

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