Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

The Challenges of Cultural Translation

Throughout The Joy Luck Club, the various narrators meditate on their inability to translate concepts and sentiments from one culture to another. The incomplete cultural understanding of both the mothers and the daughters owes to their incomplete knowledge of language. Additionally, the barriers that exist between the mothers and the daughters are often due to their inability to communicate with one another. Although the daughters know some Chinese words and the mothers speak some English, communication often becomes a matter of translation, of words whose intended meaning and accepted meaning are in fact quite separate, leading to subtle misunderstandings.

The first mention of this difficulty with translation occurs when Jing-mei relates the story of her mother’s founding of the Joy Luck Club. After attempting to explain the significance of the club’s name, Jing-mei recognizes that the concept is not something that can be translated. She points out that the daughters think their mothers are stupid because of their fractured English, while the mothers are impatient with their daughters who don’t understand the cultural nuances of their language and who do not intend to pass along their Chinese heritage to their own children. Throughout the book, characters bring up one Chinese concept after another, only to accept the frustrating fact that an understanding of Chinese culture is a prerequisite to understanding its meaning.

The Power of Storytelling

Because the barriers between the Chinese and the American cultures are exacerbated by imperfect translation of language, the mothers use storytelling to circumvent these barriers and communicate with their daughters. The stories they tell are often educational, warning against certain mistakes or giving advice based on past successes. For instance, Ying-yng’s decision to tell Lena about her past is motivated by her desire to warn Lena against the passivity and fatalism that Ying-yng suffered. Storytelling is also employed to communicate messages of love and pride, and to illumine one’s inner self for others.

Another use of storytelling concerns historical legacy. By telling their daughters about their family histories, the mothers ensure that their lives are remembered and understood by subsequent generations, so that the characters who acted in the story never die away completely. In telling their stories to their daughters, the mothers try to instill in them with respect for their Chinese ancestors and their Chinese pasts. Suyuan hopes that by finding her long-lost daughters and telling them her story, she can assure them of her love, despite her apparent abandonment of them. When Jing-mei sets out to tell her half-sisters Suyuan’s story, she also has this goal in mind, as well as her own goal of letting the twins know who their mother was and what she was like.

Storytelling is also used as a way of controlling one’s own fate. In many ways, the original purpose of the Joy Luck Club was to create a place to exchange stories. Faced with pain and hardship, Suyuan decided to take control of the plot of her life. The Joy Luck Club did not simply serve as a distraction; it also enabled transformation—of community, of love and support, of circumstance. Stories work to encourage a certain sense of independence. They are a way of forging one’s own identity and gaining autonomy. Waverly understands this: while Lindo believes that her daughter’s crooked nose means that she is ill-fated, Waverly dismisses this passive interpretation and changes her identity and her fate by reinventing the story that is told about a crooked nose.

The Problem of Immigrant Identity

At some point in the novel, each of the major characters
expresses anxiety over her inability to reconcile her Chinese heritage with her American surroundings. Indeed, this reconciliation is the very aim of Jing-mei’s journey to China. While the daughters in the novel are genetically Chinese (except for Lena, who is half Chinese) and have been raised in mostly Chinese households, they also identify with and feel at home in modern American culture. Waverly, Rose, and Lena all have white boyfriends or husbands, and they regard many of their mothers’ customs and tastes as old-fashioned or even ridiculous. Most of them have spent their childhoods trying to escape their Chinese identities: Lena would walk around the house with her eyes opened as far as possible so as to make them look European. Jing-mei denied during adolescence that she had any internal Chinese aspects, insisting that her Chinese identity was limited only to her external features. Lindo meditates that Waverly would have slapped her hands for joy during her teen years if her mother had told her that she did not look Chinese.

China itself contains American aspects, just as the part of America she grew up in—San Francisco’s Chinatown—contains Chinese elements. Thus, her first meal in China consists of hamburgers and apple pie, per the request of her fully “Chinese” relatives. Perhaps, then, there is no such thing as a pure state of being Chinese, a pure state of being American: all individuals are amalgams of their unique tastes, habits, hopes, and memories. For immigrants and their families, the contrasts within this amalgam can bring particular pain as well as particular richness.

