

The Joy Luck Club

(Drama) (1996)

© 2002 by Raymond Weschler

Major Characters

The Chinese Mothers:

- Suyuan**.....**KieuChinh**
A woman who comes to America after having abandoned her baby twin daughters during wartime. The mother of June.
- Lindo**.....**TsaiChin**
Suyuan's best friend who came to the United States after having escaped a horrible arranged marriage to a 10 year old boy when she was 13. The mother of Waverly.
- YingYing**.....**FranceNuyen**
Another friend who came to the United States after having been married to a cruel Chinese man who so badly mistreated her that she took the life of her baby son in desperation. The mother of Lena.
- AnMei**.....**LisaLu**
The last of the four best friends, who came to the US after seeing her own mother become the mistreated 4th wife of an abusive Chinese businessman. The mother of Rose.

The American Daughters

- June**.....**MingNaWen**
An unmarried writer who decides to travel to China to meet the half-sisters she has never known. The daughter of Suyuan.
- Waverly**.....**TamlynTomita**
A childhood friend of June who is a divorced accountant, and who has a new boyfriend, Rich. The daughter of Lindo.
- Lena**.....**LaurenTom**
An often depressed and newly married woman whose husband, Harold, is extremely cheap. The daughter of Ying Ying.
- Rose**.....**RosilindChao**
A frustrated housewife who decides to divorce her wealthy husband. The daughter of An Mei.

Plot Summary

This film is the complex story of four Chinese women who escape their often tragic lives in China in order to come to the United States, and who then give birth to, and raise, four beautiful American daughters. It takes place in the San Francisco Bay Area in the late 1980s, and centers on the often tense relationships between the mothers, who as women were little valued by society in pre-Revolutionary China, and the daughters, who have unlimited opportunities in the United States. It is also the story of eight women who represent the link between a very old and different society and modern American culture.

The story begins with June deciding to visit China shortly after her mother, Suyuan, has died. She hopes to see her older twin half-sisters, who she has never met, and who Suyuan herself had not seen since they were just a few days old. June is put in contact with the twins by Auntie Lindo, who somehow was able to find out where they were living. Auntie Lindo is not really June's aunt, but along with Ying Ying and An Mei, they are like June's family because they were all such close friends with Suyuan. The four of them had been part of their own Joy Luck Club, in which they passed many afternoons playing the ancient Chinese board game of Mah Jong, and many hours talking about the pain of their lives in China and the hopes that they had for their daughters in America.

A note on the plot: This film is based on the novel of the same name by Amy Tan, which was published in 1986. Like the book, the film jumps back and forth in time, as each of the four mothers and four daughters is given a chance to tell her own story. This can make the plot a little confusing, but if you study the notes for each of the Main Characters (above), it should become easier to follow the course of the movie.

A quick note on the language used: The mothers in this movie often make many of the same grammatical mistakes that are common among Chinese speakers of ESL. This includes the dropping of articles, 3rd person, plural and possessive S, and the verb to be ("Chinese Mah Jong very tricky"). Some of these errors are pointed out in the glossary, but regardless, you should at least be aware of them when the mothers are speaking.

A quick note on a glossary symbol: [W/C] means the text described is a subtitled translation of Chinese.

Some Words and Expressions that You May not Know

*June remembers her Chinese mother (Suyuan),
and her own childhood in America....*

The old woman remembered a swan she bought in Shanghai for a foolish sum.

A “swan” is a beautiful white bird, “foolish” is silly or ridiculous, and a “sum” is the total amount (in this case, the total amount of money).

The bird, boasted the market vendor, was once a duck that stretched its neck in hopes of becoming a goose...

“To boast” is to speak proudly about something. A “vendor” is a person who sells products at a store, and a “goose” is a large and pretty bird.

In America, nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband’s belch.

Another word for a burp or the act of expelling gas from the stomach through the mouth.

Over there nobody will look down on her.

“To look down” on a person is see them as inferior, or not worthy of respect.

Over there, she would be too full to swallow any sorrow.

“Sorrow” is a poetic word for great sadness.

She will know my meaning because I will give her this swan, a creature that’s become more than what was hoped for.

A “creature” is any type of animal.

The immigration officers pulled the swan away from her, leaving the woman fluttering her arms and with only one swan feather for a memory....

“To flutter” is to move with quick waving or flapping motions, such as the way birds move their wings.

The feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions.

If something is “worthless,” it has no value.

“Afar” is a poetic way of saying from far away.

You owe me five bucks!

A “buck” is a very common slang word for a dollar.

Don't put Chinese cabbage in the salad. It's bitter.

"Bitter" is one of the four taste groups (along with sweet, sour and salty). It is unpleasant and acrid. If a person is bitter, they are resentful.

