

# AMY TAN

(born 1952)

As a teenager growing up in a Chinese American family, Amy Tan tried desperately to blend into the American world of “hot dogs and apple pie.” She even considered having plastic surgery to make her features look more American. Yet she gradually came to value her cultural heritage, and a trip to China when she was thirty-five helped Tan to rediscover her Chinese roots.

In 1985, Tan—who was working as a freelance business writer—decided to try her hand at writing fiction. In 1985, she submitted a story to a writing workshop. Out of that story, which eventually became “Rules of the Game,” she developed her popular and acclaimed first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*. Many of the tales in the novel focus on mother-daughter relationships within Chinese American families. They explore both the joys and difficulties of a dual heritage—particularly the struggles of second-generation Americans who feel torn between two ways of life.

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## RULES OF THE GAME

My mother imparted her daily truths so she could help my older brothers and me rise above our circumstances.

We lived in San Francisco's Chinatown,<sup>1</sup> on Waverly Place, the street for which I was named. Waverly was my official name for important American documents; my family called me Mei-mei, the “little sister.” Like most of the other Chinese children who played in the back alleys of restaurants and curio shops, I didn't think we were poor. Our two-bedroom flat was warm and clean, and I ate three five-course meals every day, beginning with a soup full of mysterious things I didn't want to know the names of.

I was five when my mother taught me the Chinese art of invisible strength. It was a strategy for winning arguments, respect

1. **Chinatown:** the 12-block-square Chinese district of San Francisco.

from others, and eventually, though neither of us knew it at the time, chess games.

"Bite back your tongue," hissed my mother when I cried loudly, yanking her hand toward the store that sold bags of salted candy plums. At home she said, "Wise guy, he not go against wind. In Chinese, we say come from south, blow with wind—poom!—north will follow. Strongest wind cannot be see."

The next week I bit back my tongue as we entered the store with the forbidden candies. When my mother finished her shopping, she quietly plucked a small bag of plums from the rack and put it on the counter with the rest of the items.

My oldest brother, Vincent, was the one who actually got the chess set. It was Christmas. The missionary ladies of the First Chinese Baptist Church had put together a Santa bag of gifts donated by members of another church and had organized a party.

One of the Chinese parishioners had donned a Santa Claus costume and a stiff paper beard with cotton balls glued to it. I think the only children who believed he was the real thing were too young to know Santa wasn't Chinese.

When it was my turn, the Santa man asked me how old I was. I thought it was a trick question; I was seven according to the American formula and eight by the Chinese calendar<sup>2</sup>. I said I was born on March 7, 1951. That seemed to satisfy him. He then solemnly asked if I had been a very good little girl this year and did I believe in Jesus Christ and obey my parents. I knew the only answer to that. I nodded back with equal solemnity.

Having watched the other children opening their gifts, I already knew that the big gifts were not necessarily the nicest ones. I peered into the sack and chose a heavy, compact box that was wrapped in shiny silver foil and tied with a red satin ribbon. It was a twelve-pack of Life Savers; I spent the rest of the party arranging the candy tubes in the order of my favorites. My brother Winston chose wisely as well. He got an authentic miniature replica of a World War II submarine.

Vincent's chess set would have been a very decent present to get at a church Christmas party, except that it was obviously used

2. **Chinese calendar:** the Chinese lunar calendar, which differs from the Western (Gregorian) solar calendar.

and, as we discovered later, it was missing a black pawn and a white knight. My mother graciously thanked the unknown benefactress, saying, "Too good. Cost too much." At which point, an old lady with fine, white, wispy hair nodded toward our family and said with a whistling whisper, "Merry, merry Christmas."

When we got home, my mother told Vincent to throw the chess set away. "She not want it. We not want it," she said, tossing her head stiffly to the side with a tight, proud smile. My brothers had deaf ears. They were already lining up the chess pieces and reading the dog-eared instruction book.

"Me next!" I begged between games. Vincent at first refused to let me play, but when I offered my Life Savers as replacements for the buttons that filled in for missing pieces, he relented. He chose the flavors: wild cherry for the black pawn and peppermint for the white knight. The winner could eat both.

