Culture Differences Reflected in the Novel

The Kitchen God's Wife by Amy Tan

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The paper is to study the culture differences in the novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Amy Tan. Amy Tan was an oversea Chinese. Her mother was born and grew in old China. With the influences of her mother, Tan's novel inevitably reflects the Chinese culture. For herself, she was born and grew up in the States; she has been influenced by the American culture. So in her novel both the Chinese culture and American culture can be found. In this paper, the Chinese culture will mainly be talked about and analyzed, with some slight of American culture mentioned. The paper will start with the definition of culture, and the implication and features of Chinese and American culture will be explained. In the body of the paper, the typical symbols and manifestation of Chinese culture will be shown. And the conclusion is the main character's acceptance of the two cultures in the end.

Keywords: culture, Chinese culture, American culture, the symbols, Amy Tan, manifestation

Introduction of the Book

The Kitchen God's Wife is a fiction. In the 70s of the last century America, the Chinese Americans are living at the brim of the dominate society. In the novel, the author talked about the Chinese culture factors.

At 70s of the 20th century, the overseas Chinese was at the brine of the society. In the novel talked the embarrassed situation of the overseas Chinese in America.

The novel mainly concerns about the Chinese factors and forming identity during the mother's experiences both in China and in America.

More than two thirds of the pages are the mother's story in Amy Tan's second novel *The Kitchen God's Wife*. In the novel, mother was a powerful image. The character was the dominant feeling center of the novel and the character moved the readers.

The mother Wen-li is both the victim of the old China and the sider of the American supremacy, and she was a chaser for her happy life. She turned from a weak woman to a strong and independent woman.

The following analyses mainly focus on the aspect of culture. Mostly in old China, represents the culture differences discrepancy of the two cultures.

The Definition of Culture

Understanding the definition of culture is essential for talking about culture differences. About the definition of culture, of course, different people have their own understanding of culture. But American

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anthropologist, Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, explained in his book *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (1952), there are more than 160 different kinds of definitions about culture.¹ Culture is a floorboard for knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, and habits. According to the Baidu definition of culture, “culture” refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving. To be more exactly:

Culture is the systems of knowledge shared by a relatively large group of people.

Culture is communication, communication is culture.

Culture in its broadest sense is cultivated behavior; that is the totality of a person's learned, accumulated experience which is socially transmitted, or more briefly, behavior through social learning.

A culture is a way of life of a group of people—the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.

Culture is symbolic communication. Some of its symbols include a group's skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, and motives. The meanings of the symbols are learned and deliberately perpetuated in a society through its institutions.

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action; on the other hand, as conditioning influences upon further action.

Culture is the sum of total of the learned behavior of a group of people that are generally considered to be the tradition of that people and are transmitted from generation to generation.

Culture is a collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.

Cultural differences manifest themselves in different ways and differing levels of depth. Symbols represent the most superficial values and the deepest manifestations of culture, with heroes and rituals in between. The true cultural meaning of the practices is intangible; this is revealed only when the practices are interpreted by the insiders. So culture is the total way of a nations living and thinking; it is in a nation anyway and everywhere; it is with the person in the culture what he wears, what he speaks, what he eats, what ways of living he has, and what kinds of ideological ways of thinking he has.

Understanding the Chinese Culture

With the definition and understanding of culture, it is defined as that culture is really a notion for broad study. Chinese culture is always considered to be multi-faceted. In China, it is even broad, profound, and refined. It includes benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, faith, loyalty, filial piety, Ti, festival, will, courage, let; fancies of men of letters, 360 rows, the four great inventions, folk taboo, patriotism, natural health, bamboo, ballads, loess, the Yangtze River, the Yellow River, red, the moon; 12 animals: cattle, tiger, rabbit, rat, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, chicken, dog, pig; peasant, the peasant uprising, hoe; the royal palace

¹ See http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=IJMhsTp6iT1IEZ8J7OzP43O85-QV9PaDBEYe5_8XO-9GfsSaYBNh_mhIYO4YGLNh.

official, palace, imperial school culture. They represent the ancient philosophers, lyre-playing, chess, calligraphy and painting lute-playing, chess, calligraphy, and painting—accomplishments of a scholar of the old school; traditional literature, traditional holidays, Chinese drama, Chinese architecture, Chinese characters in Chinese traditional Chinese medicine, the philosophy of religion, folk handicraft, the Chinese martial arts, regional culture, folk custom, and dress. With the advances, advantages, and varieties of Chinese traditional culture, and with the fast development of Chinese modern culture, sharing these cultures with the whole world is necessary and urgent.

