

An Analysis of the Reconstruction of Chinese American Identity in *The Paper Menagerie*

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The Paper Menagerie is a short story written by Ken Liu, a Chinese American science-fiction writer, which wins Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Award. Many of his works, full of Chinese myths, are concerned about the identity problems of those protagonists who grow up in both Chinese and American cultural backgrounds. This essay is based on Ken Liu's *The Paper Menagerie*, analyzing the identity dilemma of Jack and his identity reconstruction from the perspective of post-colonialism. It aims to provide a solution for those Chinese Americans who are confronted with identity problems.

Keywords: *The Paper Menagerie*, identity dilemma, identity reconstruction

Introduction

Ken Liu (born in 1976) is a Chinese American author of science-fiction and fantasy, as well as a translator, and computer programmer. In 2012, Ken's short story *The Paper Menagerie* won the three major English science fiction awards—Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Award. It is well-known for exploring the growth of Chinese American youth in American society. It tells the story of a boy whose mother was a mail-order bride from Hong Kong. When he was a child, he was happy for his mother's magic of origami animals which could come to life when she blew into them, but as he grew up and was taunted by his classmates, he began to blame her for her Chinese identity and hate everything Chinese. It was until his mother's death that he began to rethink the meaning of her love. Ken's other works also reflect the identity problems given by the influence of dual cultures, showing a distinction from traditional science fiction writers.

Chinese readers are more familiar with Ken Liu as a translator for *The Three Body Problems*, rather than a science-fiction writer. A few studies around Ken's novels focus on the interpretation of Chinese myths that he has adapted in his works. Identity is one of the main subjects of Chinese American literature research. The descendants of Chinese immigrants are more likely to be confused by their own identity than their parents. This essay is based on Ken Liu's *The Paper Menagerie*, analyzing the identity problems of Jack who was a Chinese American boy. Under the influence of American ideology, due to cultural conflicts and racial discrimination, Jack began to hate his Chinese identity and fell into the identity dilemma. Eventually, with the help of his mother, he understood Chinese culture and emerged from this dilemma. The study of Jack's identity dilemma and

reconstruction will help those second-generation Chinese Americans solve their identity problems by listening and understanding Chinese culture.

Identity Dilemma

Those Chinese youth who are born and grown up in the United States are more confused about their identity than their parents who are first-generation immigrants. They live in a different environment from their parents, accept American education, and are more likely to recognize American culture and values. However, no matter how much Chinese youth have been Americanized, the mainstream of American society still regards them as Chinese. They will always experience direct or indirect discrimination in their daily life. This makes the new generation of Chinese American more possible to fall into identity dilemma than their parents.

Jack, a Chinese American boy, born in the United States, grew up in two cultural backgrounds. At the age of 10, he began to despise his mixed Chinese American identity due to discrimination from his new neighborhood. Cultural conflicts, racial discrimination, and strong self-hatred pushed him into a state of identity dilemma.

Cultural Conflicts

In the story, cultural conflicts are mainly reflected in the fight between Jack's paper tiger and Mark's star war toy, and the language gap between Jack and his mother. Cultural conflicts made it difficult for him to recognize his own cultural identity.

Jack grew up in both Chinese and American cultural background. His mother was born in China, worked as a servant in Hong Kong and was bought by his American father to be his wife. Due to strange foreign language, cultural differences, and racial discrimination, she could not integrate into American society. She could only hope that her son can speak Chinese to her and inherit the Chinese traditions she worshiped. When Jack was a baby, he kept crying all the time. She made origami animals as a toy to make him happy. "She breathed into them so that they shared her breath, and thus moved with her life. This was her magic" (Liu, 2016, p. 179). This magic came from traditional Chinese myth. Jack was very proud of his toys at first, but when he played with the new neighbor Mark, his paper tiger defeated Mark's obi-wan, and even if he won the game, he did not win Mark's respect. Mark tore the paper tiger and insulted him; he had to repay Mark's toy which had been broken by the paper tiger.

Mark grabbed Laohu and his snarl was choked off as Mark crumpled him in his hand and tore him in half. He balled up the two pieces of paper and threw them at me. "Here's your stupid cheap Chinese garbage." (Liu, 2016, p. 183)

The torn paper tiger actually symbolized the vulnerability of Chinese culture in a society dominated by American culture. This event made Jack feel ashamed of himself who was not a pure American. He began to abandon all Chinese traditions he had touched from his mother and strive to cuddle American culture. Jack asked his father to buy himself a full set of star war toys, and the paper animals that his mother made for him was closed in a shoebox. He chose to alienate with Chinese identity and erase the influence of Chinese culture on him.

