

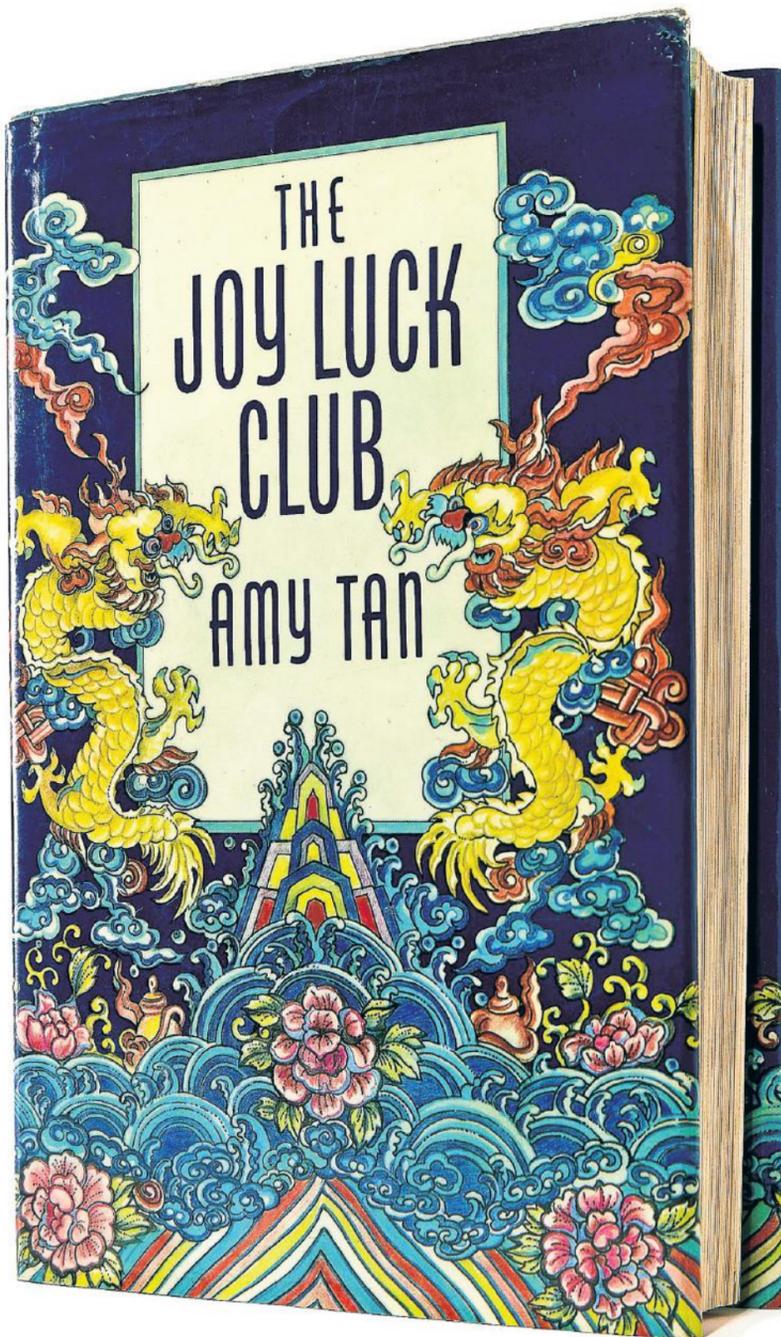
READING & RETREATING

By **MARTHA CHENG**

FAMILY DRAMAS don't halt when a country is in crisis. If anything, they intensify, and in these pandemic times, family is either too close or too far. Many of us have separated from parents and grandparents to protect them, while confined with children unmoored from classrooms. But regardless of physical distance, pandemic or no, our kin can often be inscrutable to us. In her 1989 novel "The Joy Luck Club," Amy Tan plunges deep into the chasm between mother and daughter, immigrant and first-generation, telling a tale engrossing enough to pull us out of our own present caves.

Ranging from China in the 1930s to California in the 1980s, the 16 interwoven narratives of four pairs of mothers and daughters alternate between foreign and familiar, just like family. The mothers' paths—Suyuan Woo abandons her babies, An-Mei's Hsu's mother is ensnared as a concubine, Lindo Jong escapes from an arranged marriage, and Ying-Ying St. Clair endures a philandering first husband—is juxtaposed with their American-born daughters' longing for maternal approval, a cryptic language all its own.

The older women gather at the Joy Luck Club, its origins perhaps a guide for these dark days. It began when Suyuan was hiding in caves with other refugees as the Japanese invaded Kweilin (now Guilin), in southern China. "But you can't stay in the dark for so long," Suyuan tells her daughter, as she recounts the story years later. "Something inside of you starts to fade and you become like a starving person, crazy-hungry for light." Suyuan assembled three other young women to meet once a week to play mahjong and to laugh. "We all had our miseries. But to despair was to wish back for something already lost. Or to prolong what was already unbearable." After settling in San Francisco, Suyuan meets three other women who left behind "unspeakable tragedies" in China and forms a new club, once again as a salve, a way to climb out of grief.



EATING AND DRINKING

Dishes with double meaning
Food features prominently in Chinese culture, and with a language rife with homonyms and metaphors, dishes served at the Joy Luck Club gatherings are often symbolic: "dumplings shaped like silver money ingots, long rice noodles for long life, boiled peanuts for conceiving sons and, of course, many good-luck oranges for a plentiful, sweet life." It carries over to English, as when Lindo nurses her young daughter, Waverly, with chicken rice porridge because "the chickenpox and one chicken knew how to fight another." But food is also pleasure in itself, like a decadent picnic packed for the Autumn Moon Festival: "a woven hamper filled with zong zi—the sticky rice wrapped in lotus leaves, some filled with roasted ham, some with sweet lotus seeds...a cotton sack of apples, pomegranates, and pears... red boxes lined with four mooncakes each." As parks begin to open at last, Ms. Tan's loving food descriptions have us plotting our own extravagant picnics.



