that the connection between mother and daughter exists beyond the knowledge of personal events; it's steeped in inherited behaviors and selflessness over the course of a lifetime. An-mei tells a related story about her banished mother returning home to care for An-mei's dying grandmother, Popo; her mother goes so far as to cut out a piece of her arm to prepare special medicine. The physical sacrifice represents the lengths that some daughters go to honor their mothers.

In contrast, the daughters of the Joy Luck Club members share stories about the difficulties of growing up with immigrant mothers. Cultural values clash as the American-born daughters want freedom from their mothers' old-fashioned beliefs. Yet by the end, the daughters discover their overbearing mothers have always had their best interests at heart. Ying-ying's daughter Lena tries to hide her impending divorce, but her mother wants to help her rediscover the "tiger side" of her Chinese identity, which fights and does not yield to sadness. Though initially ashamed to reveal such a failure to her mother, Lena realizes her mother fundamentally understands her decisions, as they share similar personal histories and values. As the standalone stories weave together in *The Joy Luck Club*, they expose how boundless maternal love can be, even when daughters misunderstand or undervalue it. As June meets her half-sisters for the first time in China, she feels her mother's presence with them, dispelling any doubt about understanding her mother's lifelong intentions. Though she cannot know every detail of her mother's history, June preserves the lessons that Suyuan taught her as a child, and the deep love for family to share with her new half-sisters.

STORYTELLING AND TRADITION

The novel has four sections of four stories each, narrated in turn by one of the novel's seven main characters. At the start of each section, a one-page Chinese parable (a short story with a moral) introduces the theme that connects the four stories that follow. The brief parables reflect the mothers' own parenting styles throughout the book, as they teach their daughters lessons through stories that can be internalized, rather than direct opinions or warnings. As a child, Waverly learns not to whine for attention, because her mother tells her that the "wise guy, he not go against wind… strongest wind cannot be seen." This lesson of stoicism drives Waverly's eventual success, both as a child chess champion and as a strong-willed professional. The style mimics the Chinese tradition of oral storytelling, where family history is passed along and immortalized through generations. More than just communicating advice, storytelling allows historical context and a stronger connection to Chinese heritage to be passed on, which fades as children become more Americanized and less interested in inheriting ancient proverbs. Tradition is vital to the development of personal values in *The Joy Luck Club*, and slowly becomes important to the daughters as they get older and realize the relevance, and strength, of all the stories and inherited customs within their own lives.

The mothers' longer narratives in each chapter often address their daughters, and storytelling acts as a way to transfer wisdom through personal experience. Suyuan repeats a story to June about escaping Kweilin, changing the ending each time as June grows older. When she's finally mature enough to comprehend the gravity of Suyuan's loss, June is told the whole story about the twins' abandonment and her mother's first husband's death. The story makes June confront the meanings of sacrifice, love, and despair more viscerally than simply being instructed to not take things for granted.

IMMIGRATION, LANGUAGE, AND MISTRANSLATION

Though storytelling is the main mode of communication in *The Joy Luck Club*, a constant

conflict in the novel is the language barrier between Chinese and English. When first immigrating to the United States, the mothers wish for their children to speak perfect English and succeed as Americans. However, by assimilating into American culture, their daughters lose a sense of their Chinese heritage and inherited language, in fact they lose even the ability to fully understand that heritage or language. In the opening chapter, June remembers translating all of her mother's comments in her head, but not retaining any meaning. While able to speak some English, the mothers feel most comfortable expressing ideas and stories in their native Chinese, which often cannot be translated into English. Though the daughters understand Chinese, they do not take the time to learn the language's complexities, and therefore struggle with abstract concepts, resulting in frustration or misunderstanding.

With their broken English, the mothers are often viewed as less competent or alien in American society. Non-Chinese characters often speak condescendingly to them, or ignore them altogether. Still, it is the mistranslation within the family that is most devastating. Lena recounts the relationship between her white father and Chinese mother Ying-ying, and her role as translator between them. When her mother has a stillborn son and wails her grief, Lena's father asks her to translate; rather than hurt him with her mother's near-insane words, Lena lies and tells him a more positive message. This mistranslation prevents Lena's father from properly supporting Lena's mother through her subsequent depression, resulting in Ying-ying's withdrawal from the family and life.

Tan highlights the difficulty of comprehendible expression by including Chinese or broken English in the dialogue, particularly with idioms. The reader must infer meaning rather than understand outright. During a fight with her husband, Lena can only express her anger in Chinese phrases, which aren't translatable. Unable to understand her, Lena's husband believes she's deliberately shutting him out. The novel argues that immigrants are no less intelligent or complex, but often misinterpreted to the point of being silenced, even by their own families.

FATE AND AUTONOMY

The notion of fate permeates the novel, as the protagonists waver between the traditional acceptance of a singular destiny and the opportunity to decide their own fates. The mothers often refer to the Chinese belief of predetermined outcomes; in particular, they regularly mention Chinese zodiac characters established by birthdates, which supposedly dictate personalities and personal weaknesses. Still, a common thread in all the stories is the ability to break out of one's preordained life to pursue a more positive direction. As a child, Lindo is arranged to be married to Tyan-yu, a spoiled boy from a rich family. Once she's folded into the family, more as a servant than a wife, Lindo initially resigns herself to the harsh life. She changes her mind when she sees her marriage candle blow out, signaling an inauspicious end to her marriage. When the candle is lit again in the morning, she knows someone artificially maintained the light, not fate itself. She then constructs a plan to scare her in-laws into releasing her from the marital contract and paying her way to America. Though fate might have delivered her to such circumstances, it is her own will and ingenuity that construct the solution and change the course of her life.

Similarly, An-mei's mother refuses to accept her abusive lot in life, especially as her children suffer alongside her. Though seemingly fated to live with her shame, An-mei's mother decides to kill herself at a time when her husband cannot refuse her anything, thus placing An-mei and her baby brother in a position of power. Though she dies, in doing so An-mei's mother decides her own destiny and the fortune of her children. Though the traditional Chinese belief in predetermined fate exists and determines much of a person's life, *The Joy Luck Club* reminds the reader that there is always room for free will to alter the future for the better.

SACRIFICE

The Joy Luck Club shows that all actions of love require some level of sacrifice, and that women in particular sacrifice themselves for the good of others. The greatest sacrifice in the book is Suyuan's decision to leave her twin babies in a safe spot to be rescued during the Japanese invasion of Kweilin. Nearly dead herself from dysentery, she places them near a road along with all her remaining money and her husband's information, believing they'd be saved if they seemed abandoned. Her willingness to put her daughters' lives before her own ensures their rescue. When An-mei's mother returns to care for her dying mother, she slices off a piece of her own arm and uses an ancestral recipe to prepare a medicinal broth, ignoring the physical pain. These actions show that no cost is too great when love is threatened.

These memories of sacrifice from the immigrant mothers of the novel are directly weighed with the petulance of the American daughters, who do not value their mothers' generosities. Unable to afford piano lessons in cash, Suyuan works extra hours cleaning a piano teacher's house so that June can learn how to play. At the time, June resents her mother's desire to turn her into some sort of child prodigy, and refuses to practice. As an adult however, she appreciates her mother's attempts to foster her natural talent. Though rarely appreciated in the moment, the novel argues that the act of sacrifice is the ultimate sign of love, giving up anything for the sake of another.

SEXISM AND POWER

As a novel centered entirely on women's points of view, *The Joy Luck Club* grapples with the nuances of sexism. On an explicit scale, the forced marriage of Lindo to her childish husband, Tyan-yu, shows the powerlessness of being a woman in pre-modern China. Without any say in her future, Lindo is used as barter to please a more powerful family. Sexual assault and domestic abuse feature in each of the mothers' personal histories. However, Tan does not only highlight blatant acts of sexism, but also carefully considers smaller aggressions against her female characters in daily life, which add up to life-altering problems. Lena's husband Harold, who is also her boss, repeatedly denies Lena a raise, saying that it'd be awkward to reward his wife in front of other employees. Even though she has earned the company the most profit, she remains passive to maintain peace in her marriage. This power imbalance ultimately ruins her, as she grows resentful of Harold's unwillingness to listen and cherish her. Similar instances of small, but constant, devaluations of all the protagonists show that sexism is not singular to one cultural experience, but universally shared as an oppressive force in their lives.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

GHOSTS

Unlike in other novels, **ghosts** in *The Joy Luck Club* rarely represent people who have physically died. Instead, they are people who cannot speak freely or who cannot be talked about. In the novel, having an opinion means having the power of self-agency; if someone isn't allowed to voice her opinion, then she loses any substance that makes her meaningful, and exists emptily like a ghost. For example, An-mei's mother is called "a ghost" in "Scar," not because she's dead, but because she has committed a social taboo that exiles her from her family's home. Relatives shun her opinions and remove all discussion of her, rendering her invisible. Memories of her haunt the household, but no active communication exists as if she were truly dead. Ying-ying self-identifies as a ghost following her marriage to Clifford St. Clair, knowing that she must hide her personal beliefs to protect herself in a new country. She silences herself out of fear, and her daughter Lena imagines her as a meek, unopinionated parent.

JEWELRY

Throughout the novel, valuable **jewelry** is passed from mothers to daughters, symbolizing inheritance and sacrifice. Almost all the main characters grow up in impoverished families without many luxuries. Owning a single piece of jewelry speaks to the hard work it took to earn it, and to the preciousness of the material possession. In Chinese tradition, jewelry has additional significance; they're often worn as protection charms from harm. In *The Joy Luck Club* however, the initial owner never keeps jewelry for herself, but gives it to her daughter. Lindo's mother's jade pendant is her only prized possession, but she presents it to Lindo on their last day together, hoping it brings her daughter good fortune and protection. Material sacrifice, no matter how great, doesn't matter if it protects her daughter. Lindo continues the legacy by giving the same pendant to her daughter Waverly before Waverly's first chess competition. Similar gifts are given to June by Suyuan, and to An-mei by An-mei's mother. More than just an inherited object, the jewelry represents a mother's constant love and a daughter's priceless value.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *The Joy Luck Club* published in 2006.

Feathers from a Thousand Li Away Quotes

In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

In the prologue to part one of the novel, Tan sets up one of the book's key themes: the importance of family. The unnamed woman in the parable told here could stand for any one of the novel's main characters: she wants to move to the United States in the hopes of building a new life for her child. Furthermore, the woman's decision to travel to America reflects her exasperation with Chinese culture: she doesn't like that in China, women are measured by their husbands, not their own personalities. The woman in the story wants the best for her child, even if achieving "the best" involves schooling the child harshly and giving up parts of her own culture--forcing her to speak only American English, for example. The women in the novel, as we'll see, sometimes treat their children severely, but only because they want their children to be successful and happy

as they can never be.

"This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions." And she waited, year after year, for the day she could tell her daughter this in perfect American English.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

When the unnamed woman comes to America, her prized swan is confiscated by the Americans who let her into the country: a metaphor for the way that immigration procedures and American society neuters immigrants of their native culture and forces them to "assimilate." The woman wanted to come to America to build a better life for her child, but she didn't count on having to surrender her dreams and ambitions as well. Here, the woman hangs onto a single feather from the swan, which she plans to present to her child one day, when she can express her feelings in American English. The woman's dilemma is that she wants the best for her child, and yet fails to communicate her message, due to cultural barriers. The woman makes a difficult decision: she raises her child to be an Asian-American, and yet the woman herself is still very much Asian, meaning that she'll never be able to understand her child completely.

The Joy Luck Club Quotes

I'm shaking, trying to hold something inside. The last time I saw them, at the funeral, I had broken down and cried big gulping sobs. They must wonder how someone like me can take my mother's place. A friend once told me that my mother and I were alike, that we had the same wispy hand gestures, the same girlish laugh and sideways look. When I shyly told my mother this, she seemed insulted and said, "You don't even know little percent of me! How can you be me?" And she's right. How can I be my mother at Joy Luck?

Related Characters: Jing-mei "June" Woo (speaker), Suyuan Woo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we're introduced to one of the novel's key characters, June. June is the daughter of Suyuan, a woman who, along with some of her Chinese friends, participated in a weekly gathering called the Joy Luck club. Suyuan has died recently, and June has been asked to attend the Joy Luck Club in her mother's place. June is understandably upset, although, right now she seems more upset about having to take her mother's place--both at the Joy Luck Club and, in some ways, in life--than she is about the fact of her mother's passing.

As June prepares to join the Joy Luck Club, it occurs to her that she barely knows anything about her mother. Her mother immigrated to the United States long ago, and June knows nothing about her mother's former life in China--thus making it impossible to ever "replace" her. As a member of the Joy Luck Club, however, she'll learn about her mother from old friends.

Not know your own mother? How can you say? Your mother is in your bones!

Related Characters: An-mei Hsu (speaker), Suyuan Woo, Jing-mei "June" Woo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of this chapter, June's mother's friends, the members of the Joy Luck Club, are outraged that June claims to know so little about her own mother--June is an American citizen, and her knowledge of her mother is limited to their experiences *in* America. June knows little to nothing about her mother's life back in China, and she shows little interest in learning about it.

The function of the Joy Luck Club, we begin to see, isn't just to play games--it's also to preserve the memories of the past; i.e., of life in China. In such a way, Tan lays out the basic structure of the novel: June will learn about her mother from the other members of the Joy Luck club, and gain new respect for her mother and her mother's culture.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

My mother took her flesh and put it in the soup. She cooked magic in the ancient tradition to try to cure her mother this one last time. She opened Popo's mouth, already too tight from trying to keep her spirit in. She fed her this soup, but that night Popo flew away with her illness. Even though I was young, I could see the pain of the flesh and the worth of the pain.

Related Characters: An-mei Hsu (speaker), An-mei's mother, Popo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, An-Mei Hsu, one of the old members of the Joy Luck Club, tells a story about her grandmother, or Popo. When An-Mei was a child, she remembers her mother trying to cure Popo of her illness by cutting off a piece of her own body and putting it in a soup. Her mother fed the soup to Popo, but to no avail.

The passage symbolizes the direct, even physical bond between a mother and a child. Throughout the novel, we'll see how mothers owe a certain debt to their children, and vice versa. Here, An-Mei's mother honors her "debt" to her own mother by giving back a part of herself, in soup-form. The bond between generations can be painful, certainly, but it's also a mark of love--albeit a more complex love than June is inclined to respect.

The Red Candle Quotes

I once sacrificed my life to keep my parents' promise. This means nothing to you, because to you promises mean nothing. A daughter can promise to come to dinner, but if she has a headache, if she has a traffic jam, if she wants to watch a favorite movie on TV, she no longer has a promise.

