

Cultural Polarity Hunts for Immigrant Ipseity with Digest to the Select Novels of Amy Tan

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Abstract

Every nation consists of a linguistically and culturally varied population that holds immigrants, refugees and workers from different parts of the world. In such cases, immigrants face with two different problems: first, their language of origin called the heritage language, in which the immigrants face problem of using and maintaining it; secondly, the culture of origin, in which they find difficulties and doubts to follow their own culture or to adopt themselves to the host culture.

The novels of Tan bring out the sufferings about the experiences of the immigrant struggle. The search for identity is done only for the single reason named immigration. When Tan interprets the experiences of a mother's life in China, it is necessary for a daughter to develop the intergenerational bonds that brings the reader into the world of East Asia, with reference to cultural practices, political events and social upheavals that are not familiar to the readers: the Taiping Revolution, the Sino-Japanese War and the Kuomintang-Communist Civil War. The representation of Chinese history in the novels makes the readers to feel that they are culturally distant and epistemologically adventitious. There are number of reasons that have brought out people to get into the pathway of immigrating to the United States. The article brings out the struggles faced by the Chinese immigrant women in America.

Keywords: Immigrants, Struggles, Bonds, Revolution, Experiences

Introduction

The history of China cannot be detached from the Chinese immigrants' experience in the United States, an experience which is deeply felt at the minimal level of family relationships. Cultural and historical distance, complicated by linguistic dissociation, make it difficult for the American born Chinese subject to acquire the history of the family with its roots in China and also the political history of a distant country in East Asia with which their ancestral origin is entangled. The distance is also worsening by the felt need on the part of parental figures to hold in a firm way to the carefully guarded secrets.

The level of effort required to stick to these secrets mean not only getting to know better the person having them but also catching a glimpse of the historical world that necessitated the importance of secrecy to begin with. When children strive to connect with their parents across generational and cultural divides, they also cross time to connect with history.

Many post-1960s writers struggle with the difficulty of being culturally hybrid- neither Chinese nor American and the search for an authentic identity. Maxine Hong Kingston's early works, *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, describe the difficulties she encountered while dealing with her mother and father, the traditional stories they would tell, the Chinese cultural practices to which they introduced her, and the American cultural artefacts, not lest movies, that complicated the formation of her identity as a Chinese American.

Some of the major themes that Tan examined in her novel were the ways in which truths and realities should be considered as a function of various interpretative acts, not objective realities that exist merely found and explained accordingly. Politics, morality and the media all play significant roles in shaping what realities emerge from the sites of struggle and conflict. The fracturing of a unitary, hegemonic truth into multiple truths, works to expand the borders of the world's people inhabits. Tan motivates the readers to their moral and intellectual orientations as well as their investment in the issues at hand.

The Hardship in History

Learning the language of the host country for the purpose of integration is an issue in the growing number of countries of immigrants that naturally raises the question of teaching the language. They have the dilemma, whether to maintain their heritage language to their children or not. Continuance of children's heritage language in an English-dominant nation and the development of their bilingual skills has become a prominent feature in the immigrant families.

The beginnings of large-scale immigration from China began with the discovery of gold in California in 1848. By 1866 the wave of Chinese immigration was sufficient to justify the establishment of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company to provide regular voyages from Hong Kong to San Francisco and Chinese travel agents were soon promoting the trip as a sure means of getting rich.

The 1880s would see an increase not only in the volume of immigration but in the range of its sources, and America's image as a haven for the oppressed of every nation would be put sorely to test in the decades that followed. The proverbial open door creaked somewhat on its hinges and threatened to swing shut as the government added one piece of restrictive legislation to another. Poised on the threshold of a new era, the nation divided its feelings about the diverse threads that had combined and were continuing to combine to make up the fabric of its society.

The republican government, which controlled China from 1912-1949 was never entirely stable, in the midst of World War I, during which China sided with Great Britain, France and Ireland. Japan started to make demands with Chinese people and Japan wanted access to China's ports and railroads as well as influence over political matters. China ceded territory in the north to the Japanese, but Japan then secretly funded a Chinese rebellion against the Chinese government in several provinces. Meanwhile, a separate political party was forming; the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was officially formed in 1921. In the year 1923, they joined with the reigning Nationalist Party to keep the Japanese separate from China. By 1928, the parties were at odds again, and Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-Shek rooted out the communists within his party's rank.

