

# Intergenerational relations in "rules of the game"



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Intergenerational relations between mothers and daughters are further complicated in *The Joy Luck Club* as cultural differences come into play for the first generation Chinese immigrant mother and her Americanized daughter. This is clearly brought out when Lindo Jong shows off her daughter at the market, announcing “to whoever looked her way” that “this is [her] daughter Wave-ly Jong” (90), but her behavior is only met with resentment from Waverly as she wished her mother “wouldn’t do that” (91) and sees accompanying her to the market as a “duty [she] couldn’t avoid” (90). Using this scene, Tan plays out the mother-daughter tension, as Lindo’s older generation Chinese mindset that a child’s success is a reflection of good parenting comes clashes with Waverly’s Americanized thinking that one’s success belongs to one alone. The daughter’s struggle for a separate identity from her mother brings forth the idea that the older generation views a mother and daughter as one entity, but through young Waverly’s western perspective, this is a threat to her individuality, apparent when she retorts to Lindo “if you want to show off, then why don’t you learn to play chess” (91). The distance between the pair is two-fold, as not only is Lindo older than Waverly, thus causing a generation gap, she is also from the Old World and brings with her Chinese ways that Waverly is unable to relate to. The first and second generation Chinese Americans are represented through Lindo and Waverly Jong as Tan attributes the lack of understanding between the two as a cultural difference rather than a generational one. Intergenerational tension is also shown through Waverly’s difficulty in reconciling and relating to Lindo’s seemingly mysterious power over her. This is best portrayed when Waverly imagines her mother as a chess opponent to be merely “two angry black slits” (92), failing to even give her a proper physical form, but the

latter has such great power over her chess pieces that they “screamed as they scurried and fell off the board one by one”. When Waverly pictures her mother saying “strongest wind cannot be seen” (92) in the final page of this section, the reader gets the sense that Lindo’s mastery of “the art of invisible strength” (80) is one that is incomprehensible to her daughter because logic fails to explain why it is so immense that it can determine the failure or success of her actions. Lindo’s possession of this great power and her omnipotence is, in Waverly’s eyes, associated with qualities not only of the older generation, but also of the Old World as she emphasizes how this concept is said “In Chinese” (80). This gives the connotation that the idea was conceived in ancient China and back in those times when Lindo could express it in her mother tongue without a need for translation like in America now. Here, Tan brings out the seemingly impossible task of bridging the gap between the first generation immigrants and their children as they are like chess opponents with “clashing ideas” (85). With undertones of intergenerational relations, the feminist notion of mothers empowering daughters is highlighted as Lindo imparts the rules of life to Waverly. When Lindo teaches Waverly “the art of invisible strength” (80), the latter only realizes the truth in her mother’s teaching when she started playing chess at an older age as she “discovered that for the whole game one must gather invisible strength” (86) to win her opponent and subsequently, the battles in life. The fact that Waverly is eventually able to put into practice what her mother taught her hints at a subtle form of reconciliation across the two generations, and Tan is perhaps trying to make the point that although it might never be possible for the two to gain absolute access to each other, there are elements of the ‘old way’ that will still be fused with mindset of

the younger generation. From this example, it is also evident that the mother figure plays a central role in influencing the daughter's perspective, imparting enduring Chinese ideas of human will which Waverly later referred to as a wind that "whispered secrets only [she] could hear" (88) to succeed at chess. By emphasizing the importance of learning "this American rules" (85), Lindo empowers Waverly with the knowledge that she "must know rules" (85) because it is necessary to adapt to the white dominant culture in order to survive in the American society. Tan uses this "invisible strength" as a representation of a power the older generation females possess that can shape and control events. Using this, females like Lindo and Waverly Jong become empowered and are able to exert influence on their circumstances, thereby subverting the structure of patriarchy. Tan writes Waverly and her brothers as "peer[ing]" (81) into a shop and observing old Li, giving the reader the impression that the younger generation is literally looking at the older generation through a window and the only way they can gain understanding of them is by taking note of their actions and behaviors. Waverly expresses doubt at the idea of the older Chinese generation being able to triumph western rules when she opens her sentence with "it was said that" old Li's medical practices can do better than "the best of American doctors" (81), showing how the younger generation is apprehensive of the ways of their elders. By looking in at them through a glass, the older generation seems to have become the exotic other in the American society. Thus they are not only alien to the white Americans, but to the second generation Chinese Americans as well. In the same way, when Lindo looks at the chess instructions in English but appears to "search deliberately for nothing in particular" (85), she is trying to get a grasp of the

American culture at large but is limited by her lack of language skills. This exemplifies that the inaccessibility of the other generation goes both ways, as it is not only Waverly who is unable to comprehend her mother and the first generation Chinese immigrants, the latter is similarly not able to understand the former. It is also interesting to note that the act of watching is also reversed and acted out on the American children of the Chinese immigrants, shown when a Caucasian man took a photo of Waverly and her friends with “ the roasted duck with its head dangling from a juice-covered rope” (82), as if they personify elements of the Chinese culture. This could be Tan’s attempt to bring out to the reader that people like Waverly who are Asian but American born and bred, are stuck in a space of in-between-ness because they belong to neither culture, causing them to grow up in an environment of uncertainty thus the empowerment of the daughters by their mothers become all the more important in establishing a stable identity.