Related Characters: Lindo Jong (speaker), Waverly Jong

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

The passage begins on an aggressive note: the parent, Lindo Jong, speaks about her child, Waverley Jong. Lindo thinks of herself as being a faithful, respectful daughter--i.e., one who honors her promises to her parents at all costs. Lindo's own daughter, by contrast, is flighty and unpredictable--sometimes she keeps her promises, and sometimes she doesn't. According to Lindo, anything is wrong with Waverley (a headache, for example), Waverly breaks her word.

Lindo's tone is clearly frustrated: she weighs her daughter's loyalty to her against her own loyalty to her own parents, and concludes that Waverly is somehow an inferior daughter. Lindo's speech shows the strengths, but also the limits, of the mother-daughter relationship. Daughters show incredible loyalty to their parents, and vice-versa, but sometimes, such loyalty can fade away, or be placed behind other priorities--and perhaps it's irrational for a parent to demand total loyalty of her daughter.

I had no choice, now or later. That was how backward families in the country were. We were always the last to give up stupid old-fashioned customs. In other cities already, a man could choose his own wife, with his parents' permission of course. But we were cut off from this new type of thought. You never heard if ideas were better in another city, only if they were worse.

Related Characters: Lindo Jong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

In this story, Lindo tells us about her betrothal. It may be surprising for some readers to hear that Lindo was betrothed to another man, Tyan-Yu, when she was only two years old. In her part of China at the time, Lindo explains, betrothals and marriages were usually determined by Zodiac signs, rather than love between two adults. Lindo acknowledges that there were many more forward-thinking communities in China where adults could choose their partners (but only men, never women). However, in Lindo's community, the old-fashioned Zodiac method was still popular.

Lindo's comments are important because they clarify the fact that Chinese culture isn't one monolithic object: China encompasses an incredible variety of traditions and cultures, and it's wrong to lump them all together, as so many Americans do.

The Moon Lady Quotes

All these years I kept my true nature hidden, running along like a small shadow so nobody could catch me. And because I moved so secretly now my daughter does not see me. She sees a list of things to buy, her checkbook out of balance, her ashtray sitting crooked on a straight table. And I want to tell her this: we are lost, she and I, unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others

Related Characters: Ying-ying St. Clair (speaker), Lena St. Clair

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

In this strange story, we learn that Ying-ying has acted meek, quiet, and lost for most of her life. Furthermore, for many years, Ying-ying didn't even remember *why* she felt so lost. As a result, Ying-ying never really connected with her daughter, Lena. Instead of feeling a deep connection with her mother, Lena acted aloof and distant, and focused on material things like shopping lists instead of her almost-invisible mother.

The passage conveys the tragedy of broken down communication: Ying-ying loves her daughter, and yet she can't fully express her feelings, for reasons she can barely recall. The divide between Ying-ying and Lena is cultural as well as psychological: it's her past experiences in China, experiences that Lena knows nothing about, that have kept Ying-ying feeling so lost and secretive.

"What is a secret wish?"
"It is what you want but cannot ask," said Amah.
"Why can't I ask?"
"This is because...because if you ask it...it is no longer a wish but a selfish desire," said Amah. "Haven't I taught you – that it is wrong to think of your own needs? A girl can never ask, only listen."

Related Characters: Ying-ying St. Clair, Amah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ying-ying remembers an episode from her childhood in which her nurse, Amah, told her not to openly ask for anything in life. Ying-ying was a young, impressionable child, and Amah told her that she shouldn't "disgrace" herself by voicing her own desires. Instead, Amah explained, Ying-ying should limit herself to secret wishes; i.e., wishes that she never actually expressed.

The passage shows the way that Chinese culture sometimes encourages people, especially women, to be meek and submissive instead of expressing their true feelings. Authority figures like Amah mean well, and yet they perpetuate sexism by ordering children to swallow their desires--a surefire recipe for unhappiness later on in life.

The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates Quotes

"I don't believe you. Let me see the book."
"It is written in Chinese. You cannot understand it. That is why you must listen to me."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

In the second prologue of the book, a mother tells her daughter not to bike away into the distance, because doing so is forbidden according to a supposed book, written in Chinese. The daughter, suspicious that the book's warning is made-up (which it probably is), asks to see it for herself, but the mother insists that the daughter won't be able to understand it, since it's written in Chinese.

The passage is amusing, but it also conveys a serious point: the mother in the parable is using her Chinese heritage to both educate her daughter and tyrannize her. She orders the daughter what to do, and rather than explain her reasons for doing so, she cites a book that the daughter won't be able to understand. The barrier between Chinese and English language symbolizes the wider barrier between the two generations: the mother raises her daughter according to a set of rules that the daughter finds absurd, and yet the mother seems to lack the ability to justify her own ways to her child. As a result, resentment and cultural misunderstandings build up between the daughter and the mother.

"You can't tell me because you don't know! You don't know anything!" And the girl ran outside, jumped on her bicycle, and in her hurry to get away, she fell before she even reached the corner.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

In the second part of the parable in Part Two, the impudent daughter of the mother disobeys and bikes away on her own. In the end, however, she falls off her bike and hurts herself. The mother seems to be vindicated: she's ordered her daughter not to bike away on her own, and when the daughter does so, she gets hurt.

The passage could be interpreted as a fable, the moral of which is to obey your elders. But perhaps Tan's point is subtler: the mother, while technically "right," is also a tragic figure--she seems to be motivated by a sincere desire to help her child, and yet she can't quite connect with her. The barriers between English and Chinese languages, and between American and Chinese culture, conspire to keep the daughter and her mother apart both physically and emotionally.

Rules of the Game Quotes

I was six when my mother taught me the art of invisible strength. It was a strategy for winning arguments, respect from others, and eventually, though neither of us knew it at the time, chess games.

Related Characters: Waverly Jong (speaker), Lindo Jong

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

The chapter begins on a relatively optimistic note: Waverly, a young girl, learns from her mother, Lindo, how to be strong and determined at all times. Lindo recognizes that Waverly is a loud child, and she tries to teach her daughter how to be quiet. And yet Lindo *isn't* teaching Waverly to be meek or submissive: rather, Lindo teaches Waverly how to take care of herself and project inner confidence, without ever saying a word. Waverly's "invisible strength" later helps her succeed in the game of chess.

The passage is a good example of how a mother can pass on lessons to her child without limiting the child's freedom or angering the child. Lindo doesn't want her daughter to be passive or weak; she teaches Waverly strength. In general, then, the passage shows--at least for now--a supportive relationship between mother and daughter.

Two Kinds Quotes

I saw what seemed to be the prodigy side of me – because I had never seen that face before. I looked at my reflection, blinking so I could see more clearly. The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. This girl and I were the same. I had new thoughts, willful thoughts, or rather thoughts filled with lots of won'ts. I won't let her change me, I promised to myself. I won't be what I'm not.

Related Characters: Jing-mei "June" Woo (speaker), Suyuan Woo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we see the tragedy emerging between June and her mother, Suyuan. Suyuan desperately wants her daughter June to be a child prodigy of some kind--and so she works hard to find something that June is good at. Suyuan seems motivated by a more abstract sense of socially-approved success than she is by love for her child as an individual. As a result, June finds herself growing alienated from her mother: she begins to hate herself, and hate her mother for forcing her to try to many different activities.

The passage is tragic because it shows a divide growing between mother and daughter, even when both have good intentions. June thinks of her mother as manipulating her for selfish reasons. This assessment is probably a little harsh, but it's also totally justifiable and admirable for June to want to assert her individuality and grow into her own person. At the same time, even if Suyuan pushes her daughter too hard to succeed, she wants the best for her child, and undertakes great sacrifices on her own part to give June access to resources she herself never had.

Maybe I never really gave myself a fair chance. I did pick up the basics pretty quickly, and I might have become a good pianist at that young age. But I was so determined not to try, not to be anybody different that I learned to play only the most ear-splitting preludes, the most discordant hymns.

Related Characters: Jing-mei "June" Woo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Suyuan thinks she's found something that June can succeed at: piano playing. Suyuan arranges for June to receive piano lessons, working extra hard and spending a lot of her own money to do so. June, who by this point dislikes her mother for forcing her to try so many different activities, rebels by deliberately playing the piano badly. In retrospect, June comes to realize that she could have been a successful piano player, but because she wanted to rebels against her mother, she devoted her energy to playing poorly.

The passage shows the limitations of Suyuan's approach to child-rearing. Suyuan wants her child to succeed, but because she's too forceful and aggressive in her motivation techniques, June works to *not*succeed. The tragedy is that at the same time that June is asserting herself, she is also ignoring her mother's sacrifice of work and money, and squandering the resources Suyuan has made available to her.

"You want me to be someone that I'm not!" I sobbed. "I'll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be... I wish I wasn't your daughter. I wish you weren't my mother," I shouted. As I said these things I got scared. It felt... as if this awful side of me had surfaced at last... And that's when I remembered the babies she had lost in China, the ones we never talked about. "I wish I'd never been born!" I shouted. "I wish I were dead! Like them."
It was as if I had said the magic words Alakazam!—and her face went blank.

Related Characters: Jing-mei "June" Woo (speaker), Suyuan Woo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, June rebels against her mother and takes things too far. Suyuan wants her daughter to succeed at playing the piano--an activity that June doesn't particularly enjoy. June resents her mother for pushing her so hard to succeed, and as a result, she lashes out. In this scene, June yells at her mother that she hates playing the piano, and hates her mother, too. Furthermore, she claims that she wishes she'd never been born--she wishes she'd died, like the two daughters Suyuan has "lost" in China.

Suyuan is so hurt by June's outburst that she backs off and never mentions the piano again.In all, the passage shows that the conflict between Suyuan and June is a two-way street, even if Suyuan "started it." After this, June feels guilty for pushing her mother away. For her part, Suyuan, Tan suggests, isn't just a stereotypical overbearing parent--she too has feelings of guilt and great loss, related to her two other daughters.

Rice Husband Quotes

To this day, I believe my mother has the mysterious ability to see things before they happen. She has a Chinese saying for what she knows. *Chunwang chihan*: if the lips are gone, the teeth will be cold. Which means, I suppose, one thing is always the result of another.

Related Characters: Lena St. Clair (speaker), Ying-ying St. Clair

Related Themes:

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lena discusses her mother's apparent ability to predict the future. Over the years, Lena has noticed that her mother can predict when something bad is going to happen to a family member. Notice that the events Ying-ying can predict are almost always bad--a fact reflected in the wording of the proverb she quotes here. If the "lips are gone," we're told, "the teeth will be cold"; suggesting, perhaps, that tragedies are always tied to one another.

The notion that one tragedy breeds another is important to the plot of the book. Many of the events in the novel are cyclical: characters who were wronged later cause similar wrongs for other people, whether they're trying to do so or not. Thus, the passage could be interpreted as an observation not just about tragedies predicted by Ying-ying, but about the interconnectedness of all tragedy and suffering.

Four Directions Quotes

That's what she is. A Horse, born in 1918, destined to be obstinate and frank to the point of tactlessness. She and I make a bad combination, because I'm a Rabbit, born in 1951, supposedly sensitive, with tendencies toward being thin-skinned and skittery at the first sign of criticism.

Related Characters: Waverly Jong (speaker), Lindo Jong

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Waverly complains that she and her mother are destined to never get along, thanks to their incompatible Zodiac signs. Waverly is thin-skinned, while Lindo is frank and tactless--together, they just make each other miserable. Waverly makes no real effort to get along with her mother anymore--instead, she throws up her hands and says that they'll never get along.

The passage is interesting because although it shows the conflict between Waverly and her mother, it *also* shows the deep connection between them, rooted in their common knowledge of Chinese culture. Even two people whose Zodiac signs are incompatible have one thing in common: they both believe in the same Zodiac. Subtly, then, the passage communicates the unshakable bond between Waverly and Lindo, a bond that's tied to their Chinese heritage. (Yet this particular part of their heritage--the idea that the Zodiac predicts one's personal qualities--also keeps them apart, as they feel they are "fated" to never get along.)

> And my mother loved to show me off, like one of the many trophies she polished. She used to discuss my games as if she had devised the strategies... and a hundred other useless things that had nothing to do with my winning.

Related Characters: Waverly Jong (speaker), Lindo Jong

Related Themes:

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

Waverly becomes deeply resentful of her mother's pride in her chess victories. Although Waverly is happy with her victories, she's worried that her mother isn't really concerned with Waverly's happiness or success; Lindo is more concerned about taking the credit for her daughter's games. Waverly begins to think of herself as a mere object for her mother's gratification: a "trophy" to be shown off to Lindo's friends and associates.

The passage shows the extent of the rift between Waverly and Lindo. Waverly is a talented person, but her interest in her chess games is second to her obsession with her own mother. Waverly can't stop thinking about Lindo--she's fixated on Lindo to the point where she can't concentrate on strategy anymore. Thus, the passage could be considered an example of a mother-daughter relationship that's self-destructive, rather than mutually beneficial.

Without Wood Quotes

> "A mother is best. A mother knows what is inside you," she said above the singing voices. "A psyche-atricks will only make you *hulihudu*, make you see *heimongmong*."

Related Characters: An-mei Hsu (speaker), Rose Hsu Jordan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rose describes her complex relationship with her mother, An-Mei. An-Mei was a charismatic mother, whose hypnotic voice was often enough to compel Rose to pay attention, even if she had no idea what An-Mei was talking about. Here, for example, half of the words in the passage aren't written in English, and yet Rose seems to understand the meaning of the words, based solely on the tone of her mother's voice.

What the passage dramatizes, then, is a deep, emotional connection between mother and daughter, one that defies language altogether. While some of the other characters in the novel struggle with the language gap between themselves and their parents, Rose seems to be able to communicate with her mother without language getting in the way. Even so, Tan suggests that there's a dark side to the kind of communication she shows between An-Mei and Rose: An-Mei seems to doubt that anybody *other* than she can help Rose (like a psychiatrist), suggesting that her love for Rose is smothering and invasive.

> Over the years, I learned to choose from the best opinions. Chinese people had Chinese opinions. American people had American opinions. And in almost every case, the American version was much better. It was only later that I discovered there was a serious flaw with the American version. There were too many choices, so it was easy to get confused and pick the wrong thing.

Related Characters: Rose Hsu Jordan (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rose spells out one of the limitations of life in American culture, versus life in a Chinese culture. Americans have a huge array of options available to them: they can choose any school, any career, any spouse, etc. In China, one's options in life are determined by birth, family, money, etc. While one could potentially conclude that American culture is "better" than Chinese culture insofar as it offers more options for happiness, it's also true that American life has its downsides. It can be dizzying to have to choose between so many different options, with the result that sometimes, Americans become obsessed with the choices they didn't make, rather than enjoying their current lives.

The passage is one of the most eloquent expressions of the strength of Chinese culture--a culture that limits personal freedom, especially for women, and yet offers a kind of solidarity and comfort that American society cannot match.

Ted pulled out the divorce papers and stared at them. His x's were still there, the blanks were still blank. "What do you think you're doing? Exactly what?" he said.
And the answer, the one that was important above everything else, ran through my body and fell from my lips: "You can't just pull me out of your life and throw me away."