The Taiping Revolution made the invasion of China by foreign capitalism in the forties of the nineteenth century and the increasing import of opium combined to subject

the Chinese peasantry to greater exploitation than ever before. To meet the enormous cost of the war reparations, the Qing ruling class laid additional burdens to them. Poverty, bankruptcy and the menace of death from starvation forced the desperate peasants to rise up in resistance.

Without the leadership of a proletarian class, the failure of this purely peasant war, pitted against such a powerful enemy, was inevitable. Nevertheless failure did not lessen the significance of the Taiping revolution as a great dynamic movement which shook the Qing rule and shattered the capitalist powers' day-dream of a subjugated China. Thus the Taiping Revolution is also one of the major reasons for the Chinese to leave their native country.

The implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act made the first generation parents remain connected to their homeland. Immigration has been a major basis of Urban Institute research for more than a decade. The United States has experienced a huge volume of immigration during the past century, with the emergence of new immigrants beginning in the late 1960s as a solution to the Immigration Act of 1965. Until 1800s, immigrants from various parts entered the United States freely, without any federal controls. After the independence, the federal government allowed the aliens and the automatic qualification of immigrants and their children as citizens. Until 1860, all the immigrants to the United States were from Germany, Ireland and the United Kingdom. After 1860, increasing numbers were from Scandinavia, China and South America.

Tan has brought out the immigrant difficulties during the time. She exclaimed about how people underwent all sort of problems. The Americans in the West required immigrant labour for the mines and railroads and most of the labourers were Chinese immigrants and others as contract labourers. For example, about one-third of western miners were Chinese. As there was increased number of immigrant labourers, there was an opposition for the native labour groups. American's anxiety over economic threats from cheaper immigrant labour, as well as racism was in larger parts, behind the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This law stopped the number of Chinese to enter into the United States. After this, amendments to the 1882 Act ultimately stopped immigration of all Chinese.



Fig. 1. The Chinese Exclusion Act

The recognition of Asians as more successful both socially and economically than other minority groups among the Asian population, there are broad differences that exists. Daniel briefs about the different kinds of Chinese Americans,

The fact is that Chinese Americans ate of very different kinds. Chinese Americans themselves draw sharp distinctions: the American-born Chinese (the ABCs) tend to be college-educated, to have middle-class occupations, and to live outside of the inner-city Chinatowns; and the recent immigrants (the FOBs, “fresh off the boat”) tend to be poorly educated, deficient in English, to live in Chinatowns, and to ply the low-wage service trades or sweatshop manufacturing enterprises typical of the inner city. (324)

Chinese Americans are a diverse ethnic group, made up of U.S. born Chinese and immigrants from all over the Chinese world. As of 2000, their population totalled 2,858,291. Among them, more than 1 million are immigrants from China (PRC), or “mainland Chinese”. They are not only the largest subgroup in Chinese America but also constitute a fast-growing population.

Throughout Tan’s novels, she has intertwined the critical events of Chinese history with the fictional experiences of her characters. The historical events are not

implemented to provide colour and realism but they are the integral influences on the story itself. There are so many historical events that took place with respect to the characters of the novels. Some of them are listed below.

1858 – Nunumu saves Nelly Banner from drowning and becomes her companion (*HSS* 33).

1890 – Winnie Louie's mother is born (*KGW* 122).

1916 – Japan gains control of Inner Mongolia, Manchuria and Shantung.

An-Mei's father, an intellectual and devout Buddhist dies (*JLC* 266).

Winnie Louie's mother meets Lu (*KGW* 126).

Great-Granny Liu concocts a lie passing LuLing to Liu Jen Sen and his first wife, but leaves the child in care of her birth mother Precious Auntie (*BSD* 56 & 154).

1925 – Winnie's mother abandons her and disappears (*KGW* 102).

1930 – The Kuomintang decapitates Kun, Winnie's half-brother, for selling cloth to rebels (*KGW* 79).

Lin Xiao, Gu Ying-Ying's future husband, rips open a watermelon as a gesture of ravishment (*JLC* 277).

1937 – At the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, the Japanese overrun Shanghai (*KGW* 80).

Americans remain neutral toward the Japanese and the Chinese Nationalists and Communists (*BSD* 219).

Feb – Wen Fu begins courting Peanut, but Auntie Miao, the matchmaker, makes a match between Wen Fu and Winnie, who comes from a wealthier family than her cousin (*KGW* 166).

1941 – On Christmas, Winnie dances with Jimmy Y. Louie, an Asian-American interpreter, at the American club (*KGW* 382).

Wen Fu rapes Winnie at gunpoint; signs divorce papers, and then demands custody of Danru, his only son (*KGW* 392-394).

