

The Film Version of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*:

A Survey of Critical Reactions

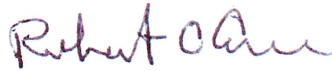
By Jordan Bailey

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University at Montgomery
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Liberal Arts

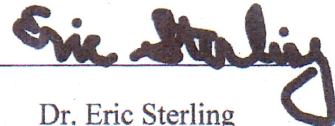
Montgomery, Alabama

8 August 2020

Approved by



Dr. Robert Evans
Thesis Director



Dr. Eric Sterling
Second Reader



Dr. Matthew Ragland

Associate Provost

The Film Version of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*:

A Survey of Critical Reactions

By Jordan Bailey

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University at Montgomery
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Liberal Arts

Montgomery, Alabama

8 August 2020

Approved by

Dr. Robert Evans
Thesis Director

Dr. Eric Sterling
Second Reader

Dr. Matthew Ragland
Associate Provost

Table of Contents

Negative Reviews	5
Mixed Reviews	8
Positive Reviews	13
Further Positive Reviews	19
Additional Positive Reviews	24
Final Positive Reviews	30
Conclusion	33
Works Cited	34

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* was a path-breaking work both as a novel and as a film. The novel, first published in 1989 and in print ever since, immediately became a best-seller and is now considered a "modern classic" of recent American literature. One of the first best-sellers to be written by an Asian American author and to feature a largely Asian American cast of characters, the book was also highly innovative in its design. It consisted of sixteen distinct but interrelated tales, each featuring a different Chinese American female as its main focus. Four of the narrators were the daughters of four of the other characters, with three of the mothers narrating their own stories. The fourth mother has died by the time the novel begins, and so her story is related by her daughter. The daughters are named (a) Jing-mei "June" Woo; (b) Rose Hsu Jordan; (c) Waverly Jong; and (d) Lena St. Clair. The mothers are named (e) Suyuan Woo; (f) An-Mei Hsu; (g) Lindo Jong; and (h) Ying-ying St. Clair. "June" Woo's mother has died when the novel opens, and so Suyuan Woo's story is related by June.¹

The interwoven stories of these four mothers and four daughters – all united by bonds of family, friendship, acquaintanceship, and occasional rivalry – feature the women's complicated, often abusive, relationships with men, both in China (the mothers) and in the United States (the daughters). But the main focus of all the narratives, and of the novel as a whole, is on the complex relationships between the mothers and daughters. Perhaps no other Asian American novel

before or since – with the possible exception of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) – had the kind of popular impact of *The Joy Luck Club*.

Hollywood was immediately interested in turning Tan's novel into a film, but the challenges seemed daunting, especially because of the book's complex structure. Fortunately Tan herself was hired, along with Ronald Bass, as one of the screenwriters – a fact that made it far more likely that the film might do justice to the book. The director of the 1993 film, Wayne Wang, was himself Asian American, as were a vast majority of the cast, including almost all the lead players. The film did well financially and proved immensely popular with most critics. Oddly, however, it went almost entirely unrecognized in that year's Academy Awards. Nevertheless, the film itself was also considered path-breaking: never before had an Asian American director, overseeing such a large Asian American cast, produced such a commercially and critically successful film. Moreover, rarely had a film been so faithful to the book on which the film was based.

Of course, not all critics admired the movie; a few, in fact, detested it. One purpose of the present essay is to survey the diversity of critical responses to the film. The on-screen version of *The Joy Luck Club* was important not only for featuring so many Asian American characters and stories but also for exploring so many issues important to women in general and feminists in particular.

Negative Reviews

An especially negative review of the film version of *The Joy Luck Club* was offered by Robert S. Cauthorn, writing for the *Arizona Daily Star*. Cauthorn, in short, called the film “the kind of movie people say Hollywood should be making more often: a movie that relishes people, a movie that doesn’t do steroids. ‘The Joy Luck Club’ is all those things,” he wrote, adding that “it is also bad in almost every meaningful way a movie like this can be bad” (15). He claimed that “Wang and co-screenwriters Tan and Ron Bass (‘Rain Man’) place viewers in the uncomfortable position of applauding the values and good hearts of those involved while loathing their means. ‘The Joy Luck Club’ bungles everything from the level of craft on up,” quipping that the film “looks as if it were edited with a chain saw.” He further added that “the visual style botches all the little details,” including “a number of panoramic images seemingly designed for the trailers.” Cauthorn further criticized “the overheated score,” which he felt “slams against the ear with romantic dementia.” He heaped further mockery on “the script designed by Tan and Bass,” saying it “could hardly be sillier” and arguing that “it shows a misunderstanding of fundamental aspects of writing for the screen.” Cauthorn explained that “actors use the term ‘indicating’ to criticize acting that is constantly calling attention to the obvious and reiterating emotions that are already clear,” and he continued that “this script has its own form of indicating,” pointing to such “incessant and needless voice-over narration

blubbers [as] ‘I was so angry at my mother’ while the limp camera plows in for a close-up of a performer scowling. The filmmakers,” he alleged, “draw neon arrows pointing to every tremor of emotion.” He assured his readers that “such nonsense is the norm for this movie and, ultimately, invites more giggles than passion.”

Cauthorn did acknowledge that, “curiously, many of the strategies that render the screenplay laughable are precisely the kinds of approaches that can work in a novel,” but he added that a “film has different requirements, which no one involved with ‘The Joy Luck Club’ seems to understand. The problem,” Cauthorn asserted, is that “the movie can’t leave small enough alone. It tries to convince the audience of the grandeur of the little issues of life: how we get along, what we do to each other by relentlessly inflating the terms.” He further criticized the performances as “all over the map,” claiming that “several, particularly by the older actresses, are finely honed. But most of them are wooden and forced. The worst of these, unfortunately, comes from Ming-Na Wen, who plays a central role as June and who is called upon to anchor the story as the daughter who lost her mother.” Cauthorn noted that, “step by step, the film moves from one daughter’s relationship with her mother to the next” and bemoaned that “each of these enforces a grim monotony” as “all begin with a complaint and a flashback, thence to a confrontation, then a hug of reconciliation as the camera fades back into present time and adoring faces.” He ended by asserting that “this

movie will have adherents among people who don't object to bad direction, bad writing and blatant manipulations," adding that "'The Joy Luck Club' takes female bonding and plasters it with all the clichés and untruths that movies have been employing for male bonding for years" (15).