The conflict between Jack and his mother was mainly showed at language in the story. Mother kept her love for the Chinese culture. "'Zhe jiao zhezhi,' Mom said. This is called origami" (Liu, 2016, p. 178). She did not learn English and insisted on talking with her son through Chinese. When Jack was a child, he was very close to his mother. After the fight against Mark, he rejected the Chinese traditions that his mother insisted on and refused to communicate with her in Chinese.

If Mom spoke to me in Chinese, I refused to answer her. After a while, she tried to use more English. But her accent and broken sentences embarrassed me. I tried to correct her. Eventually, she stopped speaking altogether if I were around. (Liu, 2016, p. 184)

The language gap hindered the communication between mother and Jack, and Jack's prejudice against his mother added to the gap between them. Mother later began to learn English for Jack, but he did not appreciate it. In the battle with his mother, he represented the powerful American culture, which was totally different when he fought against Mark, and his mother who represented Chinese culture, humiliated by him just like he was humiliated by Mark before.

Influence of American Ideology

Jack grew up in American society, which meant that he must be deeply influenced by American ideology. He inevitably treated his mother, Chinese culture, and mother's homeland with orientalism which is a prejudiced cognition of westerners who despise eastern cultures, and arbitrarily and fictionally interpret them by their own way. In childhood, Jack had no other toys but only those paper animals made by his mother. However, at that time the most popular toys in America were star war toys. Even though the paper animals made Jack a happy childhood, he still envied the American-style toys owned by other children. For Jack, mother's origami magic was just a fantasy from a distant eastern country rather than a culture that he truly understood and recognized. In his mind, what he agreed with were the values of American society. Therefore, after realizing that his Chinese identity was weak in American society, he immediately changed his attitude and began to deal with everything Chinese with contempt. Jack took it for granted that his Chinese mother was inferior to the white, and the Chinese culture she kept was also inferior to American culture. On one hand, he was confronted with discrimination from the whites because of his Chinese identity; on the other hand, he despised his Chinese mother and even other Chinese groups under the influence of American ideology. This was one of the reasons for his identity dilemma.

Racial Discrimination

When Jack was 10, he was discriminated by his new neighbors and other students in school because of his Chinese face. He was described as "a little monster" with "slanty eyes and white face", "looks unfinished", and "something about the mixing never seems right" (Liu, 2016, p. 181). Mark humiliated Jack and said that his paper tiger was made of trash. When Jack was at school, he was called "a chink". These direct humiliations had deeply hurt young Jack. He began to hate his Chinese identity and was eager to get the recognition of white people.

Meanwhile, because of Chinese face similar with his mother, the discrimination his mother had suffered in American society also made Jack very ashamed. His mother was a wife bought by his father from Hong Kong. Jack extremely looked down upon his mother who sold herself as a commodity with accurate price. In the story, the two neighbors and Mark both humiliated his mother because she was a mail-order bride; Jack did not feel angry, but ashamed of his mother. He did not try to understand mother's sufferings in the past days, but agreed with those who humiliated her. It showed that the racism against Chinese people in American society had been internalized into Jack's thoughts. On the one hand, he was the victim of racial discrimination; on the other hand, he also became an accomplice of racists. Such a contradictory self-recognition made him fall into identity dilemma.

Self-Hatred

Self-hatred means that individuals are ashamed of the characteristics of the group they belong to. In a society full of racism, Jack was ashamed of his Chinese face and his Chinese mother who could not speak English well. It could be said that racial discrimination made him self-hatred. "I pushed the chopsticks and the bowl before me away: stir-fried green peppers with five-spice beef. 'We should eat American food'" (Liu, 2016, p. 183).

He refused to speak Chinese, eat Chinese food, and talk to his mother. He locked the paper animals in a shoebox and threw it in the attic; he asked his father to buy star wars toys for him. He grew up according to an absolute American style, and indifferently ignored all the efforts his mother had made to get close to him. He even did not accompany her before she died.

Jack's resistance to all Chinese things was actually a manifestation of his self-hatred after suffering racial discrimination. The discrimination against Chinese in American society was internalized into Jack's self-discrimination. He was eager to abandon all the Chinese things in his life. He blamed all the discrimination he had suffered on his mother who was Chinese. He did not question whether the racism against Chinese was correct or not, but was trapped in the feelings of self-hatred, and could not find his own identity accurately.

