

# THE JOY LUCK CLUB

## [1993]

by

H. Arthur Taussig, Ph.D.

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*The Joy Luck Club*. Four women met weekly for a mahjong game until one of them, Suyuan (Kieu Chinh) died. They now invite her daughter, June (Ming-Na Wen) to join them. The “Aunties,” Lindo (Tsai Chin), An Mei (Lisa Lu), and Ying Ying (France Nuyen) cajole June into going to China to meet her mother’s abandoned children. In the process, each reveals their experience in China before coming to America. During the going away party for June, each of their daughters (Tamlyn Tomita, Lauren Tom, and Rosalind Chao) reveals her contemporary experiences in America. By the end, most of the conflicts between mother and daughter, and daughter and lover are resolved.

The Asian-American community has suddenly burst onto the silver screen, and into the public’s awareness, with two films released almost simultaneously – *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Wedding Banquet*. Both are directed by Chinese and have a cast that is primarily Chinese. While this is unique, it should be noted that there is another, far more important breakthrough in these two films – the credits. While there have been films with Asian actors, rarely has the *crew* been anything but American. In both these films, the credits are primarily Asian. While the socio-political importance of this is undisputed, we cannot ignore them as films. Rather than look at their impact on the film establishment, which I hope will be large, I want to concentrate on the films themselves.

*The Joy Luck Club* has a strange symmetry to it. We have eight stories about eight characters – four mothers and four daughters – even though one is told second-hand. The fact that eight is considered a lucky number in Chinese culture – *ba* (eight) rhymes with *fa* (luck) – undoubtedly accounts for this choice. But telling eight separate stories in a single film runs the risk of each tale being too thin to establish any emotional depth.

Surprisingly, *The Joy Luck Club* invests each story with individuality and impact. Perhaps this too should be considered a breakthrough. But the structure of the film surrounding and, presumably, supporting these stories is too simple, too leaden: four mothers and four daughters each tell their tales of woe. (Every time the film began a new story, clearly signaled by someone stopping the film to begin a recitation, I couldn’t stop myself from saying, “Here we go again.”) Yet the content of these stories is certainly not without merit, especially the way in which the stories compare the generations. In addition, I find fascinating the stories that have not been told. First the content.

Each of the mothers, as a young woman, had a miserable time in China, usually at the hands of a brutalizing man. Each, through her own strength and dignity, survived and escaped. Each of the daughters, now in contemporary San Francisco, has a miserable time, usually at the hands of an insensitive man. Ah, symmetry.

Each, through her own strength, dignity, and the knowledge of her mother's story, survives and gets a new perspective on life. If we eliminate the Chinese connection, we quickly realize that this is the stuff of television soap operas and romance novels. While the problems are probably very real and important, the heavy-handed way in which they are told dilutes the impact they could have had. What was literary in the novel (which spent 75 weeks on the New York Times best seller list, has been translated into twenty-three languages and has sold more than 2 million copies) has become literal on the screen – with dire consequences.

Unfortunately, the film shows little respect for the audience's intelligence. Everything is laid on thickly – especially the tears. There are more tears on screen in this film than there is blood in a Rambo film. There are perhaps ten minutes of screen time during which someone is not crying. And, of course, the audience is asked to join in. On second thought, asked is not the right word at all. I have not felt so brutally manipulated by a film since *Terms of Endearment* [1983], another classic in the filmed soap opera genre.

With these tactics, we are given little room for emotional choice, and since we are locked into a very narrow set of emotions – weep, weep, weep – we are given very little room to think about these women and their problems. This, I believe, should be the ultimate goal of a film that introduces Asians and Asian-Americans as central figures: to realize that they are simultaneously unique and a part of the collective, they are different from mainstream America by way of their heritage, but identical by way of their humanity. This film, while well intentioned, is so heavy-handed that it unfortunately precludes much thought.

The inter-generational conflict between mother and daughter, on the other hand, is worked out in a detail that is quite unusual in films. If we can, like Alice, avoid drowning in our own pool of tears, we can see this film's Wonderland of women's psychology is opening new ground. For instance, *The Joy Luck Club* outlines exquisitely the differences between the Oedipal conflict as it has been described for the past hundred years (for men) and how women have similar conflicts, but worked out in a very different way, with a different set of nuances and subtleties. While each mother/daughter pair works out a power relation in a slightly different way, inevitably power must pass from the older generation to the younger. But in the feminine versions of this conflict, shown here, in addition to power being passed, a lot of wisdom is handed down.

Where the male versions of this inter-generational power struggle in film are primarily extroverted into physical manifestations, usually as violent conflicts, in the case of women it is introverted and is revealed as emotional and intellectual connections that bind rather than separate the generations. *The Joy Luck Club* clearly demonstrates what

has been missing from the masculine versions that have stocked our myths for millennia and our films for a century – wisdom.