**Motifs**

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.

**Control over One’s Destiny**

The Joy Luck Club contains an ongoing discussion about the extent to which characters have power over their own destinies. Elements from the Chinese belief system—the twelve animals of the zodiac, the five elements—reappear in the characters’ explanations of their personalities. For example, Ying-ying St. Clair speaks about how she and her daughter, Lena, are both Tigers, according to the years in which they were born. The “black” side of their Tiger personality is that she waits, like a predator, for the right moment for the “gold” side to act—the right moment to snatch what she wants. Yet Ying-ying’s behavior contradicts this symbolic explanation of her character. Ironically, her belief in “fate” ends up negating her understanding of her “fated” nature. She believes she is destined to marry a certain vulgar older man in China, does so, and then ends up feeling bereft after she learns of his infidelity. She shows she can take matters into her own hands when she aborts the fetus of the unborn child from her first marriage, but then falls back into the same trap when she “allows” Lena’s father, Clifford, to marry her because she thinks it is her destiny. She lives in constant anxiety and fear from tragedies she believes she is powerless to prevent.

Jing-mei and her mother also clash because of their opposing concepts of destiny. Suyuan believes that Jing-mei will manifest an inner prodigy if only she and her daughter work hard enough to discover and cultivate Jing-mei’s talent. Jing-mei, on the other hand, believes that there are ultimately things about her that cannot be forced; she is who she is.

An-wei Hsu seems to possess a notion of a balance between fate and will. She believes strongly in the will, and yet she also sees the will as somehow “fated.” While her faith in her ability to will her own desires becomes less explicit, she is still confused by the loss of her son Bing. An-wei never resigned herself, as Ying-ying does, to thinking that human beings have no control over what happens to them. Thus, when Rose asks why she should try to save her marriage, saying there is no hope, no reason to try, An-wei responds that she should try simply because she “must.” “This is your fate,” she says, “what you must do.” Rose comes to
realize that for her mother, the powers of "fate" and "faith" are co-dependent rather than mutually exclusive.

Sexism

Sexism is a problem common to both Chinese and American cultures, and as such they are encountered by most of the characters in the novel. In China, for example, Lindo is forced to live almost as a servant to her mother-in-law and husband, conforming to idealized roles of feminine submission and duty. Because An-mer's mother is raped by her future husband, she must marry him to preserve her honor; whereas he, as a man, may marry any number of concubines without being judged harshly. Indeed, it is considered shameful for An-mer's mother to marry at all after her first husband's death, to say nothing of her becoming a concubine, and An-mer's disownment by her mother (Popo) because of the rigid notions of purity and virtue held by the patriarchal Chinese society. Ying-yings' nursemaid tells her that girls should never ask but only listen, thus conveying her society's sexist standards for women and instilling in Ying-yings tragic passivity.

In America, the daughters also encounter sexism as they grow up. Waverly experiences resistance when she asks to play chess with the older men in the park in Chinatown: they tell her they do not want to play with dolls and express surprise at her skill in a game at which men excel. Rose's passivity with Ted is based on the stereotypical gender roles of a proactive, heroic male and a submissive, victimized female. Lena's agreement to serve as a mere associate in the architectural firm that she helped her husband to found, as well as her agreement to make a fraction of his salary, may also be based on sexist assumptions that she has absorbed. Tar seems to make the distinction between a respect for tradition and a disrespect for oneself as an individual.

Submission to sexist modes of thought and behavior, regardless of cultural tradition, seems to be unacceptable as it encompasses a passive destruction of one's autonomy.