Listening and Understanding: An Access to Identity Reconstruction

Listening and understanding is one of the most common ways of identity reconstruction. In the story, under the influence of mother's love, Jack stopped hating his Chinese identity, and talked with other Chinese American, eventually understood and accepted Chinese culture, and reconciled with his growing experiences, thus getting rid of the identity dilemma and reconstructing his identity as a Chinese American.

When mother was still alive, Jack shamed on her who was ever a Chinese mail-order bride. He never knew about his mother's sufferings in the past days, but chose to despise her like others. After mother's death, Jack sorted out the room and pulled out that shoebox. Memories of childhood staying together with mother came to his mind. The love of mother made him take out those origami animals that had been dusty for many years, and accidentally found mother's letter written on the paper tiger. The letter told mother's painful experiences in the past, expressed her deep love and expectation on Jack, and cried for her sadness after being ignored by Jack.

Mother was born in Sigulu Village, Hebei Province, in which the origami was very famous. When she was 10 years old, she became an orphan. She went alone to Hong Kong to find the only uncle. The traffickers she met on the way sold her to a wealthy family to be a servant. In order to get rid of the violence from her owner, she found someone to make fake information about herself into the booklet and was picked up by Jack's father who was preparing to buy an Asian woman as his wife at that time. Jack's father was a nice man, but could not really understand her. Because of the different language and strange living environment, she lived a lonely life. Jack's birth saved her. Jack's face, who was similar to her, recalled her of her families in homeland. She taught Jack to speak Chinese, and made origami animals for him. Teaching Jack Chinese traditions gave her a sense of belonging in a foreign country. However, when Jack grew up, he refused to communicate with her in Chinese, which made her feel sad till her death.

After a long-time "cold war" with mother, Jack finally understood her. He sympathized with mother's sufferings, realized the reason for mother teaching him to speak Chinese, and repented his indifference to his mother for many years. Through his mother's letter, Jack "listened" to his mother's experiences as the first

generation of Chinese immigrants, eliminating misunderstandings about his mother. He was no longer ashamed of his mother's identity, but understanding her hard life as a Chinese in a foreign country. It was the first step for him to get out of his identity dilemma and reconstruct his Chinese American identity.

The second step in the reconstruction of Jack's identity was to interact with other Chinese American and understand Chinese culture. Before mother died, she said that she hoped Jack could open the shoebox every year during the Qingming. However, Jack refused. He answered that he knew nothing about the Chinese calendar. But he did know about Qingming.

Qingming was the Chinese Festival for the Dead. When I was very young, Mom used to write a letter on Qingming to her dead parents back in China, telling them the good news about the past year of her life in America. (Liu, 2016, p. 186)

After discovering the letter left by his mother, he was troubled that he could not understand Chinese. When he checked on the Internet, he found that the day was Qingming. He realized that there would be many Chinese people going to visit their ancestors' graves, so he took the letter with him downtown and found a young Chinese woman to read it for him. Qingming Festival is a day for Chinese people to miss families who died. It is a festival of mourning. For many Chinese immigrants, their parents had already died in their distant motherland, so Qingming Festival had a more pitiful and sorrowful meaning. On this day, Jack discovered mother's letter, asked a Chinese woman to help him read the letter, and emotionally mourned his mother, which symbolizes Jack's understanding of the deep love carried by traditional Chinese culture. After listening to his mother's letter, he asked the young woman to teach him to write Chinese "ai" to beg for mother's forgiveness and expressed his love for her.

In the past, he resisted speaking Chinese and refused to join in the Chinese group. He always hoped that he could become a complete American. Now driven by mother's love, he initiated to learn Chinese. He no longer refused his own Chinese identity and began to integrate into the Chinese community. With the help of mother and other Chinese American, he got out of the identity dilemma and reconstructed his identity as a Chinese-American.

Conclusion

Ken Liu's *The Paper Menagerie* focuses on Jack's growing experiences, showing his identity dilemma and reconstruction. Cultural conflicts made it difficult for Jack to recognize his cultural identity; the influence of American ideology made him look down upon Chinese culture; racial discrimination caused his self-hatred which confused him on self-cognition. Through listening mother's past experiences and understanding the emotional essence of Chinese culture, Jack eventually got out of identity dilemma and reconstructed his Chinese American identity. Ken uses the traditional Chinese myth to link Jack with his mother culturally and emotionally, which shows the importance of Chinese culture for Chinese group who are born and grown up in American society to solve their identity problems.

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