The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan.
New York: Ballantine Books, 1989.

ERRATUM

The title of this article is:
"Oriental Mothers, Occidental Daughters, and the Eternal Ties that Bind"

I

The *Joy Luck Club* is a novel of vignettes skillfully woven together by Chinese-American author Amy Tan. The vignettes are told from the first person by three mothers raised in old China and four daughters born and raised in cosmopolitan San Francisco. The tales of a mother who had died are interpreted by her daughter. It has received superlative reviews and remained in the *New York Times* Bestseller List for nine months.

II

The mothers, all escaping the chaos of war in Japanese - occupied China, migrated to San Francisco in the late 1940s and met in the First Chinese Baptist Church. Suyuan Woo organized the Joy Luck Club in Kweilin to ward off the fear and panic of war among the refugees. Transported to the United States under her leadership, the mah jong club served as a unifying force among the new immigrants, and later as a mutual-benefit association for the members largely composed of four families. An-Mei Hsu learned stoicism and sacrifice from her own mother who gave her own life so that she would have a better future. Lindo Jong, trapped by rural tradition into a loveless, exploitative marriage, used sheer cunning to get out. Ying-ying St. Clair, rich but unfortunate, went on with her long, lonely existence by passively "waiting between the trees."

The daughters were all born in America; three by Chinese parents and one by a Chinese mother and an Irish-American father. Socialized in Chinatown amid the dominant American culture, their lives were constant struggles to remain both Chinese and American. Jing-Mei "June" Woo continued her mother's work both at the Joy Luck Club and in search for two lost daughters. Rose Hsu Jordan learned from personal losses to be strong. Waverly

Jong, American junior chess champion, knew success early, but also knew pain. Lena St. Clair learned stoicism from her mother, but not much of her parapsychic wisdom.

The vignettes are about their personal tragedies and triumphs in China and in the new world.

Suyuan Woo lost her husband during the war in China, and her daughters in the retreat from Kweilin. But she never stopped looking for them. In the end, after her death, her twins were found in China by her second husband and third daughter.

Suyuan Woo's daughter, Jing-wei, felt she had disappointed her mother in every way. She refused her prodding to learn the piano, dropped out of college, and became a small-time copy writer. Yet, her mother rewarded her with her piano and a jade pendant on a gold chain to emphasize her "life's importance."

An-Mei Hou was always reminded by relatives in her rural Chinese community of the ignominy her mother had sank the family into by being the third concubine (fourth wife) of a rich man. When her mother returned home to see her dying grandmother, she saw her cut off a part of her flesh to put it in her soup, for "that is how a daughter honors her mother" (p. 41). She went back with her mother to Tientsin and observed her mother's unhappiness in a house of plenty. She knew that her mother killed herself to assure her daughter's future under the care of a wealthy man. In the United States, Ann-Mei lost her younger son when he drowned near the beach. She did not give up looking for him even when the rest of her family had.

Rose Hsu Jordan married an American classmate at Berkeley over the disappointments of their parents. Typically oriental, she helped him in every way, stayed in the background, and allowed him to make all the decisions. When he could no longer cope, their marriage collapsed. She wept for days, but found new strength to fight back.

Lindo Jong was promised in marriage at the age of two, saw and disliked her future husband at the age of eight, was delivered to his house at 12 to learn domestic skills, and was married at 16. She used the same traditions which imprisoned her to get out of her situation.

Her daughter Waverly must have inherited Lindo's intelligence, as she became national junior chess champion. However, conflict with her doting, pushy mother led her to drop chess at 14. Her first marriage to a Chinese failed. When she was getting married to an American and sought a confrontation with her seemingly indifferent mother, her mother's quiet reply was "I already know this." (p. 200)

Ying-ying St. Clair "lost her life" at 18 when her first husband proved unfaithful and left her. She moped around for ten years, "waiting between the trees," with "one eye asleep and the other working." (p. 283) She went to America with her Irish husband, living behind the splendor she was used to. She unabasedly aborted the seed by her first husband, but when she lost her second son in America, she fell apart, "piece by piece, like plates falling off a shelf one by one."(p. 117) Her daughter Lena understood, but must have inherited her quiet stoicism, because she saw but did not feel her own marriage falling apart. Like the weak table in a room in her house which she knew could only hold a vase and would fall with more weight, she just waited as more and more weights heaped on her own shaky marriage.

III

What emerges from the stories is the individual strength of the China-bred women. Suyuan Woo did what she felt was best for the twins and went about life with that eternal hope that she would find them. An-Mei Hsu did not stop looking for her son's body till her hope sank away with the sun. Lindo Jong did not waste her time crying over her loveless marriage but used her wit to get out of it. And Ying-Ying St. Clair, whose life drained out of her soul early in life, gave "the love of a ghost" to her second husband who "rubbed my feet at night, praised the food I cooked." She gave him "arms that uncircled but did not touch."(p. 286) And only after this husband died, when he was himself a ghost, did they "love equally."(p. 286)

The American-Chinese girls, though imbued by some of the wisdom passed on by their mothers, had a greater quantity of brittleness which more comfortable but more conflict-laden lives brought. All three of the marriages broke up--two with Americans and one with another Chinese--implying that the marital problems were caused more by personality rather than by cultural differences, which may be true in a melting pot like San Francisco. American orientation may have deprived the girls of much of the oriental foresight and patience their mothers had.

The differences in oriental-occidental orientations have caused major conflicts between mothers and daughters. Jing-Mei Woo resented her mother's constant prodding for her to excel in something. Waverly Jong gave up chess altogether in rebellion against her over-eager mother.

But through all the conflicts, and through all their personal conflicts in life, the mothers and the daughters in the book have that universal, special bond which most mothers and daughters through many generations all over the world have shared. It comes from the inevitable learning a daughter gets from her mother. As Ying-ying St. Clair told her daughter Lena:

"You can't understand these things."
"Why not?"
"Because I haven't put it in your mind yet."(p. 109)

As Rose Hsu Jordan hears it from her mother, she should keep trying "because you must....This is your life, what you must do."(p. 139)

The bond between mother and daughter also comes from a mutual feeling of filial respect. Waverly Jong must have her mother accept her fiance, even if she can go ahead and marry him.

It is forged by genetic similarities. As Jing-Mei Woo said when she found her sisters: "I know we all see it. Together we look like our mother."(p. 336)

Finally, the bond is strengthened by an inexplicable communion through a recognition of that genetic, spiritual and emotional link only mothers and daughters understand. The older women told Jing-Mei Woo it would be easy to talk about her mother because "your mother is in your bones"(p. 31). As An-Mei Hsu, lamenting over her daughter's emotional pain, said:

"...Even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she came out the same way! Maybe because she was born to me and I was a girl." (p. 241)

Amy Tan, a Chinese-American daughter herself, tells the stories with depth and understanding. She wove a novel of sensitive, beautiful prose from vignettes equally sensitive and beautiful.

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