Get over here! Come on!

The most widely used and versatile phrasal verb in English, here meaning "hurry up!"

Don't crush my hair!

"To crush" something is to squeeze it with so much pressure that you can destroy it (though one can't really crush hair!).

Cheese!

The word to use when you are posing for a photograph!

For 30 years, these women feasted, forgot past wrongs, laughed and played.

"To feast" is to eat a lot of excellent food. In this case, a "wrong" is an act that has caused a great harm, injury or injustice.

Each week they hoped to be lucky and that hope was their only joy.

"Joy" is a good word for great happiness.

Now, Chinese Mah Jong very tricky.

Mah Jong is a very popular board game in China. If a game is "tricky," it is difficult to understand or not as easy as it first appears (Note that the verb to be has been dropped here).

If no play well, the game is just like Jewish Mah Jong. No strategy.

"Strategy" is an excellent word for the process of developing a plan to reach a goal, often involving military, economic and political considerations.

We are your auntie and we are very honest people.

Among Chinese speakers of ESL, "auntie" is very commonly used for aunt (Note the dropping of the plural s).

My mother's version of believing in me was believing I could be anything, anything she wanted. The best piano prodigy this side of China.

A "prodigy" is a person who's extremely talented at something.

He'd gone stone-deaf over the years.

If a person is "stone-deaf," they cannot hear anything.

Me and Beethoven; We both hear it in our hearts.

This is Mr. Chong's way of saying he can hear the music even though he is deaf.

Okey dokey. How many sharps? How many flats?

“Okey dokey” is a silly but common way of saying OK.

“Sharps” and “flats” are the way to describe notes in music.

What key are we in? :: Z major.

In music, a “key” is a tone or note (but there is no such key as Z!).

For the recital, more feeling, more gusto!

A “recital” is a small concert often given by an individual musician.

“Gusto” is an excellent word for great liveliness or energy.

I am proud that my silhouette is curvy.

A person’s silhouette is the outline of their body which shows their shape. If a woman’s body is “curvy,” it has a good shape with a lot of curves or bends, and is therefore considered sexy.

Auntie Lindo was mother’s best friend and arch enemy.

“Arch” is a powerful word meaning first or most important.

Their weapons of choice were comparing their children.

A “weapon” is an arm for fighting, such as a gun or knife.

Mom was sick of Auntie Lindo bragging about her daughter Waverly.

“To brag” about something is to speak of it with too much pride, or in an arrogant or boastful manner.

That night, mom figured I’d redeem her ...with my international piano debut.

“To figure” is a common colloquial way of saying to think.

“To redeem” is to do something good or positive in order to make up for something bad or negative that was done earlier. A person’s “debut” is the first time they perform or play in public.

I dust off all her trophy!

A “trophy” is a small statue or other reward that is given for having accomplished something, or having won in a competition.

Twerp!

A funny little insult word for a small and weak person.

I used to go out of my way to prove my mother wrong;

That I wasn’t cut out to be the best of anything.

If a person is “cut out to be” something, they were born in such a way that it was almost certain that they would become like that.

It was like my hands were possessed by Mozart.

“To possess” a person is to enter into their body and take control of them (This is June’s way of saying that when she played piano, she felt like Mozart was inside her, helping her play).

Bravo! Encore! Well done!

“Bravo” is a shout of approval, and an “encore” is a call for more. Both are used after a musician or actor has performed a great show.

After the talent show fiasco, I figured I never had to play the piano again.

A “fiasco” is a great word for a complete failure.

There are two kinds of daughters---obedient or follow own mind.

If a person is “obedient,” they follow orders loyally, without questioning them or resisting.

She barely had time to grab her babies, twin girls.

“To grab” something is to quickly and forcefully take it.

I always try to picture in my mind what really happened.

If you “picture something in your mind,” you try to imagine it.

Your mother always wanted to find them; Her long cherished wish.

If something is “cherished,” it is deeply loved or thought to be very important.

They are very glad, no, overjoyed beyond belief.

If a person is “glad,” they are happy or pleased. If they are “overjoyed,” they are as happy as can possibly be.

Tell them how kind she was, how sincere, how hard-working she was.

If a person is “sincere,” they are very honest, pure or true and genuine in the way they speak. An important word.

It’s so sad for those babies; How could Suyuan give them up?

“To give up” something is to leave it behind or to give it to someone else.

***Lindo recalls her disastrous marriage in China...
and Waverly introduces her new boyfriend Rich to her family.***

She looks like a brat. [W/C]

A good word for a spoiled, badly behaved or obnoxious child.

Don't go by her looks. [W/C]

“Do not judge her character or personality by her physical appearance.”

I had to... fulfill the old matchmaker's guarantee to have many son's with a husband I had never met before.

