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The Preserved Power of the Mother-Daughter Relationship

by Natalie Berent

(English 1154)

Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, “Youth fades; love droops; the leaves of friendship fall; a mother's secret hope outlives them all” (Guillemets). That statement truly captures the essence of motherhood. Like a pillar withstanding the tremendous forces bombarding us throughout our lives, our mothers humbly support us and constantly prevent our downfall. Like Holmes, author Amy Tan also accurately describes the qualities of mother-daughter relationships in her novel *The Joy Luck Club*. With a focus on a number of intergenerational and cross-cultural relationships, Tan eloquently depicts these mothers and daughters in a way that truly captures the audience's heart. Likewise, when director Wayne Wang chose to develop the film version of this ground-breaking novel, he accomplished no less. Although Wang may have altered a number of aspects of Tan's novel, he nonetheless preserved many substantial qualities and introduced many of his own unique attributes to the piece to make it all the more powerful. Creating a masterpiece from a masterpiece is remarkably uncommon, yet Wang achieved just this with his 1993 adaptation.

In the film version of *The Joy Luck Club*, Wang makes his adaptation of Tan's novel unique by both eliminating and changing a number of the stories. In terms of stories deleted altogether, Wang chose to eliminate “The Moon Lady” completely. One reason he may have chosen to do this is because in comparison to a number of other stories within the film, “The Moon Lady” lacks depth and the genuine ability to draw the audience in with scandal, tragedy, or mother-daughter lessons that the other stories sufficiently provide. Likewise, considering a film adaptation requires a number of cuts due to the inflexibility of time, a story such as this with a lesser ability to keep the attention of the audience is rightfully one to be discarded (Giannetti 309). Although Wang chose to get rid of “The Moon Lady,” he solves the dilemma of having Ying-Ying St. Clair's upbringing and character go unexplained by emphasizing them in other scenes of the film. In “The Moon Lady,” Tan states that Ying-Ying's Amah, or her nurse, told her that “it is wrong to think of your own needs...A girl can never ask, only listen” (68). Rather than including this scene in the film, Wang chose to incorporate this lesson learned by Ying-Ying by frequently portraying her in more silent and somber scenes in which she answers to no one. Likewise, when the vase of flowers falls in Lena's guest bedroom, Ying-Ying says “my daughter will hear me calling even though I've said no words.” With use of dialogue and clearly observable character behaviors such as these, Wang successfully captured the aspects of Ying-Ying St. Clair that Amy Tan had intended.

Another story that was entirely eliminated from the film version was Tan's story of “The Voice from the Wall.” For a number of reasons, this story may also have been unnecessary to make sense of the film's plot. In the case of Ying-Ying's second baby son that Tan mentions was likewise unwanted by St. Clair, Wang may have felt that one son being unwanted and thus killed by Ying-Ying was enough to demonstrate her hatred of being forced to have a baby (Tan 109). Therefore, it would be only counterproductive to further emphasize this aspect of Ying-Ying's character that the drowning of her son already substantially captured in the film. On that note, the fact that Wang chose to show Ying-Ying drowning her son rather than aborting him prior to birth as Tan described in her novel was another positive change made in the film (281). Although both versions of the baby's murder are horrific in their own respects, Wang made a good choice by portraying the death as far less bloody and graphic in the film. Displaying an abortion in the film would have greatly reduced the target audience to only mature viewers. By removing the screaming Sorci family as mentioned in

Tan's story "The Voice from the Wall," Wang also made a good decision (120). Although interesting in the novel, the Sorci family would only serve as a side story in the film; one that would merely distract from the main plot. Its removal focuses the plot and prevents the use of irrelevant and temporary characters.

In addition to the stories that Wayne Wang completely deleted from the film, he also removed a number of smaller aspects of other stories as well. One of the stories that Wang chose to alter was "Half and Half." Although he stays true to Tan's description of the relationship between Rose Hsu Jordan and Ted Jordan, the memory of An-Mei losing her son, Bing, is never mentioned (140). This may be because in the film, Wang portrays An-Mei as a woman full of hope and strength; displaying her weakness and loss of faith after the death of her child would only contradict her image.

Along with the changes in An-Mei's character, Wang also revised many aspects of her daughter's story as well. In Tan's story "Without Wood," Rose Hsu Jordan describes Old Mr. Chou who "was the guardian of a door that opened into dreams" (207). In the story, Rose is forever impacted by his message that bad things happen when she chooses not to listen to her mother (208). Later in the story as Rose discovers that her husband Ted is having an affair, he proceeds to claim their home for he and his soon-to-be bride; a move that leaves her paralyzed in bed for days (217). In the film, Wang gave Rose a more powerful persona and portrays her as a woman with self-respect and dignity. He might have done this to tie the messages of her and her mother together. Without Bing mentioned in An-Mei's story to capture her in a state of faithlessness, An-Mei is able to teach her daughter how to recognize her own strength and worth, presenting the women far more admirably (*The Joy Luck Club*). Another minor alteration occurred in the story "A Pair of Tickets." In the novel, Tan described both June and her father traveling to China to greet June's long lost sisters (307). Although in the film Wang chose to include June's father by allowing him to tell June the story of her mother's immigration, the journey to China rested solely in the hands of June. By doing this, Wang made a decision that really strengthens the film's ending. He allowed the audience to feel the power of Suyuan through the similar faces of the siblings as they meet for the first time. Had he placed June's father in this scene, as well as any other family members, the scene would surely lose the level of emotion it possessed. Despite the fact that Wang chose to modify minor aspects of Tan's original story, his decisions worked brilliantly for the purpose of the film.

