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Chinese American Women and Traditional Chinese Values

“The Paper Menagerie” and “The Auntie” both depict the images of Chinese American women. As an ethnic minority and as women, they are often in the stress of many aspects in their lives, namely gender, ethnic identification, cultural transformation, social hierarchical rules, and so on. As a mail-order bride, the mother in “The Paper Menagerie” has a lower social status, however, on the contrary, the women in “The Auntie” appear to have a higher social status and enjoy more freedom. Nevertheless, women in both works have accepted or adhere to the same understanding of marriage, family, and death in traditional Chinese values in family life.

Jack's mother and Auntie Haichen have different social status and authority, while their view on marriage is also in line with the traditional Chinese concept of marriage from different aspects. They share the belief that marriage is out of economic consideration rather than pure love. Jack's mother is a mail-order bride from a poor Chinese village. She met Jack's father through a bridal agency and their marriage is more like a deal. Jack's mother said "If I can cook, clean, and take care of my American husband, he'll give me a good life. It was the only hope I had" (Liu). So, Jack's mother treats this marriage as a way to get a better life rather than settling down with someone she really loves. Therefore, in order to escape the previous miserable life, she can do nothing but to accept this marriage built on economic consideration rather than love, just as she said, "it's not a romantic story, but it's my story" (Liu). However, for Auntie Hai-Chen, she doesn't have experienced such a miserable life Jack's mother has gone through. Nevertheless, she holds a similar understanding of marriage, that weighs the economic status more than the love between a couple. When Maya is dating with a boy who works nonprofit, auntie said, "why are you wasting your time with this boy", which means auntie thinks dating with a man who seems poor is not worthy of time since there is little chance that they will get married (Wong and Xu ch.4). She also roared, "ask him if his parents are rich" when Maya is going to take a step further with the man (Wong and Xu ch.4). This action shows that auntie doesn't care about the relationship between Maya and the man, she judges whether the man fits with Maya only through his family's economic status. In conclusion, both Jack's mother and Auntie Haichen treat the wealth of the man rather than love is a more important factor in marriage.

In fact, the similarity of Jack's mother and Auntie Haichen's view on marriage is attributed to the social norm and shared value in ancient China. The society of ancient China is feudal and patrilineal so that women's social status was mostly lower than that of men. According to historian Dawson, "the rites of marriage symbolized the fact that the bride's body, fertility, domestic service, and loyalty has been handed over by one family to another" (143). So that in ancient China, the wife is more seemed as a property of the husband instead of an individual who has the same rights as her husband. So, the views of Auntie Haichen and Jack's mother on marriage are also imperceptibly influenced by such traditional values. For Jack's mother, she hopes to have a better life and Auntie Haichen wants Maya to lead a better life. For them, the definition of a "better life" actually refers to a better economic situation. Because of this, Jack's mother chooses to become a mail-order bride to settle down in the United States, where economic conditions are better than her birthplace. Auntie Haichen also eagerly hopes that Maya will learn about the financial situation of the boy she is dating. Therefore, their similar materialized view of marriage also reflects that they still regard women as male vassals, rather than seeking equality in marriage.

In family life, both “The Paper Menagerie” and “The Auntie” reflects a common traditional Chinese family concept of filial piety, but they convey this idea in a different way. Auntie Haichen has more discourse power in the family and she uses her parental authority to force Maya to respect her. On the contrary, Jack's mother lacks the family authority and can only hope to influence her son through love to let him respect her. There is an old Chinese saying goes "Among hundreds of virtues, filial piety goes first (百善孝为先)". This strongly emphasized virtue comes from Confucianism which takes the dominant place in ancient China. Filial piety describes how children should treat their parents. Researchers have pointed out that filial piety is both behaviorally oriented and emotionally oriented, which means filial piety is not only about responsibility, repayment, but also love, and respect (Wang, 22). In Maya's family, Auntie Haichen seems to have much parental authority, but in Jack's family, the situation is on the opposite, Jack's mother has little authority. The different authority of the two women is a reason why the two families take different approaches to convey the filial piety to the next generation.