1944 – Japan launches a major offensive in Kweilin. (*JLC* 13)

Suyuan Li gives birth to twin girls, Chwun Yu and Chwun Hwa (*JLC* 308).

1949 - The Communists end all fights in Shanghai (*KGW* 20).

Ying-Ying St. Clair gives birth to Lena, her only surviving child (*JLC* 105,286).

1960 – Waverly becomes national chess champion (*JLC* 99).

Jimmie and Winnie move from San Francisco's Chinatown west to the Richmond district (*KGW* 11, 92).

After confessing to having a daughter in China, Jack Yee dies of renal failure (*HSS* 6).

1964 - Winston Jung dies in a car accident (*JLC* 303).

Pearl expresses grief for Jimmy Louie after he dies from stomach cancer (*KGW* 48).

Helen and Winnie open the Ding Ho Flower Shop on Ross Avenue in Chinatown (*KGW* 7, 16).

Bob Laguna enters Kwan Li at Mary's Help, a mental hospital, where she undergoes shock treatment (*HSS* 16).

1987 - Pearl gives birth to Cleo Brandt (*KGW* 10).

Waverly hesitates to tell her mother that she is going to marry Rich Shields (*JLC* 195).

Ted Jordan leaves Rose, his wife of fifteen years (*JLC*, 127, 208).

1989 – A San Francisco earthquake cracks the walls of Winnie and Helen's flower shop in Chinatown and the house that Olivia and Simon Bishop look at in Pacific Heights (*KGW* 16; *HSS* 127).

Ruth Lye Young meets Art at a yoga class (*BSD* 298).

Jan - Chinese-American mourners gather in San Francisco for the engagement party of Mimi Wong and Roger "Bio-Bio" Kong and for the funeral of Auntie Du Chin, who dies of a brain concussion at age ninety-seven following a bus accident (*KGW* 3, 6, 39).

Auntie Du leaves to Pearl an altar to the Kitchen God (*KGW* 58).

1999 – Ruth leaves Art and moves in with LuLing on the pretence of collaborating on a children's book about animals (*BSD* 263).

Art and Ruth celebrate the tenth anniversary of their meeting (*BSD* 295).

These are some of the struggles faced by the Chinese in their native and are the reasons to migrate to America. The history of Chinese immigration is explained because it was the reason for the characters to come to America. Tan has also depicted out history in the beginning of all her novels in order to show the realist situation of the story. This gives a hint that Chinese people hunt for their cultural identity.

Cultural Contradictions

The term culture aims at bringing man's actions and meanings to the most basic level of significance, to examine them in universal terms in an attempt to understand them. When we speak of people belonging to different cultures, then, we are referring to a basic kind of difference between cultures, suggesting that there are specific varieties of the phenomenon of man.

The combinations of two implications of the idea of culture are the facts that we ourselves belong to a culture and that we must assume all cultures to be equivalent that leads to a general proposition concerning the study of culture. As the term "relative" suggests, the understanding of another culture involves the relationship between two varieties of the human phenomenon; it aims at the creation of an intellectual relation between them, an understanding that includes both of them.

The Chinese immigrants who left their native failed to understand the culture of the present leading them to stress which in return made the Chinese mothers to turn violent towards American born daughters. Cultural reinforcement however holds back language acquisition. A continuous stream of new arrivals, especially in immigration neighbourhoods, keeps the language alive among immigrants and their children. The culture of Chinese made them to suffer in America as they lead an orthodox life in their native.

A sketch of Chinese and American Culture is portrayed in order to bring out the differences and the sufferings undergone by the Chinese immigrants. Only with the background of both the country's culture, one can better understand about the realistic picture of the people's situation. The following are some of the differences between the Chinese and the American culture.