Related Characters: Ted Jordan, Rose Hsu Jordan (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rose stands up to her husband, Ted, and refuses to just comply with his wishes and sign the divorce papers, allowing him to immediately marry someone else. Ted is surprised to see Rose standing up for herself--she's been a relatively calm, meek wife, and Ted has taken advantage of her meekness by cheating on her with other women. Here, though, Rose seems to find inspiration in her mother's example. Just as An-Mei's voice inspired Rose when Rose was a child, Rose fills her own voice with confidence and assuredness, with the result that she at least gets acknowledgment and respect from Ted.

The passage gives us another good example of the positive relationships between mothers and their daughters. Based on the first half of the novel, it would be easy to conclude that Chinese mothers pass on nothing but submissiveness and suffering to their children, but as the novel approaches an ending it becomes clear that the characters have also learned inner strength and confidence from their parents.

A Pair of Tickets Quotes

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

Related Characters: Jing-mei "June" Woo (speaker), Suyuan Woo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, June is coming back to her mother's home in China. June was always opposed to returning to China--she thought of herself as an American, without any particular connection to Chinese culture, in spite of her heritage. But after Suyuan's death, June decides to return to China to learn about her mother's life and find out about her long-lost daughters.

The passage depicts an almost supernatural connection, not just between mother and daughter but between person and country. As June passes into China, she feels herself *becoming* Chinese. In spite of her American citizenship, June intuitively senses that she knows China--something in the environment triggers her. Here, as in other parts of the book, Tan conveys the extent of the relationship between a person and her background--try as she might, June can't escape her Chinese heritage.

"You don't understand," I protested.
"What I don't understand?" she said.
And then I whispered, "They'll think I'm responsible, that she died because I didn't appreciate her."
And Auntie Lindo looked satisfied and sad at the same time, as if this were true and I had finally realized it.

Related Characters: Jing-mei "June" Woo, Lindo Jong (speaker), Suyuan Woo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, June talks to her mother's friend, Lindo. June is preparing to reunite with her long-lost sisters--the girls whom Suyuan left back in China when she came to America. June feels guilty about her mother's death, and the thought of having to appear before her long-lost sisters makes her feel even guiltier; she imagines that her sisters will blame her for her mother's death. June voices her anxieties to Lindo, and Lindo seems to look satisfied, as if June is only just realizing the truth.

Has June "killed" her mother through neglect? It would be wrong to say so, and Tan leaves open the possibility that Lindo doesn't truly agree with June's suggestion--perhaps June is only projecting her own guilt onto Lindo's face (and Lindo also looks "sad" here, whether because she thinks this suggestion is false or because she thinks it's tragically true). It really is the case, however, that June has turned her back on Suyuan, being unnecessarily harsh with her mother; as a result, Suyuan's life has been sad and lonely. June feels guilty about seeing her sisters because they never had the opportunity to even meet their mother, much less be frustrated by and unappreciative of her.

❝ I look at their faces again and see no trace of my mother in them. Yet they still look familiar. And now I also see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood. After all these years, I can finally be let go.

Related Characters: Jing-mei "June" Woo (speaker), Suyuan Woo, Wang Chwun Yu, Wang Chwun Hwa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 288

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the novel, June finally reunites with her long-lost siblings. As she does so, she feels that she's also accomplished a task she's been attempting for many years. June has been interested in tracking down her siblings, and yet she's always felt a sense of incompleteness, both because of her strained relationship with her mother and because of her ignorance of and disconnection from her own culture. By traveling to China and finding her half-sisters, June honors her mother's memory, both respecting her mother's heritage and completing the task that Suyuan herself was never able to do.

The passage is both the culmination of the entire book and the beginning of the rest of June's life. June has always felt that her Chinese heritage is a millstone around her neck--she wishes she could break free of it. Here, in the instant that June is finally most in touch with her Chinese "roots," she can finally move on with her life. And yet at the same time, she seems to have no desire to abandon her Chinese heritage anymore: she's just getting to know her sisters. In all, the passage sums up one of the key themes of the novel: heritage, like a mother or daughter, can be freeing and imprisoning, often at the same time.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1, PROLOGUE: FEATHERS FROM A THOUSAND LI AWAY

The first part of the novel, "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away," opens with a short prologue (as do each of the other parts of the novel). This prologue is a parable told by an old woman, who purchased a swan as a young woman before immigrating to America from China. The person who sells her this swan tells her that the swan was initially a duck, but it stretched its neck out in hopes of becoming something better, and magically transformed to a swan. She immediately buys it.

The novel begins with a parable, highlighting the theme of storytelling and the idea that stories act as bridges between people to express complex ideas more easily. In this parable, the woman hopes to change her fate and become something better than what she can be in China. The swan's transformation represents her hope to transform by immigrating.

On the long voyage, while "stretching her neck to America," the woman dreams of a daughter "just like her," to whom she can give the swan as a gift. This daughter, in the woman's imagination, will be judged by the strength of her own character, not by her husband's, and won't be looked down on by others because she will only speak perfect American English.

The woman wants a daughter who innately understands her, but who also has power in the male-dominated world in part by knowing perfect English. The power of language will make the daughter stronger-willed and therefore happier, which is more important to the woman than her own happiness.

When the woman arrives in the United States, immigration officials take the swan from her, leaving only one feather behind. In the chaos of filling out forms, she forgets "why she had come and what she had left behind."

As soon as the woman immigrates, American officials strip her of her prized possession and confuse her with English documents, leaving her powerless.

The woman later has an American daughter who grows up "swallowing more Coca Cola than sadness." Over the years, the woman thinks about giving her daughter the feather. However, she holds back, waiting until she can one day tell her the importance of the feather in perfect English.

The mother seems to get her wish: her daughter is an American. But a cultural and linguistic barrier exists between the woman, who experienced so much hardship, and her daughter, who embraces an easier American life without understanding her mother's sacrifice. The mother is unable to fully communicate her complex story so her daughter can understand her intentions.

PART 1, CHAPTER 1: THE JOY LUCK CLUB

Two months after her mother Suyuan passes away, Jing-mei "June" Woo is asked by her father Canning to take over her mother's spot in the Joy Luck Club, a weekly mahjong game night that's been held for nearly forty years, since 1949. Her mother died of a cerebral aneurysm, which her father blames on a very large idea that burst in her head. June hesitates, as Canning's request stirs up the story of the Joy Luck Club's formation in her memory.

Suyuan's mahjong seat represents forty years' worth of tradition stemming back to China, as well as a daughter's inheritance of her mother's legacy. June's hesitation reveals the fear of being unable to interact comfortably with the previous generation, and that she's incapable of replacing her mother's large personality.

Suyuan concocted the Joy Luck Club to combat the sorrows of her experiences in China during the Sino-Japanese War in the 1940s. At that time, Suyuan's husband was a soldier for the *Kuomintang*, the Chinese nationalist party that was fighting off Japanese aggression against China and the Chinese Communists' attempted takeover of China. In August 1944, Suyuan's husband takes her and their twin baby girls to the city of Kweilin for safety while he goes to fight in northwestern Chungking. In contrast to her expectations of a beautiful city, Kweilin is impoverished and overcrowded by refugees, leading to rampant hunger and disease.

The Joy Luck Club's origin story not only gives June historical context to her mother's eventual immigration to America, but introduces Suyuan's twin baby girls, who are noticeably absent in the Woo family's lives. The story also shows Suyuan's personal sacrifices during the war in 1940s China. Maternal sacrifice is repeated throughout the novel, as is the daughter's who benefited from those sacrifices being unable to appreciate the loss involved in those sacrifices.

Stuck in Kweilin with little optimism, Suyuan asks three other female refugees to pool their meager money with hers for a shared feast each week, with special dishes that promise prosperity and joy. After the feast, they play mahjong, a game where four players strategically trade domino-like tiles to make winning tile combinations. The club's goal is to find a little joy and luck amid terrible circumstances. Suyuan first hosts the Joy Luck Club in Kweilin before she is forced to emigrate from China. Later, she revives the weekly game nights in America in 1949 with new participants, after immigrating to California and meeting An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair at the San Francisco Refugee Welcome Center. In the eyes of these women, she senses unspeakable tragedies left behind in China, and instantly feels akin to them and their shared immigrant experiences.

Rather than resign herself to a miserable fate in Kweilin, Suyuan takes it upon herself to create a little happiness in weekly celebrations with other women. Her decision to continue the Joy Luck Club's traditions in San Francisco further reveals her fortitude and autonomy in the face of severe circumstances. Note that Suyuan bonds with the other women in San Francisco through a sense of shared tragedy, of shared sacrifice – such tragedy and sacrifice, the novel suggests, was near universal among Chinese immigrants of this generation to the United States.

Suyuan tells June the origin story of the Joy Luck Club in a lighter tone when June is a child, always ending on her delight at having hope for the future through the weekly celebrations; June imagines the story as a "Chinese fairy tale" with a happy ending. But as June gets older, the story continually changes and becomes increasingly bleaker. Eventually, June learns the true story. As the Japanese come closer to Kweilin in 1944, her mother is warned to flee and find her husband, as the families of Kuomintang officers were sure to be killed first. She puts her twin baby girls and her last possessions into a stolen wheelbarrow and starts pushing to the faraway city of Chungking.

Suyuan holds back from telling young June about the sacrifice of her baby girls (whatever that turns out to be), partly to protect her from knowing sadness – as the prologue's parable foreshadowed. Yet without hearing her mother's full story, June falsely believes that her mother's immigration story ended happily, and therefore lacks empathy for her mother while growing up. The real ending about fleeing Kweilin depicts Suyuan's refusal to accept her babies' doomed fates and the depths of her maternal love for them.

During Suyuan's arduous journey, the wheelbarrow breaks and she abandons valuables along the road to carry her babies as far as possible, while getting sicker from dysentery. By the time she reaches Chungking, she only has three silk dresses left that she's wearing on her body. When June asks about the babies' fates, horrified, Suyuan only says that "your father is not my first husband. You are not those babies."

Suyuan sacrifices everything to protect her daughters, even ignoring her own life-threatening illness to get them far away from enemy troops. She does not elaborate on what happened to the twins, showing the insufficiency of language to express grief, as well as the rift in her relationship with June (a rift founded on her attempt to protect her daughter from sadness by keeping it to herself).

Back in the present day, June arrives at An-mei's house for the Joy Luck Club meeting. She immediately feels out of place, like she is a child again, even though the older generation of women stiffly attempt to treat her as an equal in conversation. As they play mahjong, the three older women – all mothers of daughters – start talking about their daughters' successes and, in doing so, imply that June has failed because she did not finish college and was recently evicted from her apartment.

In addition to the relationship between Suyuan and June, the novel examines three other mother-daughter relationships. The mothers often boast about their daughters' successes to others but scold their daughters in private for having weaknesses, creating an emotional disconnection between the mother-daughter pairs.

After the game, June tries to leave, but the three women stop her and reveal that Suyuan had finally found her lost twin daughters' addresses in China after decades of searching; however, she died before having the chance to contact them. The three women – An-mei, Lindo, and Ying-ying – ask June to fulfill her mother's greatest wish of reconnecting with her daughters, and give June $1,200 of their money to fly to China. Though moved by the gesture, June expresses her fear that she doesn't know enough about her mother's life to properly manage the meeting.

Suyuan has secretly searched alone for her lost babies for forty years, revealing the extent of her maternal devotion (and the way she has sacrificed her ability to share the pain she must have felt). In contrast, and as a result of that combined act of sacrifice and protection by Suyuan, June guiltily feels like she didn't value her mother enough during her life, nor try to learn her mother's life story enough to pass on to others.

The three older women are outraged that June would think she didn't know Suyuan after a lifetime of being raised by her. June recognizes that behind the anger, An-mei, Lindo, and Ying-ying are actually afraid that their own daughters would have the same reaction as June, disconnected from their mothers' lives and histories. June impulsively agrees to travel to China to meet her half-sisters, and pass on her mother's story to them.

June's ignorance represents the mothers' greatest fear: their life stories won't be passed on between generations, and eventually the cultural traditions and personal histories will be lost forever. Legacy is highly valued in Chinese culture, but their American daughters don't try to maintain it, though perhaps it might also be said that the daughter were so protected that they didn't know enough to be able to maintain it.

PART 1, CHAPTER 2: SCAR

In "Scar," An-mei recalls her childhood in China, when she lived with her grandmother rather than her mother. Popo, Chinese for 'grandma,' would regularly frighten her by saying An-mei's mother was a **ghost**; in those days, a ghost meant anything they "were forbidden to talk about," not that her mother was dead. Over time, An-mei forgets about her mother entirely.

An-mei's mother committed such a heinous act in the past that her own mother (An-mei's grandmother) refuses to acknowledge her existence. In a novel about mothers and daughters, Popo strips An-mei's mother of any maternal or filial identity by re-naming her a "ghost."

Popo becomes ill and bedridden in 1923, when An-mei is nine years old. Popo continues to scare her by telling bedside stories about disobedient girls who receive horrible bodily punishments. Right before she loses the ability to speak, she warns An-mei to never say her mother's name out loud, or she'd be spitting on An-mei's deceased father's grave.

Popo knows that stories are more influential than outright advice, because stories can be interpreted and internalized in many ways. Though An-mei doesn't fully understand the bedside stories as a child, she develops a vague fear of disobedience.

Later that summer, An-mei's aunt loses her temper and reveals to An-mei that An-mei's mother had run off with a man named Wu Tsing to be his lowly fourth wife, when An-mei was four. Her re-marriage was so shameful that the family exiled her, calling her a traitor to their ancestors. An-mei realizes Popo's stories were meant as warnings against her mother's bad behavior, and disappointedly imagines her mother as a flighty woman with no care for honor or familial responsibility.

The family condemns An-mei's mother for becoming a concubine rather than remaining a widow and honoring her dead husband's memory for the rest of her life, as tradition dictates. Popo scares An-mei into obedience as a pre-warning to not be like her mother.

Soon after that revelation, a pretty woman arrives at Popo's house to nurse Popo back to health, and An-mei immediately knows it's her mother even though she has no memory of her mother's face. While other relatives ridicule her or ignore her like a **ghost**, An-mei watches her mother urge Popo out of her near-death slumber, telling her "your daughter is back."

An-mei's mother returns to take care of her dying mother despite the humiliation of showing her face among relatives again; her will to save her mother is stronger than any shame. Even though An-mei has forgotten what her mother looks like, the bond between mother and daughter is innate and immediately felt.

Later that afternoon, An-mei's mother calls An-mei over to brush her hair, scolding her shyness by saying "An-mei, you know who I am." While brushing, An-mei's mother touches an old scar under An-mei's chin. The touch revives the memory of the night her mother left five years ago.