Equally negative was a review penned by Ty Burr of *Entertainment Weekly*, who claimed the film "pounds you with pathos," further describing it as "a sumptuous two-and-a-quarter-hour emotional epic built on one lachrymose climax after another" and adding that "what little plot there is exists only to set up the next Big Cry." Burr acknowledged that the film is "extremely faithful to the novel" but claimed that "the problem is, you can't put a movie down to catch your breath" (n.p.). He asserted that "Tan, Bass, and Wang set up a short-story structure that quickly turns exhausting." He noted that "the moral is almost always that Mama Knows Best, which fits *The Joy Luck Club* neatly into the beloved genre of Mother-Guilt films like *Stella Dallas*." Burr further criticized the film for constantly "telling us what to feel," adding that "little is shown that isn't at the same time described in voice-over; it's the books-on-tape method of filmmaking." He alleged that "the dialogue, too, is often cringingly bald, full of self-help blather like 'Every time you hoped for something I couldn't deliver, it hurt me, Mommy'" (n.p.).

Marjorie Baumgarten of the *Austin Chronicle* offered another negative review of the film, criticizing its allegedly guided emotional build-up and stating

that “I’d rather feel surprised than manipulated” (n.p.). Although Baumgarten said that there was “no ignoring the fact that *The Joy Luck Club* is a moving work,” she claimed that “eight separate stories become difficult to keep straight in your head,” adding that the movie offers “just too much detail in too little time.” She continued that, “arguable, of course, is the degree to which the entire point of the story is, rightly, the merger of their individual identities into a collective whole,” and felt that, “personally, I have to admit feeling more jumble than merger.” She continued that “it prompted me to question (quite atypically) where all the fathers in these stories were,” noting that “men are either absent or shadowy figures.” Baumgarten concluded that, “still, *The Joy Luck Club* is one of the season’s highlights, the kind of roller coaster ride that we interpret as ‘good’ because of the unmistakable sensations experienced along the way” (n.p.).

Mixed Reviews

Hal Hinson of the *Washington Post* penned a mixed review, beginning by claiming that “the syrupy light pouring down on Wayne Wang’s ‘The Joy Luck Club’ is so luxurious that even the lowliest peasant looks model-chic” (n.p.). He argued that the film is “the latest in multicultural haute couture,” adding that “never has political correctness looked so sumptuously handsome as it does here.” He applauded the film for “crossing ethnic lines, time lines and generational lines” but called it “a weeping epic.” Hinson asserted that “Wang moves briskly

and efficiently from one storyteller to another,” continuing that, “in structure and technique, the film is a marvel.” He added that, “out of this chorus of different singers, Wang (working from an adaptation by Tan and Ronald Bass) creates a single melody,” and that “just as each path is crossed with tragedy, each of these individual stories in itself fits neatly with the next one and the one before it.” He claimed that “there is an artful symmetry in the way Wang has balanced the various narratives.”

Hinson did regret that, “unfortunately, as pleasing as these carefully proportioned vignettes are on their own, together they have a kind of sameness,” adding that although “the surface details may differ, when stripped down to their essence, they all pretty much make the same point.” He further argued that “the rhyming seems forced and a trifle glib” and that “the women often come across as noble, self-sacrificing victims instead of courageous and resilient survivors.” Hinson felt that “the events of the film all too often appear contrived to fit the pattern of feminist ideology” and claimed that “the film is weakest, as a result, in the places where this agenda reveals itself,” adding that “this is especially true of the performances, which are compromised in their eagerness to present Asian American women in a positive light.” He continued that “it might have been nice if just once a character deserved the heartache she endured – in other words, if she were marked with some trace of unredeeming humanity.” Hinson concluded that “it’s ravishing to look at, a truly gorgeous object. But it is not deep” (n.p.).

Offering another mixed review was Brian D. Johnson of *Maclean's*. Johnson described the film as “an ambitious weave of stories” that was “rigorously adapted from Amy Tan’s best-selling novel” (70). He noted that “most movies would abridge a novel as complex as *The Joy Luck Club* by putting the focus on two or three characters” but commented that this “script, which Tan co-wrote with Ron Bass, swallows the book whole.” He described the film as “dense with narration,” adding that “the movie unfolds as a kaleidoscope of flashbacks involving four sets of daughters, mothers and grandmothers.” He felt that “the pacing is languorous, occasionally laborious” but that “under the assured hand of director-producer Wayne Wang, the movie takes on a crystalline beauty.” He further commented that “the images are static yet haunting” and that “the actual stories . . . have cumulative power.” Johnson argued that “there are some cloying aspects to the dovetailed symmetry of the eight lives,” asserting that “all the women are beautiful, successful and affluent, a fact that is simply taken for granted. And all their men are stupid, evil or, at the very least, unfaithful.” Despite this, he felt that “the movie’s directness is refreshing,” writing that “*The Joy Luck Club* is openly manipulative. It offers joy and sadness without subterfuge: full-frontal sentiment. And by delivering the novel to the screen with so little compromise, it represents an impressive feat” (70).

James Berardinelli of *ReelViews* offered a mixed-to-positive review of *The Joy Luck Club*, calling it “the sum total of its parts with common themes giving

solid grounding and greater resonance to the overall film” (n.p.). He thought “the stories are not related ... [so] as to seem pared down or truncated,” adding that “nor is their presentation confusing, thanks to a cleverly-orchestrated framing scene with the principal characters gathered together.” Berardinelli did think, however, that “a lot more could have been told, and we’re left wondering about all that we didn’t get to see.” He felt that “the characters are mostly well-developed” but said “it’s tantalizing to consider how much fuller some of them could have been with a different plot structure.”