“To fulfill” a promise is to keep it by doing what was promised.

A “matchmaker” is a person who helps find husbands and wives or boyfriends and girlfriends, for those people looking for a partner.

Stop stuffing yourself [W/C]

If you “stuff yourself,” you are eating too much food.

Look at those spots; Who would want such a dirty daughter in law? [W/C]

A “spot” is a little mark or colored dot, in this case on a child's face.

Pay respect to the ancestors; Be blessed with prosperity [W/C]

“Ancestors” are grandparents and earlier generations. If a person is “blessed,” they are given good luck or fortune. “Prosperity” is a good word for economic and material success or wealth.

That night I would meet my husband;

The one who would control my destiny.

A person's “destiny” is their future, which many think has already been predetermined by God or some other supernatural force.

I decided underneath I knew who I was.

In this case, “underneath” is a way of saying “in my heart.”

I must have prayed too hard!

If a person prays or tries very “hard,” they do so with as much energy and concentration as they can.

My son says you often refuse to sleep with him.

“To sleep with” a person is to have sex with them.

Still, she was not pleased.

Another word for happy, content or satisfied.

It's your fault. Always running around, letting my son's seed spill out. [W/C]

If a person is “running around,” they are constantly moving from one place to another. In this case, “seed” is a silly way to refer to a man's sperm. If a liquid “spills out,” it drops out of its container.

Disgusting little thing! [W/C]

A strong adjective meaning extremely offensive, unpleasant or more colloquially, gross.

What the hell is happening? [W/C]

A common colloquial filler added to WH questions in order to show anger, frustration or other emotion.

They told me that if he stays in this marriage, he will die! :: What's this **bullshit**? [W/C]

A crude but excellent word for lies, half-truths or general nonsense.

The ancestors said if the matter is not settled immediately, they will begin the cycle of destruction. [W/C]

In this case, a “matter” is a general situation, and here, “settled” means solved or resolved. A “cycle of destruction” is a pattern of continuing crisis and disaster.

He said there are three **signs**. [W/C]

In this case, a “sign” is a signal or message that suggests the presence of something else of great importance.

The same mole I had seen all those nights of sleeping just like brother and sister. [W/C]

A “mole” is slightly raised dark spot on the human body.

The open spot in my mouth, where a rotted tooth fell out four years ago. [W/C]

If a tooth is “rotted,” it is physically destroyed and even dead.

To prove it, our ancestor planted the seed in her womb, already ripe in one day [W/C].

A woman’s “womb” is the internal organ where she carries a baby when pregnant. If a seed or fruit is “ripe,” it is mature and ready.

How could you? :: Well, mistakes happen in heaven. [W/C]

A common question that expresses great anger after somebody has done something that is very bad or morally wrong.

The hell with this! Get out!..... [W/C]

A slangy way of expressing anger or frustration.

The servant girl got her marriage....and I got a rail ticket to Shanghai.

A “servant girl” is a dated way of referring to a housekeeper or perhaps au pair, who often takes care of the kids, cleaning and cooking.

Whatever I do, whatever I think, she always has the perfect countermove.

A good word for an action that is done in reaction to what has been done just before. The word implies a good use of strategic thinking.

Even at this age, I knew I had an amazing gift.

“Amazing” is a powerful adjective meaning incredible or fantastic. In this case, a “gift” is special or unique skill or talent that others would love to have.

If they were mean, I could make them sorry.

“Mean” is a common word for rude, abusive or ill-tempered. If you “make a person sorry,” you do something to them that will make them regret what they had done earlier.

Checkmate.

The word used after one player defeats another in the game of chess.

I told my daughter, “Use your horses to run over the enemy.”

In chess, one of the pieces is officially called a knight, although many people just say horses. “To run over” a person is to hit or crush them with great force or speed, often in a vehicle such as a car.

Why do you have to use me to show off?

“To show off” is an important phrasal verb meaning to act in an overly boastful or confident way, often while showing a special talent or skill.

About time! Boy, are you in trouble!

“About time” is a common way of expressing the idea that somebody is very late, or what is about to happen should have taken place a lot earlier. “Boy” is a filler word used to express emotion such as surprise.

She never mentioned it, as if I had never played at all.

“To mention” something is to briefly talk about, or refer to it.

What she said, it was like a curse.

A “curse” is great harm or evil that comes to a person because of a prayer or solemn request by someone else, or because of a God or another force of nature.

This belief in myself. I could actually feel it draining away.

If a liquid “drains away,” it gradually disappears, often the way water does when it washes down the kitchen sink.

I could feel myself becoming so ordinary.

Another way of saying just average, or not special.

The best part of me just disappeared. But I can't put it all on my mother.

In this context, “to put it on” a person is to blame them for something bad that happened.