As numerous as Wayne Wang's alterations may seem, he also maintained many important aspects to create a faithful adaptation. In the case of the story "The Red Candle," Wang successfully captured the essence of Tan's description of each character, theme, and plot. The way Lindo Jong's mother treated Lindo as though she were already someone else's daughter, the way her husband treated her in their young marriage, and even the way Lindo played upon the superstitions of Huang Taitai in order to escape her terrible marriage were all parts of Tan's story represented magnificently by Wang (42-63). With the exception of the red candle aspect of the story that Wang left out, the adaptation of Tan's "The Red Candle" covered nearly every detail. The absence of the red candle was a minor detail that would have only been an unnecessary complication to halt the progression of the plot. Displaying Lindo as she suffered through a marriage that could not be ended with a simple candle burning out allowed the audience to observe her gaining strength and character from her sufferings. Another aspect that Wang perfectly mirrored in his adaptation was the entire relationship between Harold and Lena. The way that Tan portrayed them as a couple sinking in their endless lists and equal spending habits was portrayed on film in the best way imaginable (173-180). Wang also included a number of Tan's original stories without any changes whatsoever. These stories, including "Scar," "The Rules of the Game," and "Two Kinds" are truly what give the fans of Amy Tan's novel a visual account of a story with which they've become so familiar. Needless to say, these portions of the novel that Wang chose to include in the film adaptation were unique and beneficial to the piece in their own way; none of them stood out as a mistake to include in the final product.

But the impact of Wang's masterpiece went beyond a simple replication of a brilliant work of literature. He used a variety of symbols, settings, and visual techniques to enhance the piece in a way that only a film would be able to. One of these recognizable symbols throughout the film is the use of color, especially in clothing. Throughout the entire film, one can find red, white, and blue in almost every scene. In the scene where Lindo walks with her daughter Waverly down the street, proudly displaying her magazine with her daughter's face on the cover, Lindo appears to be wearing a red and white outfit while Waverly appears to be wearing red, white, and blue. When the disagreement arises between them, it is as though Lindo is missing a part of what Waverly, a native-born American, understands. Because Lindo is lacking one of the three colors of the American flag, she may also be lacking the ability to recognize the difference between pride and bragging; an attribute that may be looked upon differently in China. Likewise, in the scene where Lindo is slapped across the face by Huang Taitai for her inability to give her a grandson, Taitai is wearing a striking purple dress. Although purple can symbolize a variety of things, it could serve as a visual sign of a warning that danger may be approaching (Lexico Publishing Group). The audience may be receiving a warning that Lindo is in danger even before she receives the harsh strike to the side of her face.

The setting also appears to give the audience an understanding that dialogue alone cannot convey. In Tan's novel, Rose and Ted Jordan's garden plays a significant role in the status of their marriage. It is clear when the garden appears to be neglected that Rose realizes that her marriage has too lacked the attention that it needs (215). Wang integrated this symbolism within the film by displaying a shot of the garden chairs toppled over in complete disarray, staying true to the intention of the author while adding his own unique touch. Likewise, when Lindo Jong awaits the meeting of her first husband on their wedding day, a crash of lighting and a boom of thunder clearly foreshadow unhappiness the marriage will bring her. These developments in the settings of the film are additions that truly benefit the story in a way that is completely separate from the novel itself.

Many of the visual effects utilized by Wayne Wang also helped to create a more valuable story. In the final scene of the film, as June approaches her sisters, the audience sees through June's eyes her own mother looking back at her. Soon after, the audience views the sisters through June's eyes again and the face that was once her mother's becomes a stranger. By doing this, Wang gave the audience a visual sense of how June's mother is present with her on this journey even though she is no longer alive. The emotions that this scene arouses within the audience cannot be found in the novel; it is solely the creation of film. Also, the power of the shot where the vase of flowers crashes to the floor in Lena's guest bedroom is also an effect that is exclusively part of the film. Despite the fact that Tan mentioned this occurrence in her novel, the feeling of a true breaking point happening between Lena and Harold is so strongly represented by the slow spread of the water and the pieces of broken glass and flowers scattering the floor as they appear in the film (180). The words that Amy Tan uses to tell her story are powerful, but Wayne Wang's visual additions only added more feeling to create a stunning work of art.

Defining motherhood and all its complexities is a difficult task, but Amy Tan was successful at just this with her novel *The Joy Luck Club*. In the transition from the written story to the movie screen, Wang was likewise successful with such a difficult job. Although both artists are unique in their own ways, each accomplished something marvelous with many similarities and differences. In the production of the adaptation, Wang incorporated a number of his own visual techniques and symbols that produced a piece that Tan herself would not have been able to create with the written word alone. Likewise, Wang might have eliminated various parts of Tan's original story, but he nonetheless truly captured Tan's intended themes, plot, and character personalities in the final product. The final result of Wang's creation was without doubt a faithful adaptation, one that leaves the audience feeling as though they've just walked out of the pages of Tan's novel.

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