As strong as are the psychological messages of *The Joy Luck Club*, the structure in which these are intertwined is weak and simplistic. *The Joy Luck Club* consists of four stories placed in China in the early part of this century and four stories in contemporary San Francisco. Four women are haunted by memories of mainland China and these memories complicate their relations with their daughters. What is pointedly missing are the four stories that in each case must link the two time zones. After their bad adventures in China, each of the mothers somehow got to the United States, met and married a man, became upper middle class (judging by their clothes and homes), had a family, sent the daughters to college, and so on.

Once all this has taken place, the second set of stories kicks in. In reality the shape of these women's lives is: Sad-Happy-Sad. But, since this is a "woman's film," what we get is: Sad-Sad-Sad. No dad! The men are missing from this film. And it is the men, the new husbands, who provided for these women – provided, presumably, means to get to America, a loving home and hearth, and an education for their daughters (this itself must have been traumatic, for even recently and still occasionally in Chinese culture, the education of a daughter is considered only after the education of a son, if at all).

Single gender films have always been an odd lot, the absence of the opposite gender giving them an odd psychological tilt. They vary from *The Women* [1939] where the likes of Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, Rosalind Russell, Joan Fontaine, Paulette Goddard, Ruth Hussey, Virginia Grey, Hedda Hopper, and Butterfly McQueen experience seemingly aimless divorce, competition, and cattiness because of the absence of the psychological masculine, to the most recent, *Glengarry, Glenn Ross* [1992] where Jack Lemmon, Dave Harris, Al Pacino, and Alan Arkin self-destruct because of the absence of the psychological feminine. And in between we find such notable films as *12 Angry Men* [1957], *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* [1982], and *Streamers* [1983]. Single-gender films are rare, for without the psychological balance of the opposite gender, they are both disturbing and often destructive. Actually, *The Joy Luck Club* avoids this pitfall by being a not-quite-single-gender film and introduces a few token men.

One clever way that *The Joy Luck Club* introduces the masculine is that one of the mothers has died and her story is told by her husband. If he is representative of the other husbands, we have another film brewing here. He seems an honest and sensitive man – in fact, he seems less emotionally manipulative than any of the women in the film.

The other prominent males are the husbands or boyfriends of the daughters. One is an insensitive and emotionally blind architect; one is the scion of a rich and racially prejudiced family; one is a boor. In each case the wives/lovers of these men initiate the cause of friction in the relationship, but the film quickly points out, it is the men who capitalize on this single feminine weakness. One woman wants independence within the relationship by evenly dividing the household expenses and then chafes under the

inequity of their incomes and on the compulsiveness with which he pursues this division of financial responsibility. Another, in the Chinese tradition, wants a rich husband and becomes, again in a throwback to Chinese tradition, a totally subservient wife. She too chafes within the prison she herself constructed and, even at her husband's urging, refuses to escape. However, it is the last man, the boor, that I find most interesting.

He is invited to the home of the parents for a Chinese dinner and does everything hilariously wrong. While it is not made explicit, the film implies that there is something innately wrong with this man, that because he is male and American, when exposed to another culture he can do nothing but screw up. While the comic aspects of the "fish out of water" situation have been exploited endlessly and often to good effect, in a film that supposedly brings awareness of another culture to a broader audience, the film's own intolerance leaves a bitter taste. This film has elements that are both male-bashing and American-bashing that, while minor and subtle, are nonetheless present. I believe it is the daughter's responsibility to educate her American boyfriend into Chinese culture, especially when he seems so eager not only to please, but to sincerely learn. This single character – the American plunged into a miniature China located within America – is a good point of comparison to the other recent Chinese film that has appeared on our screens, *The Wedding Banquet* [1993].

At the level of the personal, *The Joy Luck Club* plumbs deeper than any ethnicity; at root it represents the fantasy of every misunderstood child – reconciliation. We also experience the strong emotions of that struggle toward reconciliation. However, we must realize that the emotionality of the film distracts us from the repetitive plot. Were this all, the film would simply be another tear-jerker with a different complexion. Fortunately, the film also has social ramifications, as does *The Wedding Banquet*. When we walk out of the dark of *The Joy Luck Club* or *The Wedding Banquet* into the light of day, we also walk into the realization that Asians are little different from other people, that homosexuals are little different from other people.

In this aspect *The Joy Luck Club* reminds me of a story I recently heard. Four women are sitting around a table. The first one whines sorrowfully. The second moans as if in pain. The third wails as if tortured. The fourth says, "I thought we weren't going to talk about our children." These are mothers. They could be Italian, Jewish, Chinese, Polish, Mexican, . . . anything. They could be White, Yellow, Black, or Green. And that is one of the better points of *Joy Luck Club* and the core of *The Wedding Banquet*: the universality of experience.

*The Joy Luck Club*. Directed by Wayne Wang. Screenplay by Amy Tan and Ronald Bass based on the novel by Amy Tan. Production Design by Maysie Hoy. Distributed by Buena Vista Pictures, 1993.