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CAMEBRIDGE LITERATURE

This edition of *The Joy Luck Club* is part of the Cambridge Literature series, and has been specially prepared for students in schools and colleges who are studying the book as part of their English course.

This study edition invites you to think about what happens when you read the novel, and it suggests that you are not passively responding to words on the page which have only one agreed interpretation, but that you are actively exploring and making new sense of what you read. Your ‘reading’ will partly stem from you as an individual, from your own experiences and point of view, and to this extent your interpretation will be distinctively your own. But your reading will also stem from the fact that you belong to a culture and a community, rooted in a particular time and place. So, your understanding may have much in common with that of others in your class or study group.

There is a parallel between the way you read this book and the way it was written. The Resource Notes at the back are devised to help you to investigate the complex nature of the writing process. This begins with the author’s first, tentative ideas and sources of inspiration, moves through to the stages of writing, production and publication, and ends with the text’s reception by the reading public, reviewers, critics and students. So the general approach to study focuses on five key questions:

- Who has written *The Joy Luck Club* and why?
- What type of text is it?
- How was it produced?
- How does *The Joy Luck Club* present its subject?
- Who reads it? How do they interpret it?

*The Joy Luck Club* is presented complete and uninterrupted. You will find some words in the text asterisked: these are words which may be unfamiliar because they have a particular cultural or linguistic significance. They are explained in the Glossary section at the back.

The Resource Notes encourage you to take an active and imaginative approach to studying the novel both in and out of the classroom. As well as providing you with information about many aspects of *The Joy Luck Club*, they offer a wide choice of activities to work on individually, or in groups. Above all, they give you the chance to explore this fascinating novel in a variety of ways: as a reader, an actor, a researcher, a critic, and a writer.

*Judith Baxter*
To my mother
and the memory of her mother
You asked me once
what I would remember.
This, and much more.

Introduction

The Joy Luck Club, published in 1989, is Amy Tan’s first novel. It tells the stories of four mothers and their daughters, and although it is set in San Francisco, where Amy Tan lives, it moves backwards and forwards between there and China.

The Joy Luck Club itself is a weekly gathering of Chinese women who play mah jong together. The story starts when Jing-mei Woo (June), the thirty-six year old principal storyteller, is asked to join the club to replace her mother, Suyuan Woo, who has recently died. Jing-mei tells the story of her induction to the club: a story that takes us back to the founding of a similar club by Suyuan during the Japanese occupation of China in the 1940s.

Before you start reading the novel, jot down anything you know about, and what you associate with San Francisco, China and the Japanese occupation of China. Then find out more by looking in an encyclopedia or atlas.

Reflect on the relationship with your parent(s) and on any moves you have made, however short the distance. These issues are partly what the novel is about.

You might find the family trees on page 6 helpful as you read the novel for the first time.

Note

The notes in this edition use the present day Chinese names for towns and cities (e.g. Beijing rather than Peking); and Jing-mei Woo has been used throughout in preference to June Woo.
FAMILY TREE

The Woo family

Canning Woo = Suyuan Woo = Officer in Kuomintang
Jing-mei (June) lost sisters (in Shanghai)

The Hsu family

Popo (grandmother)
Mother (‘a ghost’) = Wu Tsing
An-mei Hsu = George Hsu
Ted Jordan = Rose Hsu Jordan
Ruth
Janice
Matthew
Mark
Luke
Bing
new baby

The Jong family

Huang Taitai
Tyan-yu = Lindo (Auntie Lin) Jong = Tin Jong
son
Winston
Vincent
Waverly Jong (= Rich Shields)
Shoshana (from previous marriage to Marvin Chen)
(in China)

The St. Clair family

Mama = Baba
Ying-ying (Betty) = Clifford St. Clair
Lena St. Clair = Harold Livotny
Feathers from a thousand li away

The old woman remembered a swan she had bought many years ago in Shanghai for a foolish sum. This bird, boasted the market vendor, was once a duck that stretched its neck in hopes of becoming a goose, and now look! – it is too beautiful to eat.

Then the woman and the swan sailed across an ocean many thousands of li wide, stretching their necks toward America. On her journey she cooed to the swan: “In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband’s belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow! She will know my meaning, because I will give her this swan – a creature that became more than what was hoped for.”

But when she arrived in the new country, the immigration officials pulled her swan away from her, leaving the woman fluttering her arms and with only one swan feather for a memory. And then she had to fill out so many forms she forgot why she had come and what she had left behind.

