Amy Tan:
A Look at the Critical Reception

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Amy Tan is one of a lucky minority of writers whose first book made a major impact in the world of publishing. Her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, hit the *New York Times* best-seller list and stayed there for nine months, longer than any other book that year. It was short-listed for the National Book Award for fiction and nominated for the National Book Critics Award. The book also won the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for fiction in addition to the Commonwealth Club Gold Award. While Tan's initial contract sold the hardcover book for $50,000, the paperback rights earned her nearly $1.2 million. Since then, the book has been made into a major motion picture, translated into more than twenty languages (including Chinese), and adapted into a play (Huntley 11-12, 41).

Tan's popularity might not have been so meteoric if Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiographical work of fiction *The Woman Warrior* had not primed the pump in the 1970s. Until the 1960s and 1970s, Asian American literature had a spotty history, consisting largely of memoirs and autobiographies. Kingston continued the tradition but chose a more fragmented, multivoiced style in which to tell her story. Rather than employing the linear narrative to which the reading public was accustomed, Kingston used a form called "talk-story," which celebrated the oral histories contributed by generations of women kept out of the formal histories created by men both in the United States and in China, among other places. Kingston's book was well received, earning the National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction in 1976. Tan's novel seemed to be a kind of literary kin, with its multivoiced, multi-generational series of stories. In *Time* magazine, John Skow wrote, "Growing up ethnic is surely the liveliest theme to appear in the American novel since the closing of the frontier. . . . The Chinese-American culture is only beginning to throw off such literary sparks, and Amy

Tan's bright, sharp-flavored first novel belongs on a short shelf dominated by Maxine Hong Kingston's remarkable works of a decade or so ago, *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*."

By the end of the 1980s, Chinese American authors had made a name for themselves in the literary world. Kingston continued her success in 1980, winning the American Book Award for *China Men*. Poet Cathy Song won the Yale Younger Poets Prize with her volume titled *Picture Bride*. Poet Li-Young Li read on National Public Radio and received both a Guggenheim and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and Garrett Hongo won the Academy of American Poets Lamont Poetry Prize (Huntley 29). David Henry Hwang's Broadway sensation *M. Butterfly* won several Tony Awards in 1988. With Tan's publication of *The Joy Luck Club* in 1989, Asian American authors had definitively entered both the public consciousness and the literary canon.

Both the public and the critics embraced Tan and *The Joy Luck Club*. *New York Times* critic Orville Schell wrote that Amy Tan "has a wonderful eye for what is telling, a fine ear for dialogue, a deep empathy for her subject matter and a guilelessly straightforward way of writing, [so that her themes] sing with a rare fidelity and beauty. She has written a jewel of a book." Other critics were largely positive, although some found Tan's seemingly happy ending to be problematic, too "easy." Some complained that Tan's fiction did little to address larger political issues and that Tan should have written a book that cast China in a more flattering light.

For Tan herself, the book was less about creating a literary masterpiece than it was about understanding her mother and her mother's memory. No discussion of the origins of *The Joy Luck Club* can begin without an examination of Daisy Tan's life. Born in Shanghai, Daisy grew up the daughter of a wealthy family. Her father, a scholar, had died when she was very young. After his death, Daisy's mother, Jingmei, refused the proposal of a man, who then raped her and made her his concubine, thereby forcing her into exile from her family and her daughter. Daisy was allowed to visit her mother periodically, but that

ended with her mother's suicide. When Jing-mei bore the rapist a son, one of his principal wives stole the child and raised him as her own. Jing-mei, overcome with the pain of her position, lost family, and stolen son, killed herself by eating an overdose of opium. Daisy was nine and orphaned. Still, her relatives did their duty by her and settled her in an arranged marriage. She bore her abusive husband four children: a son, who died very young, and three daughters. She left them behind when she fled the marriage and made her way to the United States. Shortly after her arrival in 1949, Daisy met Tan's father, John, also a Chinese immigrant, and married him. Much of this story made its way into *The Joy Luck Club*.