Despite their fundamental connection, An-mei has been taught by others to be cautious about her mother because of her mother's supposedly deviant behavior.

An-mei's mother had begged An-mei to leave with her that night, but Popo refused to let her go, arguing that An-mei's mother was a disgrace, and that the shame would infect An-mei's life too. Four-year-old An-mei reached out for her mother and accidentally tipped a boiling hot pot of soup onto herself, burning her so badly that Popo thought she'd die that night. The family threw An-mei's mother out, and Popo took care of An-mei as the burn became a scar.

Unlike what An-mei had been told, her mother did not abandon her, but was driven away by angry relatives. Most mothers and daughters in the novel cannot emotionally connect because some external force drives them apart, leaving the daughter without a full understanding of her mother's plight or actions.

Right before Popo dies, An-mei discovers her mother cutting off a piece of her arm and cooking it in a soup made with "magic in the ancient tradition"—a soup which is supposed to heal anything. An-mei's mother then attempts in vain to feed the broth to Popo, desperate to cure her. From this act, An-mei recognizes and admires "the pain of the flesh and the worth of the pain," and the lengths that a daughter would go to honor her mother.

An-mei's mother's physical sacrifice is an act of true daughterly love, which transcends personal pain. An-mei respects her mother again for proving her bone-deep devotion to Popo, regardless of Popo's harsh banishment of her. From this, An-mei recognizes that mothers and daughters are connected forever by blood, that this connection entails pain, but that it is a worthwhile pain, a pain that communicates love.

PART 1, CHAPTER 3: THE RED CANDLE

Lindo opens the chapter by saying she "sacrificed [her] life to keep [her] parents' promise," but that to her daughter Waverly, "promises mean nothing." She then thinks about her granddaughter Shoshana, to whom she occasionally gives gold jewelry as gifts. Though Shoshana promises to never forget her grandmother's generosity, Lindo worries that Shoshana will eventually forget about their Chinese heritage.

Sacrifice and promises mean different things to the two generations of women. For the younger generation, there is rarely any consequence to not following through on a promise. Lindo worries that her granddaughter will continue the pattern of making worthless promises, rather than respecting the Chinese value of her word.

Lindo expands on her previously sacrifice, describing her arranged marriage in China when she was two years old and her betrothed, Tyan-yu, was one. Tyan-yu comes from a wealthy family, and is spoiled by his overbearing mother, Huang Taitai. The matchmaker says Lindo is fated to be Tyan-yu's wife because of their compatible Chinese zodiac characters; Lindo is an Earth Horse, signaling a strong and hardworking nature, which pleases Huang Taitai.

According to old Chinese traditions, women were merely valued as objects to barter with between families. Love did not matter in arranged marriages, only the future compatibility of their personalities, as predetermined by Chinese zodiac.

After the initial arrangement, Lindo's mother refers to Lindo as Huang Taitai's daughter instead of her own, and treats her coldly "as if [she] belonged to someone else." Lindo notes that the treatment wasn't out of spite, but Lindo's mother's way of reducing their emotional connection, so the eventual separation would be easier on Lindo.

Though incredibly difficult, Lindo's mother emotionally divorces herself from Lindo to protect her daughter from heartache. Lindo doesn't understand at the time why her mother is so cold, and can't appreciate her mother's sacrifice.

When Lindo is twelve, her family's farm is destroyed by floods, and her parents decide that, rather than move far away with them, she's old enough to go to Huang Taitai's. Before leaving, Lindo's mother gives Lindo her precious jade **necklace** for good luck. Once in Huang Taitai's home, Lindo is treated like a lowly servant, waiting on Tyan-yu and living in the kitchen.

Lindo's mother shows her love by giving Lindo her prized jade necklace. The material sacrifice means little to her if it protects her daughter. Girls are powerless in this cultural hierarchy, attending to the whims of their future husbands as if indentured servants.

Over the next four years, Lindo becomes such a good servant that Huang Taitai jokingly complains that she can't make a mess without Lindo immediately cleaning it up. Lindo gradually loses her own opinions and dreams, brainwashed by Huang Taitai to believe that Tyan-yu is her god to serve, "whose opinion was worth much more than [her] own life."

Lindo's story continues to highlight the power imbalance for young women in arranged marriages. Lindo has no other option but to submit to her mother-in-law and future husband's wills, and loses her own independent thoughts in the process

By Lindo's sixteenth birthday, Huang Taitai is anxious for a grandson, and plans a lavish wedding for Tyan-yu and Lindo. However, Japanese troops invade adjacent provinces during the wedding week and no guests come, which is a bad marital omen. Another bad omen is a huge thunderstorm on their wedding day. At first, Lindo cries at her great misfortune, but the storm's strong wind reminds her that she is just as strong, and Lindo promises herself to "always remember [her] parents' wishes, but… never forget [herself]" again.

Though superstition is important to Chinese tradition and bad omens seem to suggest a predetermined fate, Lindo maintains her autonomy by remembering that she is strong enough to overcome any negative circumstance.

On her wedding night, Lindo sees her red marriage candle on display. According to tradition, a candle is decorated with her name on one end and Tyan-yu's name on the other, and the two ends are simultaneously burned. If the candle stays lit through the night and neither end goes out, then the marriage can never be broken.

The marriage candle is a tradition passed along each generation, and Lindo believes in its power to bind her to Tyan-yu. She knows someone must intervene before the symbolic ritual is completed, and she's stuck to Tyan-yu forever.

Huang Taitai had ordered a servant to watch over the candle all night, but the servant gets scared by thunder and leaves her post. In that moment, Lindo rushes over without hesitation and blows Tyan-yu's candle end out. The next morning however, Huang Taitai proudly shows the burnt candle, and Lindo realizes the servant artificially relit it because she was afraid she'd get in trouble for not watching the candle.

In a moment of complete autonomy, Lindo disregards fate's divine power and blows out the candle herself, choosing to break the marriage on her own terms. This shifts from old-fashioned tradition, which teaches complete obedience in women, and foreshadows the independent spirits in the American daughters. Lindo is disillusioned when she sees the relit candle because it means that fate can be tampered with.


After the wedding, Lindo falls into a comfortable, platonic relationship with Tyan-yu, caring for him like a sister and sleeping on his sofa at his request. Months later, Huang Taitai gets angry that Lindo is still not pregnant, and Tyan-yu falsely blames Lindo's unwillingness to sleep with him.

Even though Tyan-yu makes Lindo sleep on the couch, he avoids blame by being Huang Taitai's revered son. There is no fairness in the situation because Lindo has no power.

Huang Taitai, with her old-fashioned thinking, straps Lindo to her bed to increase her chance at pregnancy, as well as strips her of gold **jewelry** to make her deficient in the zodiac element of metal, and thus more vulnerable to a baby. Feeling freer without the weight of jewelry, Lindo concocts a plan to escape the Huang household.

Fate both dictates Lindo's actions, as it predicted her tenacious nature, and is undermined, since Lindo creates a plan that goes against her fated marriage.

Not long after, in a frenzied performance, Lindo tells an elaborate story to Huang Taitai, saying that Tyan-yu's ancestors came to her in a dream, and told her that the marriage candle had gone out on their wedding night, foretelling Tyan-yu's death if he remained in the marriage. Then, Lindo says the ancestors secretly planted Tyan-yu's heir in one of Huang Taitai's servant girls (whom Lindo previously observed was pregnant out of wedlock). The servant girl, elated to not give birth shamefully, backs up Lindo's story and becomes Tyan-yu's reverent wife. Lindo's marriage contract is severed and Huang Taitai buys her a ticket to America, not realizing that it was Lindo's ingenuity that ended the marriage.

By enacting such a complex plan to get out of her awful life, Lindo has full agency over her life. She uses superstitions and traditional thinking to her own benefit, rather than let them trap her. This is not a disavowal of her culture however, but an innovative approach to making the culture her own.


PART 1, CHAPTER 4: THE MOON LADY

Ying-ying regrets that she kept her true nature hidden while raising her daughter, Lena, and instead acted so meek and quiet that Lena stopped noticing her. For many years, Ying-ying forgot the source of her silence, but suddenly remembers the central event when watching Lena go through a divorce: the Moon festival when Ying-ying was four.

Ying-ying buried her stories deep in her memory as a child, to the point that she cannot connect to her daughter. Stories are necessary to building a maternal bond, but also contain a great deal of pain that Ying-ying struggles to reveal. It isn't until Lena is also in pain that Ying-ying is able to access the memories again.

On that festival day in China many years ago, Ying-ying remembers how hot it was. Despite the heat, her nanny Amah dresses her in heavy formal clothes and tiger-patterned slippers that make Ying-ying whine. Amah tells her about the Moon Lady, who grants secret wishes during the festival but shuns selfish desires. If Ying-ying is good, she'll get the chance to meet the Moon Lady and have a wish granted. When Ying-ying loudly wishes to be out of her robes, Amah calls that a selfish desire because Ying-ying voiced it out loud.

Part of the Chinese female identity revolves around silence and secrecy, which is ingrained at an early age. To desire something out loud is considered "selfish."

Ying-ying's extended family boards a lavish boat on a nearby lake to celebrate the Moon festival, and Ying-ying sneaks away to watch fishermen catch seafood and the boat's chef slaughter animals for the evening's banquet. Before she knows it, Ying-ying is covered in eel blood and fish scales from sitting in the kitchen. Thinking she can avoid punishment by dyeing her fancy clothes entirely red, she covers herself in blood. Amah, in a panic, discovers Ying-ying soaked in blood and scolds her for misbehaving. While the rest of the family celebrates in the front of the boat, Ying-ying is left to sit alone in the back, in only her undergarments and tiger slippers.

Ying-ying has a boisterous and inquisitive nature as a child, in line with her identified zodiac sign of the Tiger. Rather than sit still and be seen but not heard, as good Chinese girls are told to do, she explores her interests and gets into trouble.

Hours pass, and Ying-ying hopes Amah will come retrieve her as night falls. Instead, fireworks launch off the other boats on the lake, scaring Ying-ying and causing her to fall off the back of the boat. She flails in the lake water, unable to find the surface, and tries to call out Amah's name. Eventually, she gets caught in a fishing net, and an old couple pull her out of the water. They try to locate Ying-ying's boat on the crowded lake, but she can't tell which one is her family's. The old couple end up placing her on shore, assuring her that her family will find her once they notice she's missing.

Unlike the other vignettes, where mothers play key roles, Ying-ying's mother is virtually absent, and Amah acts as a substitute maternal figure. Yet in Ying-ying's time of need, when she's potentially drowning and calling out her nanny's name, even Amah is not present. This represents Ying-ying's constant feeling of loss and incompleteness throughout her narrative, her sense of never having been found.

Rather than wait on shore, Ying-ying follows the sound of music to a stage, where a play retelling the Moon Lady myth is happening. Though too far from the stage to see details, Ying-ying is mesmerized by the Moon Lady's beauty and the sorrow of her banishment for defying her husband, the Sun. Ying-ying relates the Moon Lady's loss to her own loss at getting separated from her family.

Hearing the Moon Lady's sorrowful story, Ying-ying finds a maternal figure she can relate to, who articulates temptation and regret as understandable human actions rather than bad behavior. The opportunity to feel connected to someone through shared stories is key to emotional fulfillment in the novel.

After the performance, Ying-ying eagerly seeks out the Moon Lady backstage, thinking the goddess will answer her wish and reunite her with her family. To her horror, Ying-ying discovers that the Moon Lady is a male actor in drag, shattering her naïve hopes.

Just as young Ying-ying thinks she's found a woman to guide her, her hopes are dashed. She is still unable to connect to any maternal source of wisdom.

Ying-ying as an adult has pushed this memory away until she sees Lena suffering in a loveless marriage. At that moment, Ying-ying remembers the wish she wanted to tell the Moon Lady: she wished to be found.

Ying-ying was unable to be an active mother to Lena because she never had a maternal figure to give her wisdom as a child, and thus built a wall of silence between them. However, Ying-ying does understand sadness, and is finally able to access firsthand wisdom to pass on to Lena.

PART 2, PROLOGUE: THE TWENTY-SIX MALIGNANT GATES

In the parable for part two, a woman tells her daughter that she will fall off her bike if she rides around the corner of the house and out of her mother's view.

As with the parable in part 1, this short story sets up a theme that connects the following four vignettes, namely about daughters who don't value their mothers' advice.

The young daughter doesn't believe her, but the mother cites *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates*, a book that describes twenty-six awful fates of children who travel beyond the protection of their homes. When the daughter demands to see the book, the mother tells her that it's written in Chinese, so the daughter wouldn't understand anyway.

Again, a mother uses stories as an indirect way of imparting wisdom and warnings to her daughter, backing up her point with the weight of long-standing tradition. By saying the book is in Chinese, the mother deflects any opportunity for the daughter to understand the morals firsthand (whether the book actually exists or not), but also suggests the difficulty of truly communicating knowledge across the Chinese/English language barrier, which is an extension of the immigrant/American-born barrier.

The daughter wants to know what all twenty-six fates are, and when the mother refuses to answer, she gets mad and pedals off on her bike, shouting back "you don't know anything." Even before she turns the corner of the house, the daughter falls and hurts herself, as her mother predicted.

The daughter ignores her mother's attempt to protect her by de-valuing her mother's knowledge or personal experience. The stubbornness backfires when the girl gets hurt as anticipated.

PART 2, CHAPTER 1: RULES OF THE GAME

Waverly Jong narrates her experience as a child chess prodigy, saying that her mother Lindo was the one who taught her the art of "invisible strength." As a child, Waverly tries to get treats at the grocery store by demanding Lindo's attention, but Lindo tells her "[the] strongest wind cannot be seen." The next time they're at the store, Waverly stays quiet and patient, and Lindo ends up buying her the treats. These traits informed her future playing style.

The novel suggests that the most important teacher to a young girl is her mother, who imparts wisdom in small lessons throughout childhood.

One Christmas, Waverly's older brother receives a used chess set with missing pieces as a holiday gift from their church. Lindo wants to throw the chessboard out because it's clearly been worn down and discarded by a richer family, but Waverly replaces the missing pieces with her Christmas candy in exchange for a chance to play with her brothers. At first, she doesn't understand the game's complex rules and loses. When she complains to Lindo, her mother wisely compares it to the random rules imposed upon immigrants, and advises Waverly to learn "all the whys" thoroughly to succeed at the game.

Immigrants are automatically at a disadvantage when arriving in the United States, because they don't know the cultural etiquette of American society and "lose the game" of social success. It is not that immigrants are any less intelligent than American-born citizens, as the chess analogy proves – it's simply a matter of access to and understanding of the rules of the game.

Waverly goes to the library to research chess strategies and game theory in her free time, and slowly starts beating her brothers. She loves the feeling of winning, and daydreams about chess moves. When her brothers get tired of losing, Waverly starts playing against an old man in the Chinatown park. Through him, she learns master-level strategies told in Chinese proverbs.

