“The Rules of the Game”
By: Amy Tan

Publish Date: 1985
Amy R. Tan

- Born February 19, 1952 in Oakland, CA
- Grew up in California and Switzerland
- Graduated from University of California, Berkeley
- Writes about Chinese American Women and the immigrant experience
Other works by the author:

❖ The Joy Luck Club
❖ The Kitchen God’s Wife
❖ The Hundred Secret Senses
❖ The Bonesetter’s Daughter

Children’s Books:
❖ The Moon Lady
❖ The Chinese Siamese Cat
Setting

- Chinatown in San Francisco, California, Urban
- Mid to late 1950’s
- Insular Immigrant Community
- Lower to Middle Class
- Changes main character’s perspective on the world
- More Free Ranging; Affected by Parents’ Beliefs
In the short story “Rules of the Game” by Amy Tan, Waverly Jong, the main character, is a chess prodigy. Waverly is a nine year old living with her middle-lower class family in Oakland, California, near Chinatown during the mid 1900s. Vincent, Waverly’s brother, receives a chess set for Christmas and Waverly begs her brothers to let her play with them. Soon enough, Waverly starts to join in on the chess games, by giving up her lifesavers in compensation for the missing chess pieces. One day, Waverly spots a gathering of old men playing chess. She immediately hopes they will let her join in. Waverly starts to compete against a man named Lau Po, who teaches Waverly a plethora of chess secrets and skills to help her win tournament. Waverly soon enters a tournament, and ends up making it all the way to Nationals, after winning again and again. At this point, Waverly’s mom is involved in her success, bragging whenever she can, to the extent that Waverly is irritated to the point that she yells at her mom for acting as an embarrassment, and runs far away from her mom. Coming home hours later, Waverly heads into her room. She sees her mom’s beady black eyes across the chessboard hanging from her wall, as her opponent. “Strongest wind cannot be seen,” her opponent says, leaving Waverly to ponder her next move.
Main points of summary:

- Oakland’s Chinatown, California, USA during the 1950s
- middle-lower class salary family
- receives chess set for Christmas
- Waverly Jong becomes a prodigy
- mom brags about Waverly’s successes
- Waverly gets annoyed and runs off
- learns the power and importance of “invisible strength”
The Point-of-View

- First Person
- Allows the Reader to empathize more with the main character and her struggles
- Gives the Reader insight into what the Waverly is thinking and feeling
- Hides from Reader what Waverly’s mother is thinking
Symbol: “The art of invisible strength”

Invisible strength: Strength that cannot be seen, but can help to power through obstacles

The “art of invisible strength” is taught to Waverly by her mother as a way to win respect from others and dominate in games. These rules are forever changing and very difficult to learn. Self-control is an “invisible strength” that can help Waverly learn and grow. By neglecting Waverly after she runs away, Mrs. Jong is equipping Waverly with life skills she needs later on. From the start to end of the story, the enforcing of this “invisible strength” was demonstrated many times.
Symbol: “The art of invisible strength

- Waverly describes herself as the fish the family ate for dinner
- uses her self-control and thinking as “strong wind”
- demonstrates self-control, a form of invisible strength
- mom doesn’t concern Waverly after she runs away
- learning how to control yourself
  - win battles
  - deal with life
- Waverly sees two black slits across the chessboard
- “strongest wind cannot be seen”
Theme

- For every benefit, there is a cost.
- Due to her success in chess, Waverly is given fewer chores by her parents, BUT she must put up with her mother’s bragging.
- Like the metaphor at the end of the story, if life is like chess, it is sometimes required to sacrifice lesser pieces i.e. a pawn in order to win something greater i.e. a queen.
Rating: 2.3 Stars

Pros:
- inciting incident was creative
- symbolism in the story was clearly thought out
- lives of Chinese immigrants were accurate (for the time period)
- scene and characters came to life, and were realistic
- allowed reader to think about Waverly’s life
- adjective usage let reader easily picture the situation the characters were in
- a lot of figurative language was used, e.g. “my white pieces screamed as they scurried and fell off the board”
Rating: 2.3 Stars