Berardinelli also criticized the dialogue for being “often too poetic to be real,” just as he found “the story too clearly plotted to be acceptable as anything more than an imperfect reflection of the world we live in.” He warned that “the line between drama and melodrama is a fine one, and, while *The Joy Luck Club* most often successfully navigates the tightrope, there are times when it slips and comes across as heavy-handed,” adding that “this film is no stranger to moments of manipulation.” Despite focusing on these alleged flaws, though, Berardinelli felt that “the characters are *The Joy Luck Club*’s real strength,” although he also felt that “transitions are smooth and seamless.” He concluded that “it’s fascinating and satisfying the way the diverse threads are knitted together into a single tapestry,” contending that “*The Joy Luck Club*’s message is one of hope – that catharsis and emotional fulfillment often come through tragedy” (n.p.). He acknowledged that, “sure, a lot of bad things happen during

the course of this film,” but he asserted that “at the end, the tears are of happiness and new beginnings, not loss.” He awarded the film three stars out of four.

Another mixed-to-positive review came from Michael MacCambridge of the *Austin American-Statesman*, who thought the film “earns your tears with melodrama” but warned that it “occasionally seems heavy-handed and manipulative” when “unleashing miseries on its cast like a plague of boils from above, then relying on the audience’s natural empathy for the characters to do the rest.” However, he felt that “it’s quite possible to resent the film’s overplayed histrionics during its first two hours yet still wind up surrendering to the accumulated emotional weight of the saga in the film’s final 30 minutes.” He claimed that, “in the screenplay-collaboration with Ronald Bass, Tan has perhaps correctly decided to set the stories apart, telling them one at a time, in an episodic structure” since doing so “allows the audience to get to know each of the mother-daughter relationships and the antecedent experience in China that has influenced it.”

MacCambridge felt that “because the film’s vignettes move so quickly from one melodramatic moment to the next, its supporting roles aren’t injected with much realism,” saying that the film presented “a series of demonized, dictatorial men, none of whom really come across as fully realized characters.” He did commend “Wang’s longtime cinematographer Amir Mokri (*Blue Steel*, *Pacific Heights*)” for doing “his best work yet, making the flashbacks (to the older

women's experiences in China) look like the sad memories from some faded postcard." He contended that "the structure of the story occasionally leads to some slow spots," claiming that "we know, after two families' tales, exactly where the next hour of the film will go." But he felt that "Wang occasionally provides enticing glimpses of Chinese American culture," continuing that "as the fourth story plays out and the film returns to June's impending trip to China, we realize that much of what has gone before was meant to show the way that the other lives affected those of June and her mother." He maintained that this focus made "the film's final scene all the more effective" since "a film isn't good just because it makes someone cry," adding that "McDonald's commercials can do that." MacCambridge concluded that "by the end of the story, *The Joy Luck Club* has earned its tears honestly. It reminds us that lessons passed from one generation to the next are not immediately heeded, or understood, but that it's never too late to try."

Positive Reviews

Moviemet.com's James Plath penned a mostly positive review but warned that the "focus on females and Wang's willingness to let the scenes have their emotional power and not hurry past them will make 'The Joy Luck Club' feel to some like what is derogatorily called 'a chick flick'" (n.p.). Plath commended the film's acting as "solid" and continued that "the cinematography—especially in the

flashback scenes—is accomplished.” He felt that “the stories may be different, but they really all illustrate the same thing: life in China for women is about like life in India for a woman, or in so many other Third World countries.” He offered a final commendation, stating that

if you can get past the repetitive message, the pacing, the length, and the occasional melodrama, ‘The Joy Luck Club’ rewards on two levels: as a look at Asian-American and Asian culture, and as a consideration of the dynamics that shape mother-daughter relationships in any culture—or father-son relationships, for that matter. (n.p.)

Renowned reviewer Roger Ebert also offered a positive assessment, writing that “in a screenplay remarkable for its complexity and force, ‘The Joy Luck Club’ moves effortlessly between past and present, between what was, and how it became what is” (n.p.). He argued that although “many different actresses ... play the daughters and mothers at different ages, and there are many stories, ... the movie proceeds with perfect clarity.” Of the film’s dealings with generational and cultural divides, Ebert commented that the mothers’ tragic stories “fall equally hard on Americanized ears.” He concluded by calling *The Joy Luck Club* “one of the most touching and moving of the year’s films” (n.p.).

Desson Howe of the *Washington Post* offered another positive review, calling the film’s story “really your story” (n.p.). Stating that the movie is

“adapted faithfully” from the book, Howe added that it “gives refreshing—and bittersweet—dimension to the age-old clash between generations.” He wrote that “the multiple plots unfold in a series of flashbacks and narration” wherein “mothers and daughters are shown at different stages in their lives,” with “the movie flitting constantly between past and present, and between China and San Francisco.” He stated that it is “from this almost-surrealistic collage of faces and stories” that “universalities emerge.”

Howe continued that “director Wayne Wang is not a streamlined, cut-to-the-quick kind of director,” warning that “his style is respectful, if not plodding,” but asserting that “he’s pointed helpfully in the right direction by a sturdy – if overly deliberate – framework created by screenwriter Ronald Bass and Tan.” Howe added further praise, saying that, “in a drama of multiple plot lines, the movie makes clear and vivid sense,” and he maintained that, “in addition to its storytelling wealth, ‘Joy Luck Club’ is nourishing for its avoidance of Asian stereotypes” (n.p.).