A running theme in the novel is the transfer of wisdom through storytelling, and Waverly's chess lessons continue this theme in a subtle way. The strategies she learns from an old man are rooted in Chinese tradition, yet still benefit her modern sensibilities.

Lindo notices Waverly's talent and signs her up for neighborhood chess tournaments. At the first tournament, Lindo gives Waverly her jade pendant, the same piece of **jewelry** Lindo's mother gave young Lindo for good luck; Waverly easily beats her competition that day. Waverly gets increasingly better with every tournament, and by nine years old, she is a national chess champion featured in the popular "Life" magazine. Part of her championship strategy involves playing up her youthful innocence so that her opponent, a 50-year-old chess master, underestimates her abilities. Lindo is so proud of Waverly that she attends every event and covers every surface in their small apartment with chess trophies.

As with the other immigrant mothers, Lindo wants her daughter to achieve maximum success in America, and pushes Waverly to higher and higher triumphs. Waverly's style of chess-play subtly comments on sexist attitudes. Just because she is young and girlish, Waverly seems beatable, but she takes advantage of the arrogance of such assumptions to surprise and win.

After becoming a national champion, Waverly takes advantage of her mother's vanity in her by getting out of chores and getting her own bedroom. Waverly enjoys the benefits, but grows increasingly irritated by her mother's overbearing presence. Lindo takes Waverly on walks through Chinatown's markets to show her off, inflating Lindo's own ego.

Lindo's bragging is her way of showing love and pride, though Waverly doesn't interpret the actions that way. The miscommunication in expectations leads to a rift between mother and daughter.

On one trip, Waverly loses her temper and tells Lindo that the bragging is embarrassing. Lindo angrily asks if Waverly is embarrassed to be her daughter; and Waverly replies "that's not what I meant." Still, unable to stop complaining, Waverly says that if Lindo wants to show off so badly, she should learn chess herself. Lindo has no words in reply, shocked.

Waverly sees her achievements as purely her own, an American-learned belief, and dislikes her mother taking credit. But according to Lindo's values, her daughter's success could not have happened without the family's support. The embarrassment is therefore an insult to everything Lindo has done for her.

Waverly runs off, ignoring her mother calling her back, and hides in an alley. Hours later, she returns home to her brothers telling her that she's in deep trouble. However, Lindo doesn't acknowledge her, saying the family has no concern for Waverly if Waverly has no concern for them. Waverly goes to her room and dreams of a chess game against her mother, where she's not only losing the game, but floating away from the world, blown away by the wind.

Waverly calculates her interactions with Lindo in terms of wins and losses, rather than emotions. She cannot understand Lindo's brusque style of love as a child, and resentfully casts her mother as a constant opponent.

PART 2, CHAPTER 2: THE VOICE FROM THE WALL

Lena comes from a biracial family: her father Clifford is American of English/Irish descent, and her mother Ying-ying is Chinese. Her parents met while Clifford was working in China, and when they relocated to America, he altered Ying-ying's name and birthdate out of ignorance. Growing up, Lena is very aware of the large gaps in understanding between her father's English and her mother's Chinese, and she acts as the interpreter between them. Clifford constantly puts words into Ying-ying's mouth when he isn't sure what she's saying, interpreting through his lens rather than trying to figure out what she actually means.

The immigrant mothers are often emotionally alienated by their loved ones, who don't make the complete effort to understand them. Ying-ying is never fully heard or appreciated for her thoughts because of the language barrier, and her husband takes on the socially-accepted role of a man speaking for his wife.

While growing up, Lena sees her mother slowly turn into a **ghost**, first speaking in gestures and halted thoughts, and then eventually not speaking at all.

Since no one seems to care what Ying-ying really thinks, she withdraws into herself and becomes barely present.

Clifford receives a promotion that affords them a bigger place, and he claims Ying-ying "is thrilled." The family moves to a nicer apartment complex in San Francisco, surrounded by tenants with European-sounding surnames. Ying-ying says in Chinese that the new apartment is full of negative omens, but Clifford doesn't understand Chinese and Lena ignores her. At night, Lena hears Teresa Sorci, a neighbor girl about her age, argue loudly and violently with her mother. Lena imagines Teresa getting beat up every night, but never sees any physical damage on Teresa when they bump into each other in the hallway.

While Clifford values status as an American, Ying-ying values her superstitions; her values are ignored. Similarly, Clifford misinterprets what Ying-ying says, rendering her true emotions meaningless. Even when Lena hears her, Ying-ying's warnings go unheeded. Unable to communicate, the immigrant mothers are made powerless. The vocal intensity of Teresa and her mother is in stark contrast to Lena and Ying-ying, who exist in silence.

Soon after the promotion, Clifford tells Lena that they're expecting another baby. Though her father is overjoyed at the news, Lena hears Ying-ying predict that the apartment's bad omens, felt around her as "a heaviness," will negatively affect the health of her baby.

Ying-ying's predictions continue to be ignored, at the cost of her unborn baby's safety. Clifford's enthusiasm shows how out of touch he is with his wife, stemming back to their cultural incongruity.

Ying-ying's premonition comes true, and the baby boy is stillborn, missing part of his brain. After the birth, Ying-ying is hysterical, confessing to Lena in Chinese that the baby's death was due to bad decisions in Ying-ying's past. Clifford, unable to understand, asks Lena to translate her mother's rapid Chinese. Lena decides to purposely misinterpret Ying-ying's fears to protect her father's feelings, and tells him that Ying-ying is looking forward to trying for another baby.

Lena's deliberate mistranslation of Ying-ying's pain is the clearest example of language alienation in the novel. Ying-ying cannot be her authentic self, even in front of loved ones. Her despair is filtered through Lena's attempt to protect her father, at the expense of Ying-ying herself.

Ying-ying is not the same after coming home from the hospital without her baby. She wanders around like a **ghost**, and retreats from social life, worrying Clifford and Lena. Lena tries to convince herself that her life is at least happier than Teresa Sorci's, until one day, Teresa uses Lena's fire escape to hide from her mother, Mrs. Sorci. Lena expects to hear the biggest fight yet when Teresa goes back home, but instead hears crying and laughing. Teresa and Mrs. Sorci are able to openly communicate and apologize in the same language.

Part of being a ghost in this novel involves being unheard. Ying-ying's remaining spirit disappears as a consequence of Lena's reinterpretation of her emotions. Though Lena wants to believe her relationship with her mother is fine in comparison to a different kind of extreme parental style, she realizes that communication is vital to healthy relationships.

PART 2, CHAPTER 3: HALF AND HALF

Rose notices a white leather bible propping up a coffee table leg in her parents' living room, and remembers a time when her mother An-mei was very religious and treasured that bible. Though now An-mei pretends to care little for it, Rose sees that it's always carefully dusted. Rose's real reason for visiting her mother is to tell her that she's getting a divorce, but she can't find the courage to say it. Rose knows An-mei will tell her to try harder to save the marriage even though Rose knows it's "hopeless."

The mothers and daughters have very different values due to their cultural upbringings. To the mothers, something as significant as marriage cannot be abandoned lightly. Even though Rose is suffering in her marriage, An-mei believes some sacrifice is necessary, and there's still a solution to the problem that doesn't involve giving up.

When she first started dating her now estranged husband, Ted, Rose didn't think the relationship would become serious. But after spending time with his parents, who say racist remarks about Asians in the Vietnam War and disapprove of their relationship, Rose and Ted get closer out of defiance. Ted enjoys how helpless Rose seems, and in turn, Rose lets him make the decisions in their relationship. They eventually get married.

The main reason that Ted appreciates Rose is that she acts like a 'damsel in distress,' needing his masculine attention to support the relationship. Her passivity follows a traditional pattern in sexist relationships (as well as fulfills a typical Western stereotype of "passive Asian women"), where the male partner is emotionally dominant.

At first, Ted (a doctor) is confident being the sole decision-maker in their marriage, but later he loses a large malpractice suit and becomes uncertain in his abilities. He pushes Rose to take responsibility in the relationship and own up to the consequences of decision-making. However, after years of passivity, Rose can't bring herself to make even the simplest decision.

Rose's inability to react to Ted's prodding reveals the problem with extended power imbalance. Anyone forced into passivity cannot immediately switch into a role of action, and as a woman, Rose is placed in an unwinnable situation.

Ted grows increasingly angry with Rose, blaming her for not caring about the outcome of their marriage. She is shocked when he calls one day and requests a divorce. The trauma of being asked for a divorce transitions to her greatest childhood trauma, which also served as the reason behind An-mei's loss of religious faith.

Just as other women in the novel have sacrificed to maintain relationships, Rose thought she was helping her marriage by giving Ted all the power. However, Ted realizes he wanted an equal all along, and now has the unfair power to change his mind on Rose.


When she is fourteen, Rose goes with her mother, father, two older sisters, and three younger brothers to the Pacific ocean for a family trip. She thinks how out of place they all look, uncomfortably pretending to be a leisurely white family at the beach. As the middle child, Rose was instructed by An-mei to watch her little brothers as they played on the beach; in particular, her four-year-old youngest brother Bing needed the most attention.

Trying to fit into American culture, the Hsu family goes out of their comfort zone and travels to the beach for vacation. Still, they cannot fully understand and inhabit the idyllic scene, and just go through the motions of what richer, white families do.

Late in the afternoon, Bing asks Rose if he can go out to the reef line and see where their father is fishing. Rose agrees, but warily watches him climb the precarious cliff side. Her attention is diverted when her other brothers start fighting, and An-mei calls to Rose to stop the two boys. Rose turns her gaze back to Bing just as he falls into the ocean without a splash. Rose is completely frozen in shock, but her sisters immediately notice Bing's absence, asking Rose where he is. When the family realizes he's fallen into the ocean and can't swim, An-mei dives in without hesitation even though she can't swim either. They call the police for help, but after hours of searching, Bing's body isn't found.

An-mei's maternal love is so great that she risks her own life without hesitation to save her young son. Meanwhile, Rose's moment of passivity in the face of the tragedy seems to implant itself within her, and she takes as a lesson that passivity and indecision is a part of her.


Rose blames herself for her negligence and expects her whole family to blame her too, but each member has self-guilt for not being attentive. Only An-mei refuses to accept Bing's fate, and takes Rose back to the ocean to look for him. An-mei uses the white leather bible and calls out to God, asking for mercy. She also sacrifices a valuable sapphire **ring** to the ancient ocean gods—throwing the ring into the water—asking in return for Bing's body. In a final attempt, An-mei throws a life preserver out into the waves, thinking Bing will latch onto it from the ocean depths and she'll be able to pull him to shore. However, the rubber tube catches on the sharp rocks and becomes shredded. An-mei realizes that Bing couldn't have survived, and feels "so foolish as to think she could use faith to change fate."

Again, An-mei values her children over any material possession, and willingly sacrifices her valuables for the small chance of seeing her son again. Even though fate seems to tell her that Bing is doomed, An-mei fights to alter the course of events. In the end though, fate is stronger than maternal love.


Back in the present-day, Rose tells An-mei about her divorce, and as predicted, An-mei tells her to try and save the marriage, because "you must… this is your fate. This is your life, what you must do." An-mei leaves Rose in the living room to think, and Rose muses that fate "is shaped half by expectation, half by inattention." She then reaches down to the bible under the coffee table and opens it to a section called "Deaths;" in erasable pencil, An-mei has lightly included Bing's name.

This chapter defines what fate looks like for most of the characters in the novel. Fate is not completely preordained, but as soon as a person stops paying attention and stops actively resisting bad omens, the power of destiny is ruthless. It is Rose's fate to try and save the marriage, but it's up to her to actively alter the final results, not passively allow fate to run a bad course.



PART 2, CHAPTER 4: TWO KINDS

June remembers Suyuan telling her that a person could be anything in America if he or she worked hard enough. Suyuan is convinced that June could be a child star after watching Shirley Temple on television, but an attempt to get cute Shirley Temple curls backfires, leaving June with a boy's bowl haircut. Around that time, June starts to hear an inner voice tell her that if she doesn't hurry up and become perfect, her inner prodigy will disappear and June would "always be nothing."

As with all the Joy Luck Club mothers, Suyuan believes wholeheartedly that her daughter has limitless potential, especially in America, where talent can raise an individual's status, regardless of one's heritage. Suyuan doesn't express encouragement in a positive American way though, and June feels unloved because of the miscommunication.

Suyuan and June try different avenues of talent to find something June is amazing at, but they always end up deeply disappointed. At the same time, Waverly becomes a chess prodigy, and Lindo brags about her daughter's victories. June can see Suyuan's envy, even though Suyuan says Waverly is only good at being tricky.

The mothers' competitiveness represents a common parental trait in immigrant families. Finally able to give their children full access to resources in ways they never had, parents see their children as measures or markers of their own success.

June gets sick of seeing Suyuan's disappointment, and one night, looks at herself in the bathroom mirror and cries at her own "sad, ugly" expression. In that moment, she believes she's not meant to be a prodigy and promises herself to not let her mother change her into someone unrecognizable.

This moment of autonomy is complex, because June argues that her authentic self is what fate determines, not what her mother pressures her to be. At the same time, June might be fated to be a prodigy, but her stubbornness resists the potential.

Suyuan sees a little Chinese girl playing the piano on "The Ed Sullivan Show" and decides that June should excel at that. Having no spare money, Suyuan agrees to clean an old piano teacher's house in exchange for June's lessons. She also saves precious wages to get June a used piano. June whines, asking Suyuan "why don't you like me the way I am? I'm not a genius!" Suyuan slaps her and calls her ungrateful.

Because she is fundamentally unable to understand her mother's pressure for success, having not grown up in a culture with minimal resources, June thinks Suyuan doesn't value who she is. In contrast, Suyuan wants what's best for June, and will sacrifice herself to get June opportunities.

June starts her piano lessons, but quickly learns that her old teacher is deaf and can only feel rhythms. She stops trying to play correctly and just stays in rhythm so her teacher will praise her playing. Adult June thinks that she never really gave herself a fair chance, because she was actually quite good naturally, but was determined not to play well.

June's cleverness to subvert the lesson reveals that she actually has more intelligence and natural talent than she herself believes. June is resistant to her own potential, just to spite her mother.

The pointless lessons continue, and June gets more apathetic as Suyuan becomes more boastful of June's "talents," despite never having heard June play. Suyuan enters June in a talent show, to play "Pleading Child" from Schumann's Scenes from Childhood. June daydreams rather than prepares, and practices her ending curtsy more than the song. She believes her natural talent will see her through the performance.

Unlike the mothers' upbringings, which all required major sacrifice at an early age, the daughters don't have a true grasp of overcoming hardship or doing things they don't want to do. June's dreamy ignorance shows how little she has had to learn about effort.