She needs a cut and a perm.

A “perm” is a type of haircut in which the hair is treated to stay permanently curled.

It’s from that cheap black dye she’s been using at home.

“Dye” is a type of chemical coloring for hair and nails.

God forbid she’d pay to have anything professionally done.

At the beginning of a sentence, “God forbid” is a dramatic way of expressing skepticism or disbelief (“I really doubt she’ll ever pay to get her hair done by a professional barber...”)

Go to fancy barber with torn-up jeans.

In this case, “fancy” means expensive or snobby. If blue jeans are “torn up,” they have a lot of holes or tears in them.

He was gorgeous. He gave her a granddaughter.

A powerful adjective meaning very beautiful (though usually it’s used for women and not men).

Was she satisfied? When we got divorced, she got all upset like it was my fault.

If a person is “satisfied,” they are pleased or content. If a person is “upset,” they are angry, frustrated or emotionally disturbed.

When I finally started dating again, when I tried to hint to her about Rich, that we were living together...

“To date” a person is to go out socially with them to see if there are any romantic possibilities. “To hint to” somebody is to indirectly suggest something without directly saying it.

This was not going to go away, even with her silent treatment.

A slangy expression for the act of refusing to speak to someone if you are angry or upset with them.

Only left-over strips.

A “strip” is a narrow band of cloth or material.

Fur too short. No long hairs.

“Fur” refers to clothing made with the hair or coat of animals.

I wasn’t going to let her get away with it this time.

“To get away with” something illegal or immoral is to do it without getting caught or having to pay a price for having done it.

The love of my life, who treated me like I was perfect.

One way of referring to a person's wife, husband or life partner.

I figured she was going to have to accept Rich, like it or not.

"To figure" is a common way of saying to think. "Like it or not" is a way of saying that something is the way it is, no matter what others think.

Thank God I already prepped him on the Emily Post of Chinese manners.

"To prep" a person is to prepare them for an important test or event. Emily Post is a well known writer on how to act correctly in various social situations. "Manners" refer to a person's style of behavior.

Let me make a toast.

"To make a toast" is to honor a person by giving a very brief speech while people in the room raise their glasses before drinking.

He should have taken only a small spoonful of the best dish until everyone had had a helping.

A "spoonful" is the amount of food that fits in a spoon. In this context, a "helping" is a small amount of food.

He has good appetite.

A person's "appetite" is the hunger they have.

He shouldn't have bragged he was a fast learner.

"To brag" about a talent or accomplishment is to boast about it, or to talk about it in an overly confident or arrogant manner.

That was our cue to eat some and proclaim it was the best she ever made.

A "cue" is a signal or hint, such as a word or sound, to do something. "To proclaim" means to officially say or declare.

It never came up. :: **How come?**

"To come up" in conversation means to be discussed.

"How come?" is a very common way of asking why.

She'd rather get rectal cancer.

"Rectal" refers to the part of the digestive tract near the anus (asshole).

Soft wave for body; what do you think?

In this case, "body" refers to the health and vibrancy of hair.

We don't want it looking too weird or kinky.

"Weird" is an excellent word meaning strange or bizarre, and "kinky" is a way of referring to strange or unconventional sexual behavior.

If I don't like your Rich, I act polite, say nothing.

An important word meaning well-behaved and nice or courteous.

Let him have big cancer, let my daughter be a widow.

A "widow" is a woman whose husband has died.

***Ying Ying tells of her marriage at 16 to a horrible Chinese playboy,
and Lena faces her own awful relationship with Harold.***

Dog fart! [W/C]

A "fart" is a crude word for the passing of intestinal gas, and this is apparently an insult in Chinese (but it's not used as such in English).

I have persuaded the famous diva....to sing in honor of my son. [W/C]

"To persuade" somebody to do something is to convince them to do it. A "diva" is a goddess or important women, especially in the arts.

There he was, with his opera singer. This was not his first conquest!

In this case, a "conquest" is the act of successfully seducing and sleeping with a women (To conquer a country is to defeat and control it).

He became forgetful.

A good adjective for a person who is starting to lose their memory.

This person is a whore! Just like you! [W/C]

A crude but common word for a prostitute.

Clean up this mess. [W/C]

An important word for a disorderly, cluttered or dirty area that needs to be organized or cleaned up.

My whole life turned in this moment.

In this case, "to turn" means to dramatically change, though this word is rarely used in that way.

He had taken from me my innocence, my youth, my heart, so I took from him the only thing I could.

A person's "youth" is the quality that makes them young, with the energy and spirit of a young person or child.

My baby was so light in my arms because his little spirit had flown away.

A person's "spirit" is the non-physical part of them that lives on after they die (at least in theory!).

As I was growing up, there were times when mom went through these bad spells.