The Basic of American Culture

American Culture and the Idea of Self-government

Edward T. Hall (1966) has said that the “hidden dimensions” of language and culture provide interesting insights into understanding the cultural behavior of other groups with whom we may not be familiar.

From the beginning, American culture was defining itself against confederations of big government in favor of self-government. There is much more evidence to indicate that the early period (1600s), before the American Revolution, was filled with cultural emphasis about self-government. The people were quick to rise up against any condition which prevented self-government from dominating their lives, even taxation.

Covenantal Freedom as the Basis for American Culture

Richard Parker of the Kennedy School in Boston (1995) maintains that American culture is neither cultural or a civilization. Rather, that America is the dream born out of the Protestant Reformation that individuals can find God on their own terms, and without intervention by the church. He believes that America's core is born out of the need to free oneself from both the tyranny of the state and the church. He maintains that it was the community of belief around these ideas that the American culture and state were born.

The Basis for American Values as Religious Commitment

Maier (1995) suggests another view of American culture. He is concerned about Americans believing that religion is the basis of American culture because the root word is “cult” (as defined here he means a particular system of religious worship) or a small group of religions that formed the basis for American values. To be sure, the role of religion in America is an interesting one.

American Prosperity as a Cultural Root

In an analysis of *Tocqueville Revisited*, Handy (2001) suggests that earned wealth not inherited wealth is a value that was immediately embraced by American cultural values. He also suggests that by “codifying and legalizing the emerging property”, it was possible to move capital and grow into a wealthy culture. These values, inside the American psyche, associated with human capital and knowledge, create a United States that is pivotal in the global economy.

The Natural Rights of Man as a Central Cultural Value

Thomas Jefferson (1826) in his last message before he died on the 50th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence said it best, “...assume the blessings and security of self-government...the form which we have substituted restores the faith in unbounded reason and freedom of opinion...and all eyes are open or are opening to the rights of man...”

The Refection of Both Chinese Culture and American Culture in the Novel

As the ideas mentioned above in the novel, some of the Chinese cultures will be found and some of the American cultures or signs will be shown.

Chinese Culture Reflected and Scattered in the Novel

The novel is considered as the novel full of Chinese culture. It not only refers to the ideas or things in the novel, even in the novel, from the beginning to the end, the author use the Chinese sound to mean the idea. The Chinese letters are the most noticeable Chinese culture.

The Name Identity of Chinese

At the beginning of the story, the name of the boy (then the adult) is called Bao-bao, which is the typical boy's name in China, whose real name is Roger. From the first paper, readers can notice the Chinese indication with the name. And the author continuously explained that Bao-bao means "precious boy".

The Dragon Symbol

Another noticeable Chinese culture at the beginning of the story is that they were going to have a big banquet dinner at Water Dragon Restaurant (p. 2). The dragon is an obvious Chinese culture symbol. Only Chinese or overseas Chinese prefer to the restaurant with dragon.

The Banners for the Congratulation

It is a typical Chinese custom. For the banners with the congratulating sentences, not the English ways of saying like "Good Luck" or "prosperity and Long Life", "all the sayings, written in gold Chinese characters, are of her own inspiration, her thoughts about life and death, luck and hope: First-Class Life for Your First Baby", "Double-Happiness Wedding Triple Family fortunes", "Money Smells Good in Your New Restaurant Business", "Health Returns Fast, Always Hoping" (p. 19).

The Mandarin Words in the Novel

In the mother's Mandarin words, she sometimes used the Chinese words to express the idea: as "He swallowed them until he made himself sick. Ai! *ying-gai* find him another job" (p. 27). In the sentence "*ying-gai*" is Chinese sound for "should have or would".

Also, in the novel, the author purposely used many Chinese Mandarin words: *Suanle* – Forget this! (p. 235), *Daomei* – bad luck (p. 235), *Tang jie* – sugar sister (p. 90), *Qipao* – long wedding dress (p. 188), *Ganbei* – bottom up (p. 180), *Chi ping mei* – Chinese traditional book (p. 155), *Wah-wah ye* – a special kind of fish (p. 129), *Dabing* – kind of pan cake (p. 485), *Taonan* – to ran away/escape (p. 497), *Yin and Yang* – the Traditional conception of essence of women and man (p. 511).

Chinese Fable Story in the Novel

The key point in this novel is the "Kitchen God". In the second chapter of the novel, the mother told a story about "Kitchen God".

In China long time ago, there was a rich farmer named Zhang, such a lucky man... He was not satisfied with his happy life. He wanted to play with a pretty girl and chased his wife away. Later, he became poor, he wore patches than whole cloth on his pants. He crawled from the gate of one household to another, crying, give me your moldy grain. At last he got to his wife house, but he was shame to meet his wife and began leaping about the kitchen looking for some place to hide, then jumped in the kitchen fireplace just as his wife walked in the room.