In another positive review, Malcolm Johnson of the *Hartford Courant* praised the “countless joys” in a film that, “at its heart ... turns on the discovery by the American daughters of their Chineseness, with June as the emblematic figure” (n.p.). Johnson wrote that Wang “and his screenwriters weave vignettes of bad or doomed marriages in both China and America into a film of cogency and fluidity,” adding that “the most dramatic and dynamic tales belong to the

mothers.” He also praised “the score by Rachel Portman,” saying that it “pulls the various stories together with Asian themes and stirring American movie music” and added that “Amir Mokri’s photography fills Wang’s film with images of many textures” (n.p.). Yet another positive review, by Candice Frederick, was published more recently by *Reel Talk Online*, whose reviewer felt that “ambition and desire is a constant theme throughout each of the women’s stories” in the film (n.p.). The reviewer claimed that Wang’s “sensitivity to film and to his actor is not only commendable but beautiful to watch,” adding that “the masterful storytelling of the eight women in *The Joy Luck Club*, illuminated by each actress’s elegant portrayal, make the film as resonating today as it did when it first hit theaters nearly eighteen years ago” (n.p.).

The New York *Times*’ Janet Maslin wrote an equally positive review calling the film “anything but a traditional women’s picture” and describing it as “directed simply and forcefully” (n.p.). She felt that “admirers of the best-selling novel will be delighted by the graceful way it has been transferred to the screen” and added that “those unfamiliar with the book will simply appreciate a stirring, many-sided fable, one that is exceptionally well told.” She commended the movie’s ability to feel “streamlined despite its more-than-two-hour running time,” stating that “Mr. Wang’s film glides through the essentials of Ms. Tan’s novel while solving difficult narrative problems with deceptive ease.” Maslin gushed that, “on film, the story’s point of view makes sudden, acrobatic shifts from one

character to another, in a manner that artfully underscores the story's many parallels," and she praised Wang's direction, saying that "the agility with which he weaves together these elements is at times quite amazing."

Maslin did criticize a feeling of sameness created by the film's repetitive and interwoven stories, but she assured readers that, "if this idea produces a certain patness by the time 'The Joy Luck Club' is over, it also helps to impose order on an otherwise sprawling narrative," adding that "some of the film's segments are so beautifully realized that their predictable aspects never detract from their emotional power." Maslin also expounded on the universality of the film's theme, saying that "this film's emotional impact will be felt by anyone who has ever experienced such feelings over a parent or a child."

Commenting on the film's use of traditionally feminine scenes and encounters, she suggested that "it would be easy for Mr. Wang to lose the men in the audience at such moments, particularly because the film's husbands and boyfriends are all such cads or fools, and because its daughters barely seem to have fathers at all. But," Maslin assured audiences, "'The Joy Luck Club' creates such a powerful sense of its older women's suffering, and presents such brutalizing events in several of their lives, that its impact achieves a welcome degree of universality," continuing that "these are sad, gripping stories, eloquently told, and only occasionally are they softened by greeting-card saccharinity." Finding the movie not perpetually attention-grabbing, she claimed that it is "only

late in the film, when some of the weaker anecdotes surface and when the structure of these tales becomes too familiar,” that “‘The Joy Luck Club’ loses steam.” She concluded, however, by calling it a “richly sentimental tale” (n.p.).

The Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette*'s Ron Weiskind likewise gave *The Joy Luck Club* another positive review, claiming that it “paints a rich mosaic that plumbs the inner depths of its characters” and adding that it “transcends its ethnic specificity so that it seems likely to resonate with mothers and daughters everywhere” (5). Weiskind analyzed the film’s theme of unmet expectations, noting that, “like the mothers, the daughters end up feeling unworthy and, often, emotionally estranged from those closest to them.” He felt that “the singularity of that theme begins to wear thin after the seventh or eighth exploration,” quipping that “one starts noticing the film’s length (two hours and a quarter) at some point. But,” he continued, “the stories of each of the daughters and, more so, the remarkable adventures of the mothers in China and their mothers before them hold our attention and engage our emotions.” He praised “a uniformly strong cast” for creating “vivid portraits of the characters,” offering particular praise to director Wayne Wang by admiring his “masterful visual style which, along with the mass of narration, effectively serves as a form of shorthand” (5). Weiskind awarded the film three stars.

Theresa Johnson of the Missouri *Missourian* was also positive in her review, praising the film for “casting light on the complexities of [the women’s]

relationships without resorting to heavy-handed sentimentality” and calling “the performances ... first-rate” (E3). She found the confrontations between the mothers and daughters “dramatic but not overstated” and added that “the movie’s cinematography is beautiful” and “the acting [is] almost always on target.” Johnson thought “the family dynamics” were “presented honestly,” asserting that “these characters transcend Chinese culture to reflect the joyful, confusing and often painful relationships mothers and daughters of all backgrounds experience” (E3).

Further Positive Reviews

Amy Longsdorf of the Allentown *Morning Call*, calling the film “a cause for celebration,” applauded “Wang’s masterful translation” as “life-affirming without being falsely sentimental” and “profoundly moving without being too manipulative” (D12). Calling it “a woman’s movie from start to finish,” she claimed that “this multi-generational panorama of Chinese mothers and daughters works not only as an Asian immigrant saga, but also as a contemporary drama about four women on the brink of adulthood.” She praised the relatability of the film’s “more conventional narrative” and argued that screenwriters Tan and Bass had “come up with a framing device that helps give the movie a sense of momentum.” Although she contended that, “with its mother-knows-best motif and its penchant for never-ending emotional epiphanies” the film seemed “firmly

within the tradition of the Hollywood weepie,” she added that, “unlike such four-hankie affairs as ‘Stella Dallas’ and ‘Mildred Pierce,’ this movie presents mother-daughter bonding in the most positive light,” saying that this fact “alone would make the movie a cause for celebration” (D12).

Offering another positive review of *The Joy Luck Club* was Jack Garner, a widely syndicated national reviewer who particularly praised the film’s director, claiming that, “with a largely unknown cast and challenging source material, Wang has fashioned an emotional, insightful, intricately structured film” that depicts these women’s stories through an “impressive series of flashbacks” (2D). Garner wrote that the film, “like Tan’s novel, ... also connects the specifics of the Asian immigrant stories with the universal elements in all parent-child relationships, especially as the child grows to adulthood.” He further praised the cast, calling their work “a revelation” and adding that “[d]istinctive, memorable characters are created through eight uniformly sensitive and intelligent performances” (2D).