The day of the talent show, all of the Joy Luck Club members are in attendance, and June comes on stage, completely confident. The beginning of the song sounds so good to daydreaming June that she loses track of her notes, and messes up the entire piece. June is stunned by her failure, but Suyuan is completely humiliated after bragging so much. Waverly tells June that not everyone can be a prodigy, and the gravity of June's self-imposed mediocrity sets in. June blames her mother for the humiliating debacle.

June accepted her fate rather than try to surpass expectations by working hard. The result is an unimpressive showing that reflects not only on her, but her mother as well. As with all the novel's relationships, repercussions on the daughters always negatively affect the mothers, and vice versa, because their lives are more intertwined than the cultural gap seems to suggest.

Two days later, Suyuan tells June to practice at her usual time in the afternoon; June assumed that the talent show failure meant she was free from ever playing again. June throws a tantrum, accusing Suyuan of wanting a daughter that June can't be. June feels the dark side of her come out, and shouts "I wish I were dead! Like them," in reference to Suyuan's lost daughters in China. Suyuan is so hurt that she backs out of the room and never speaks of the piano again.

June's complete disrespect for Suyuan's past daughters is so hurtful that Suyuan gives up on June's potential gift, despite all her sacrifices leading up to the awful talent show. June is too self-centered to recognize the magnitude of her cruel statement, or the depth of her mother's sacrifice to try to save her twin daughters.

In the following years, June believes that to be authentic to herself, she has the right to fall short of expectations. Having internalized this sentiment, she constantly fails at life goals. On June's thirtieth birthday, Suyuan gives her the used piano, saying that June had natural talent and could've been a genius if she tried.

Again, fate acts "half by expectation, half by inattention" as stated by Rose in an earlier chapter. June expects never to be a prodigy, because that's not her true self. Yet by not attentively bettering herself, June actualizes her fears of mediocrity. On the other hand, Suyuan always believed in June's abilities, even after June let her down.

Soon after Suyuan's passing, June gets the piano reconditioned for "purely sentimental reasons," and discovers her old lesson books in the piano bench. She flips to "Pleading Child," the same song she botched in the talent show, and learns that a song called "Perfectly Contented," printed on the adjacent page, is actually the other half of "Pleading Child." Together, they make up one complete song.

The realization that two drastically different songs can combine into one complete song shows that fate and autonomy do not have to be polar opposites of one another. June does not have to abandon learned talent for the sake of authenticity, because they actually converse together.

PART 3, PROLOGUE: AMERICAN TRANSLATION

In the parable for part 3, a mother sees her adult daughter's condominium for the first time, and is horrified to see a mirrored dresser at the foot of the bed. According to superstitious tradition, having mirrors in certain places causes marital happiness to bounce away.

The mother's over-the-top reaction to a mirror shows how much Chinese tradition helps to psychologically comfort immigrant parents. By passing on old beliefs, parents can contribute some protection to their children, even if they don't fully understand American ways.

The daughter irritably accuses her mother of finding bad omens in everything, and ignores the warning for the sake of her bedroom's aesthetics. Still, her mother persists, pulling out a large, cheap mirror from a bag. This mirror is her housewarming present for her daughter, meant to re-align the bad mirror's reflection and boost "peach-blossom luck."

The difference in aesthetic decision-making represents the gap between old-fashioned superstition and the modern value of status. Both generations believe they're right, and they are. They simply can't find a middle ground.

The daughter asks what peach-blossom luck is, and the mother tells her to look inside the mirror and see the future granddaughter awaiting them. The daughter looks into the mirror and sees her own reflection looking back at her.

A daughter is a direct reflection of her mother, and in a transitive sense, of her grandmother too. Values are passed down through generations, which the daughter finally recognizes.

PART 3, CHAPTER 1: RICE HUSBAND

Lena believes that her mother Ying-ying has a mysterious ability to see things before they happen; however, her premonitions only predict bad things that will affect the family, not any way to stop them from happening. For example, Ying-ying predicted her husband Clifford's fatal heart attack based on a dying house plant's inability to get water up its roots. Now, as Lena picks up her mother for a weeklong visit with Lena and her husband, she wonders what Ying-ying will see in them.

Unlike the other characters, Ying-ying is actually able to see fate's actions before they happen, even though she doesn't have the autonomy to change anything.

Driving back to their new house, Lena's husband Harold gets annoyed by Ying-ying's constant criticism of his driving. Lena is secretly glad that her mother reprimands his aggressive style, as Lena has always been too passive to complain.

Lena does not have open communication with her husband, similar to Rose's marriage. The theme of female passivity compared to male dominance continues to develop among the young generation as it did with the old generation.

Lena shows Ying-ying around the new house, pointing out the architectural highlights, but her mother can "only see the bad parts." Lena remembers when she was eight years old, and Ying-ying looked into her rice bowl and predicted that Lena would marry a bad man, with one pock mark on his face for every kernel of uneaten rice she left.

The mother-daughter relationship is strained because Ying-ying can only see negative forces in their life, and Lena inherits the anxiety. Even though mothers just want to protect their children from harm, they often pass on their fears.

At the time, Lena knew of a bully named Arnold, who was covered in acne marks. Every meal, Lena leaves rice behind, and her eight-year old mind becomes terrified that she's fated to marry Arnold. She decides the solution is to not eat at all, in the hopes that it would cause Arnold so many health problems that he'd die before becoming her husband.

Lena believes in fate as much as Ying-ying, but tries to trick fate by sacrificing her health.

By the time she's thirteen, Lena has developed anorexia and has mostly forgotten about Arnold and her marital fate. One morning, her father reads in the newspaper that Arnold had died from an unusually severe measles. Lena is terrified, and thinks that Ying-ying can see through her and tell that she caused Arnold's death. That night, Lena steals a gallon of strawberry ice cream and eats the entire container until she vomits.

Lena is unable to separate coincidence from fate, and believes so strongly in her role of Arnold's death that she can't bear the guilt.

As an adult, Lena wonders if she really was fated to marry Arnold, and received her husband Harold in his place as punishment for defying fate. She and Harold meet while working in the same division of an architectural firm, focused on restaurant design and development. As they start dating, Lena insists on splitting the bill evenly in half whenever they go out, even though she orders very little food and he makes more money.

In Lena's case, the result of tricking fate is receiving a worse fate than initially expected. Harold seems like a great man, but small signs of his lack of consideration foreshadow marital troubles.

Lena believes that she's not good enough for Harold, who seems like the perfect man. Rose, however, tells her that such thoughts are commonplace among Chinese-American women, who are raised with Chinese humility and don't expect to be treated like they deserve.

This is the first point in the novel where sexism against Chinese-American women is explicitly correlated with mismatched cultural ideals. Though raised to be obedient in a Chinese sense, they are not prepared for potential exploitation by non-Chinese partners, who don't understand the foundation of their humility.

Later in their relationship, Lena encourages Harold to start his own architectural business. She leaves her job at her initial firm to become an associate at his firm, at her own financial sacrifice. The initial years are difficult, and Lena gives Harold pep talks to keep him positive. During one such talk, Lena gives Harold the idea that turns his business into a huge success; Harold, however, does not give Lena any credit. When she asks for a raise, he says it would look bad to promote his wife. They also continue to split all expenses evenly, even though Harold makes seven times more money.

Harold undervalues Lena in a more overt way while at work. Though she offers innovative ideas and works harder than other employees, he cannot see her beyond her role of submissive, self-sacrificing wife. She is held back from achieving success in an American sense of status, because Harold has a narrow concept of her.

Back in the present day, Ying-ying finds a running total of domestic expenses that Lena and Harold will evenly split at the end of the month. Ying-ying sees ice cream as a shared expense, and asks why Lena pays for something that makes her ill (Lena has hated ice cream ever since her vomiting experience). Lena is unable to come up with a good reason. Harold finds out about her hatred of ice cream later that night and awkwardly offers to take it off the list, but the offer only angers Lena, who has started questioning the entire basis of their "equal marriage."

Lena can no longer see how problematic her marriage's power dynamic is, and it takes Ying-ying's prompting to get Lena to face Harold's unfair treatment. Rather than have support for each other unconditionally, their marriage has become centered on money, with Lena always sacrificing more to make the sides seems fair. Put another way, Harold and Lena have focused on bearing costs equally while not actually ensuring that they also share benefits.

As they fight that night about whether their marriage exists around a balance sheet, Lena and Harold hear a crash from Ying-ying's guest room. Lena goes to find her mother standing by a broken end-table. The end-table had been one of Harold's first architectural creations, and Harold proudly displayed it, despite the table being poorly built. Ying-ying doesn't apologize, but Lena still says she knew it would break eventually so it didn't matter. Ying-ying then asks Lena why she didn't try to stop it from happening, and Lena doesn't know how to answer "such a simple question."

The end-table represents the fragility of Lena's marriage, which was based entirely on validating Harold's ego. Lena knew from the start that equality meant more than just paying half of all expenses, but she was afraid to challenge expectations due to her cultural values. Ying-ying acts as the voice of reason and strength, just as the other mothers do in their daughters' times of crisis.

PART 3, CHAPTER 2: FOUR DIRECTIONS

Waverly takes Lindo out to lunch to tell her about her recent engagement to Rich Schields, but it goes poorly, as Lindo complains about Waverly's edgy haircut and the restaurant's service. Waverly thinks that she and her mother were destined to not get along, since their Chinese Zodiac signs make a bad combination. Lindo, as a Horse, is fated to be overly honest, while Waverly's sign of a Rabbit is thin-skinned to criticism.

Despite the genetic bond between mother and daughter, there is another complex relationship between predestined personality types in Chinese tradition. Certain personalities simply do not get along.

Whenever Waverly tries to bring Rich up, Lindo changes the subject, so Waverly decides to bring her to Rich and Waverly's apartment, where the evidence of a man's existence is so obvious that Lindo can't ignore it. The apartment is messy in a domestic way; "a home full of life and love." Lindo steps over Rich's running shoes and toys that Shoshana, Waverly's daughter from her first marriage, left lying around. Even still, Lindo doesn't comment on the co-habitation, only the apartment's mess.

Waverly's insistence to make Lindo accept her American values – such as moving in with a man before marriage – is at odds with Lindo's Chinese style of denial. Waverly craves her mother's acceptance, which Lindo does not hand out easily.

Waverly angrily recalls her childhood again, after her fight with Lindo in "Rules of the Game." Thinking she can spite Lindo by no longer being a chess champion, Waverly skips a tournament. However, the plan backfires as Lindo has no reaction, and Waverly gets angry at herself for forfeiting to a weak opponent. Tired of fighting and wanting to play again, Waverly tries to outwit Lindo by announcing that she's prepared to return to chess, as if Lindo had won their argument. To her astonishment, Lindo doesn't allow it, saying "one day quit, next day play… no! It is not so easy anymore."

As said by Lindo before, the daughters of the Joy Luck Club do not think through their actions, and therefore don't anticipate the extent of their consequences. Waverly thinks she can do anything as if life were all a game, but Lindo teaches her about repercussions and sacrifice.

Waverly goes back to playing competitively a few weeks later, but has lost her confidence and is unable to strategize or hide her weaknesses from opponents. Though she continues to play for a few more years, her prodigious gift is gone, and Waverly retires from competition at the age of fourteen. Her mother's ability to erode self-confidence haunts Waverly into adult life, coloring Waverly's opinion of her romantic partners. Lindo openly disliked and criticized Waverly's first husband who was also Shoshana's father; by the time Waverly divorces him, she believes Lindo poisoned her marriage. Now with Rich, she's worried the same negativity will pollute her happiness.

This lesson shakes Waverly's confidence because Waverly no longer believes she can beat anyone—not after she feels that her mother has beaten her. Lindo represents someone more knowledgeable and stronger-willed than she is. Rather than appreciate her mother's insights, Waverly continues to see her as an opponent, which poisons their relationship.

Waverly finally gets Lindo to acknowledge Rich through a sneaky plan: she first takes him to Suyuan and Canning's house for dinner, then claims that Rich has never had better Chinese food. Lindo's personal pride gets the better of her, and she invites Waverly, Rich, and Shoshana for dinner the next day.

Waverly twists Chinese etiquette and tradition to her advantage, making her mother feel obligated to host someone she doesn't want to. This manipulation of superstition echoes Lindo's childhood cunning against Huang Taitai.

The dinner is a disaster, as Rich breaks a number of Chinese etiquette rules, such as adding soy sauce to Lindo's cooking and calling Waverly's parents by their first names. Waverly is horrified by his behavior and has second thoughts about marriage. She then blames her mother being "the queen" of a chessboard, "relentless in her pursuit, always able to find [Waverly's] weakest spots," and being the reason behind her indecision.

Even though he is a good man, Rich has no understanding of Chinese values, and mistranslates polite behavior. Rather than forgive him, Waverly internalizes her mother's complaints and can't see him objectively anymore.

Waverly stays up all night stewing, then drives straight to Lindo's in the morning to yell at her. When she arrives, Lindo is asleep, looking "innocent… defeated." Waverly is seized with a fear that Lindo might be dead and shakes her awake, then breaks down in tears. Lindo reveals that she knew about the engagement and thinks Rich is fine. Waverly reconsiders all her assumptions about her mother, and suddenly understands her for the first time. Beneath her prickly exterior, Lindo has only wanted the best for Waverly, and has expressed her love in the only way she knows how to.

When Waverly sees her mother's unguarded expression, she realizes how similar they are, hiding behind walls of stoic strength; like mother, like daughter. She also discovers that she underestimated her mother's compassion all her life—she did not realize that her mother could see past Rich's cultural blindness to the good man underneath—and Waverly didn't realize this because of her own misunderstanding of her mother's sacrifice for her.

PART 3, CHAPTER 3: WITHOUT WOOD

Rose used to believe every superstition her mother An-mei mentioned, even when she didn't quite know what it meant; the power of An-mei's words were just that strong to her.

Language has immense power, especially when spoken out of maternal wisdom.

In the present day, Rose and An-mei attend the funeral of a family friend, and Rose tells her mother more about her impending divorce from Ted. She also tells An-mei that Ted sent her money, which immediately makes An-mei suspicious that Ted's "doing monkey business with someone else." Rose brushes the accusation off, but An-mei says that "a mother know what is inside you" in a way that no one else can.

Chinese mothers in the novel all have intuitions that the daughters don't initially trust, in part because their expressions seem outdated and out of place in modern America. Yet the mothers suggest that their sensitivities to their daughters are timeless, because they have a bond unlike anything else.

Over the next few weeks, Rose inventories her whole house, dividing furniture and remembering the history of everything she and Ted bought together. One day, she gets the official divorce papers from Ted, along with a hastily written check for $10,000. Rose becomes overwhelmed by the reality of her divorce and can't decide if the check is a trick or an attempt to be compassionate. She remembers that An-mei told her she lacks the Chinese Zodiac element of wood, which causes Rose to listen to too many people.