A “bad spell” is a period of time when many important things seem to go wrong in life, or when a person is sick or depressed.

I hope she can finally be happy for me.

Note that a person can be happy (or sad) *for* another person.

Sharing, that’s what Harold calls it. Everything 50/50.

“50/50” is a common way of saying that something is divided evenly between 2 people (here, the price of things that are bought as a couple).

The irony is, I was the one who started it that way.

An important but difficult word that often refers to the unexpected difference between the actual result of a series of events and what was expected to happen.

So what if I had a salad and he had three courses.

“So what” is a widely used colloquial way of saying something is not important. In a meal, a “course” is a separately served portion of food (Many big Chinese dinners have eight or more courses!).

We were equals, except I work in his firm and he pays himself 7 times more than he pays me.

A “firm” is a partnership of two or more professional people, such as doctors or lawyers, who work together as a single business.

We agreed. Love, yes, false dependencies, no.

If something is “false,” it is not true. A “dependency” is the state of needing someone or something else to survive (Ying Ying is telling Lena that she doesn’t really need her husband to do well in life).

Of course, we agreed early on not to include personal stuff, like my tampons and feminine hygiene spray.

“Stuff” is a key word referring to things in general. “Tampons” are feminine napkins used when women have their periods, and “feminine hygiene spray” is used by women to make them feel cleaner (A silly product for those women who already have good hygiene!)

Honey, isn’t there a generic brand of cat food?

A “generic brand” is a product that is cheaper than a famous name brand, but is often the exact same quality (There are generic brands for most products, from medicine to potato chips),

For crying out loud, \$34.67.

A curious colloquial expression to express frustration or anger.

We still have these philosophical arguments about the grey areas.

“Grey areas, ” unlike those things that are considered “black and white,” are topics or situations that are not so easy to have a strong opinion on because it’s not so clear what the right answer is.

Even the goddamn cat’s fleas.

“Goddamn” is a crude filler term that is used to show anger.

“Fleas” are the horrible tiny insects that make cats and dogs scratch.

Now you want me to pay to get rid of the fleas?

“To get rid of” something is to eliminate or destroy it.

When you buy charcoal, you have to buy lighter fluid.

“Charcoal” is the small pieces of black coal that is used for barbecue fires, and “lighter fluid” is the chemical used to make fires stronger.

I don’t touch the stuff.

One way of saying “I never drink it.”

One million dollars and the walls are still crooked.

If something is “crooked,” it is bent, or not straight.

Harold wanted to keep it that way for the effect.

In this case, “the effect” refers to the feeling or sensation that the crooked walls give to the people that are in the room.

A person has to lie here thinking she’s in a coffin.

A “coffin” is the long narrow box in which dead people are buried.

It’s not too sturdy.

If something is “sturdy,” it is strong or firm.

What an idiot! It’s not a drag race!

An “idiot” is a stupid person, or perhaps a fool or moron. A “drag race” is a type of auto race.

Why do you have to be so goddamn fair?

An important word meaning unbiased or without prejudice (A fair person treats people fairly, or the way they deserve to be treated).

The way we account for everything...I’m sick of it.

In this case, “to account for” something is to decide how to pay for it.

“To be sick of” something is a way of saying to be very tired of it.

Adding things up. Subtracting. Making it come out even when it's not.
If two sides "come out even," it is thought that they are equal.

This is not about fleas. This is not the point! :: **What's the point?**
An extremely important question in which a person is basically asking "What exactly do you want to say?"

We need to think about what this marriage is based on, not this balance sheet.
A "balance sheet" is a chart that shows how much money a business is both spending and earning.

All my regrets. I will gather them together.
A "regret" is a feeling of frustration for something that has happened in the past. "To gather" is to collect in order to bring together.

I am waiting like a tiger in the trees, now waiting to leap out and cut her spirit loose.
"To leap out" is to jump out, perhaps from behind a hidden place, with great force and energy.

Respect, tenderness.
"Tenderness" is the quality of being soft, caring or gentle, often while in a close or intimate relationship.

Tell him now and leave this lopsided house!
If a building is "lopsided," it is leaning to one side, or out of balance.

Losing him does not matter. It is you who will be found and cherished.
If a person is "cherished," they are much valued and loved.

Yeah, put that baby right on the ceiling.
Note that some people colloquially use the word "baby" to refer to things in general. In this case, to a mirror.

They're allies.
An "ally" is a person who is on your side in a fight against another (During World War 2, the US and England were allies).

Now it's getting out of hand, because after the party, we're going to Lake Tahoe, and he actually asked her to come with us.
If a situation gets "out of hand," it becomes very uncomfortable, crazy or difficult to control.

Do I have to use chopsticks?
The small sticks used for eating in countries such as Japan and China.