At first, we look into two incidents where both Maya and Jack offended Auntie Haichen and Jack's mother respectively. By comparing the different outcomes, we conclude that Jack's mother possesses much fewer discourse power in her family than that of Auntie Haichen. After Maya attacks the ghost with salt and went to warn her parent about the ghost who is known as Auntie Haichen, she receives severe criticism from parents. Auntie Haichen is floating above the dining table, with her arms and legs crossed, looking down at Maya sideways, giving her an angry look. Maya's mother criticized her, "Maya, I'm disappointed at you! Auntie Haichen was just telling me how rude you were to her" (Wong and Xu ch.1). So, Maya is criticized for being rude to her auntie indicating respecting her is the family rule that she should strictly follow. This scene indicates the parental authority of Auntie Haichen in this family. However, Jack has also been rude to his mother, but the situation is totally different. When Jack shouted at his mother for not speaking English, his father didn't criticize Jack's rude behavior but also demand her to stop using her mother language. Jack's mother "sat, looking from dad to me [Jack], and back to dad again", she "tried to speak, stopped, and tried again, and stopped again" (Liu). Jack's mother didn't yell back at Jack to maintain her parental authority, which might happen in Maya's family, instead, she is forced to accept Jack being rude to her. In these two scenes, both Maya and Jack take rude action or even offend the elder, the result is totally different in these two families which indicates Jack's mother possesses little authority in this family which is opposite to that of Auntie Haichen. Nevertheless, the difference between the two women's status in the family can be used to explain the different approaches they take to convey the idea of filial piety to the next generation.

Although the status of women in “The Paper Menagerie” and “The Auntie” is different which also lead to different parenting methods, they both managed to pass on the concept of filial piety to the next generation. In terms of methods, Auntie Haichen uses her authority to force Maya to respect her, while Jack's mother uses love and her own behavior to teach Jack the meaning of filial piety. After Maya offended Auntie Haichen by attacking her with salt, Maya's father criticized her, "We raised you better than that, you need to behave" (Wong and Xu ch.1). Father's indication meaning is that because we have raised you, you need to be grateful to us as well as Auntie Haichen by paying respect and being polite. Therefore, in Maya's family, filial piety is seen as a family rule that the younger generation should strictly follow. Also, when Maya is dating the boy, Auntie Haichen is always complaining the boy is not worthy since he doesn't seem rich. She also uses her own experience to try to persuade Maya to follow her advice and leave the boy, "I'm telling you, my daughter was already married at your age" (Wong and Xu ch.4). From these scenes, we see that Auntie Haichen is emphasizing her parental authority to make Maya listen to her. However, due to the lack of discourse power in the family, Jack's mother cannot force Jack to pay her respect. Instead, Jack's mother takes a much moderate approach to make Jack know what filial piety really means. She passes the concept of filial piety to Jack through her own deeds. In the letter Jack's mother left, she said, "I finally found a good life. I wished my parents could be here so that I could cook for them, and give them a good life too" (Liu). Jack's mother is eager to serve her parents and takes her parents' well-being as part of her pursuit. She also told Jack the saddest feeling for a Chinese is "a child finally grow the desire to take care of his parents, only to realize that they were long gone (子欲养而亲不待)" (Liu). Therefore, Jack's mother shows Jack her attitude to her parents and express how sad she was since she was not able to take care of her parents anymore. Jack's mother influenced Jack through her love for her parents so that Jack finally realize the same pain as his mother who failed to take good care of her parents before they have gone. It was through this influence that makes Jack eventually understand the concept of filial piety, and respected and loved his mother. In conclusion, Auntie Haichen and Jack's mother both pass the idea of filial piety to the next generation which is the most emphasized virtue in traditional Chinese culture, but due to their different status in the family, they have to choose different parenting method to convey the idea of this virtue.