Now the woman was old. And she had a daughter who grew up speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow. For a long time now the woman had wanted to give her daughter the single swan feather and tell her, “This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions.” And she waited, year after year, for the day she could tell her daughter this in perfect American English.
Jing-mei Woo
The Joy Luck Club

My father has asked me to be the fourth corner at the Joy Luck Club. I am to replace my mother, whose seat at the mah jong* table has been empty since she died two months ago. My father thinks she was killed by her own thoughts.

“She had a new idea inside her head,” said my father. “But before it could come out of her mouth, the thought grew too big and burst. It must have been a very bad idea.”

The doctor said she died of a cerebral aneurysm.* And her friends at the Joy Luck Club said she died just like a rabbit: quickly and with unfinished business left behind. My mother was supposed to host the next meeting of the Joy Luck Club.

The week before she died, she called me, full of pride, full of life: “Auntie Lin cooked red bean soup for Joy Luck. I’m going to cook black sesame-seed soup.”

“Don’t show off,” I said.

“It’s not showoff.” She said the two soups were almost the same, chabuduvo. Or maybe she said butong, not the same thing at all. It was one of those Chinese expressions that means the better half of mixed intentions. I can never remember things I didn’t understand in the first place.

My mother started the San Francisco version of the Joy Luck Club in 1949, two years before I was born. This was the year my mother and father left China with one stiff leather trunk filled only with fancy silk dresses. There was no time to pack anything else, my mother had explained to my father after they boarded the boat. Still his hands swam frantically between the slippery silks, looking for his cotton shirts and wool pants.

When they arrived in San Francisco, my father made her hide those shiny clothes. She wore the same brown-checked
Chinese dress until the Refugee Welcome Society gave her two hand-me-down dresses, all too large in sizes for American women. The society was composed of a group of white-haired American missionary ladies from the First Chinese Baptist Church. And because of their gifts, my parents could not refuse their invitation to join the church. Nor could they ignore the old ladies’ practical advice to improve their English through Bible study class on Wednesday nights and, later, through choir practice on Saturday mornings. This was how my parents met the Hsus, the Jongs, and the St. Clairs. My mother could sense that the women of these families also had unspeakable tragedies they had left behind in China and hopes they couldn’t begin to express in their fragile English. Or at least, my mother recognized the numbness in these women’s faces. And she saw how quickly their eyes moved when she told them her idea for the Joy Luck Club.

Joy Luck was an idea my mother remembered from the days of her first marriage in Kweilin, before the Japanese came. That’s why I think of Joy Luck as her Kweilin story. It was the story she would always tell me when she was bored, when there was nothing to do, when every bowl had been washed and the Formica table had been wiped down twice, when my father sat reading the newspaper and smoking one Pall Mall cigarette after another, a warning not to disturb him. This is when my mother would take out a box of old ski sweaters sent to us by unseen relatives from Vancouver. She would snip the bottom of a sweater and pull out a kinky thread of yarn, anchoring it to a piece of cardboard. And as she began to roll with one sweeping rhythm, she would start her story. Over the years, she told me the same story, except for the ending, which grew darker, casting long shadows into her life, and eventually into mine.

“I dreamed about Kweilin before I ever saw it,” my mother began, speaking Chinese. “I dreamed of jagged peaks lining a
curving river, with magic moss greening the banks. At the tops of these peaks were white mists. And if you could float down this river and eat the moss for food, you would be strong enough to climb the peak. If you slipped, you would only fall into a bed of soft moss and laugh. And once you reached the top, you would be able to see everything and feel such happiness it would be enough to never have worries in your life ever again.

“In China, everybody dreamed about Kweilin. And when I arrived, I realized how shabby my dreams were, how poor my thoughts. When I saw the hills, I laughed and shuddered at the same time. The peaks looked like giant fried fish heads trying to jump out of a vat of oil. Behind each hill, I could see shadows of another fish, and then another and another. And then the clouds would move just a little and the hills would suddenly become monstrous elephants marching slowly toward me! Can you see this? And at the root of the hill were secret caves. Inside grew hanging rock gardens in the shapes and colors of cabbage, winter melons, turnips, and onions. These were things so strange and beautiful you can’t ever imagine them.

“But I didn’t come to Kweilin to see how beautiful it was. The man who was my husband brought me and our two babies to Kweilin because he thought we would be safe. He was an officer with the Kuomintang, and after he put us down in a small room in a two-story house, he went off to the northwest, to Chungking.

“We knew the Japanese were winning, even when the newspapers said they were not. Every day, every hour, thousands of people poured into the city, crowding the sidewalks, looking for places to live. They came from the East, West, North, and South. They were rich and poor, Shanghaiese, Cantonese, northerners, and not just Chinese, but foreigners and missionaries of every religion. And there was, of course, the Kuomintang and their army officers who thought they were top level to everyone else.