

'YOUR MOTHER IS IN YOUR BONES'

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- 1 Born in Oakland, Calif., in 1952 to a father educated as an engineer in Beijing and a mother raised in a well-to-do Shanghai family, Amy Tan grew up in an American world that was utterly remote from the childhood world of her parents. In "The Joy Luck Club," her first novel, short-story-like vignettes alternate back and forth between the lives of four Chinese women in pre-1949 China and the lives of their American-born daughters in California. The book is a meditation on the divided nature of this emigrant life.
- 2 The members of the Joy Luck Club are four aging "aunties" who gather regularly in San Francisco to play mah-jongg, eat Chinese food and gossip about their children. When one of the women dies, her daughter, Jing-mei (June) Woo, is drafted to sit in for her at the game. But she feels uncomfortably out of place in this unassimilated environment among older women who still wear "funny Chinese dresses with stiff stand-up collars and blooming branches of embroidered silk sewn over their breasts," and who meet in one another's houses, where "too many once fragrant smells" from Chinese cooking have been "compressed onto a thin layer of invisible grease." The all-too-Chinese ritual of the Joy Luck Club has always impressed her as little more than a "shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war."
- 3 She is made uncomfortable by the older generation's insistence on maintaining old customs and parochial habits, which she views as an impediment to breaking loose from her parents' cultural gravity. What she yearns for is to lead an independent, modern and American life free of the burden of her parents' Chineseness and the overweening hopes for their children that they can't even "begin to express in their fragile English."
- 4 "At first my mother tried to cultivate some hidden genius in me," recalls June. "She did housework for an old retired piano teacher down the hall who gave me lessons and free use of a piano to practice on in exchange. When I failed to become a concert pianist, or even an accompanist for the church youth choir, she finally explained that I was late-blooming, like Einstein, who everyone thought was retarded until he discovered a bomb."
- 5 What she fears most of all is being dragged under by all that the Joy Luck Club symbolizes and transformed "like a werewolf, a mutant tag of DNA suddenly triggered, replicating itself insidiously into a syndrome, a cluster of telltale Chinese behaviors, all those things my mother did to embarrass me - haggling with store owners, pecking her mouth with a toothpick in public, being color-blind to the fact that lemon yellow and pale pink are not good combinations for winter clothes."
- 6 Part of June's struggle is to distance herself from the kind of helpless obedience that she recognizes in traditional Chinese women, and that she fears is manifesting itself in passivity in her own American life. "I was raised the Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat my own bitterness," says June's mother, spelling out the dangerously congenial nature of this Chinese female submissiveness. "And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she came out the same way! Maybe it is because she was born to me and she was born a girl. And I was born to my mother and I was born a girl. All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way." With a weary

fatalism that speaks for June as well, her sister Lena confesses her propensity for "surrendering everything" to her American husband "without caring what I got in return."

- 7** However, after the death of June's mother a mixture of grief, guilt and curiosity, coupled with the relentless goading of the aunties of the Joy Luck Club, conspire to draw her into the very world from which she had so assiduously sought to distance herself. As the aunties talk over their mah-jongg game, even scolding June at one point for her evident lack of interest in her parents - "Not know your own mother?" asks one of them. "How can you say? Your mother is in your bones!" - June begins to see her mother's generation in a different light. Rather than viewing the aunties as expressionless aliens from an opaque and distant land who hound and embarrass their children, bit by bit she begins to understand the real dimensions of the "unspeakable tragedies they had left behind in China," and to sense how vulnerable they actually are in America. Slowly she begins to comprehend how, after all they have endured, they might well be anxious and concerned lest all cultural continuity between their pasts and their children's futures be lost.
- 8** "Because I remained quiet for so long now my daughter does not hear me," laments one auntie. "She sits by her fancy swimming pool and hears only her Sony Walkman, her cordless phone, her big, important husband asking her why they have charcoal and no lighter fluid." It comes as a revelation to June that "they are frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English. They see that joy and luck do not mean the same to their daughters, that to these closed American-born minds 'joy luck' is not a word, it does not exist. They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation."
- 9** Ms. Tan, who is 37 years old, was born in Oakland, Calif., shortly after her parents emigrated from China. Her father, an electrical engineer and a Baptist minister, died when she was 15. Her mother, who came from a wealthy Shanghai family, had a disastrous first marriage in China, and left three daughters there in 1949 - something like her character Suyuan Woo.
- 10** "My memory is that I found out about them when my father died. We were having a fight and yes, she said, she did have these perfect, wonderful, Chinese-speaking daughters in contrast to me, the wicked English-speaking daughter," Ms. Tan recalled in a telephone interview from her home in San Francisco.
- 11** Her mother returned to China in 1978. "She would write me letters from China, and when she came back I was so relieved that she still loved me."
- 12** Her mother, Ms. Tan said, expected her to be a neurosurgeon and a concert pianist in her spare time. "In me she saw this opportunity to look at so many chances in life, to take advantages and be strong and not depend on men." She says her mother is proud of her now but doesn't see "The Joy Luck Club" as autobiographical - although "all my friends say that it's like listening to my mother and me talk, though the details are not from our life together."