Cons:
❖ include more of the mom in the story
❖ wasn’t enough for reader to fully understand background information of Chinese immigrants
❖ wishy-washy main character
❖ not an interesting topic
❖ unclear resolution
Types of Characters:

- **major character:** where the attention is focused, takes lots of action in the story
- **minor character:** not the main focus of the story, but takes place in the story
- **round character:** fully developed, with multiple traits (faults and virtues)
- **flat character:** one sided, stereotypical
- **dynamic character:** character that changes or grows during the course of the work
- **static character:** a character who doesn’t change
Character: Waverly Jong

- Round character, major character, dynamic character
- Stubborn, unappreciative, talented girl
- Fault: hasn’t yet recognized the sacrifices her mom made and let’s her child stubbornness get to her
- Virtue: self-taught chess prodigy at a young age, strives for success
- Main character/protagonist
Character: Lindo Jong (mother)

❖ round character, minor character, dynamic character
❖ faults:
  ➢ isn’t fully immersed in American parenting
  ➢ strict, harsh, strong
❖ virtues:
  ➢ wants the best for her kids
  ➢ makes sacrifices for Waverly
❖ opposed to main character/antagonist
Characters: Vincent, Winston, and Mr. Jong

- minor characters, static characters, flat characters
- in the background
- not really vital to the plot
Types of Characterization:

- **Direct Characterization**: traits are stated by the writer
- **Indirect Characterization**: writer depends on the reader to draw conclusions about the character’s traits, sometimes tells what other characters think and say about the character
- **Character Traits Characterization**: qualities, attitudes, and values a character displays
Characterization: Waverly Jong

- indirect characterization
  - Waverly’s thoughts
- hard working
  - self learns chess
- rebellious
  - runs from mother
- curious
  - possesses desire to learn
- ungrateful
  - inferred from Mother’s words
Characterization: Lindo Jong (mother)

- indirect characterization
- actions towards Waverly reveals some traits
- sacrificing
  - sacrifices for Waverly to succeed
- nosy
  - continuously watches Waverly practice
- harsh
  - calls daughter “stupid”
Foreshadowing: Amy Tan uses Foreshadowing closer to the end of the story when Waverly is getting nationally recognized and her mother is giving her time off her chores. This was getting a little too good to be true and some kind of meltdown was definitely foreseeable.

Imagery: Tan uses imagery really well when she is describing the Chinatown neighborhood that Waverly grows up in. When she talks about the alley that they have numerous adventures in and the forbidden and scary restaurant in the corner, it’s easily visible in the minds eye.

Metaphor: A metaphor is used when comparing a chess game to life and the decisions and sacrifices made to ultimately achieving success, and they are really similar. It is shown in the story.
Inciting Incident: Waverly’s brother Vincent receives a chess board at a Christmas Party at the First Chinese Baptist Church

Exposition
- On Waverly Place above a Chinese Bakery in a small apartment
- Lower Middle Class Family
- China Town, San Francisco, California
- Mid to late 1900’s
- Mood: Proud

Rising Action
- Waverly’s brothers allow her to play chess after she bribes them with lifesavers
- Waverly reads instructional chess books and learns to play and wins all chess games
- Waverly begins to play chess with other men in the neighborhood and her playing ability improves
- Waverly begins going to chess tournaments and wins game after game
- Waverly stops playing chess with locals
Climax: Waverly confronts her mother in the market, saying that she dislikes how her mother is using Waverly to boast and give herself airs.

Falling Action

- Waverly returns home after running away from her mother.
- She is ignored by the family per her mother’s command.

Resolution

- Waverly goes to her room and thinks about her mother’s power; Waverly begins to plan her next move.
Video analysis on “Rules of the Game”

