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The Strongest Wind

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Class of 2015

Literary Explorations I

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The Strongest Wind

The essence of the American Dream is that it promises those who embrace it a spirit of hope that they can become anything they wish, doctors, lawyers, mothers, volunteers, or even heroes. Just as these dreams are different, the way in which Americans embrace them is just diverse. When considering the conglomeration of identities in a society such as that of America, such differences can often be strange, unfamiliar, and even harsh from a new perspective. In her short story, "Rules of the Game," Amy Tan, a writer of Asian descent herself, prompts her audience to ponder a new perspective, as she tells the tale of a Chinese mother and her daughter, as they grow in the world of American dreams. The main character, Waverly "Meimei" Place Jong, follows her passion towards becoming a chess grandmaster, but must also remember the cultural way of her family. Tan ends the story with fierce words from Waverly's mother, following a rare public argument between mother and daughter, "We are not concerning this girl. This girl not have concerning for us" (Tan 8). Such a harsh verdict from Mrs. Jong, after all of the pride Waverly's national chess championships have brought upon her family, causes the reader to wonder if the mother is acting in the best interest of her daughter, or herself. It is important to understand that the seemingly stern Mother is actually the greatest protector of her daughter's interests. Mrs. Jong serves as a guide to a new American culture for her family, presents important wisdom, and maintains a beneficial environment for her daughter.

It is particularly difficult to incriminate an essentially single parent for not caring about their child, as their very existence as a parental figure stems from grit, courage, and emotional strength. Tan's sole mention of Waverly's father, "From my bed, I would listen as my father got ready for work, then locked the door behind him..." (Tan 1), places Mrs. Jong alone, in a world that she has already struggled in. Mrs. Jong tells her children "'This American rules,' she concluded at last. 'Every time people come out from foreign country, must know rules. You not know, judge say, Too bad, go back....'" (Tan 4), presuming a sense of lamentation over a past event. As a mother, she works to ensure that her children not only understand the apparent rules of law, but also, a more social set: the rules of the game of life. Mrs. Jong seeks to guide her children through American culture by maintaining one particularly important element, appearance. Knowing that the American society is one driven by judgments, the mother makes sure that Waverly has two, well-wound braids before school each day (Tan 2), or a delicate dress for a chess competition (Tan 6), so that she is not unfairly put down, simply because she looks like a small, cheeky schoolgirl. By framing Waverly's best appearance, that of a chess master, Mrs. Jong protects her with a sense of dignity that she was not blessed with in a new country. The challenges and struggles of an immigrant mother give way to the fundamental tenet of Asian parenting: A good parent will provide a life for their offspring that yields the most success, with the least amount of strife. Rather than aggressively apply for bigger jobs, or manipulating other women in her community to advance her status, Mrs. Jong takes the challenges that plagued her and acts to protect her daughter from them.

In addition to serving as a parental guide, Mrs. Jong also inhabits the role of another key Asian identity: the wise elder. The mother serves to teach Waverly lessons that keep her in line. Tan's classic example from the story creates a dichotomy between the rowdy American child

who wants candy and the well-behaved model daughter who exhibits patience and is later rewarded (Tan 1). Mrs. Jong provides guidance through all daily actions to ensure that her child develops well in her community. While it this can be seen as a way in which the mother establishes superiority and orders her daughter about, Mrs. Jong's lessons extend beyond rules and personal behavior within the family and their community, to advice that allows Waverly to become a stronger person with respect to her own interests. In Tan's story, the mother imparts significant truths to her daughter, even when Waverly attempts to manipulate Mrs. Jong into allowing her to participate in a chess tournament. As Waverly employs cheeky reverse psychology to seem as if she is not keen on attending an even that she very much wants to be at, her mother teaches her to be a stronger person in saying "Is shame you fall down nobody push you" (Tan 5). Mrs. Jong teaches Waverly that she should not give up without trying, even though this may mean failure. Even though this wisdom manifests itself as castigation, it is Mrs. Jong's motherly way of encouraging her daughter, not by complimenting her or constantly showering her with frivolous gifts as more Western parents do, but by empowering her daughter with a sense of drive and passion. Similarly, when Mrs. Jong, rather smugly, professes to Waverly that she "Lost eight piece this time. Last time was eleven. What I tell you? Better off lose less!" (Tan 6), she is trying to instill stronger values and strategies for life in her daughter. Even though some are not particularly precise, this shows that Mrs. Jong makes a constant effort to better her daughter and her daughter's interests. This role as an elderly source of wisdom is typically occupied by another member of the community, as Lao Po does for Waverly (Tan 4). However, when combined with the Asian motherly instincts and the ultimate goal of providing her daughter with the most success with the least strife, this source of life lessons expands to take a place much closer to Waverly's heart, helping her in all her endeavors and interests.

In order to have continued success in her endeavor of choice, Waverly would benefit from an adapted environment, which is exactly what her mother provides her with. The most prominent example of Mrs. Jong's adjustment of focus on her daughter is the warping of house rules in Waverly's favor. From relieving Waverly of household chores (Tan 6) to giving her a comfortable room to study and sleep in (Tan 7), the mother makes numerous concessions to help Waverly succeed. These concessions disrupt a typically ordered and filial home life, while potentially straining Waverly and her mother's relationships with Vincent and Winston, Waverly's brothers, who had to do Waverly's chores in her place. This shows that Mrs. Jong was proud of her daughter's achievements to the point where she would place her daughter in a position of higher priority over her sons. This pride leads to a desire to expand that success for Waverly, showing a motherly dedication to her daughter's interests. Seeing Waverly respond to this with greater dedication of her own added more trust to this situation. Tan writes of Waverly that she “,,no longer played in the alley of Waverly Place... (she) went to school, then directly home to learn new chess secrets...” (Tan 6). Waverly's actions put forth a sense of obedience and understanding of her mother's concessions, and that she would work harder as a daughter to finish the job her mother had set in motion, by succeeding in the environment built for her. Mrs. Jong accepts this victory as a mother, as she has provided a route to success for her daughter nearly free of strife, and thus, the mother is able to revel in her daughter's success. Unfortunately, when Mrs. Jong displays her new, more public, sense of pride at the neighborhood grocery market, Waverly perceives it as showboating, or parading, of her daughter as solely the product of a mother's efforts (Tan 7). The ensuing argument and its aftermath bring the reader back full circle to Mrs. Jong's harsh words to Waverly. Waverly had acted in betrayal of her mother's efforts to lead her to success, and the environment that the mother had modified

to benefit her daughter was now shattered with one outburst. Mrs. Jong felt disrespected, because all of her work had been dedicated to protecting, nurturing, and her daughter's interests, attempting to keep Waverly from such strife as the public embarrassment that now befell their family following the store incident.

Finally, still within the argument's fallout, Waverly realized the truth that best describes dedicated Asian parents such as her mother: "Strongest wind cannot be seen" (Tan 8). The influence that a mother has on her daughter's life is great, and when a person such as Mrs. Jong is truly dedicated to the interests of her daughter, great success will follow them, as the mother chases the strife away. Waverly's mother embodied this great tenet of Asian parenting as the strongest wind in her daughter's life, by helping to guide her through a new culture, dispensing life lessons to enrich her character, and creating a beneficial environment for her interests. Even though this powerful force is not always apparent, make no mistake, the Asian mother is one of the most caring, resourceful, and dedicated figures in a child's life. Amy Tan's story of Mrs. Jong is not an exception, but an example of the power an effective parent can wield in favor of their child's best interests.

Work Cited

Tan, Amy. "Rules of the Game." *The Joy Luck Club*. New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 1989.89-103. Print.