Sacrifices for Love

Many of the characters make great sacrifices for the love of their children or parents. The selflessness of their devotion speaks to the force of the bond between parent and child. An-mer's mother slices off a piece of her own flesh to put in her mother's soup, hoping superstitiously to cure her. An-mer's mother's suicide could also be seen not as an act of selfish desperation but as one of selfless sacrifice to her daughter's future happiness; because Wu-Tsing is afraid of ghosts, An-mer's mother knows that in death she can ensure her daughter's continued status and comfort in the household with more certainty than she could in life. Later, An-mer throws her one memento of her mother, her sapphire ring, into the waves in hopes of placating the evil spirits that have taken her son Bing. So, too, does Suyuan take an extra job cleaning the house of a family with a piano, in order to earn Jing-mer the opportunity to practice the instrument. These acts of sacrifice speak to the power of the mother-daughter bond. Despite being repeatedly weakened—or at least tested—by cultural, linguistic, and generational gullies, the sacrifices the characters make prove that this bond is not in danger of being destroyed.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

Suyuan's Pendant

In Jing-mer's story "Best Quality," she discusses the jade pendant her mother, Suyuan, gave her, which she called her "life's importance." Over the course of the story, the symbolic meaning of the pendant changes. At first, Jing-mer found the pendant garish and unstylish; to her it represented the cultural differences between herself and her mother. After Suyuan's death, however, Jing-mer comes to see it as a symbol of her mother's love and concern. It is particularly interesting to note that, in its very ability to change meanings, the Pendant gains an additional symbolism: it symbolizes the human power to assign new meanings to the phenomena around us. The development that Jing-mer undergoes in understanding the gift of the pendant symbolizes her development in understanding her mother's gestures in general. While Jing-mer used to interpret many of her mother's words as expressions of superstition or criticism, she now sees them as manifesting a deep maternal wisdom and love.

Lena's Vase

In the story "Rice Husband," a vase in Lena's home comes to symbolize her marriage. Lena had placed the vase upon a wobbly table; she knew the placement of the vase was dangerous, but she did nothing to protect the vase from breaking. Like the vase, Lena's marriage is in danger of falling and shattering. According to the text, it was Lena's husband, Harold, who built the wobbly table when he was first studying architecture and design. If one takes this information as similarly symbolic, one might say that the precariousness of the marriage may result from Harold's failure to be "supportive" enough, "solid" enough in his commitment. In any case, Lena, too, is to blame: as with the vase, Lena realizes that her marriage is in danger of shattering, but she refuses to take action. When Ying-yings "accidentally" causes the vase to break on the floor, she lets Lena know that she should prevent disasters before they happen, rather than stand by passively as Ying-yings herself has done throughout her life.

Lindo's Red Candle

When Lindo Jong is married, she and her husband light a red candle with a wick at each end. The name of the bride is marked at one end of the candle, and the name of the groom at the other. If the candle burns all night without either end extinguishing prematurely, custom says that the marriage will be successful and happy. The candle has a symbolic meaning—the success of
the marriage—within the Chinese culture, but within the story it also functions as a symbol of traditional Chinese culture itself: it embodies the ancient beliefs and customs surrounding marriage.

Lindo feels conflicted about her marriage: she desperately does not want to enter into the subservience she knows the wedding will bring, yet she cannot go against the promises her parents made to her husband’s family. In order to free herself from the dilemma, she secretly blows out her husband’s side of the candle. A servant relights it, but Lindo later reveals to her mother-in-law that the flame went out, implying that it did so without human intervention. By blowing out the flame, Lindo takes control of her own fate, eventually extricating herself from an unhappy marriage. Thus, the candle also symbolizes her self-assertion and control over her own life.

It is important to consider the candle’s original symbolism as a sign of tradition and culture, for it is by playing upon the traditional beliefs and superstitions that Lindo convinces her mother-in-law to annul the marriage. Her act of blowing out the candle would have been meaningless without an underlying, pre-established network of belief. Thus the candle, first a symbol of tradition, then of self-assertion, ultimately comes to symbolize the use of tradition in claiming one’s own identity and power.
Filial Piety (Devotion to One’s Ancestors, Living and Dead)

Chinese culture places a high value on filial piety (respect for one’s family; both living relatives and the spirits of one’s deceased ancestors). This, along with traditional Chinese folk-tales and folk-beliefs, and influences of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, date back many centuries and remains intact despite the attempts of Mao’s Communist regime to stamp out all that was old and to breed disrespect for authority. Considering the intensity of that massive change in China brought about under Mao, the fact that these aspects of Chinese culture have remained in place shows how deeply they were ingrained in the collective consciousness of the Chinese people, and how important and influential they are.