Yet another positive review, by Jeff Strickler of the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, called the film a “poignant tale” that discusses the relational gaps between mothers and daughters, noting that, “in addition to the typical generation gap, these women find themselves separated by a cultural chasm” (4E). Strickler particularly praised Wang, claiming that “he does an excellent job of pulling together the novel’s disparate elements” and suggesting that, “while the book

often makes radical jumps from one chapter to the next, Wang wisely decided against ending each tale with a blackout,” arguing that such a choice “would have been jarring,” and further praising Wang for making “this change without imposing major rewrites on the book.” Strickler added that “fans of the novel should be pleased with how accurately the movie reflects both its content and tone” (4E).

Strickler felt that “the ensemble cast has no star, per se,” continuing that, “in terms of allocating screen time, each of the main characters gets the same amount of attention.” He said that “the film also is balanced in the weight it gives each point of view,” adding that, “when mothers and daughters fight, there’s no attempt to decree who’s ‘right’” as “the film details the forces that have shaped their lives without making judgments.” Of the multiple generations represented in the film, Strickler admitted that “these are a lot of players to keep track of, and Wang helps by providing visual hints.” He noted that “each of the pairs is color-coded: The scenes involving Suyuan and June are heavy on browns, those with Ying Ying and Lena feature purple, green is prominent for An Mei and Rose, and red is the color for Undo and Waverly.” He added that, “while the shadings are helpful for identification purposes, they’re also symbolic” as “they represent earth, fire, forests and water.” Strickler concluded with the thought that, “at virtually every turn, the potential arises for the story to drown in syrupy sentimentality,” but he claimed that this, in fact, “never happens, and, as a result,

‘The Joy Luck Club’ never loses its dignity. It moves the heart with honest emotion, not gimmickry” (4E).

Also offering a positive review was Ron Cowan of Salem, Oregon’s *Statesman Journal*. Calling the film “a tapestry of emotion,” Cowan claimed that “the tears are sure to flow with this gripping drama” (4). While he contended that Wang, Bass, and Tan had “fallen prey to some simplification and solemnity” that undercuts “the richness of the material,” he praised Wang for having “done a marvelous job of capturing the welter of dramatic stories” by “subtly shifting from vignette to vignette.” Although finding “some potential for confusion” as “daughters and mothers alike are played by older and younger actresses,” he called the episodes “compelling, particularly in the China stories,” maintaining that “*The Joy Luck Club* has an epic sweep but often is more compelling in its intimate details.” He concluded by praising the work as “a rare and moving piece of human drama” (4).

Another positive review, by Candice Frederick, appeared on the website *Reel Talk*. Frederick called the film an amalgam of “four heartbreaking stories” of mothers and “daughters, whose own lives prove that their long ancestry of stifling their true feelings had entered the new generation of women.” She noted, however, that “in *The Joy Luck Club*, each mother is finally able to forgive herself for her own past” and is “then . . . able to share it with her daughter and allow a connection to form between them,” continuing that “that connection would give

each of them the voice they hid for too long, and the power to move on.”

Similarly positive was a review by Todd McCarthy of *Variety*. McCarthy called the film a “fine adaptation,” adding that it was “beautifully made and acted and emotionally moving in the bargain” (n.p.). He claimed that, while the film’s themes are “widely accessible to all viewers . . . women will certainly comprise the base audience” of this “lovely production.” Of the many prospective hurdles that stood in the way of the film’s success, McCarthy felt that, “quite impressively, screenwriters Tan and Ronald Bass and director Wang have solved all these potential problems in a very lucid explication of the major tales related in the book. Even more important from a commercial p.o.v.,” he continued, “they have retained, and perhaps even magnified, the universal emotional qualities of the material” – qualities that he felt made “this story of innumerable hardships and sacrifices one that the mainstream general public will likely embrace” (n.p.).

McCarthy also claimed that the film expressed the theme “of maternal expectations for and disappointment in daughters” in a powerful way that “will leave many teary-eyed at the powerful, if sentimental, fadeout.” He applauded Wang, saying that although his “focus remains as intimate as in his previous work, . . . the emotions and concerns are much bigger.” McCarthy wrote that “visually, the film is splendid, with Amir Mokri’s luminous lensing, Donald Graham Burt’s production design and Lydia Tanji’s costumes fusing into a rich look that is not overly self-conscious.” Of the film’s performances, he felt that the

acting “from the vast cast is top-notch.” McCarthy thought some viewers might quibble with allegedly “slight pacing problems at times” including “a bit of a sag around the two-hour mark and, most of all, the similarity of some of the stories, which makes the lives of these women seem surprisingly uniform.” McCarthy asserted, however, that “the film contributes a strong and exceedingly rare view of a different cultural experience to the American screen, and in a way that will reach a wide public.”

Additional Positive Reviews

Yet another very positive review came from Emanuel Levy, who called *The Joy Luck Club* “a fine film that in its ambition goes far beyond mainstream entertainment.” He admitted that he might “be less vulnerable than other viewers, but I didn’t shed tears” despite finding “the film extremely moving” (n.p.). Emotional weight aside, Levy claimed that *The Joy Luck Club* might “prove to be the most important Chinese-American film ever made” and might also “be a breakthrough for the portrayal of Asians in America.” He felt that the film held such power and potential because it probed “universal issues,” including “mothers’ expectations for, pressure on, and disappointment in their daughters when they don’t surpass them, when they end up being just as victimized or abused as [the mothers] were in China.” Levy also said the movie “retains the universal emotional qualities of the source material.” He called it a “miracle ...

that the film just happens to be politically correct,” adding that “it’s not a feminist agenda picture, and though dealing with Asian-American women, it propagates cultural diversity.” He felt a personal connection to the movie, noting that “watching this film, I kept thinking to myself: a similar work about generational strife between Jewish immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters needs to be made.”