Her auntie June is putting her down for a nap.

“To put a child down” is to put them to bed so they can sleep for the night, or at least take a nap.

I’ll go check on her.

“To check on” a person is to make sure that they are ok.

She had a daughter who grew up speaking only English and swallowing more coca cola than sorrow.

“Sorrow” is a poetic word for great pain or suffering.

A good intention means everything your mother wants for you, like blowing out candles on your birthday cake.

“Good intentions” are honest desires or wishes to help others.

***An Mei recalls her mom’s life as a 4th wife,
and Rose decides to end her marriage to Ted.***

Worst of all, I had to wonder in secret. I had no memory of my mother because she was kicked out of the house when I was four years old.

“To wonder’ about something is to feel curiosity about it. If a person is “kicked out” out of a place, they are forced to leave, often because the owner is very angry at them.

If you have any self-respect, you should kill yourself. [W/C]

“Self-respect” is an important word that refers to the respect, admiration or love that a person has for themselves, or for their general position or accomplishments in life.

Your husband died and you’ve become another man’s concubine.

A “concubine” is a man’s long-term sexual partner, but not wife.

The scar from the soup was all I had left from my mother.

A “scar” is a colored mark that is left on skin after it has been burned or injured.

They accused her of breaking her vow as a widow.

A “vow” is a very solemn or serious promise.

If you have any dignity, leave right away! [W/C]

“Dignity” is a key word that refers to the quality of being admired and respected as well as a certain grace and maturity in behavior.

Only the most dutiful of daughters would put her flesh in a soup to save her mother's life.

If a person is "dutiful," they are loyal and obedient and do what they are told. A person's "flesh" is their skin, muscle and other soft parts.

My mother did this with her whole heart even though my grandmother had disowned her.

If a parent "disowns" a child, they act as if they were never related.

This is how a daughter honors her mother.

"To honor" a person is to treat them with great respect and dignity.

This is the most important sacrifice a daughter can make for her mother.

In this case, a "sacrifice" is the act of giving up something very important in order to help somebody else.

If you take your daughter, she will become like you, never able to face anyone, never able to lift her head.

"To face" a person is to be able to talk to and look at them, without being embarrassed or humiliated (A person who can't lift their head usually can't do so because they are so ashamed).

You are going to ruin her whole life!

"To ruin" something is to completely destroy it.

Give the soup to mommy; I'm afraid you'll spill it.

"To spill" a liquid is to accidentally let it fall out its container.

Bitter sweet Hershey bar. Skippy crunchy. Good for only chocolate peanut butter pie. Who else eat?

The "Bitter-sweet Hershey chocolate bar" is a well known type of chocolate bar, and the "Skippy crunchy style" is a much loved brand of peanut-butter. Note that the correct form of the last sentence should be "Who else would eat this?"

We both thought it was time to settle all the property stuff.

"To settle" an argument is to come to an agreement. In this case, "the property stuff" refers to various pieces of property such as houses and cars that a couple who are getting divorced will often fight over.

He introduced himself on campus. He asked to borrow my notes.

A "campus" is the physical land where a school is located.

I pretended I didn't know who he was.

"To pretend" is to give a false appearance or to make believe (Here, she was acting as if she didn't know who he was, but in fact she did).

I knew who you were when you came up to me.

“To come up” to a person is to approach or walk up to them.

I was excited and flattered when you came on to me.

If a person is “flattered,” they feel content or happy for having been spoken highly of or praised by another person. If a man “comes on to” a woman, he tries to seduce her or get her romantically or sexually interested in him.

I didn’t say it to impress you.

“To impress” a person is to do something that leaves them with a strong memory (often because of having said something persuasive or having accomplished something of excellence).

His dad owned a publishing empire. His mom’s family had wineries.

A “publishing empire” is a huge business organization involved in the production of books, magazines, newspapers or other printed media. A “winery” turns grapes into wine.

Is this a private reverie, or can an old lady join you?

A “reverie” is the act of daydreaming or being lost in thought (but note that this word, from the French word for dream, is rarely used).

It’s always a thrill for a mother to hear that sort of excitement in her son’s voice.

A good word for a sudden wave of great excitement or emotion.

I want you to know Rose, we’re a fairly liberal family.

Here, “liberal” means open-minded and not at all racist.

It was straight out of some awful racist movie like The World of Suzie Wong.

“Awful” is a good alternative word to horrible or terrible. “The World of Suzie Wong” is a 1960 film that is known for silly stereotypes about Chinese women.

He’s going to be judged by people of a different standard.

A key word for a person’s expected level of quality or excellence.

They won’t be as understanding as we are.

If a person is “understanding,” they are sensitive, tolerant or sympathetic.

That’s hardly the case!

“That is simply not true!”