China Vs America

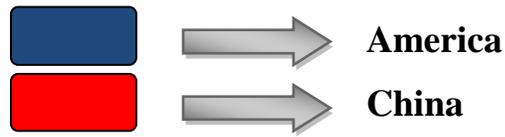


Fig.2. Relationships among People

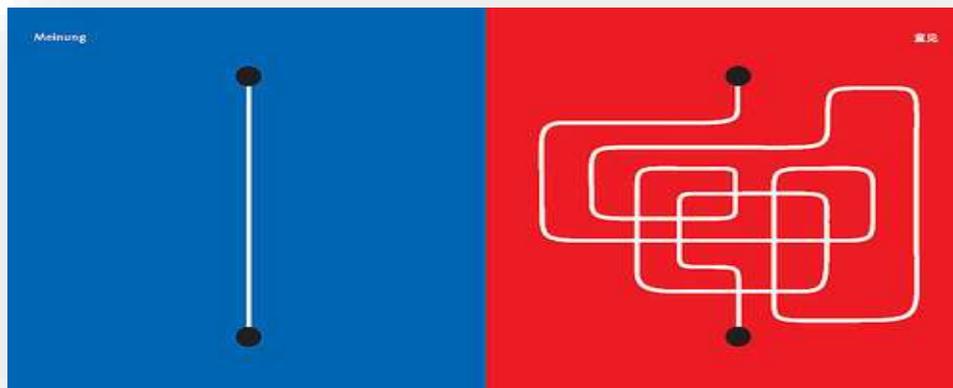


Fig.3. Communication among People

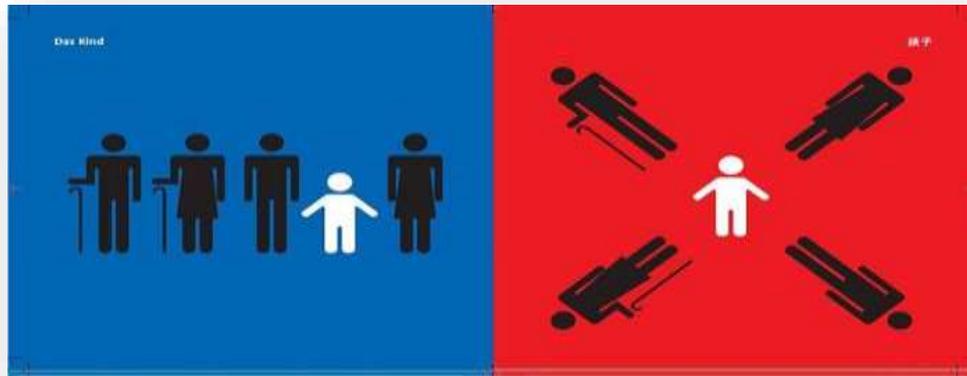


Fig.4. Child among People

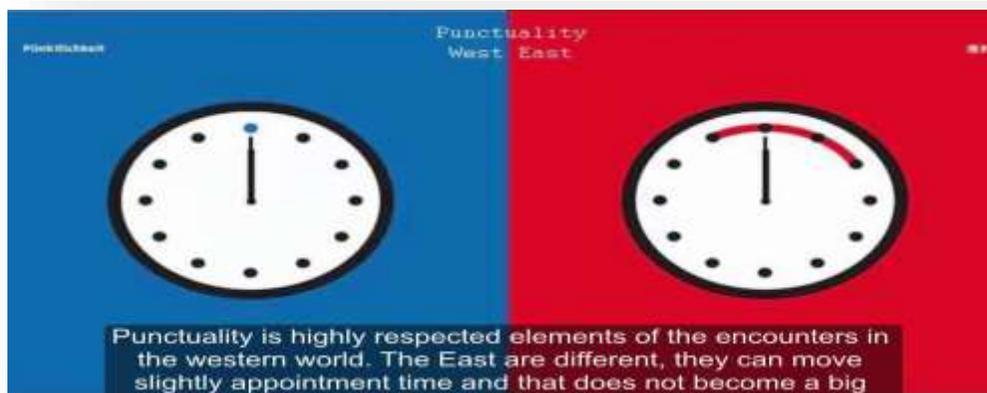


Fig.5. Differences in punctuality

Cultural differences between the East and West play a vital role in relationships between individuals and between companies as well as in world affairs across the board can be summed up in the concepts of emotional intelligence and rational intelligence. In broad terms, Western thinking and behaviour is based on rational intelligence, that is on facts and objective logical thinking, whereas traditional Chinese thinking and behaviour is based on emotional factors first and rational factors later.

The Chinese were conditioned for millennia to think and behave on the basis of personal and emotional considerations— not hard impersonal and unemotional factors. In that culture, emotional intelligence took precedence over rational intelligence. To Westerners the thought of applying emotional intelligence to their personal relationships

with their spouses, children or friends, etc., makes pretty good sense up to a point. But the thought of taking an emotional approach to business and political affairs is enough to induce a state of shock in most of them.