Levy also praised the film’s imagery, calling it “rich, but not sumptuous and overbearing” and adding that, “as befits its intimate scale and psychological nature, most of the film is done through close-ups. He acknowledged one discrepancy in this trend, noting that, “toward the end of the picture, there is one crucial sequence that is shot in an epic style, recalling Bernardo Bertolucci’s style.” He added that “it’s the only sequence that uses long shots and that somehow ‘violates’ the otherwise personal nature of the material.” Levy closed by arguing that although “each of the stories is different ... the overall emotional tone is coherent and the thematic link clear: Most of the women, of both generations, have been victims in one-way or another,” and while he admitted to having “reservations about the film’s melodramatics, which at times is excessive,” he felt it would “make the picture more accessible to the large public,” adding that “my only complaint against the film is that it’s too long (2 hours and 20 minutes) and that it contains, as does the book, too many stories and too many flashbacks” (n.p.).

Slate's Inkoo Kang, offering another very positive (and fairly recent) review of *The Joy Luck Club*, spoke of the initial backlash of Asian Americans against the film, noting that "the film's greatest achievement—becoming the most prominent example of Asian American representation on screen for a quarter century—is also what has relegated it to being a relic and, for many Asians, an embarrassment" (n.p.). Kang explained that "the problem came when the larger culture decided that there was no need for any more ideas of Asian Americanness other than those in *The Joy Luck Club*," adding that "the burden of representation thrust upon the film proved impossible to bear." She argued that, "had a wave of Asian American stories followed *The Joy Luck Club* into American cineplexes, as many hoped after its success, the movie could have found a comfortable home among a spectrum of representations." However, since that did not happen, "its unique standing curdled both the book and the movie for many of the people they purportedly spoke for, regardless of whether they read the novel, watched the film, both, or neither." Kang acknowledged that "if the mainstream film or publishing industries had been more welcoming toward all kinds of stories from all kinds of communities, none of these works or entertainers would be loaded with the expectation that they please everyone," but she continued that this "environment where only one person, or portrayal, is permitted to stand in for the whole is bound to turn into a breeding ground for resentment."

However, Kang argued that "*The Joy Luck Club*'s reputation deserves to

be rescued from this phenomenon,” arguing that this “epic, gut-wrenching, emotionally layered melodrama gives tear-jerkers a good name” and quipping that, “despite the early ’90s trappings—one of the daughters swans around in a gleamingly white, gloriously angular power suit—it’s still surprisingly resonant, even modern.” Kang further praised the film, contending that it “remains unusual in how seriously it takes women, mother-daughter relationships, and the dangers of patriarchal cultures” and noting that “[f]ifty of its 60 speaking parts are female.” Kang also claimed that the film “isn’t just well-written and well-acted. It’s sexy, overflowing with stylish costumes, and captures a huge variety of human experiences,” but she thought that, “while Tan has the right to express herself as she sees fit, I’m sympathetic to those who find the film and book’s imagery—Wang’s calligraphy-inspired opening sequence about a swan, for example, and even the title *The Joy Luck Club*—too ’Orientalist’ and foreign.” But she continued: “so what if *The Joy Luck Club* is culturally legible to outsiders if it also speaks to Asian American concerns? ... I don’t think we’re so inscrutable.” She added, however, that “where I do find myself short on patience is with critics who say *The Joy Luck Club* is Exhibit A for Asian American misandry.” Kang concluded that “it’s time for Asian Americans to finally forgive *The Joy Luck Club* for the sin of being the first and only and instead start to think of it as what it has been all along: a brave and beautiful film in a canon long overdue for more” (n.p.).

Carrie Rickey of the Philadelphia *Inquirer* also very positively reviewed the film, calling it a “heartrending and transcendent adaptation” and “the ultimate movie about almost everyone’s first love: Mom” (3). Calling it “passionately directed by Wayne Wang” and a “a symphonically structured affair,” she said it “gradually builds to an emotional crescendo that few movies ever try for, let alone achieve.” Rickey wrote that “what’s great about the screenplay (streamlined from the novel by Tan herself in concert with Ronald Bass, who wrote *Rain Man*) is its canny shape,” adding that “*Joy Luck*’s reconciliations are cathartic beyond words.” Rickey further praised the film for choosing to “show instead of tell,” claiming that, “instead of offering a glib moral, i.e., mothers have to solve their problems before daughters can resolve their own, *Joy Luck* beautifully illustrates how each mom does this, including one who stage-manages a reconciliation from beyond the grave.” She continued that “more eloquent than *Joy Luck*’s poetic monologues are its silences,” adding that “one stern look, one crabbed embrace, the shifting of a morsel from mother’s to daughter’s plate, says more about disappointment, the pain and joy of love and maternal sacrifice than could the most florid soliloquy.” Rickey did suggest that “if the movie has a flaw, it’s that of the book: The mothers’ stories are grounded in politics and history and those of their daughters are without context,” but she felt that “so glorious is the storytelling, the muted flute music (by Rachel Portman), the cinematography (by Amir Mokri, including some startlingly beautiful sequences in rural China) and

most of all the honesty of the acting, that the film is pure joy” (3).

Philip Wuntch of *News-Press* also offered a very positive review, warning readers that, “if you have tears, prepare to shed them. If you have sighs, prepare to heave them. If you have a heart, prepare for it to be wrenched,” and adding that “the film version of ‘The Joy Luck Club’ attains a universality rare for any movie, especially one that on the surface deals with a specific group of people” (13).

Wuntch claimed that “labeling it a ‘woman’s picture’ would be unfair to the movie and insulting to men,” continuing that “the film has humor, adventure and heart lots and lots of heart.” To those wary of overabundant emotion in a film, he promised that, “far from depressing, it is life-affirming without being sappy,” and said “you’ll leave the theater happy, as long as you’re not pondering why it was burdened with an unjust ‘R’ rating.” Wuntch also praised the film for being “remarkably faithful to Amy Tan’s best seller,” stating that it “admirably keeps each story in focus.”