The couple had three children, Peter, Amy, and John, who grew up embracing all things American while trying to deal with the culture and language their parents had brought with them from China. For Amy, being bicultural was painful. She felt ashamed of her Chinese heritage, of her mother's imperfect speech, and of herself for being unable to live up to the high expectations of her parents. When Tan was fifteen, her father and her older brother Peter both died of brain tumors. Tan's mother took her children away from the "diseased" house and traveled with them around the eastern seaboard before leaving for Europe and finally settling in Switzerland. Tan graduated in 1969 and the family returned to the United States, where Amy attended college, first at Linfield College, then at San Jose City College, and finally finishing at San Jose State University, where she earned a B.A. in English and linguistics and then a master's degree in linguistics, thereby ruining her mother's dream that her daughter become a doctor. Tan married Louis DeMattei, an Italian American tax lawyer. She enrolled in a doctoral program but decided to leave it, preferring instead to enter the job market. She floated from job to job before finally settling as a freelance writer.

Eventually, Tan, a self-diagnosed workaholic, decided to cut back on her freelance work to make room for her creative endeavors. She wrote a short story, "Endgame," that gained her entrance into the Squaw Valley Community of Writers. There she met Amy Hempel and

Molly Giles, who encouraged Tan in her work. A little while later, Tan joined Giles's San Francisco-based writing workshop. "Endgame" was published in *FM Magazine* and later reprinted in *Seventeen* magazine. She also wrote a second story, "Waiting Between the Trees," which she submitted to *The New Yorker*. The community of writers was essential to Tan; Giles gave "Endgame" to agent Sandra Dijkstra, who liked the story and encouraged Tan to keep writing. A short while later, after discovering that "Endgame" had been published in Italy without her consent, Tan sought representation from Dijkstra. The agent requested another story. Tan sent "Waiting Between the Trees" with a letter outlining her idea for a novel or series of short stories telling the tales of a group of women of different backgrounds and generations. On the basis of the story and the letter, Dijkstra agreed to become Tan's agent (Huntley 9).

Meanwhile, Daisy Tan was not feeling well. In 1986, she was hospitalized for a heart attack. Though the heart attack turned out to be angina, Tan was so unsettled at the thought of losing her mother without really knowing her that she endeavored to create a closer relationship with her mother. She also agreed to accompany her mother to China and meet her three half sisters. Just before Tan left for China, Dijkstra asked the writer for one more story and an outline for a complete book. Tan created the proposal and then left for China with her mother and her husband. When she returned from China, she had a book deal with G. P. Putnam and Sons and a novel to finish. Tan had originally conceived of the book as a series of stories, but the publishing company thought a novel would be easier to market. Tan quit her freelance job and spent four months completing the text.

At the center of both Tan's life and her first book is the mother-daughter relationship. Tan's own struggle as an American of Chinese descent living between the culture of her Chinese parents and the culture of her native country, the United States, informs the text as well. Much of the critical response to *The Joy Luck Club* reflects these primary concerns. For an excellent critical overview of Tan's first three novels, the

history of Asian American literature, and Tan's biography, E. D. Huntley's *Amy Tan: A Critical Companion* is a particularly useful source.

Feminist readings of *The Joy Luck Club* begin with the idea that women find themselves and their relation to each other by interacting with texts by other women. In the case of *The Joy Luck Club*, the mothers' stories represent shifts in their own lives from silent, powerless women to empowered survivors. This forward motion helps to shape the book as the mothers move from China to the United States. That movement also suggests that the Asian women are "prefeminist." The West becomes the beacon of democratic hope, of equality and modernity. The mothers' hopes for their daughters are enacted as they move to the United States, where they believe their daughters will have the opportunity to be recognized as public, relevant people independent of their domestic skills and their husbands. Leslie Bow does acknowledge that the stark dichotomy that figures the West as exclusively enlightened and the East as exclusively patriarchal and oppressive does an injustice to both. The same dichotomy also negates the potential for more fully problematizing gender issues in both countries. Ultimately, Bow suggests, this dichotomy may have helped to make the book more palatable to Western readers. David Leiwei Li concurs. He argues that Tan's insistence on chronicling only the nuclear family is a means by which the author can ignore other, larger political issues and create China as a gender-oppressing monolith. He also suggests that Tan's claims of a matrilineal, genetic inheritance keep the understanding private and familial rather than allowing that Chinese politics and history might have offered a similar kind of understanding.