As our mother sprinkled flour and rolled out small, doughy circles for the steamed dumplings that would be our dinner that night, Vincent explained the rules, pointing to each chess piece. "You have sixteen pieces, and so do I. The pawns can only move forward one step, except on the first move. Then they can move two. But they can only take other men by moving diagonally."

"Why can't they move more steps?" I asked as I moved my pawn.

"Because they're pawns," he said.

"But why do they go diagonally to take other men? Why aren't there any women and children?"

"Why is the sky blue? Why must you always ask stupid questions?" said Vincent. "This is a game. These are the rules. I didn't make them up. See. Here. In the book." He jabbed a page with a pawn in his hand. "Pawn. P-A-W-N. Read it yourself."

My mother patted the flour off her hands. "Let me see book," she said quietly. She scanned the pages quickly, not reading the foreign English symbols, seeming to deliberately search for nothing in particular.

"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. They not telling you why so you can use their way go forward. They say don't know why, you find out yourself. But they knowing all the time. Better you take it, find out why yourself." She returned the book with a satisfied smile.

I found out about all the whys later. I learned about opening moves and why it's important to control the center early on; the shortest distance between two points is straight down the middle. I learned about the middle game and why tactics between two adversaries are like clashing ideas; the one who plays best has the clearest plans for both attacking and getting out of traps. I learned why it is essential in the endgame<sup>3</sup> to have foresight, a mathematical understanding of all possible moves, and patience; all weaknesses and advantages become evident to a strong adversary and are obscured to a tiring opponent. I discovered that for the whole game one must gather invisible strengths and see the endgame before the game begins.

I also found out why I should never reveal "why" to others. A little knowledge withheld is a great advantage one should store for future use. That is the power of chess. It is a game of secrets in which one must show and never tell.

One cold spring afternoon while walking home from school, I detoured through the playground at the end of our alley and saw two old men playing chess. They were seated across a folding table, surrounded by other old men smoking pipes, eating peanuts, and watching.

I ran home and grabbed Vincent's chess set. I also carefully selected two prized rolls of Life Savers. I came back to the park and approached a man who was observing the game.

"Wanna play?" I asked him. His face widened with surprise, and he grinned as he looked at the box under my arm.

"Little sister, been a long time since I play with dolls," he said, smiling benevolently. I quickly put the box down next to him on the bench and opened it, displaying my retort.

Lau Po, which he allowed me to call him, turned out to be a much better player than my brothers. I lost many games and many Life Savers. But over the weeks, with each diminishing roll of candy, I added new secrets. Lau Po gave me the names: The double attack from the east and west shores. Throwing stones on the drowning man. The sudden meeting of the clan. The surprise from the sleeping guard. The humble servant that kills the king. Sand in the eyes of advancing forces. A double killing without blood.

3. **endgame:** the final stages of a game of chess.

There were also the fine points of chess etiquette. Keep captured men in neat rows, as well-tended prisoners. Never announce "check"<sup>4</sup> with vanity, lest someone with an unseen sword slit your throat. Never hurl pieces into the sandbox after you have lost a game, because then you must find them again, by yourself, after apologizing to all around you. By the end of summer, Lau Po had taught me all he knew, and I had become a better chess player.

A small weekend crowd of Chinese people and tourists would gather as I played and defeated my opponents one by one. My mother would join the crowds during these outdoor exhibition games. She sat proudly on the bench, telling my admirers with proper Chinese humility, "Is luck."

A man who watched me in the park suggested that my mother allow me to play in local chess tournaments. My mother smiled graciously, an answer that meant nothing. I wanted to go, but I knew she would not let me play among strangers. So I bit back my tongue. As we walked home, I told her in a small voice that I didn't want to play in the local tournament. They would have American rules, I said, and if I lost, I would bring shame on my family.

"Is shame, you fall down nobody push you," said my mother.

During my first tournament, my mother sat with me in the front row as I waited for my turn. I frequently bounced my legs to unstick them from the cold metal seat of the folding chair. When my name was called, I leapt up. My mother unwrapped something in her lap. It was her chang, a small tablet of red jade that held the sun's fire. "Is luck," she whispered and tucked it into my dress pocket. I turned to my opponent, a fifteen-year-old boy from Oakland. He looked at me, wrinkling his nose.