Hello, darling. You know, I always knew you were a **jerk**, but still, this is the first time in my life I'm ashamed of you.

An important insult word for a fool, idiot, moron, asshole, creep, etc...

How dare you use that language!

"How dare you..." is a way of expressing great anger after a person has said or done something that appears to be insulting.

I'm sorry, mom, you made a fucking asshole out of yourself in front of the woman I love.

This is a much more vulgar version of "to make a fool out of yourself."

We're outta here.

A very slangy way of saying "We should now leave."

After the wedding, the fears begin to sink in, take hold.

If fear or other emotions begin to "sink in," or "take hold," they become more noticeable or serious.

I promised myself I could handle it.

"To handle" a difficult situation is to be able to deal with it, live with it or survive it well.

Could you chop them up into smaller slices?

"To chop" something is to forcefully cut it into smaller pieces.

Could you dress the deviled eggs with the tomatoes.

In this case, "to dress" a food is to doctorate or cover it. "Deviled eggs" are hard-boiled in which the yolk has been whipped fine like a cream.

At first, it was just a bunch of little things, loving things a wife would do behind the scenes without him ever asking.

A "bunch" is another word for a lot or a group of. If a person does something "behind the scenes," they do it quietly or even secretly, without anybody else even noticing.

I told myself that this was the selfless way, the loving way, instead of the chickenshit way.

"Selfless" means being concerned only with others, or the opposite of selfish. "Chickenshit" is a crude but useful word meaning cowardly, or without courage (It can also be used as a noun).

I was offered a fellowship in fine arts to this school I admired in Idaho.

A "fellowship" is a paid position in a university to study and teach. "Fine arts" refers to such endeavors as painting, classical music, etc.

Of course, that was out of the question.

If something is “out of the question,” it is impossible.

There were four or five business affairs each week.

In this context, a way of referring to important business meetings, perhaps including various meals in which business is discussed.

I got pregnant for the worst reason imaginable; A last attempt to hang on.

“To hang on” is to try and survive (In this case, Rose’s way of trying desperately to make her relationship work with her husband).

I’ll figure something out.

“I’ll find a solution to this problem.”

I could defrost a chicken if the lamb chops are too heavy.

“To defrost” frozen food is to warm it up so it is no longer frozen.

I’d like to hear your voice, even if we disagree.

In this case, “voice” is used as a word for hopes or desires.

What’s her fucking name?

Here, a very vulgar filler adjective which is used to express anger.

What you going to do with leftovers after he eat one slice?

Food that is left but still edible, after everyone has finished eating.

I like being tragic, ma. I learned it from you.

If something is “tragic,” it is marked by horrible pain, suffering or loss.

He take you for granted. You the foolish one.

“To take a person for granted” is to not appreciate them. If a person is “foolish,” they act in a silly or unwise way that could hurt them later.

You never know what you’re worth, until too late.

A person’s “worth” is how much they are valued by others.

First wife was a ghost of a woman.

One way of referring to a woman who is old, weak, and perhaps treated as if she were already dead (A “ghost” is the spirit of a dead person).

She blinded herself to the faults of her daughters.

“To blind yourself” to something is to refuse to see it because it is unpleasant. A person’s faults are their negative qualities.

Third wife lived in fear she'd be kicked out, but even she outranked my mother, who was only 4th wife.

If one person “outranks” another, they are considered to be at a higher or more important level (Note the dropping of the definite articles).

The empress of the household.

An “empress” is a queen (An “emperor” is a king). A “household” refers to all those people who live together in a house or apartment.

A treasure like you...needs precious pearls to lighten up your face. [W/C]

A “treasure” is anything of great value (It usually refers to diamonds or gold, but it can be used for people). If something is “precious,” it is very highly valued or cherished. “Pearls” are very valuable and tiny stone-like structures that are found in the shells of certain sea animals.

A low-class concubine.

One way of referring to a mistress who is not respected at all, and who is basically used as a permanent prostitute.

Go to your nanny's room. [W/C]

A “nanny” is a servant who cleans the house and often cooks and takes care of the children in the house.

You went to the temple to make offerings for my father. [W/C]

A “temple” is a church building. To “make offerings” is to offer some small gift of appreciation for those who have died.

No one would take her in, no one would give her work, and she was carrying Wu Tsing's child.

“To take in” a person is to allow them to live in your house. “To carry” a baby is to be pregnant with it.

Second wife told me my mother died by accident, taking too much opium.

A powerful and dangerous drug that is used to make heroin, which became popular in China in the 19th century.

When the poison broke in her body, she whispered to me that she would kill her own weak spirit so that she could give me a strong one.

In this case, a person's “spirit” is their non-physical energy. This is An Mei's poetic way of explaining why her mom committed suicide.