Filial piety means respecting one’s parents, placing their needs first, caring for them, and (especially for daughters) being obedient to them, though in some schools of Buddhist and Confucian thought it was believed that it was the duty of the children to point out to their parents any mistakes they were making. Filial piety ties in with the philosophical ideas of Confucianism and Buddhism and Taoism (that Chairman Mao exploited) that the rights of the individual are not more important than the good of society as a whole. In contrast to Western cultures’ valuing individual rights above all else (with obvious lapses in times of hysteria), China (along with much of the rest of Asia) has traditionally seen individuals as existing only within a complex network or ‘web’ of other relationships. An individual’s rights are balanced by that individual’s responsibilities to family, ancestors, and culture. For example, in China, an individual does not have the ‘right’ to place his or her parents into a ‘retirement home’ and abandon them; this would be seen as violating the rights of the parents and a shirking of the main responsibility of any child: to take care of one’s parents as long as one is able to do so.

In The Joy Luck Club’s scenes that are flashbacks to China, we see many of the mother characters (and in some cases, their mothers) making selfless sacrifices to fulfill their filial piety duties, to care for their relatives, and to show honor and respect for the wishes of their ancestors, who are still believed to take an active interest in what’s going on in the lives of their descendants, and who have ways of making their wishes known to the living. We will see several instances in the novel of characters paying respect to their ancestors (both living and dead), for example, through shrines and rituals, and we will see characters using beliefs about filial piety to their advantage. The ‘framing device’ of the entire novel has to do with one daughter character’s quest to fulfill her deceased mother’s last wishes.

Many of the characters make great sacrifices for the love of their children or parents. The selflessness of their devotion speaks to the force of the bond between parent and child. One character’s mother sacrifices a part of herself to try to heal her own mother when she is ill. A character commits suicide to better her daughter’s position in the traditional household in China in which she resides; she knows that her daughter’s husband fears the wrath of her ghost if her daughter is ever mistreated. Another character throws away a meaningful memento in the hope of appeasing evil spirits she believes have stolen her child in order to get him back. Another character takes a demanding job in a household because it has a piano so that her daughter may use it to practice playing the piano.

In The Joy Luck Club, the older generation of women characters continue to believe in filial piety, and their Westernized, Americanized daughters’ lapses in this area provide a constant source of tension. The mother characters do in fact exact the proper obedience and respect from their daughters—at times—but often, they can only do so through manipulation such as guilt-trips.

Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism

Confucianism and Taoism are generally regarded as being more philosophical systems than religions, though Buddhism is often regarded as both.

Confucianism, concerned with how one should live one’s life, was created by the philosopher Confucius, while Taoism (rooted in compassion, moderation, and humility) has not been traced to a single thinker but to a series of texts. ‘Tao (or, Dao) means ‘path’ or ‘way.’

Both Taoism and Confucianism are primarily focused on conceptions of proper behavior and good manners, conceptions of right conduct and of what is of ultimate value and of what types of lives are worth living.
Confucianism focuses on character traits identified as the virtues; the good and worthwhile life; and modes of ethical reasoning. The virtues are traits of character necessary for living a good life. The virtues typically involve acting on modes of ethical reasoning that take into account the context of the situation to determine what needs to be done. Consider some of the virtues that belong to the junzi (the noble person): ren (humanity, benevolence), xiao (filial piety), yi (righteousness), and li (acting according to ceremonial ritual or more generally propriety). The very concept of yi connotes the ability to identify and perform the action that is appropriate to the particular context. While traditional rules of ritual provide one with a sense of what is courteous and respectful action given standard contexts, the virtue of yi allows one to identify when those rules need to be set aside in extreme circumstances. In the novel The Joy Luck Club, the mother characters strive to instill in their children all of these values. As a result, the daughters do struggle to (for the most part) show respect for their parents and conform to the expectations of their parents, particularly their mothers. Also, the idea (that the appropriate resolution to each conflict depends very much on the situation, found in Taoism, Buddhism, and most especially Confucianism) clearly comes through in the novel, as the characters struggle to see their situations clearly and to choose the right path of action to respond to their situations. The mother characters use the common practice (again, in all three philosophical traditions) of telling stories to illustrate their points, to give guidance to their daughters. There are no hard and fast principles that will apply equally well to every single situation, but by learning from stories, from experiences, one can make wiser decisions about what to do in one's own life when faced with similar situations. The wisdom that comes from learning these personal life histories is meant to give shape to general considerations or guiding principles that can help one judge what to do, rather than 'constant' moral laws that apply equally well to every situation. This is why Chinese philosophy is generally referred to as 'invitational' in its method of persuasion. It invites the individual to contemplate, reflect, and draw conclusions about the stories that might help guide future action with wisdom.