Despite the millennia of conditioning in giving emotional and personal considerations precedence in their daily affairs by imperial law and by custom— the Chinese retained the ability to think in rational, logical, and pragmatic terms because these characteristics were absolutely essential to their survival. This phenomenon resulted in a great clash with the traditional role of emotional intelligence in China because it was fundamentally incompatible with many of the Western business concepts that prevailed at that time. The more Westernized business management in China became the smaller role of emotional intelligence. Rational intelligence has continued to gain ground in China, in both business and government, but it has not displaced emotional intelligence as an integral part of Chinese culture. The vast majority of ordinary Chinese still react emotionally first, and then, when necessary, engage the rational side of their brains. Westerners involving with the Chinese, and that too in business and diplomacy, one should be aware of the traditional and present day role of emotional intelligence in China because it continues to have a clash on their thinking and behaviour.

Another contrast in Chinese and Western cultures is the Western emphasis of the “why/because” approach to most things and the Chinese emphasis on the “what” approach. Sometimes the first question that Westerners, especially Americans, ask in virtually all situations is “why”— and they expect an immediate “because” answer. The typical Chinese response to any- thing new was “what”—what is that; what are you talking about; what are you doing; what is it you want, etc.

These are the basic background things that Tan has used in her novels. The famous banquet tradition, myth, superstition, Chinese food and tradition, the influence of English language etc are discussed in four novels. For instance, The *JLC* contains the famous tradition of playing Mah-jong, after the game gets over, people gather together to dine, where all the Chinese traditional food are served. In the *KGW*, we can find the superstitions of the mother Winnie towards her daughter Pearl. In the *HSS*, the novel is immersed in the world of *yin* (speaking to the ghosts). In *BSD*, bringing out the history of

the past generation plays a vital role. Wholly, Tan has bound the novels with the Chinese culture but finding difficulties to remove the layer of nativity.

In China, identity is based on family's social status. In *JLC*, the four mothers are liable to expose their Chinese culture. The mothers hoped that their daughters can have all the opportunities in America. However, they also want their children to embrace the Chinese heritage and Chinese values over American values. Suyuan, An-Mei, Lindo and Ying-Ying are afraid that their daughters have become so Americanised where they cannot identify their culture of origin. The mothers recognize that the daughters are so spoiled and are unexposed to the reality of the grating world.

The four American-born daughters do not have the characteristics of their mothers and were forced to build as first generation immigrants to America. The mothers finally narrate to their daughters about their suffering and try to prove who they really are. When the daughters appreciate the spirits of their mothers and the Chinese heritage; they become individualistic and at the same time loyal to their culture. The daughters assimilate to accept the past and blend it to the present. Jing Mei, Waverly, Lena and Rose find their true identity through this learning process and indulged their lives to do something in return for their mothers. Kosaku Yoshino's analysis of cultural nationalism in Japan:

Cultural nationalism aims to regenerate the national community by creating, preserving or strengthening a people's cultural identity when it is felt to be lacking or threatening. The cultural nationalist regards the nation as a product of its unique history and culture, and as a collective solidarity endowed with unique attributes. (33)

This is the case of the other three novels, *KGW*, *HSS* and *BSD*. In *KGW*, Winnie tries to persuade her daughter Pearl not to forget about their own culture through the narration of her past. Winnie is not satisfied to lead a life in America as the culture is entirely different and also the fear of her daughter turning Americanized. When concerning with *HSS* Kwan never let her sister Olivia to get distracted to American culture by narrating her lifetime stories. Kwan makes Olivia to believe the stories in order to follow the Chinese culture.

And in *BSD*, Luling's portrayal of her past to her daughter Ruth makes to sustain the culture of origin. Tan elucidated in her novels that in one way or the other, the Chinese characters suffered and struggled to get their identity back. The search for identity is indirectly expounded through the narration of stories in the novels.

Conclusion

The characters symbolize many actions that would make a way for their dreams and future. As the daughters grow older, the mothers look forward for their futures. The daughters on the other hand, have a mind of their own when it comes to their future. The mothers and daughters especially face the hardest sacrifice when they arrive to America: the difficult decision to opt between the Chinese culture and the American culture. Lindo Jong tells in the novel that one should always sacrifice part of oneself by putting on one's American face or one's Chinese face. The uttermost sacrifice done by the mothers is to accept the American heritage and the daughters understanding the Chinese heritage.

Assimilation can be attained by

1. Socioeconomic Status (SES)
2. Language Attainment
3. Inter-marriage

Mothers act as transmitters of Chinese culture and traditions and daughters act as those who cannot understand the importance of such a struggle. Therefore language becomes more effective means to attach to culture. For example, in *BSD*, through searching her mother's history, Ruth finds out the background of her immigrant mother. This finally makes up Ruth's maturity and her identity as a Chinese woman. LuLing shows her anger to Ruth, "not studying Chinese hard enough when she was little". (*BSD* 11)