My mother's ghost will return in three days to settle scores! [W/C]

If a person decides to “settle scores,” they return to get revenge for the injustices or bad things that had been done to them.

That day will be the lunar New Year. [W/C]

“Lunar” refers to the moon.

All debts must be paid by then or horrible tragedies will befall you! [W/C]

“Debts” are money that are owed by one person to another. A “tragedy” is a horrible cause of great pain, suffering or loss. If a tragedy “befalls” a person, it will happen to them (This is a poetic but rare verb).

Wu Tsiang promised to revere my mother as if she had been first wife.

To “revere” a person is to honor and show great respect toward them.

On that day, I learned to shout.

Another way to say scream or yell.

I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people’s misery and to eat my own bitterness.

Here, “bitterness” is anger or great resentment.

I died for my daughter’s sake.

If you do something “for another person’s sake,” you do it for their benefit or well-being.

I was the one who told you your love was worth more than mine. I was so full of shit!

A crude but very useful expression. If a person is “full of shit,” they are saying lies, half-truths or just general nonsense.

Rose returns to China to see the side of her family she had never known...

I was the biggest disappointment in my mother’s life.

A sentence that seems to capture the relationship that all four daughters had with their moms, who expected so much of them.

Yeah, I could’ve sworn...

One way of saying “...but I thought for sure that...”
A common way of expressing surprise

After all these years, she was still so sneaky.

A good little adjective that describes a person who is always trying to get what they want, either by lying, cheating or doing unfair things in very subtle or hard to notice ways.

One of my clients seems to think freelance means free just because were friends.

A “client” is a customer for a professional, such as a lawyer or architect. If a person works “freelance,” they work on their own, or for themselves instead of for another employer or company.

That stuff you wrote--The firm decided it was unacceptable.

If a piece of work is “unacceptable,” it is so bad or unsatisfactory that it can’t be used. A powerful little adjective.

You said it was terrific! :: I didn’t want to hurt your feelings.

Another word for excellent, great or fantastic.

All copy needs fine-tuning. Rewrites are free, of course.

In this context, “copy” refers to the writing that is used in an advertisement. “To fine-tune” writing is to edit it one last time so that it reads better.

It’s just not, well, sophisticated.

If a piece of writing is “sophisticated,” it has an educated and polished feel to it, especially if it’s describing something complicated.

Satisfaction guaranteed? For today’s’ and tomorrow’s tax needs?

The two words that many businesses use to promise their customers that they will be happy with the products they buy.

I was so humiliated.

If a person has been “humiliated,” they are made to feel very embarrassed, foolish or bad about themselves.

Outsmarted by Waverly and betrayed by my own mother.

“To outsmart” a person is to be more intelligent than they are, often in the context of some type of contest or competition. “To betray” a person is to suddenly work against their interests, or to even force them into the hands of an enemy, despite a previous close or loyal relationship.

I’m just sorry you got stuck with such a loser.

If a person is “stuck with” a person, they are forced to stay with them. A “loser” is an insult word for a person with no or few good qualities.

Every time you hoped for something, I couldn’t deliver. It hurt.

In this case, “to deliver” means to obtain or give.

You have style no one can take. I see you.

In this case, “style” is a certain grace or dignity in life.

It's amazing, isn't it?

An important alternative to incredible or unbelievable.

You signed the letter in my mother's name?!

In this case, to sign a letter in somebody's name is to sign it *with* their name, pretending to be them!

She hides everything, jewelry, even the fake stuff.

"Fake" jewelry or paintings are those that are not real, but are cheap copies that have little true value.

Very bad dysentery. Back then, no medicine, no doctors.

A disease caused by a bad stomach infection.

She left a note with all her gold, promising more if babies brought to their father in Chunking.

A major city in central China.

She thought she wasn't worthy enough to give to you.

In this case, "worthy" means deserving.

On the day you born, she transfer all her hope to you.

"To transfer" something means to move it from one place to another (or in this case, from one person to another).

The feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions.

If something is "worthless," it has no value.

"Afar" is a poetic way of saying from far away.

I found the best of myself; What she kept for all of us. Her long-cherished wish.

If something is "cherished," it is much loved or highly valued.

The Joy Luck Club

Possible Topics for ESL Class Discussion

- 1) Do you think parents have a harder time knowing their own children if they are raised in a different culture from their own?

- 2) Are the tensions seen here between the mothers and daughters part of most mother-daughter relationships, or is it specific to immigrants?

- 3) What are the biggest differences in culture between 1940s China and 1980s America? In terms of society's treatment of women, how much has China changed since the stories seen in this film?

- 4) How are men portrayed in this film?

- 5) Of all the mother's, whose story was the most dramatic?

- 6) What did you like and not like about this movie?

