

The joy luck clubexample narrative



“ Hey, Sabrina, are you Japanese or Chinese?” I asked. Her reply, as it seems to be for a lot of minority groups, is, “ Neither, I’m Chinese-American.” So, besides her American accent and a hyphenated ending on her answer to the SAT questionnaire about her ethnic background, what’s the difference? In Amy Tan’s enjoyable novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, about the relationships and experiences of four Chinese mothers and four Chinese-American daughters, I found out the answer to this question. The difference in upbringing of those women born during the first quarter of this century in China, and their daughters born in the American atmosphere of California, is a difference that doesn’t exactly take a scientist to see. From the beginning of the novel, you hear Suyuan Woo tell the story of “ The Joy Luck Club,” a group started by some Chinese women during World War II, where “ we feasted, we laughed, we played games, lost and won, we told the best stories. And each week, we could hope to be lucky. That hope was our only joy.” (p. 12) Really, this was their only joy. The mothers grew up during perilous times in China. They all were taught “ to desire nothing, to swallow other people’s misery, to eat their own bitterness.” (p. 241) Though not many of them grew up terribly poor, they all had a certain respect for their elders, and for life itself. These Chinese mothers were all taught to be honorable, to the point of sacrificing their own lives to keep any family members’ promise. Instead of their daughters, who “ can promise to come to dinner, but if she wants to watch a favorite movie on TV, she no longer has a promise” (p. 42), “ To Chinese people, fourteen carats isn’t real gold . . . my bracelets must be twenty-four carats, pure inside and out.” (p. 42) Towards the end of the book, there is a definite line between the differences of the two generations. Lindo Jong, whose daughter, Waverly, doesn’t even know four Chinese words, describes

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the complete difference and incompatibility of the two worlds she tried to connect for her daughter, American circumstances and Chinese character. She explains that there is no lasting shame in being born in America, and that as a minority you are the first in line for scholarships. Most importantly, she notes that " In America, nobody says you have to keep the circumstances somebody else gives you." (p. 289) Living in America, it was easy for Waverly to accept American circumstances, to grow up as any other American citizen. As a Chinese mother, though, she also wanted her daughter to learn the importance of Chinese character. She tried to teach her Chinese-American daughter " How to obey parents and listen to your mother's mind. How not to show your own thoughts, to put your feelings behind your face so you can take advantage of hidden opportunities . . . How to know your own worth and polish it, never flashing it around like a cheap ring." (p. 289) The American-born daughters never grasp on to these traits, and as the book shows, they became completely different from their purely Chinese parents. They never gain a sense of real respect for their elders, or for their Chinese background, and in the end are completely different from what their parents planned them to be. By the stories and information given by each individual in The Joy Luck Club, it is clear to me just how different a Chinese-American person is from their parents or older relatives. I find that the fascinating trials and experiences that these Chinese mothers went through are a testament to their enduring nature, and constant devotion to their elders. Their daughters, on the other hand, show that pure Chinese blood can be changed completely through just one generation. They have become American not only in their speech, but in their thoughts, actions and lifestyles. This novel has not only given great insight into the Chinese way of

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thinking and living, but it has shown the great contrast that occurs from generation to generation, in the passing on of ideas and traditions.