Of the film’s focus on female-centric stories that often involve mistreatment at the hands of men, Wuntch acknowledged that “some may label the movie as ‘male-bashing,’” but he countered that “others will say it is merely a case of historical accuracy.” Wuntch also praised the film’s universal theme of strained parent-child relationships, claiming that “parents and children of either gender and any nationality can identify with these emotions.” He admitted that “‘The Joy Luck Club’ sometimes offers an oversized buffet, but it never leaves

the viewer feeling bloated,” attributing much of its effectiveness to “the elegant grace of Wang’s direction” which he said was “everywhere in evidence.” Of the cast, Wunch gushed that “each performance represents an essential part of this human tapestry, making it virtually impossible to pinpoint one portrayal as rising above the others.” He offered further praise of the film’s artistry, claiming that “the sets are surprisingly simple yet majestic.” He concluded by writing that “‘The Joy Luck Club’ is a film to see, remember and see again” (13).

Final Positive Reviews

Yet another very positive review came from Kenneth Turan, a nationally syndicated columnist, who claimed that the film makes “quite an impact,” continuing that, “though feeble attempts will be made to pigeonhole it as a women’s picture, *The Joy Luck Club* is more accurately a humane film, one that makes a point of being honest and compassionate about its characters and unashamed about their feelings,” and quipping that “if men think this is of no interest to them, the species is in worse shape than we thought” (14). Turan applauded both the script and direction for keeping “the quiet simplicity of style that is the core of Tan’s book” and credited the filmmakers for having “honed and focused [the book’s] emotional impact” as well as for having “not attempted to soften the bitterness of the conflicts it portrays.” He further praised the film’s cast, saying that, “while their names are largely unfamiliar to general audiences, the

eight actresses who play the film's four pairs of mothers and daughters are not only the pick of several generations of acting talent but also women who understand these characters from the inside and know how to take advantage of the opportunities the roles present." Turan also admired how "*The Joy Luck Club* manages to preserve each tale's individuality while bringing them all together with an almost casual skill," adding that "though each woman's experience is involving, it is what these experiences say en masse about the drama behind the fabled golden door of immigrant dreams that is most moving." Turan acknowledged potential confusion as the characters are often portrayed by multiple actresses at different stages in their lives, but he felt that "Wang and editor Maysie Hoy ... bring it off with perfect naturalness and comprehension." Of the film's intricacy and emotion, Turan stated that although the plot "may sound too much on the soap opera side," the film "is saved from that by its absence of sentimentality" (14).

Marshall Fine, another syndicated columnist, praised the film for allowing "viewers to share a common experience" and adding that, "if sisterhood is powerful, 'The Joy Luck Club' shows that motherhood and daughterhood are positively overwhelming" (23). Fine was quick to assert that "this is not a film about ethnicity," adding that "while the details are Chinese, the stories themselves carry a universality that will speak to everyone." He promised that "you don't have to be Asian – you don't even have to be female" – to connect to the movie,

stating that “all you need to be is human to be touched by this stunningly engrossing film.” He applauded the ways the multiple individual stories were “fit together in intriguing, serpentine fashion, flowing into and out of each other with dreamlike ease.” He further praised Wang for often leading “his story into a flashback by one character, only to have the flashback taken over by another” and added that “it may sound confusing but it’s just the opposite; the effect is to gain entry into a kind of collective family consciousness.”

Fine also admired the way “Wang’s sinuous yet simple storytelling perfectly matches Tan and Bass’s beautiful spare script,” adding that “the visuals are striking without being overpowering” and asserting that “even scenes filmed in China – including moments of mass panic involving big crowds – never overwhelm the intimate story of generations in conflict or agreement.” Fine wrote that “the ensemble cast is perfect” and asserted that “all of the women playing the daughters – Rosalind Chao, Lauren Tom, Tamlyn Tomita and Ming-Na Wen – are equally strong, though Wen and Tomita are particularly affecting.” He concluded that “‘The Joy Luck Club’ packs an emotional punch unlike any film so far this year,” calling it “a beautifully wrought movie, one that will leave you with an inward smile and outward tear” (23).

Conclusion

As one of the first and most enduringly influential books written by an Asian American woman about Asian American women, *The Joy Luck Club* was and remains an important contribution to feminist American literature. The same thing is true of the film the book inspired. But as many reviewers of the film in particular attested, the stories Tan told can seem relevant not only to Asian women but to all women everywhere and even, in fact, to all humans everywhere, no matter how they define their genders. All humans have mothers, and the relationships between mothers and their children, no matter what the precise nature of those relationships, have always had crucial effects on the health of any culture. *The Joy Luck Club*, both as a novel and as a film, helps highlight that fact.

Note

1. The narrators of the various tales are as follows, and in this order, with bold print emphasizing the names of mothers, italics emphasizing the names of daughters, and italics and underlining emphasizing the name of the one daughter who tells her deceased mother's story as well as her own:

Jing-Mei Woo (1); **An-Mei Hsu** (1); **Lindo Jong** (1); **Ying-Ying St. Clair** (1); *Waverly Jong* (1); *Lena St. Clair* (1); *Rose Hsu Jordan* (1); *Jing-Mei Woo* (2); *Lena St. Clair* (2); *Wavery Jong* (2); *Rose Hsu Jordan* (2); *Jing-Mei Woo* (3); **An-Mei Hsu** (2); **Ying-Ying St. Clair** (2); **Lindo Jong** (2); *Jing-Mei Woo* (4). Thus Jing-Mei Woo narrates four chapters, while the other women narrate two chapters each. Jing-Mei Woo's chapters both open and close the book.

Works Cited

Baumgarten, Marjorie. Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang.

Austin Chronicle, 8 Oct. 1993, n.p.,

<https://www.austinchronicle.com/events/film/1993-10-08/139041/>.

Accessed 20 May 2020.

Berardinelli, James. Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang.