As I began to play, the boy disappeared, the color ran out of the room, and I only saw my white pieces and his black ones waiting on the other side. A light wind began blowing past my ears. It whispered secrets only I could hear. "Blow from the south," it murmured. "The wind leaves no trail." I saw a clear path, the traps to avoid. The crowd rustled. "Shhh! Shhh!" said the corners of the room. The wind blew stronger. "Throw sand from the east to distract him." The knight came forward ready for the sacrifice. The wind hissed, louder and louder. "Blow, blow, blow.

4. "check": pronounced by a chess player when threatening the opponent's king.

He cannot see. He is blind now. Make him lean away from the wind so he is easier to knock down."

"Check," I said as the wind roared with laughter. The wind died down to little puffs, my own breath.

My mother placed my first trophy next to a new plastic chess set that the neighborhood Tao Society had given me. As she wiped each piece with a soft cloth, she said, "Next time win more, lose less."

"Ma, it's not how many pieces you lose," I said. "Sometimes you need to lose pieces to get ahead."

"Better to lose less, see if you really need."

At the next tournament, I won again, but it was my mother who wore the triumphant grin.

"Lose eight piece this time. Last time was eleven. What I tell you? Better off lose less!" I was annoyed, but I couldn't say anything.

I attended more tournaments, each one farther away from home. I won all the games, in all divisions. The Chinese bakery downstairs from our flat displayed my growing collection of trophies in their window, amid the dust-covered cakes that were never picked up. The day after I won an important regional tournament, the window showcased a fresh sheet cake with whipped-cream frosting and red script saying "Congratulations, Waverly Jong, Chinatown Chess Champion." Soon after that, a flower shop, headstone engraver, and funeral parlor offered to sponsor me in the national tournaments. That's when my mother decided I no longer had to do the dishes. Winston and Vincent had to do my chores.

"Why does she get to play and we do all the work?" complained Vincent.

"Is new American rules," said my mother. "Mei-mei play, squeeze all her brains out for win chess. You play, worth squeeze towel."

By my ninth birthday, I was a national chess champion. I was still some 429 points away from grandmaster<sup>5</sup> status, but I was touted as the Great American Hope, a child prodigy and a girl to boot. They ran a photo of me in *Life* magazine next to a quote in which Bobby Fischer<sup>6</sup> said, "There will never be a woman grand

5. **grandmaster**: a chess player with the highest level of expertise.

6. **Bobby Fischer** (Robert James) (1943-): U.S. chess Champion.

master." "Your move, Bobby," read the caption.

The day they took the magazine picture I wore neatly plaited braids clipped with plastic barrettes trimmed with rhinestones. I was playing in a large high school auditorium that echoed with phlegmy coughs and the squeaky rubber knobs of chair legs sliding across freshly waxed wooden floors. Seated across from me was an American man, about the same age as Lau Po. I remember that his sweaty brows seemed to weep at my every move. He wore a dark, malodorous suit. One of his pockets was stuffed with a great white kerchief on which he wiped his palm before sweeping his hand over the chosen chess piece with a great flourish.

In my crisp pink-and-white dress with scratchy lace at the neck, one of two that my mother had sewn for these special occasions, I would clasp my hands under my chin, the delicate points of my elbows poised lightly on the table in the manner that my mother had shown me for posing for the press. I would swing my patent leather shoes back and forth like an impatient child riding on a school bus. Then I would pause, suck in my lips, twirl my chosen piece in midair as if undecided, and then firmly plant it in its new, threatening place, with a triumphant smile thrown back at my opponent for good measure.

I no longer played in the alley of Waverly Place. I never visited the playground where the pigeons and old men gathered. I went to school and then directly home to learn new chess secrets, cleverly concealed advantages, more escape routes.

But I found it difficult to concentrate at home. My mother had a habit of standing over me while I plotted out my games. I think she thought of herself as my protective ally. Her lips would be sealed tight, and after each move I made, a soft "hmmph" would escape from her nose.