TECHNOLOGY

Circuitous flights
The mothers flee China in 1949, just ahead of the Communist revolution, some on a "slow boat." Lindo Jong, meanwhile, proudly says, "I was not that poor. I took a plane"—albeit one that, in the early days of international air travel, takes three weeks to arrive in the U.S., via Hong Kong, Vietnam, the Philippines and Hawaii. Planes help the mothers escape and the daughters to return. Decades later, Jun-mei takes a flight to China to meet the twins—now grown—her mother had abandoned in Kweilin long ago, rediscovered only after her death. And as Waverly hopes to fly to China with her new Caucasian husband and estranged mother, her reflection feels especially poignant now, with so much travel and family inaccessible: "The three of us, leaving our differences behind, stepping on the plane together, sitting side by side, lifting off, moving West to reach the East."



COMFORT READS

Eastern Union

Mothers and daughters lay at the heart of Amy Tan's 1989 novel, but in bridging the generational gap—and crisscrossing the globe—the story imparts key lessons for forging ahead in trying times

LOCALES

Jagged peaks, mysterious alleys
Most outside of China know only of Shanghai and Beijing—and now, Wuhan—but "The Joy Luck Club" is set in other cities deliciously depicted, such as Kweilin, where "the peaks [shown] looked like giant fried fish heads trying to jump out of a vat of oil." During the Autumn Moon Festival, a full moon and red lantern lights illuminate Tai Lake, one of China's largest lakes, and a boisterous scene of aquatic tailgating—revelers celebrate on boats and floating pavilions. Even the depictions of San Francisco are especially evocative, with its bellowing foghorns and Chinatown alleyways "cramped with daily mysteries and adventures," such as herbal medicine shops, Chinese bakeries and a playground where Waverly, Lindo's daughter, learns to play chess to become a national champion at age 9.



DESIGN

Feng shui or fate
Many of the houses in "The Joy Luck Club" feel unsettled, mirroring its inhabitants' emotions and a China in upheaval. When Lindo's family's home floods, she's sent to her arranged husband's house in a village near Taiyuan. It has four stories, "one for each generation...The house had a confused look...reflecting too many opinions." In the British concession of Tientsin (aka Tianjin), where An-Mei goes to live with her mother, the concubine of a wealthy merchant, much is made

of the foreign-built house. The merchant, writes Ms. Tan, "liked foreign things because foreigners made him rich." At first, An-Mei is amazed and amused by what she sees: "a curved staircase that wound up and up, a ceiling with faces in every corner, then hallways twisting and turning into one room and then another." But the house, she soon learns, is a gilded cage, and even the "extravagant nuisance" of the big wooden clock can't mask the terrible truth of her mother's fate.

FASHION

Not a hair out of place
In the sliver between post-imperial China and pre-Communist China—regimes that employed clothing as an instrument of order—the women slip in and out of Western dress and a traditional qipao. Now, reading the book while many of us are still sheltering-in-place, as our hair grows shaggy and our roots start to show, it's the detailed hairstyles that catch our eye. In China, young Ying Ying's braid is woven with "five

strands of colorful silk" and wound into a tight ball, while in America, Jun-mei gets a Peter Pan haircut, a prerequisite on her path to child prodigy. Before school, Waverly's mother "would twist and yank on my thick black hair until she had formed two tightly wound pigtails," a form of "Chinese torture" says Waverly slyly. In a reversal of roles decades later, Waverly subjects her mother to a salon (gasp!) for a soft wave before her wedding.



F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (BOOK); MATTHEW COOK (ILLUSTRATIONS)

POP THE QUESTION

What Books Best Capture the Immigrant Experience?

Three notables share their picks for the most poignant works, including one that rivals 'The Great Gatsby'



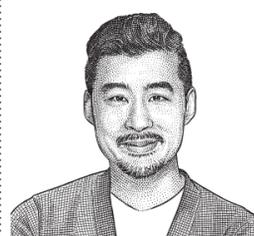
Min Jin Lee
Author of novels 'Pachinko' and 'Free Food For Millionaires'

"When I think of the O.G. immigrant novel, what comes to mind is Anzia Yezierska's 'The Bread Givers'—published in 1925, the same year as F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Great Gatsby.' Fitzgerald gave us Gatsby, a Midwestern romantic obsessed with a ridiculous woman, and Yezierska offered up Sara Smolinsky, a poor immigrant willing to forsake almost everything for an education. Both books, nearing a century old, are great American novels, but unlike Fitzgerald's, Yezierska's does justice to the new American woman."



Helon Habila
Author, most recently of 'Travelers: A Novel'

"Eva Hoffman's 'Lost in Translation' is an autobiographical account of her family's migration from Krakow to Canada, and her time at Rice University and Harvard. Set in the 1960s and '70s, it's about nostalgia, homesickness, about departure and return, and ultimately about accepting that home is wherever we can find happiness. Most of all it is about language—our first language is our truest home, in which we express ourselves with all the innocence of childhood, before we are forced to change by adulthood."



Francis Lam
Host of radio show and podcast 'The Splendid Table' on American Public Media

"I remember being stunned by Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake.' By the beauty of the language, the richness of the characters and the fact that [the main character] Gogol's interior life sounded so much like mine, despite his being raised in an Indian American family and me in a Chinese American one. There is something that ties many immigrant families—the sacrifice it takes to uproot your life for the sake of your children, and how those children struggle to understand what that means." —Edited from interviews by Martha Cheng