A Buddhist perspective holds that our entire notion of 'self' is an illusion, and that we are all merely part of a greater and universal whole. Buddha (the founder of Buddhism) taught that suffering comes primarily from wanting that which we cannot have; therefore the secret to perfect happiness is to cease to want anything material and to concern one's self solely with attaining enlightenment and becoming one with the greater cosmos. Once one loses one's illusion of 'self' (or, 'annihilates' the self), one can become a drop in the cosmic ocean, feeling at peace. This notion has been used in a gender-biased way in China as a justification for disregarding the rights of women; though the principle is to be applied to both men and women, very often, in China, men would expect women to sacrifice everything for their husbands and/or children without question or complaint. Women were taught to accept that their needs, their desires, their wants, were unimportant, and they were expected to teach this to their daughters so they would become obedient wives, and to their sons, so they would expect obedient wives. Confucianism also placed a large emphasis on social standing, and how relationships determined one's obligations (wife to husband, son or daughter to parents or in-laws, youth to elder, etc.). This also usually worked out to the advantage of men and to the disadvantage of women in China. One mother character says: "I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat my own bitterness" (Tan 241). This shows up in the novel as a recurring motif: the women have to learn to stand up for themselves against sexist oppression that has been culturally ingrained and justified through certain select interpretations of Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist beliefs and concepts, and to accept that while at times passivity (non-action) and self-sacrifice for one's family can be noble, striving to fulfill one's own needs and desires is also important. This also correlates to a Buddhist principle, the Middle Way, which is a path of moderation away from extreme self-indulgence or total denial of self. One daughter character blames her culture's values for her bad marriage, saying being raised with them caused her to accept the social circumstances and roles and expectations she was given instead of working to change them: "At first I thought it was because I was raised with Chinese humility. Or that maybe it was because when you're Chinese you're supposed to accept everything, flow with the Tao, and not make waves" (Tan 170).

One of the mother characters was always the proper Confucian woman. Women were chosen as wives based on "who would raise proper sons, care for the old people, and faithfully sweep the burial grounds long after the old ladies had gone to their graves" (Tan 45). She was of poor standing but lucky enough to be betrothed to a rich boy young enough to be her baby brother. When their land flooded, her family moved on. She stayed behind in reverence to them (filial piety) and to not lose face (social standing). Her mother's words of wisdom to her were: "Obey your family. Do not disgrace us" (Tan 48). Her character at the time lacked 'metal,' one of the Five Elements, one that determines personality and the ability to be an independent thinker. She did not value herself above the community. She couldn't think outside of the Confucian rules about social standing and social roles (wife's duty to husband, daughter-in-law's duty to in-laws, daughter's duty to parents, etc.), and therefore was unable to see that her situation was unhealthy and that it was possible to leave it. In Taoist terms, she had no te,
meaning that she didn’t fulfill her purpose and do what was best for her. She got out of her oppressive marriage by assessing the situation as it was and using her knowledge of ancestor worship (as part of filial piety) to her own advantage against her cruel and oppressive in-laws.

Taoist ethics also act in a complementary way here in the novel, in that Taoists believed there was not always a clear-cut ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answer, and that actions were not just simply ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ Decisions have consequences, both anticipated and unexpected, both good and bad. This is Amy Tan’s stated philosophical belief system, and shows through the morally ambiguous gray areas in which her characters struggle. The Taoist concept of wu-wei recommends a style of action that consists of being receptive rather than aggressive, of following from behind rather than leading, of being accommodating rather than confrontational, and being flexible and ready to change with the situation rather than following a rigid set of rules (this is a nice connection to The Poisonwood Bible). We will see this aspect of Taoist philosophy reflected in the actions of all the major characters, who accommodate each other’s idiosyncrasies and difficult personalities (up to a point), who realize they must adapt to changing circumstances (as difficult as that may be), mothers who (sometimes subtly, other times blatantly) nudge their daughters (from behind) into making decisions.

Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism are all deeply inter-related in China; they each influenced the development of the other. All three also are concerned with ‘balance’ (which shows up in the story as well: balancing one’s work with one’s personal life, the balancing act of marriage, and the particularly Taoist concept of feng shui, achieving balance in one’s home, through understanding the Five Elements).

The Five Movements (The Five Elements)

The Five Elements are Wood, Water, Fire, Metal and Earth, and each are associated with certain qualities. These are referred to in the novel. So if a character is referred to as lacking “wood” that means that she lacks the ‘gumption’ or ‘chutzpah’ or ‘guts’ to stand up for herself. In Chinese beliefs about the Five Elements (or, Five Movements), ‘wood’ is associated with the emotion of anger and the mental quality of sensitivity. In other words, if a character lacks ‘wood,’ she is too insensitive to her own situation and should be angrier and stand up for herself.

The interactions of Wu Xing: The creation cycle (black, pentagon shaped lines) and the overcoming cycle (purple, star shaped lines).

Generating

The common memory jogs, which help to remind in what order the phases are, are:

- Wood feeds Fire;
- Fire creates/produces Earth (ash);
- Earth bears Metal;
- Metal carries Water (as in a bucket or tap, or water condenses on metal);
- Water nourishes Wood.

Other common words for this cycle include “begets,” “engenders,” and “mothers.”
**Overcoming**
- Wood parts Earth (such as roots);
- Earth absorbs (or muddies) Water;
- Water quenches Fire;
- Fire melts Metal;
- Metal chops Wood.

Also:
- Wood absorbs Water;
- Water rusts Metal;
- Metal breaks up Earth;
- Earth smothers Fire;
- Fire burns Wood.

This cycle might also be called "controls," "restrains," or "fathers."

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movement</th>
<th>Wood</th>
<th>Fire</th>
<th>Earth</th>
<th>Metal</th>
<th>Water</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Mars</td>
<td>Saturn</td>
<td>Venus</td>
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<td>creativity</td>
<td>clarity</td>
<td>intuition</td>
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<td>happiness</td>
<td>anxiety</td>
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<td>fear</td>
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<td>spleen</td>
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<td>youth</td>
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<td>old age</td>
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The Chinese Zodiac

The Five Elements are also related to the concept of the Chinese Zodiac, a twelve-animal cycle of time that is believed to influence people's personalities. One level of this is the year in which a person is born, but there are also other layers that most Westerners do not know about: there is an animal identified for the specific month in which a person was born, and another 'secret' animal that is linked to the hour the person was born. The Five Movements/Five Elements and the Chinese Zodiac are also linked to many other things, such as colors, directions, seasons, planets, etc. Chinese zodiac signs represent twelve different types of personality. The zodiac traditionally begins with the sign of the Rat; the following are the twelve zodiac signs in order and their characteristics.

**Rat** (Element Water): Forthright, disciplined, systematic, meticulous, charismatic, hardworking, industrious, charming, eloquent, sociable, shrewd. Can be manipulative, vindictive, mendacious, venal, selfish, obstinate, critical, over-ambitious, ruthless, intolerant, scheming.

**Ox** (Element Water): Dependable, calm, methodical, born leader, patient, hardworking, ambitious, conventional, steady, modest, logical, resolute, tenacious. Can be stubborn, narrow-minded, materialistic, rigid, demanding.

**Tiger** (Element Wood): Unpredictable, rebellious, colorful, powerful, passionate, daring, impulsive, vigorous, stimulating, sincere, affectionate, humanitarian, generous. Can be restless, reckless, impatient, quick-tempered, obstinate, selfish.
Rabbit (Element Wood): Gracious, good friend, kind, sensitive, soft-spoken, amiable, elegant, reserved, cautious, artistic, thorough, tender, self-assured, astute, compassionate, flexible. Can be moody, detached, superficial, self-indulgent, opportunistic.