Yuan Yuan also examines Tan's narrative configuration of China. For the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club,* China is both geographical and historical; for their daughters, it is a culture from which they are removed. The mothers use China and their memories to create myths and legends with which they intend to guide their daughters to an understanding of their lineage, their culture, their inheritance. The daughters must rely on their mothers to offer and explain the stories; the mothers

must trust that their daughters will listen. Chandra Tyler Mountain takes the idea a step further, claiming that without the context of China and its symbols, the mothers are unknowable, so that their stories, and subsequently their identities, are lost. It is a political act to remember China and to make it a part of the lives of their daughters. The daughters must reconcile their identities not as Chinese or American but as Chinese American, a hybrid with its own history and culture. These two necessities create much of the tension that drives the novel. In E. Shelley Reid's reading, the book sets up the mothers and daughters as yin and yang, implying a search for balance, particularly for the daughters, who strive to find their identities in the midst of the American society in which they have public lives and the Chinese society in which the nuclear family operates. The daughters must find balance to find enlightenment; they must come to terms with their mothers' lives and culture before they can live fully in their own. Eventually, the daughters come to understand that they can find strength in the stories of their mothers without having to relive those stories.

Wenying Xu continues the examination of myths, claiming that the women in the stories reverse the tradition of using myths to suppress women; instead, revisionary myths are used to empower and enlighten women ("Womanist"). Critic Frank Chin takes exception to these changed myths, alleging that Tan, along with Maxine Hong Kingston and David Henry Hwang, wrote the myths to appear cruel and misogynistic, thereby reinforcing negative stereotypes about China and Chinese men.

Tan's use of multiple narrators and multiple time periods has encouraged a number of readings based on the theories of the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, who assumes that a dialogical work is in conversation not only with itself and its own multiple perspectives but also with other works and other authors. The conversation resists single-source authority; instead it encourages change, exchange, and elucidation. Each work has the power to change and expand as other works come into contact with it. This theory became increasingly popular in the 1970s as a lens through which to view intertextuality. This concep-

tual approach is also well suited to certain elements often found in women's writing that stresses community and multivoiced narratives, as does that of both Kingston and Tan.

Bonnie Braendlin was one of the first critics to apply the Bakhtinian approach to *The Joy Luck Club*. In her reading, the multiplicity of voices suggests a desire for self-definition that transcends the boundaries of generations and ethnicities. Qun Wang uses a study of dialogics to explain how Tan analyzes the effects of traditional Chinese culture on second-generation Chinese Americans. Wang examines the daughters' struggles for balance in the novel and links them back to the Chinese belief in balance for harmony of body and soul. She also looks at the varied effects of American culture on both the mothers and the daughters and their relationships with one another. Marc Singer approaches the study of dialogics in the text by emphasizing the past and the present. He suggests that the juxtaposition of past and present, history and myth, and the methods of presentation offer their own dialogic. Indeed, it is only through hearing all of the stories, myths, and histories, then reassembling them in the mind of the reader, that the book truly speaks, and the narrative structure helps to support that supranarrative.

Stephen Souris uses the theories of both Bakhtin and Wolfgang Iser to interrogate the text. Adding Iser's reader-response theory adds the reader's voice to the dialogic mix. The experience of understanding and grouping choices of the reader dramatically affects the experience of reading the book. Iser's theory insists on an active, intertextual engagement. Souris's reading celebrates the gaps in the narratives, as they require the reader to make the connections between the narratives and within the relationships. Souris also asserts that Iser's theories help to explain how readers experience and read the text. The reader will try to balance negative elements of the text with a more positive counterpoint. In this way, a reader might mourn the loss of Ying-ying St. Clair's aborted son in the story and balance it with the potential the story has to teach the daughters and what it taught the mother. Souris also argues that the structure of the story encourages the reader to have

a more sympathetic response to the mothers and their plight as a result of when and how the reader interacts with the text. The reader knows what kind of interaction might happen between the mothers and daughters if only they would talk to each other. Readers experience that loss of potential keenly, and this draws them more deeply into the stories. Souris further adds that readers are in what Iser calls a "feedback loop" in which they must constantly revise their notions of the text in relation to the new information being offered in new chapters.