ReelViews.net, 1993, n.p.,

[https://web.archive.org/web/20070110020350/https://www.reelviews.net/](https://web.archive.org/web/20070110020350/https://www.reelviews.net/movies/j/joy_luck.html)

[movies/j/joy_luck.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20070110020350/https://www.reelviews.net/movies/j/joy_luck.html). Accessed 20 May 2020.

Burr, Ty. Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang. *Entertainment Weekly*, 17 Sep. 1993, n.p., <https://ew.com/article/1993/09/17/joy-luck-club-2/>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Cauthorn, Robert S. "Female Bonding Message in 'Joy Luck Club' Lost in Bungled Script." Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang. *Arizona Daily Star*, 1 Oct. 1993, p. 15, <https://newspapers.com/clip/49256368/arizona-daily-star/>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Cowan, Ron. "A Tapestry of Emotion: Haul Out the Tissues." Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang. Salem, OR *Statesman Journal*, 1 Oct. 1993, p. 4 Entertainment, <https://newspapers.com/clip/49267219/statesman-journal/>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Ebert, Roger. Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang. Rogerebert.com, 17 Sep. 1993, n.p. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-joy-luck-club-1993>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Fine, Marshall. “‘Joy’ Will Fill Heart and Hankie.” Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang. Gannet News Service. Battle Creek, Michigan *Enquirer*, 14 Oct. 1993, p. 23.
<https://newspapers.com/clip/49266075/battle-creek-enquirer/>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Frederick, Candice. “The Ties that Bind in ‘The Joy Luck Club.’” Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang. Reeltalkonline.com, 21 Mar. 2011, n.p., <http://www.reeltalkonline.org/2011/03/cinema-flashback-ties-that-bind-in-joy.html>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Garner, Jack. “‘Joy Luck Club’ Brings Complex Stories to Life.” Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang. Great Falls, Montana *Tribune*, 22 Oct. 1993, p. 2D, <https://newspapers.com/clip/49266339/great-falls-tribune/>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Hinson, Hal. Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang. *The Washington Post*, 24 Sep. 1993, n.p.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/thejoyluckclubrhinson_a0a844.htm. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Howe, Desson. Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang. *The*

Washington Post, 24 Sep. 1993, n.p.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/thejoyluckclubrhowe_a0aff7.htm.

Accessed 20 May 2020.

Johnson, Brian D. "Terms of Endearment." Review of *The Joy Luck Club*,

directed by Wayne Wang. *Maclean's*, 27 Sep. 1993, p. 70.

<https://archive.macleans.ca/article/1993/9/27/terms-of-endearment#!&pid=70>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Johnson, Malcolm. "Let's Jump Up and Down for 'Joy Luck Club.'" Review of

The Joy Luck Club, directed by Wayne Wang. *The Hartford Courant*, 1

Oct. 1993, n.p., [https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-xpm-1993-](https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-xpm-1993-10-01-0000004027-story.html)

[10-01-0000004027-story.html](https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-xpm-1993-10-01-0000004027-story.html). Accessed 20 May 2020.

Johnson, Theresa. "It's a Joy to Watch Fan's 'Luck Club.'" Review of *The Joy*

Luck Club, directed by Wayne Wang. *Missoulian*, 15 Oct. 1993, p. E3.

<https://www.newspapers.com/clip/49241823/the-missoulian/>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Kang, Inkoo. "It's Time to Forgive *The Joy Luck Club*." Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang. *Slate.com*, 17 Aug. 2018, n.p., <https://slate.com/culture/2018/08/the-joy-luck-club-needs-to-be-forgiven-by-asian-americans.html>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Levy, Emanuel. "Joy Luck Club, The: Wayne Wang's Adaptation of Amy Tan's Best-Selling Novel." Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang. *Emanuellevy.com*, 17 Dec. 2005, n.p.. <https://emanuellevy.com/review/joy-luck-club-the-2/>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Longsdorf, Amy. "'Joy Luck Club' Is a Cause for Celebration." Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang. Allentown, PA *Morning Call*, 8 Oct. 1993, p. D12. <https://newspapers.com/clip/49260899/the-morning-call/>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

MacCambridge, Michael. "It's Never Too Late to Try – or Cry." Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang. *Austin American-Statesman*, 1 Oct. 1993, p. 5. <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/49241172/austin-american-statesman/>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

McCarthy, Todd. Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang.

Variety, 7 Sep. 1993, n.p.,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20080506115540/https://variety.com/review/VE1117901213.html?categoryid=31&cs=1>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Maslin, Janet. “*The Joy Luck Club*; Intimate Generational Lessons, Available to

All.” Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang. *The New*

York Times, 8 Sep. 1993, n.p.,

<https://www.nytimes.com/1993/09/08/movies/review-film-the-joy-luck-club-intimate-generational-lessons-available-to-all.html>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Plath, James. Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang.

Moviemet.com, 21 Dec. 2012, n.p. <https://moviemet.com/review/joy-luck-club-blu-ray-review>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Rickey, Carrie. “Mothers and Daughters Bridging a Cultural Divide.” Review of

The Joy Luck Club, directed by Wayne Wang. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*,

24 Sep. 1993, p. 3. <https://newspapers.com/clip/49242400/the-philadelphia-inquirer/>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Strickler, Jeff. “‘Joy Luck Club’ Tells Poignant Tale.” Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang. *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 1 Oct. 1993, pp. 1E and 4E, <https://newspapers.com/clip/49266794/star-tribune/>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Turan, Kenneth. “Weeping with ‘Joy.’” Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang. Spokane, Washington, *Spokesman-Review*, 8 Oct. 1993, p. 14. <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/49268768/the-spokesman-review/>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Weiskind, Ron. “China Dolls.” Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang. *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 1 Oct. 1993, Weekend, p. 5. <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/49240737/pittsburgh-post-gazette/>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

Wuntch, Philip. “A ‘Joy’ to Behold.” Review of *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang.

Fort Myers, Florida *New Press*, 1 Oct. 1993, p. 13.

<https://newspapers.com/clip/49268064/news-press/>. Accessed 20 May 2020.