Dragon (Element Wood): Magnanimous, stately, vigorous, strong, self-assured, proud, noble, direct, dignified, zealous, fiery, passionate, decisive, pioneering, ambitious, generous, loyal. Can be arrogant, imperious, tyrannical, demanding, eccentric, grandiloquent and extremely bombastic, prejudiced, dogmatic, over-bearing, violent, impetuous, brash.

Snake (Element Fire): Deep thinker, wise, mystic, graceful, soft-spoken, sensual, creative, pruient, shrewd, ambitious, elegant, cautious, responsible, calm, strong, constant, purposeful. Can be loner, bad communicator, possessive, hedonistic, self-doubting, distrustful, mendacious.

Horse (Element Fire): Cheerful, popular, quick-witted, changeable, earthy, perceptive, talkative, agile - mentally and physically, magnetic, intelligent, astute, flexible, open-minded. Can be fickle, arrogant, anxious, rude, gullible, stubborn.

Ram (Element Fire): Righteous, sincere, sympathetic, mild-mannered, shy, artistic, creative, gentle, compassionate, understanding, mothering, determined, peaceful, generous, seeks security. Can be moody, indecisive, over-passive, worrier, pessimistic, over-sensitive, complainer, wise.

Monkey (Element Metal): Inventor, motivator, improviser, quick-witted, flexible, innovative, problem solver, self-assured, sociable, polite, dignified, competitive, objective, factual, intellectual. Can be egotistical, vain, selfish, reckless, snobbish, deceptive, manipulative, cunning, jealous, suspicious.

Rooster (Element Metal): Acute, neat, meticulous, organized, self-assured, decisive, conservative, critical, perfectionist, alert, zealous, practical, scientific, responsible. Can be over zealous and critical. Puritanical, egotistical, abrasive, opinionated.

Dog (Element Metal): Honest, intelligent, straightforward, loyal, sense of justice, and fair play, attractive, amicable, unpretentious, sociable, open-minded, idealistic, moralistic, practical, affectionate, dogged. Can be cynical, lazy, cold, judgmental, pessimistic, worrier, stubborn, quarrelsome.

Pig (Element Water): Honest, simple, gallant, sturdy, sociable, peace-loving, patient, loyal, hard-working, trusting, sincere, calm, understanding, thoughtful, scrupulous, passionate, intelligent. Can be naive, over-reliant, self-indulgent, gullible, fatalistic, materialistic.

Remember, in Chinese astrology the animal signs assigned by year represent what others perceive you as being or how you present yourself. There are also animal signs assigned by month (called inner animals) and hours of the day (called secret animals).

To sum it up, while a person might appear to be a dragon because they were born in the year of the dragon, they might also be a snake internally and an ox secretively. In total, this makes for 8,640 possible combinations that a person might be. These are all considered critical for the proper use of Chinese astrology.

The Chinese Zodiac and Fate versus Free Will

The Joy Luck Club contains an ongoing discussion about the extent to which characters have power over their own destinies. Elements from the Chinese belief system—the twelve animals of the Chinese Zodiac, the Five Elements—reappear in the characters’ explanations of their personalities. For example, one mother character speaks about how she and her daughter are both Tigers, according to the years in which they were born. The “black” side of her Tiger personality is f’out she waits, like a predator, for the right moment for the “gold” side to act—the right moment to snatch what she wants. Yet her behavior contradicts this symbolic explanation of her character. Ironically, her belief in “fate” ends up negating her understanding of her “fated” nature. She believes she is destined to marry a certain vulgar older man in China, does so, and then ends up feeling bereft after she learns of his infidelity. She shows she can take matters into her own hands when she aborts the fetus of the unborn child from her first marriage, but then falls back into the same trap when she “allows” her second husband to marry her because she thinks it is her destiny. She lives in constant anxiety and fear from tragedies that she believes she is powerless to prevent.

