

Welcome to "The Joy Luck Club"

By Jennifer Whangbo

"...The woman and the swan sailed across an ocean many thousands of li wide, stretching their necks toward America. On her journey she cooed to the swan: 'In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow! She will know my meaning, because I will give her this swan — a creature that became more than what was hoped for...'"

The woman and the swan in this passage from the opening of "The Joy Luck Club" represent numerous Chinese immigrants of the past and present, whose hopes and experiences inspired this introspective film. Based on the best-selling novel by Amy Tan, "The Joy Luck Club" is a collection of vignettes told by four mother and daughter pairs.

The four retirement-aged mothers, Suyuan Woo, Lindo Jong, An-mei Hsu, and Ying-ying St. Clair, are first generation Chinese

Americans living in San Francisco. Each woman left personal tragedies behind in China as she came to America looking forward to a better life.

The four daughters, Jing-mei "June" Woo, Waverly Jong, Rose Hsu Jordan, and Lena St. Clair, are all American-born and have grown up "swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow." While trying to establish meaningful relationships and

satisfying careers, the daughters often find themselves caught between the

desire to fulfill their mothers' hopes and the desire to follow their own minds.

The action begins as all the Joy Luck "aunties" and their families are gathered at a farewell party for June Woo, who is leaving for China that morning. It is also the first meeting of the Joy Luck Club since the death of its founding member, Suyuan Woo. Instinctively, June takes her mother's place at the mah jong table and joins the aunties in the customary round of mah jong followed by small talk around a bowl of soft-boiled peanuts.

We learn that June's mother, Suyuan, died with one important unfulfilled wish: to be reunited with her twin baby girls, whom she was forced to abandon while fleeing the Japanese invasion of Kweilin. After years of searching, the twins were located only months after Suyuan's death. Out of loyalty to their friend, the aunties make arrangements for June to meet her half-sisters in China.

Initially, June is moved and ecstatic. But when faced with the responsibility of telling her sisters about their mother's life, June becomes overwhelmed. She asks the aunties, "What will I say? What can I tell them about my mother? I don't know anything. She was

my mother."

Shocked and unbelieving, they respond: "How can you say? Your mother is in your bones!" A series of distinct and colorful stories ensues. They explore various aspects of the mother-daughter relationship and show how the generation and culture gaps lead to misunderstandings. The action weaves in and out of the party scene as each mother and daughter tells her story through flashbacks.

While reflecting on their youth in China, the mothers paint a grim portrait of a woman's life. There, a woman had no freedom to follow her own will. As a girl, she obeyed her parents, and as a woman, she obeyed her husband. Her only options were to marry, to please her husband and to bear children, especially sons. One mother tells of being promised in marriage at age 2 and being delivered at age 12, only to face a tyrannical mother-in-law. Another mother tells of naively marrying a handsome playboy who drives her into a deep misery from which she can never escape. We also see how a daughter honors her mother — not by mere words, but by enduring pain of the flesh.



Mothers and daughters of Wayne Wang's film adaptation of Amy Tan's "The Joy Luck Club." (photo by Shane Sato; copyright Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, Inc. All Rights Reserved.)

In later scenes, we see the mothers in the United States, where they have transferred all their hopes to their daughters. They are convinced that in America, one can be anything, including a chess champion or a piano prodigy.

Unfortunately, the American-born daughters do not relate to their mothers' suffering in China and do not share the same hopes. June's struggle with her mother at the piano bench epitomizes the conflict arising from the mothers' attempts to raise their daughters the Chinese way in the American environment.

After a humiliating performance at a recital, a young June realizes that she is not a prodigy and decides that she will no longer play the piano. However, her mother is determined that she will continue to practice. While being dragged to the piano bench, June sobs: "You want me to be someone I'm not! I'll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be!" Her mother responds with the fierceness of an Asian mother who doesn't tolerate impertinence: "...Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!"

Yet we also see that the bond between a mother and her daughter can overcome any cultural or generational misunderstandings. An-mei Hsu gives her daughter, Rose, the confidence to confront her failing marriage by simply telling her to "know your worth."

While the movie adaptation accurately follows the novel, it also enhances the emotional force of Tan's poetic writing. Actually seeing the images on the screen adds a dimension of reality that can only be achieved by film. The scenes produce a mesmerizing effect which enables the viewer to swallow sorrow and to share hopes and joys. Although the film focuses on Asian Americans, the theme of passing on heritage and hope through generations is universal.

Fans of "The Joy Luck Club" will want to check out Amy Tan's second novel, "The Kitchen God's Wife," and the following films by director Wayne Wang—all of which feature Asian Americans and are available at the Undergraduate Library:

Chan Is Missing (1982) is Wang's first feature about taxi drivers Steve and Jo, who try to track down Chan Hung. Hung has disappeared with \$4,000 of their savings in this Chinatown "detective" story about stereotypes, identity, and Asian America in general.

Dim Sum (1985) is a somewhat slow-paced but well-made film about a mother and

daughter's complex interplay of love and guilt, and the lonely, mediating Uncle Tam. The film is in some ways a precursor to "The Joy Luck Club," but less glamorized, less manipulative and more honest.

Eat a Bowl of Tea (1987) is based on Louis Chu's novel of the same name and is one of Wang's more mainstream works. Set in the late 1940's, the film is about a Chinese-American World War II veteran, his new bride from China, and the familial and societal pressures imposed on them by the predominantly-male Chinatown. It features Russell Wong (who played An-Mei's evil, rakish, watermelon-chopping husband in "The Joy Luck Club") as the lead male.