As expressed in her previously narrated chapter, Rose struggles to find her voice after years of passively agreeing with Ted's opinion. During this stressful time, she can't help but turn to wisdom inherited from her mother.

Unable to make a decision, Rose stays in bed for three days, taking sleeping pills to numb her chaotic mind. An-mei starts calling Rose non-stop on the fourth day, rousing her from her depressed stupor. Rose wearily tells her the marriage is unsalvageable, but An-mei interrupts, saying "I'm not telling you to save your marriage. I only say you should speak up."

An-mei is the only one who can snap Rose out of her depression, because they have a bond that goes beyond any other relationship. An-mei wants her daughter to voice her fears, and not be silent as past generations of women have been forced to be.

Rose hangs up, and when the phone rings later, it's Ted. He demands that she sign the papers and cash the check, because he wants to get re-married as soon as possible to a woman he's been seeing during their separation. Rose realizes An-mei was right in suspecting extramarital "monkey business," and gets the courage to not sign anything until she sees Ted in person.

As with most premonitions in the novel, An-mei's instinct is correct that Ted has been having an affair. Her mother's support encourages Rose to be assertive for the first time in her marriage.

Ted comes over after work, expecting the divorce papers to be signed. However, Rose has finally made up her mind, and refuses to bend to Ted's will without a fight. She tells him that he can't just pull her out of his life and throw her away, and gives him unsigned divorce papers. For the first time, she sees fear in Ted's eyes, as he acknowledges how powerful her words are.

Just as An-mei's words were powerful during Rose's childhood, Rose's words have power over Ted. She finally inherits the courage that existed through many generations of women in her family, and can voice her strength in a way that they were often not allowed.

PART 3, CHAPTER 4: BEST QUALITY

On the Lunar New Year holiday before she passes away, Suyuan gives June "her life's importance," a jade **pendant** on a gold chain. June is unsure why Suyuan calls it that, and Suyuan dies before June thinks to ask her. June reflects on her inability to make sense of her grief without her mother's help to get her through.

June is the first of the Joy Luck Club daughters to experience life without her mother's guidance, and immediately struggles to understand large life values such as her core purpose.

June then flashes back to that Lunar New Year day, when she went with Suyuan to Chinatown to buy ten whole crabs for a holiday dinner with the Jongs. Eating a large, healthy crab at New Year's signals good fortune for the rest of the year, and Suyuan sifts through a large tank to find the best live crabs. June accidentally pulls out a crab with a missing leg, a bad omen, but the storekeeper makes her buy it. Suyuan tells June that it counts as an extra eleventh crab, which shouldn't affect their luck.

June's bad choice of crab represents her inability to impress Suyuan, even in the smallest actions. Yet even though Suyuan believes in bad omens, she finds wiggle room to manipulate those superstitions so June doesn't feel bad.

At Suyuan's dinner party, Waverly ruins Suyuan's head count by bringing her daughter Shoshana and giving her the biggest, best crab to eat. She also takes the second-best and third-best for her fiancé, Rich, and herself. By the time the plate of crabs reaches Suyuan and June, only a smaller crab and the broken-limbed crab remain. Without hesitation, June reaches for the broken crab so her mother can have the luckier whole one, but Suyuan makes her take the better one and throws the broken one away. While everyone else enjoys their dinners, Suyuan goes hungry.

Waverly only cares about maintaining the status of her immediate family, rather than respecting her elders and giving them the best food, as June was taught to do. Their different approaches show the tension in Chinese-American values. Suyuan knows what a bad crab foretells about the new year, but sacrifices her own well-being for her daughter.

Midway through dinner, conversation strikes back up again. Waverly compliments June's new haircut, but then acts horrified when she learns that June goes to a gay hairstylist, who "could have AIDS." Waverly recommends her own stylist, but quickly notes that he's probably too expensive for June's small budget.

The daughters inherit their mothers' competitive natures, as well as a passive-aggressive style of interaction. Waverly can't just compliment June – she has to insult her as well, to feel more powerful.

Angry at Waverly's pettiness, June retorts that she'd have more money if Waverly's advertising firm paid her for completed work. Waverly coolly dismisses her, saying June's writing was too unsophisticated and the firm couldn't use any of it. She mocks June's language, considering it old-fashioned in style. Suyuan agrees that her daughter is less sophisticated than Waverly. Humiliated, June carries dirty plates into the kitchen so no one sees her tears.

Though Suyuan scolds June in private, she is always loyal to her daughter in public, which makes the slight insult more hurtful than any of Waverly's jabs. Waverly interestingly calls out June's old-fashioned tendencies, which aligns June closer to the Joy Luck Club mothers.

After everyone leaves, June asks Suyuan what was wrong with the broken crab, and Suyuan says that it had died before being cooked, leaving it with a bad taste. June asks what Suyuan would've done if someone else had chosen it, but Suyuan proudly says that only June, who thinks differently than most, would sacrifice the best quality meal for someone else's sake. Suyuan then gives June her jade **pendant**, which she's been waiting to pass on for many years.

Now it is revealed that when Suyuan said June was less sophisticated, it wasn't meant as an insult but a compliment. Suyuan sees sophistication, as Waverly defines it, as American arrogance, which goes against Chinese values. By having a generous heart, June actually successfully puts her mother's lessons into practice. And now, suddenly, June sees the ways in which she is powerful—compassion—and understands that her mother recognizes this power in her.

PART 4, PROLOGUE: QUEEN MOTHER OF THE WESTERN SKIES

In the fourth parable, an old woman plays with her baby granddaughter, and laments that she doesn't know whether to teach her how to stay naïvely optimistic or how to become self-protecting. The old woman shed her innocence to protect herself from being hurt, and taught her daughter to do the same. However, as a result, both can only identify the evil in others now, which reflects a level of evil in themselves.

For the first time, a Chinese mother questions whether she was correct in passing along certain Chinese values to her daughter, and now her granddaughter.

The baby girl laughs at the grandmother's worry, which makes the old woman call her the "Queen Mother of the Western Skies," a deity who has lived many lives and knows the answer to the woman's dilemma. In her laughter, the baby seems to value laughter and optimism over cynicism. The grandmother thanks her, and asks her granddaughter to teach her mother how to laugh forever too.

Immigrating women must often prioritize self-protection and distrust to survive in a new country. However, they forget that life is about happiness too, which is what the wisest deity knows after years of making human mistakes. Sometimes daughters do know best, because they haven't yet learned to be defensive. And so the novel makes it clear after so many lessons passed on from mother to daughter, that there are things for mothers to learn form daughters as well.

PART 4, CHAPTER 1: MAGPIES

An-mei connects to her daughter Rose's divorce narrative by concluding her own mother's story. Though Rose feels like she's out of options, An-mei argues that Rose is making a choice by not speaking up. This reminds her of when her mother leaves again, following Popo's death in "Scar." An-mei cries at the impending abandonment, but An-mei's mother tells her a story about a turtle who visited An-mei's mother as a girl and ate her tears. The turtle warned her that if she kept crying, her life would always be sad. It then laid pearly eggs that immediately cracked open and released beautiful magpies. The turtle told An-mei's mother that her tears didn't wash away sorrow, but fed someone else's joy.

Through storytelling, An-mei's mother passes on wisdom to help An-mei survive the difficult circumstances. Rather than let others see her pain, An-mei learns to hold in her sadness and not let others take advantage of her. This lesson is not necessarily the healthiest however, as is also shuts people out from helping.

The next morning, An-mei wakes to her relatives screaming at An-mei's mother, who's kneeling pitifully in the dirt in front of the house. They refuse to let her take An-mei, yelling that she's evil and An-mei will inherit all of her mother's bad traits. An-mei calls out to her mother while running down the stairs, and seeing her daughter's love, An-mei's mother straightens herself and takes An-mei with her, ignoring the relatives' terrible judgement.

The bond between mother and daughter is stronger than any insult or brainwashing that the relatives can instill.

After a long train ride, they arrive at the opulent Western-style mansion of Wu Tsing, An-mei's mother's new husband. He is a very wealthy merchant, who collects wives on a whim. Wu Tsing and the other wives are away, and An-mei's mother is treated kindly by the servants, who respect her despite her lowly status as the fourth wife.

Though An-mei's mother has no real power as an insignificant wife in a large household, she still has the staff's respect, revealing her good heart. An-mei may inherit her mother's personality like her relatives claimed, but now it is revealed that this will be a positive inheritance.

An-mei's first few weeks in the new mansion are the happiest times in her whole life, as she connects with her mother. The peaceful bliss immediately changes when Wu Tsing returns with a new, incredibly young wife, who is nothing more than "decoration." An-mei sees how shameful her mother's position is, as Wu Tsing uses An-mei's mother's body for pleasure, then discards her for his girlish new conquest. 000001

Sexism occurs on a spectrum in the novel, from subtle jabs at characters' femininity, to complete objectification in the case of An-mei's mother. An-mei's mother is stripped of all power in Wu Tsing's presence, because he physically forces her into submission.

When winter arrives, Wu Tsing's second and third wives return to the main house after spending the hotter months in their own houses with their children. Second Wife is clearly the dominant matriarch, and tries to win An-mei over with a beautiful strand of pearls. An-mei's mother privately shatters the illusion by cracking a pearl in front of An-mei, revealing that the pearls are actually glass. In exchange for the fake pearls, An-mei's mother gives An-mei a beautiful sapphire **ring** so An-mei can "recognize what is true." At the same time, An-mei notices that Second Wife has a baby boy, even though she's obviously too old to bear children.

An-mei is initially deceived into believing that her love can be bought by the gift of the false pearls, but through her mother's gift of the ring her mother passes on essential wisdom that protects An-mei in the future.

An-mei learns more about Second Wife from a servant who's loyal to An-mei's mother. Second Wife gained power in the household by faking suicides over the years, scaring the very superstitious Wu Tsing. Rather than be haunted one day by her angry **ghost**, Wu Tsing appeases Second Wife with anything she wants. One thing she can't give him is children, but Second Wife craftily arranges young wives for Wu Tsing. In the case of An-mei's mother, Second Wife maliciously tricked her. An-mei's mother fell asleep at Second Wife's summer house on the way to a monastery, still loyal to her deceased husband. Second Wife then let Wu Tsing into the bedroom to rape An-mei's mother. As a widow, An-mei's mother was not allowed to remarry, yet Second Wife announced to the community that An-mei's mother had seduced Wu Tsing, and An-mei's mother was cast off in disgrace. Soon after, she gave birth to a son, whom Second Wife immediately adopted as her own, ensuring her role as mother to Wu Tsing's heir.

The novel finally explains why An-mei's mother ended up with such a disgraceful life – it was not her choice at all, and it seems ludicrous that what happened should lead to her dishonor. Yet, because women have no authority in the old Chinese culture, no one believed An-mei's mother's story and she was forced to make the best of a horrible situation by marrying her rapist. Though influential among the wives, Second Wife's power is still restricted to the household. She has to operate within her husband's desires to get what she wants, at the expense of other women. In contrast to the supportive environment of the Joy Luck Club, the community of Wu Tsing's wives shows how women can attack and manipulate each other as a means to the limited power granted to them by men.

After learning the awful truth about Second Wife's wickedness, An-mei starts noticing all of Second Wife's attempts to hold power. The worst happens when Wu Tsing promises An-mei's mother her own house for bearing him a son. Second Wife, filled with jealousy, fakes another suicide and makes Wu Tsing renege his promise. An-mei's mother locks herself in her room, crying, as she has no choice but to accept it.

An-mei's mother's only chance to alter fate is to bear Wu Tsing a son. At the time, a woman's main worth was her ability to give her husband a male heir to continue on the family legacy. However, Second Wife thwarts An-mei's mother's one opportunity for happiness and self-control in order to maintain her own power.

Two days before the Lunar New Year, An-mei's mother commits suicide by overdosing on opium. Though some think it was supposed to be faked like Second Wife's attempts, An-mei's mother previously told An-mei that she was going to "kill her own weak spirit so she could give [An-mei] a stronger one." The timing of her suicide is perfect, because all debts must be settled before the new year, or vengeful spirits will attack. Wu Tsing is so scared of An-mei's mother's **ghost** that he promises to raise An-mei as his most honored child and shun Second Wife for her actions. On that day, An-mei learns to shout and have her voice heard.

An-mei's mother makes the ultimate sacrifice to give An-mei a chance for actual happiness, beyond her doomed fate as the daughter of a meaningless fourth wife. An-mei learns that she doesn't have to accept silence as her only option, like older generations were physically forced to do. She wants Rose to realize this too.

PART 4, CHAPTER 2: WAITING BETWEEN THE TREES

As Ying-ying visits Lena's new home, all she can see are bad omens, including the rickety end-table that breaks in "The Voice from the Wall." Lena's failing marriage reminds Ying-ying of her first marriage in China. Back then, Ying-ying was wild and loud, spoiled by her family's wealth. When she turns sixteen, she meets an older, coarser man who initially disgusts her with his lewd humor. However, she has a premonition that she's meant to marry him, and soon learns that a marriage is being arranged between them.

Part of Ying-ying's timidity stems from her absolute acceptance of whatever fate assigns her. She is unable to see her own power to change her life's direction.

Ying-ying bitterly notes that Lena has no idea about Ying-ying's first marriage, or how beautiful Ying-ying once was. Her first husband praises her for having "tiger eyes," which "gather fire in the day" and shine golden at night. She childishly falls in love with his compliments, and wants only to please him. The night she conceives his child, Ying-ying immediately knows it's going to be a boy. Her husband starts taking long business trips after the pregnancy announcement, and runs off with an opera singer a few months before Ying-ying is supposed to give birth. Enraged by his abandonment, Ying-ying aborts the unborn baby.

Following tradition and her own premonitions, Ying-ying happily slips into wifely submission, thinking her husband has ultimate authority. When he abuses that trust, Ying-ying has no way of protecting herself or seeking revenge, beyond killing the only thing left of him: her own baby. She sees the baby as her husband's legacy, rather than her own flesh and blood, and feels no ownership toward it, even though it's in her body.

Ying-ying then explains that she was born in the year of the Tiger, and thus has a Tiger's spirit. A Tiger has a gold side to its spirit, leaping with a fierce heart, and a black side, devious and cunning. She channels the black side of her nature for ten years after her husband leaves her. No longer an innocent girl, Ying-ying moves to the city and works in a clothing shop, where she meets an American, Clifford St. Clair. Clifford, taken by Ying-ying's beauty, tries to woo her with cheap gifts, and Ying-ying pretends to be impressed, even though she knows how worthless the trinkets are.

Even though Ying-ying is shown as meek and distant throughout the novel, she is fated by birth to have a complexly fierce nature, which manifests in unexpected ways. She uses her cunning to lure Clifford into loving her, as he represents an opportunity for a better future in America.