Another character and her mother also clash because of their opposing concepts of destiny. The mother believes that her daughter will manifest an inner prodigy if only she and her daughter work hard enough to discover and cultivate the daughter’s talent. Her daughter, on the other hand, believes that there are ultimately things about her that cannot be forced; she is who she is.
Another character seems to possess a notion of a balance between fate and free will. She believes strongly in free will, and yet she also sees this will as somehow "fated." Thus, when her daughter asks her why she should try to save her marriage, saying there is no hope, and no reason to try, her mother responds that she should try simply because she "must." "This is your fate," she says to her daughter, "what you must do." Her daughter comes to realize that for her mother, the powers of "fate" and "faith" are co-dependent rather than mutually exclusive.

Amy Tan talks about how her family's beliefs have influenced her and her writing

On the Tan side of my family, my great-grandfather, who did not come from a wealthy family, was able to receive an education at a [Christian] missionary school, where he learned to read, write, and speak English. Being a Christian did not prevent people from keeping other Chinese traditions, such as praying to ancestors. My great-grandfather's conversion may have been sincere, but in his later years, he also took on a young concubine, who bore him a son when he was eighty-five years old. The latter was related to me as proof of my great-grandfather's vitality, but nothing was said about the young concubine, or the circumstances that led her to become the possession of an old man. Yet she was my great-grandmother, and the son she bore was my grandfather. He also was educated in a Christian school. My grandfather continued the tradition and passed along both his linguistic skills and his religious fervor to his fourteen children, the oldest of which was my father. They also helped maintain the Tan family temple, the building where the family prayed to our ancestors ... With help from Baptist missionaries, my father was able to come to the States, where he enrolled in the Berkeley Baptist Divinity School and became minister of the First Chinese Baptist Church of Fresno. Because of financial need, he eventually returned to his original profession as an electrical engineer but continued to devote his spare time to the ministry.

My mother was not raised as a Christian, but she grew up in Shanghai, where it was not unusual for people to have contact with Westerners and Christian beliefs. Both Shanghai and Beijing had been divided into foreign concessions, and my mother lived in the French Concession in a yang fang yuan, a foreign garden house, meaning Western in style. She was raised without any religion in particular, but had the motley beliefs common to many of the well-to-do of her generation, that is, rituals for showing respect to ancestors, a fear of unhappy ghosts (for some reason ghosts were never happy), and a belief in reincarnation, which could explain a lot of things, like curses, fate, and acceptance of your bad circumstances. At times my mother believed I was a reincarnation of someone she had wronged, and I had come back as karmic revenge to make her life miserable. Today, my father's side of the family continues their evangelism in Taiwan and China. My mother's side of the family adheres to no religion, Chinese or Western. But they enjoy any excuse for a feast and they adopt all kinds of rituals.

Interviewer: *The Joy Luck Club* is divided into four sections, each preceded by a brief tale that in some way reflects each stage of the eight women's lives. These stories read like small myths—in fact there are many mythological elements in this book. What was your inspiration for the four tales?

I am ashamed to admit that the myth-like tales were the result of structural retro-fitting, an afterthought posed by my editor Faith Sale at Putnam. After I turned in my manuscript, I met with Faith a couple of months later. We went to an old-time New York restaurant with dark wood-paneled booths. We spread the stories across the table, and she told me we needed to reorder them in a way that felt right and made sense. We tried doing it chronologically, then by family relationships, and later by alternating voices of mothers and daughters. Eventually, we settled on an order that was simply intuitive—what felt right. What emerged was an emotional arc spanning the sixteen stories. Those stories naturally fell into four groups of four stories. I sensed that each group of four had its own emotional arc. Some were more about loss, some were more about hope, and so forth. Faith asked that I create short vignettes that would delineate the section and suggest the connectedness of the stories within. I went looking for sources of inspiration and found them in a Chinese almanac and a book of four-character sayings. Within those sources were elements that suggested fairy tales: a magic feather, the warnings of the twenty-four malignant gates, the harmony found in feng shui, and ... a baby passing along her native wisdom to the queen mother of the Western sky.

With each, I added some personal aspects to the story. My uncle in Beijing, for example, once gave me a gift and used the expression "a swan feather from a thousand li away" to mean it was a little bit of nothing but it had a lot of heart, so it was worth a lot. This reminded me of my mother's belief that the more work something required, the more it was worth. Struggles were good. So I struggled to write those four vignettes and finished my book, hoping my editor would see its worth.