Another trend in Tan scholarship is to examine her works' portrayals of the East versus the West. Some critics have charged Tan with perpetuating stereotypical Chinese characters, exoticizing China and its people, and demonizing the East. Tamara Silvia Wagner argues that Tan actually interrogates assumptions made by the Occidentalist and the Orientalist by looking critically at the behavior of both Americans and Chinese in the book, although the interrogation is not always sufficiently critical. Boyfriend Rich becomes the tourist at the dinner table, asking about Chinese customs and behaving in ways that seem rude to the Chinese household. At the same time, the mothers criticize and question the Western approaches to parenting and decision making. Wagner discusses the realm of domesticity as a sphere in which both sides, the Chinese and the American, interact and try to understand the assumptions of the other ("Realigning"). In Wagner's essay "'A Barrage of Ethnic Comparisons': Occidental Stereotypes in Amy Tan's Novels," she also looks at Tan's use of more Americanized stereotypes, including Chinese and Jewish, which Tan uses to comedic effect to question the American ideal of the "melting pot." Wagner expresses concern that the stereotypes are not interrogated enough to prevent them from reinforcing themselves through the vehicle of the text. Using the semiotic analysis of the ethnic as theorized by William Boelhower and Werner Sollors, Mistri Zenobia argues that investigating the cultural symbols imported from Chinese culture will help to broaden potential study of the novel, particularly examination of the structure of the book as a metaphor for its larger themes.

Li Zeng uses both Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston to talk about the negotiation of ethnicity. Postmodernism has led to a great interest both in fragmented stories and in stories from outside the mainstream white male perspective. Zeng sees the daughters and mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* as negotiating, respectively, between being Chinese and being American and between being mothers and being survivors. These identities keep the two sets of women from truly knowing each other. What does eventually bridge the gap between them is shared gender experience. In this way, women are knowable across cultures, and the suffering of the mothers is recontextualized to be inclusive of the daughters' lives and fears rather than exclusionary. Ben Xu also assesses the ethnic self in Tan's novel. For the mothers, as for many immigrants, the self is constructed from what they have overcome. They are self-reliant, strong, mindful, and sly. Their daughters, like much of American society, assume that these characteristics are ethnic characteristics when, Xu argues, they are more individuated than that. The mothers do not represent China; they represent survivors. The mothers, in turn, make experiences of the events of their lives; they use those experiences to create identity. In addition, they make sense of what happened to them in terms of the moment, of what is most useful to educate their daughters. In this way, the past and present are constantly acting upon each other. In lieu of the traditional relationship a Chinese daughter might share with her mother, the mothers and daughters now connect as covictims and cosurvivors.

The Joy Luck Club is rich with Chinese cultural symbols, beliefs, and mythology. Examining those beliefs helps to create new readings of the text. Patricia L. Hamilton investigates the use of feng shui, Chinese astrology, and the five elements in the book. These aspects of Chinese culture help to make sense of the actions of the mothers, but they also create distance between the daughters and the mothers as the members of the younger generation do not have the context to make sense of their mothers' actions. This leads to disconnection between them. Still, the belief systems helped the mothers to survive their histo-

ries in China and their lives in the United States. Ellen Handler Spitz uses a Western myth—that of Demeter and Persephone—and a psychoanalytic approach to explore the relationship between mothers and daughters in the text. Walter Shear sees the text as reflective of a critical moment in immigrant history, where the traditional Chinese family unit is fractured and must be reconfigured in light of the diaspora. Tan chooses to emphasize healing possibilities in using Chinese culture, history, and stories to overcome the schism.