"Ma, I can't practice when you stand there like that," I said one day. She retreated to the kitchen and made loud noises with the pots and pans. When the crashing stopped, I could see out of the corner of my eye that she was standing in the doorway. "Hmmmph!" Only this one came out of her tight throat.

My family made many concessions to allow me to practice. One time I complained that the bedroom I shared was so noisy that I couldn't think. Thereafter, my brothers slept in a bed in the living room facing the street. I said I couldn't finish my rice; my head didn't work right when my stomach was too full. I left half-finished bowls on the table, and nobody complained. But there was

one duty I couldn't avoid. I had to accompany my mother on Saturday market days when I had no tournament to play. My mother would proudly walk with me, visiting many shops, buying very little. "This is my daughter, Wave-ly Jong," she said to whoever looked her way.

One day after we left a shop, I said under my breath, "I wish you wouldn't do that, telling everybody I'm your daughter." My mother stopped walking. Crowds of people with heavy bags pushed past us on the sidewalk, bumping into first one shoulder, then the other.

"Aiii-ya. So shame be with mother?" She grasped my hand even tighter as she looked at me evenly.

I looked down. "It's not that—it's just so obvious. It's just so embarrassing."

"Embarrass you be my daughter?" Her voice was cracking with anger.

"That's not what I meant. That's not what I said."

"What you say?"

I knew it was a mistake to go on, but I heard my voice speaking. "Why do you have to use me to show off? If you want to show off, then why don't you learn to play chess?"

My mother's eyes turned into dangerous black slits. She had no words for me, just sharp silence.

I felt the wind rushing around my hot ears. I jerked my hand out of my mother's tight grasp and spun around, knocking into an old woman. Her bag of groceries spilled to the ground.

"Aii-ya! Stupid girl!" my mother and the woman cried. Oranges and tin cans careened down the sidewalk. As my mother stopped to help the old woman pick up the escaping food, I took off.

I raced down the street, dashing between people, not looking back as my mother screamed shrilly, "Mei-mei! Mei-mei!" I fled down an alley, past dark curtained shops and merchants washing the grime off their windows. I sped into the sunlight, into a large street crowded with tourists examining trinkets and souvenirs. I ducked into another dark alley, down another street, up another alley. I ran hard until it hurt, and I realized I had nowhere to go, that I was not running from anything. The alleys contained no escape routes.

My breath came out hard, like angry smoke. I was cold. I sat down on an upturned plastic pail next to a stack of empty

boxes, cupping my chin with my hands, thinking hard. I imagined my mother first walking briskly down one street or another looking for me, then giving up and returning home to await my arrival. After two hours, I stood up on creaking legs and slowly walked home.

The alley was quiet, and I could see yellow lights shining from our flat like two tiger's eyes in the night. I climbed the sixteen steps to the door, stepping quietly on each so as not to make any warning sounds. I turned the knob; the door was locked. I heard a chair moving, quick steps, the locks turning—click! click! click!—and then the door opened.

"About time you got home," hissed Vincent. "Boy, are you in trouble."

He slid back to the dinner table. On the table were the remains of a large fish, its fleshy head still connected to bones swimming upstream in vain escape. Standing there waiting for my punishment, I heard my mother speak in a dry voice.

"We not concerning this girl. This girl not have concerning for us."

Nobody looked at me. Bone chopsticks clinked against the insides of bowls being emptied into hungry mouths.

I walked into my room, closed the door, and lay down on my bed. The room was dark, the ceiling filled with shadows from the dinnertime lights of neighboring flats.

In my head I saw a chessboard with sixty-four black and white squares. Opposite me was my opponent, her eyes two angry black slits. She wore a triumphant smile. "Strongest wind cannot be see," she said.

Her black men advanced across the plane, slowly marching to each successive level as a single unit. My white pieces screamed as they scurried and fell off the board one by one. As her men drew closer to my edge, I felt myself growing light. I rose up into the air and flew out the window. Higher and higher, above the alley, over the tops of tiled roofs, where I was gathered up by the wind and pushed up toward the night sky until everything below me disappeared and I was alone.

I closed my eyes and pondered my next move.