In the heaven, the jade Emperor heard the whole story from his new arrival. For having courage to admit you were wrong. The Emperor declared him to Kitchen God, watching everybody's behavior, every year, you let me know who deserves good luck who deserves bad. (p. 61)

This is the traditional Chinese belief of the Kitchen God. With the retelling of story, the author was telling the American readers to know something about traditional Culture.

Women's Marriage Is the Typical Old Chinese Culture

The mother's own marriage was dominated by fate and she was helpless with the marriage. "What else could I do? I let him in" (p. 159). This is the mother's first marriage when she was in old China. The uncertainty of herself was formed at the very beginning of her life.

And the mother knew that,

Perhaps this was wrong of me to blame another woman for my won miseries. But that was how I was raised—never got criticize men or the society thy ruled, or Confucius, that awful man who made that society. I could only blame other women who were more afraid than I. (p. 325)

Perhaps, the mother was right with her story, not to blame herself, not the mother-in-law. But she did not really notice the real root of the women's fate at that time China.

In the whole story, readers can find the mother experienced too many unbelievable things. Some of them are hard to understanding for her age. However, some of her fate was determined by the old Chinese doctrine of obedience.

The History of Chinese History Depicted in the Novel

In the novel, the history was recorded. It mentioned.

When the Japanese took over Shanghai in 1937...when the Japanese lost in 1945 and the Kuomintang came back...and when the communists took over in 1949, the first story came back. All the time mentioned is the exact time sequence of the Japanese invasion of China and the liberation of Shanghai in 1949. (p. 80)

Of course, it is not the exact history of Chinese in the 30s; the novel referred to something happening at that time. It is a vivid description of the Chinese at that time. But it is a miniature of the Japanese invasion of China in 30s and 40s. About the war Chinese experienced was mainly in three places: Nanking, Kunming, and Shanghai.

The Domination American Culture Reflected in the Novel

In the novel, the Philip's response to his mother-in-law was an immediate reflection of the American culture. "...the day before, we had a polite argument with my mother over where we would stay" "But we've already made reservation at the hotel" (p. 6). Staying at the hotel rather than with the relatives is an American culture of visiting either friends or relatives. In Chinese culture, it is common to stay at the relatives houses. It can be resumed from the old Chinese ways of living style. In the old China, when relatives visited, the host usually prepared a spare room for the visitors to live in. Later, things changed in China, each family has not got enough space for visitor. Actually they could not provide them bed, and they had not enough money to reserve at a hotel. So the only way for the visitors is either to crowd with the host family or the host asked for help of the neighbor for shelter of the visitor. Over time, Chinese have developed a habit not to stay in a hotel in the city or town with relatives. But the situation in the story is that there are lots of rooms in the house for them to

settle down. And the mother persuaded them not to waste the money. So the description here shows the American ways contrast with Chinese ways.

While they were talking about the Kitchen God, they mentioned “he is not Santa Clause. More like a spy – FBI agent, CIA, Mafia, worse than IRS, that kind of person! And he doesn’t give you gift and you give him things”.

When mother talked about her childhood experiences, she mentioned that:

In China back then, you were always responsible to someone else. It’s not life here in the United States—freedom, independence, individual thinking, do what you want, disobey your mother, no such thing. No body ever said to me: be good, little girl, and I will give you a piece of candy. You did not get reward for being good, what was expected. But if you were bad—your family could do anything to you, no reason needed. (p. 162)

The Solution of the Two Cultures

With the explanation of culture in the novel, the writer shows the conflicts of the two cultures. But the solution is the acceptance of the other culture. With the mother’s (Wei-wei’s) early experiences in China and her later living in America, she adjusted the two cultures properly. She never preferred one to the other in her talking about the differences of the two cultures. After many years in America, the mother knew some differences between China and American.

While the mother recalled her visits to her father after many years of departure, she had the kind of mood to describe the moment situation. “Of course, he did not hug me and kiss me, not the way you Americans do when you have been reunited after five minutes’ separation” (p. 176). That shows she notices and accepts the Western culture.

Conclusion

In the novel, the author shows the Chinese culture and American culture. For the stories about the old China, the Chinese culture is panorama of the whole China then. The details are vividly shown by the name identity of Chinese, the dragon symbol, the banners for the congratulation, the mandarin words in the novel, Chinese fable, women’s marriage, and the history of Chinese history. While parts of American culture are depicted in the novel, American culture was not the main topic, for the purposes of the novel *The Kitchen God’s Wife* is to show the Chinese culture then and now to the world.

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