Clearly the stories of mothers and daughters are central to the understanding of the text and its criticism. Some critics approach those relationships as representative of movements in Chinese American literature and as a larger part of the women's movement. Wendy Ho positions the book in terms of the women's movement. During the 1960s and 1970s, many women of color were dissatisfied with the women's movement as it seemed centrally focused on the concerns and lives of middle-class white women and unsympathetic to the unique concerns of women of color, including Asian American women. The forebears of many Asian Americans were brought to the United States as labor commodities. In 1943, the Magnuson Act finally added women to the quota of Chinese allowed into the United States (Huntley 21). The Chinese who entered had concerns that were markedly different from those of white middle-class women. They contended with racist stereotypes, disrespect shown to themselves and their husbands, and the task of educating their children in Chinese culture and tradition. When the mainstream feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s called for a reclamation of women's stories, Asian American writers responded, as in the cases of Tan, Kingston, and Fae Myenne Ng. The movement intended to reclaim stories and histories from the patriarchal, imperialist, capitalist traditions. In Tan's novel, the mothers suffer dislocation as their histories and beliefs are independent of their daughters' experience. Unfortunately, differences in social strata, cultural histories, and other matters make it difficult for the younger women to connect with their mothers. However, on a larger scale, Ho sees the book as helping

to make mother-daughter connections in the lives of the readers. She explores the public reception of the book and the way in which its mother-daughter stories brought mothers and daughters together across social, economic, and ethnic strata. Some critics have scoffed at the popular response the novel generated and the outreach it has created with readers, claiming it to be "sentimental." Ho argues that this response invalidates the history of women and women's culture. Ho also addresses Tan's assertion that her book is not to be taken as a monolithic explanation of all things Chinese or as a primer for the would-be tourist. Xiaomei Chen adds to this vision of *The Joy Luck Club* as a unifying text by exploring the mother-daughter bond as it connects women and women's literature across generations, cultures, and histories.

Megali Cornier Michael argues that another part of the women's perspective in *The Joy Luck Club* is the privileging of the community over the individual. She uses the novel's San Francisco Joy Luck Club as a primary example of this idea. The club gives the women agency; rather than having consistent losers and winners, the women pull together to offer each other power and support with which they can thrive in their adopted country. They even pass on the sense of community to the younger generation through their support of June and her trip to China. Marina Heung adds to the view of the mother-daughter relationship by positing the mother as the fulcrum between the past and the present. The daughter can understand the two only by engaging the texts/lives of the mother. In this way, the text is transformed from the typical daughter-centered text to a mother-centered text. By the end of the book, the only individual privileged to see all of the stories and their intersections is the reader. In this way, the text moves to become sister-centered as the reader re-creates the connections of the text.

The text's conversion to film has also brought comparative studies. Karen Fang sees *The Joy Luck Club* as part of an ongoing cultural conversation about Asian representation in film. To what extent must the filmmaker present Asian characters in a positive light? Are stereotypes being reproduced ad infinitum, and to what end? How are the women

of *The Joy Luck Club* portrayed? Do they move outside of the stereotypes of Asian American women? Do they go beyond the China doll and the dragon lady? Robert Mielke's inquiry focuses on whether the film is as strong in its medium as the novel is as a novel. Ultimately, Mielke asserts, overexplanation and sentimentality rob the film of the complexity and texture the novel possesses, making it a much less successful example of its genre. Claire A. Conceison opens up a new venue for criticism by examining the process of producing the live theatrical version of *The Joy Luck Club* across cultures. This process may very well elicit more critique in the future.

Since *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan has published the novels *The Kitchen God's Wife*, *The Hundred Secret Senses*, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, and *Saving Fish from Drowning* as well as the nonfiction volume *The Opposite of Fate*. She has also written children's books. The critical reception of her work has been largely positive, although some critics continue to question Tan's endings and her fragmented style. Still, she has seen great success in the classroom, with the presence of her works on collegiate syllabi a testament to her growing importance in Chinese American literature. Increased interest in postmodernism and fragmented storytelling styles will likely continue to breed commentary on Tan's work, as will interest in women's history and the history of women of color. Also, the proliferation of books by and about women of color will surely invite comparison of Tan's novels to texts about other immigrant groups and other groups split between American and immigrant identities. Tan's fiction will likely continue to be a staple in women's studies, Asian studies, and literature classrooms for the foreseeable future.

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