Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* within the Framework of the Asian-American Women's Bildungsroman

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Amy Tan and Asian-American Literature

As exemplified by the unprecedented commercial success of *The Joy Luck Club*, which were sold over two million copies in paperback alone and subsequently translated into 23 languages, Amy Tan is arguably one of the most widely recognized contemporary 'Asian-American' writers to date. Such an accolade, however befitting, begs the question that there exists a distinctive body of works within the American literary canon that warrants the label of 'Asian-American literature,' and that the parameters of such a grouping can be clearly delineated. It is worth noting that British writers of Asian descent such as Kazuo Ishiguro and Timothy Mo are rarely, if ever, referred to as 'Asian-British' writers.

Two factors seem to justify the distinction of Asian-American literature. First is the sheer volume of literature produced by American writers of Asian descent during the second half of the 20th century. *Asian American Literature: An Annotated Bibliography*, published by the Modern Language Association in 1988, lists over 1,500 published works by writers of Asian origin. Secondly, in consistently foregrounding the Asian immigrant history and their ongoing struggles for assimilation into the American mainstream, writers of Asian descent have forged
out their own unique signatures, which clearly distinguishes them from other ethnic-American writers.

Despite the fact that the history of Asian immigration to the States spans some 140 years, the notion of ‘Asian-American literature’ is a relatively recent neologism and only now slowly gaining serious recognition in the literary circles. The working definition of Asian-American literature, in its narrowest sense, is analogous to what Lindo Jong in *The Joy Luck Club* referred to as “American context and Chinese character,” namely that it denotes works produced by writers of Asian descent that are set in America. Under this criterion, Elaine Kim’s *Asian-American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (1982), widely recognized as the most authoritative study on Asian-American literature to date, excludes such notable writers as Richard E. Kim, whose works are solely set in Korea.

During the past two decades the number of published works by Asian-American women writers has risen dramatically, and with it we witness the emergence of a new type of Asian-American discourse, which, for the lack of a better term, can be referred to as Asian-American women’s *bildungsroman*. Traditionally, Asian-American literature has been dominated by male writers, but as Suttillasana suggests, since the beginning of Asian immigration to the States, Asian-American women have consistently revealed their interest in communicating their life stories but denied the opportunity to express themselves outside the home by the restrictions of the masculine culture of which they were a part (124). For many Asian-American women who began writing in earnest as the feminist movement came of age, the literary medium provided a viable forum for reexamining and redefining their sense of ‘identity,’ not only as ‘ethnic’ minorities but also as ‘gender’ minorities as well.

Stories in the genre invariably portray young female protagonists who come to terms with their inherent hyphenated identity by resolving generational and cultural tensions with their mothers (or mother figures). In this sense Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* is in line with works by other notable Asian-American women writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Chuang Hua, and Ronyoung Kim, to name a few.

The notion of literary genre is pertinent in that it facilitates categorization and