When it comes to the concept of death, “The Paper Menagerie” and “The Auntie” adopted different methods to reflect a similar understanding of death. In both works, the death of relatives is not interpreted as terrifying and taboo, but full of love and warmth, which is also in line with the understanding of death in Chinese tradition. In “The Paper Menagerie”, Jack's mother flies paper crane to the graves of her deceased parents at Qingming, which is full of love and respect for her family. By comparison, in “The Auntie”, the author takes an unusual way to show the same understanding of death by creating a ghost with a rich personality. When Jack's mother is dying, she reminds Jack to take the box of origami and think about her at *Qingming* and said, "I will be with you always" (Liu). According to the letter she left for Jack, she thought "if you think of me on *Qingming* when the spirits of the departed are allowed to visit their families, you'll make the parts of myself I leave behind come alive too" (Liu). Therefore, in Jack's mother's perspective, she believes the spirits of the passed family members will come back to guide and accompany the living ones. Similarly, in “The Auntie”, the author also reveals this belief. But, different from “The Paper Menagerie” where this belief only exists in Jack's mother's perspective, “The Auntie” directly constructs a ghost Auntie Haichen who visited Maya's family. Some researchers pointed out that this common belief in many Chinese American families is attributed to ancestor worship, known as "the original philosophical underpinning of Chinese culture" which can be dated back to the Chou Dynasty (周朝) (trad.1027-221 B.C.) (Hsu et al., 154-155). Therefore, many Chinese believe "the spirit of the dead continue to remain on earth" and will influence the family's wealth, health, and success (Hsu et al., 155).

Furthermore, the two works not only express the same belief that the spirit of the passed family members will return home but also interpret the belief as warm and loving rather than horrifying. In “The Paper Menagerie”, Jack's mother shows her love and respect to her dead parents through her action. She writes letters to them and fold the letter into a paper crane and flies the cranes across the Pacific to land on her family's grave on every Qingming (Liu). Therefore, instead of seeing death as terrifying, Jack's mother's action shows her caring and deep love with her long-gone parents. By contrast, "The Auntie" doesn't use such a direct way to express the understanding of death. Auntie Haichen is not portrayed as a friendly and warm ghost, rather, she appears in “The Auntie” as an annoying and distinctive image. She has been making harsh comments on the clothes Maya is going to buy and the boy she is dating. But meanwhile, she is also a ghost rich in personality. She always adheres to her living habits, namely playing mahjong. She has never changed the complaining and picky style of speaking, just like a living old lady. This ghost also has complicated emotions and feelings as living people. She would be afraid and angry when attacked by sault. Also, she is jealous when Maya is picking the clothes that she would never be able to wear. Through the creation of such an abnormal ghost, the author conveys the unique charm of Auntie Haichen and makes people forget the horror image of ghosts in traditional cognition. In conclusion, both works express the understanding of the death of relatives in these two Chinese American families. They all believe that the souls of their loved ones will return to their home after their deaths. Also, they pay full respect and love for their dead relatives and didn't understand their death as horrifying and taboo. In “The Paper Menagerie”, this understanding is directly expressed through the mother's behavior, and the words left to Jack. In contrast, "The Auntie" expresses a similar understanding of death in a more subtle way by shaping a ghost with a distinctive personality.

In summary, this article compares the female images in “The Paper Menagerie” and “The Auntie”, especially Jack’s mother and Auntie Haichen. We find that although they have different family and social status, they are all influenced by traditional Chinese culture and old customs which has caused them to have similar understandings of marriage, filial piety, and death. They all believe that the essence of marriage is not love, but a comprehensive consideration of the man’s social and economic status. In terms of educating the young, the differences in their discourse power in the family led to different parenting methods, but they all pass on to future generations the virtue of filial piety, which is to love and respect the elders. On the topic of death, the two works have different expressions, but they both convey the deep love and warmth of the two Chinese American families for their deceased relatives.

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