Lena thinks that her father saved her mother from China, but Ying-ying actually made Clifford wait for four years "like a dog in front of a butcher shop." One day, Ying-ying receives a letter saying her first husband is dead. Something "strong and bitter" flows through Ying-ying, and she takes the letter as a sign to marry Clifford, even though she does not love him. She becomes "pale, ill, and more thin… a tiger **ghost**." She goes to America with her new husband and raises a daughter, but lacks any spirit. Though Clifford loved her, Ying-ying was too much of a ghost to love him back.

Ying-ying reverses the expected romantic narrative by not being a weak woman who needs saving; their relationship unfolds on her terms. However, she is incapable of loving Clifford because she believes fate, not her own spirit, directs her life. Everything feels enacted upon her, sucking away her autonomy until she is nothing more than a shadow.

Ying-ying says her greatest shame is raising her daughter, also born in a Tiger year, without any spirit. But now, with Clifford deceased and Lena on the brink of divorce, Ying-ying is finally ready to embrace her fierceness again, and tell Lena about her painful past that has been buried for decades. By freeing all her memories, Ying-ying will be able to pass her powerful Tiger spirit to Lena, because "this is the way a mother loves her daughter."

Ying-ying regrets that Lena has only had access to Ying-ying's passivity and pessimism, and inherited the worst parts of their shared nature. In order to pass on the best parts, Ying-ying must confront her trauma and sacrifice her comfort to save her daughter while there's still time for Lena to learn.

PART 4, CHAPTER 3: DOUBLE FACE

Waverly worries that she will blend in too much on her trip to China, and airport officials won't let her back into the United States; Lindo scoffs and says that Waverly doesn't even need to open her mouth to reveal that she's an outsider. Despite Lindo's attempts to nurture Waverly's Chinese heritage, Waverly barely knows Mandarin and has an American haughtiness when she talks. Lindo argues that "only her skin and hair are Chinese. Inside – she is all American-made."

Lindo wanted her daughter to be half Chinese and half American, but now understands how impossible it is to achieve a balanced combination. Waverly is so influenced by her birth country that there's no room for Chinese values to fit in.

Before Waverly's wedding, Waverly forces Lindo to get her hair cut at a fancy San Francisco salon. The stylist doesn't even try to converse with Lindo, thinking she can't speak English. Instead, he fields all questions about Lindo's hair to Waverly, who in turn, pretends like she has to translate (even though she knows Lindo speaks English). Lindo smiles politely and uses what she calls her "American face," the blank expression that Americans expect Chinese people to have. The stylist comments that Lindo and Waverly look alike, which makes Lindo genuinely smile, revealing her "Chinese face."

Having different public "faces" is common in immigrant experiences, since Americans' (rather lazy) misperceptions lead them to devalue immigrant people's worth so frequently. It's seemingly easier to pretend to fit American's expectations and not cause problems. The consequence, though, is that no one then sees an immigrant's authentic expression, and that authentic expression itself becomes difficult to access.

When left alone, Lindo thinks about the similarities between she and Waverly, as mother and daughter; then, she thinks about her own mother and her. Before they were separated, Lindo's mother told her that she could read Lindo's fortune in her face, and that it was similar to hers. Lindo wonders what her mother would say, seeing Lindo's old, drooping face now. Lindo thinks about how hard it is to keep a Chinese face in America, when everyone sees immigrants differently.

Though they have had very different life experiences, mothers and daughters share indisputable behaviors, features, and heritages. Still, the immigrant experience is unique because they must juggle multiple personalities to survive in a new society.

When first traveling to America, Lindo pays an American-raised Chinese girl to teach her the rules of survival. She's told to first marry an American citizen and eventually have a baby, which will keep immigration officials away. Lindo starts work at a fortune cookie factory in San Francisco, where she meets An-mei. Through An-mei's church, Lindo meets Tin Jong, a nice man who unfortunately speaks Cantonese, not Lindo's Mandarin. Despite the language barrier, they learn to laugh together, and eventually marry and start a family. When Waverly is born, after two boys, Lindo is overwhelmed by how much they look alike, and names Waverly after the street they lived on, so no one would question that Waverly belonged in America.

Lindo's value in America is based on her ability to marry well, which again reduces her to her gender. Her relationship with Tin is interesting to the discussion of language, as it shows the nuances within Chinese dialects that most non-Chinese speakers don't realize. Though they're both from mainland China, Lindo and Tin can't communicate in the same language. Still, they find a shared language in laughter and affection. Waverly's birth signals Lindo's completion of 'the American Dream,' yet Lindo is afraid that Waverly will be unwelcomed due to her Chinese appearance.

Back in the parlor, Lindo complains about Waverly's crooked nose, inherited from Lindo, but Waverly likes it, saying it makes them look "devious… people just know we're two-faced." Lindo considers the idea of having two faces again, and wonder why they must always sacrifice one face to show the other.

Waverly enjoys the idea of seeming mysterious, because she's always been able to switch between American and Chinese identity without consequence. As an immigrant, Lindo does not have the luxury of choosing which face she wears, but also wonders why it is that she can't wear "both" of her faces, as those two faces really do speak to her total experiences.

PART 4, CHAPTER 4: A PAIR OF TICKETS

In the final chapter of the novel, June flies to China with her father to meet her long-lost half-sisters. As soon as she enters China, she immediately feels different, and senses her true connection to her heritage. Suyuan always claimed that being born Chinese meant having undeniable Chinese thoughts and emotions. June realizes that even though her mother's dead, June is still carrying Suyuan's dreams of coming home.

The connection between mother and daughter transcends life, as June inherits all of Suyuan's hopes and beliefs in order to keep them alive.

June and Canning first go to Guangzhou, formerly Canton, to see Canning's aunt. In the forty years since Suyuan and Canning emigrated, many of the cities changed spellings and full names. The journey makes June think about her half-sisters and their impending meeting. Suyuan died before replying to their letter, so Lindo was asked to reply with the bad news. All of the Joy Luck Club members were so devastated by Suyuan's passing, and the missed opportunity at reunion, that they decided to pose as Suyuan in the return letter. They believed it'd be too awful to break the news of Suyuan's passing in a note.

Even in China, where the Joy Luck Club members should feel most comfortable, time has passed and places have become unrecognizable. For immigrants, there is no clear home country, because neither the country of origin, nor the country of immigration, quite fit their personal histories and values; they have hybrid experiences.


June struggles with the thought that she'll have to break the news of Suyuan's passing to two sisters she doesn't even know. The worry seeps into her sleep, causing nightmares. June begs Lindo to write another letter in Chinese that says Suyuan is dead. June confesses that her fear is "they'll think I'm responsible, that she died because I didn't appreciate her." Lindo accepts June's genuine remorse and writes the letter.

Since the first chapter, June has worried that Suyuan died from a lack of appreciation, and more specifically from her own lack of appreciation for her mother. A daughter's positive actions energize her mother's life, but repeatedly, June let Suyuan down or was ungrateful. Now that Suyuan is gone, June is unable to atone for her mistreatment, and is racked by guilt.

In Guangzhou, Canning reunites with his aunt for the first time in forty years. She introduces June to their extended Chinese family, even though June is unable to converse with them. They all go to a fancy Western-style hotel (which only costs thirty-five American dollars) and order hamburgers, French fries, and apple pie for everyone, even though June wants to try authentic Chinese food.

Now experiencing what it's like to be a foreigner in a different country, June senses the bewilderment, intimidation, and inability to communicate that her parents felt when they came to America. She also feels a bit of that same cultural misunderstanding, as her relatives assume that she is American and isn't interested in the food of her heritage.


After dinner, June is left alone for the first time of the trip, and she starts missing her mother again. She first wishes Suyuan could answer all the questions that June never got around to asking, such as recipes and old relatives' names, then wonders if her mother ever wished her long-lost daughters could replace June.

As she comes closer to meeting her sisters, June finally grieves over all the information that passed away with Suyuan, and the cultural practices that June didn't pay attention to while growing up. Her heritage suddenly means more now that she's lost her link to it.


Late that night, after most of the relatives have fallen asleep, June wakes up and hears Canning tell his aunt about his life in the past forty years, including how he met Suyuan in Chungking and their immigration to America. When Canning's aunt brings up Suyuan's twins, June enters the conversation to ask their names; Canning says their names are Chwun Yu and Chwun Hwa. June then inquires about the meaning of her Chinese name, Jing-mei. Canning defines "jing" as what's left over when impurities are removed from gold – "just pure essence." "Mei" means "younger sister." June thinks about Suyuan's decision to name her as a tribute to her lost twins, and gets teary.

For the first time in her life, June asks about her Chinese name, and gets a better understanding about why Suyuan raised June so forcefully, following the sacrifice of her daughters. June is, according to Suyuan, fundamentally made of the best elements of her sisters. Throughout the novel, language and communication have been misconstrued between speakers, but here, Suyuan's message in Chinese is clear to June: June was not born to be a replacement, *but an* heir *to her first daughters' legacy.*

Canning's aunt falls asleep, leaving just June and her father awake. June asks if he knew why Suyuan abandoned the twins in 1944, and Canning admits that he found out through conversations with the Joy Luck women rather than from Suyuan herself, but that there was no shame in her decision. He starts to tell the story in English, but June quickly asks him to narrate in Chinese instead.

Profoundly aware of the disappearing connection to her Chinese heritage, June wants Canning to tell her everything about her mother, and in Chinese so that she can begin to access her mother on her mother's terms. Suyuan's story of sacrifice is finally being told, after traveling through many different sources to reach June.

After fleeing Kweilin in 1944, Suyuan starts walking a long, heavily-trafficked road to Chungking, where her husband might be stationed. She slings the twins around her shoulders and pushes a few possessions in a wheelbarrow. A few days in, she contracts dysentery from the many sick refugees walking the same path. Suyuan becomes so sick and exhausted that she can barely move, but keeps pressing forward a few more miles, thinking about her daughters' futures.

As seen over and over again in the novel, a mother's fortitude and will can overcome incredible adversity if her child's wellbeing is at stake.

Suyuan finally collapses on the side of the road, accepting that she's close to death. The babies smile sweetly next to her, and she realizes she "can't bear to watch her babies die with her." She begs other refugees to take them, but everyone who walks past looks to be near death as well. When night falls, she puts the last of her jewelry and money into her babies' shirts. Then, she removes photos of her family from her pocket and writes the babies' names, and her family's address, onto the back of each picture. Kissing their cheeks and telling them not to cry, Suyuan leaves them on the road, thinking a family would be more willing to rescue them as orphans.

After an entire novel about motherly sacrifice, Suyuan's final interaction with her twin girls represents how selfless mothers can be. Rather than keep her valuables and attempt to save herself, Suyuan gives it to the babies to make them more enticing to passers-by. Still, she wants her girls to know their heritage, even if she can't be with them, and leaves photographic evidence of her daughters' adopting family to one day connect them with their kin.

Suyuan doesn't remember falling unconscious or how much time passed after she left her babies, but she awakes in the back of a medical truck. At some point, an American missionary found her unmoving on the ground (but did not find her babies). When Suyuan finally reaches Chungking, officers tell her that her husband died two weeks previously. She is so delirious with disease that she laughs uncontrollably at the news. Canning, also displaced by the war, meets Suyuan sometime later in the same Chungking hospital.

The cruelty of fate destroys Suyuan's best-laid plans. Thinking she was doing the right thing by returning to her husband's last known location, rather than stay in Kweilin and accept a fated death, Suyuan ends up in an unknown city with no children, no husband, and no semblance of her previous life. Nothing good seems to come from challenging fate, until Canning offers a new start to her life.

Canning now knows from the recent correspondences with Suyuan's twins that they were rescued by an old peasant couple who were hiding in the Kweilin caves. They found the cheerful babies and brought them in from the dangerous road, but couldn't read the address on the photos. The girls seemed so precious and loved that the old couple decided to raise them as their own, and saved the expensive **jewelry** as the girls' inheritance. When the twins were eight, their adoptive mother took them to Suyuan's family's address, but it had been repurposed into a factory after the war. At that point, Suyuan and Canning had already immigrated to San Francisco, after spending seven years in China looking for the twins.

Though Suyuan never knew the story of her twins' rescue, it's clear that her sacrifice saved the babies' lives. And, because of the love Suyuan put into so obviously caring for them, the twins seemed more precious to the elderly couple. Unfortunately, living in a remote area safe from wartime violence also meant the girls were impossible to find, and Suyuan's wish to see her daughters again could not be fulfilled while she was alive.

For the rest of her life, Suyuan secretly searches for her daughters from overseas, asking old friends in China to look anywhere for young twin girls. Canning knows nothing about her constant efforts, until Suyuan has a big idea right before she passes away, to return to China before they're too old. Canning tells her it's too late to return, thinking Suyuan just wants to reminisce in her old home country even though it's completely different after the Communist revolution. Suyuan misunderstands him, thinking it's too late to ever find her daughters, and Canning believes the thought grew inside her mind until it burst. He also believes Suyuan's **ghost** led one of Suyuan's old friend to bump into two twin women at a department store in China, and to recognize their resemblance to Suyuan even after forty years of separation.

Miscommunication can transcend language and represent a misunderstanding in emotions. Since Suyuan never found a way to express her story, Canning could not empathize and support her through her continued search efforts. In the end, the grief of mishandling her daughters' lives is too much for Suyuan, not knowing that her daughters are happy and healthy in eastern China. Yet her love for them finally alters fate (or fulfills fate's plan) by leading them to meet a connection to her, after she's passed from mortal suffering.

On the plane to meet her half-sisters, June is wracked by doubt, particularly about how she will tell her mother's story to strangers in broken Chinese. When they arrive in Shanghai, June sees a woman wearing the same expression as June had seen before on Suyuan. Then, June sees the same face again on someone else, and realizes they are her sisters, Chwun Yu and Chwun Hwa. "Hesitations and expectations forgotten," they run together and embrace, whispering Suyuan's name in unison. Canning takes a quick-develop Polaroid picture of them together, and when June sees their similar smiles developing on the film, she finally sees what part of her is truly Chinese – her family and her mother's legacy.

Despite her initial fears of miscommunication and misunderstanding, June sheds all the worry when she reunites with her sisters in person. Their deep love for Suyuan exists beyond language and cultural barriers, and all they really need to share in common is her name and her expressions—their legacies of their shared mother. June finally fulfills Suyuan's greatest hope by not only reuniting the family, but also embracing her Chinese heritage as more than just a superficial foreign culture. Being Chinese is a complex, internalized feeling that connects June to a beautiful lineage and history.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Ogi, Alyssa. "*The Joy Luck Club*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 24 Jul 2015. Web. 7 May 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Ogi, Alyssa. "*The Joy Luck Club*." LitCharts LLC, July 24, 2015. Retrieved May 7, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-joy-luck-club.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Joy Luck Club* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Tan, Amy. The Joy Luck Club. Penguin Books. 2006.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Tan, Amy. The Joy Luck Club. New York: Penguin Books. 2006.