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The Message of the Paper Menagerie

The author of the Paper Menagerie(Ken Liu) is trying to express how valuable different cultures are; How we should protect and preserve them before it is too late, and they are lost permanently. He does this through the story of someone who was not able to preserve the culture his mother belonged to and so was never able to develop a meaningful relationship with her. Helping paint a tight knit connection of culture to real people, whose memories could be lost with the culture. The story brings us on a journey with the narrator, Jack, as he reminisces on his childhood. Jack is a Chinese American man whose mother was from rural china while his father is from Connecticut. Before diving into his childhood, he notes how his mother arrived in America tell us that his “dad had picked [his] mom out of a catalog”(Liu 1). This establishes early on how abnormal the mother’s presence in suburban Connecticut was and lays the groundwork for Jack’s future actions. When the narrator was a child, he attempts to reject and forget the part of him that is Chinese. The child, too young to understand what his mother has gone through, refers to her actions, a representation of an alien and unfamiliar culture, as “exaggerated, uncertain, ridiculous, graceless”(Liu 5) among other words. He thoroughly despises the different part of himself. Having been surrounded by American peoples who ridicule and ostracize him because of his bloodline, he grows to associate this culture with his bad experiences and begins to grow apart from his mother, whom he believed to be the root of his problems. Even as his mother was dying from cancer, he is “already thinking about the flight back, and the bright California sunshine”(Liu 6). At this point, Jack has unknowingly lost his last chance interact with his mother. However, he does not care, choosing instead to allow his mother to take a back seat in his mind and focusing, instead on the future. A few years progresses after the mother’s death as Jack goes to college. His older self, looking back, dearly regrets this. He realized that his mother’s being different was something to be celebrated. Later we learn of the mother's desire to be able to pass on to her son, what she had held dear. The mother wished she could teach Jack her language, and “remake a small piece of everything [she] loved and lost”(Liu 10). This is the final piece of the message the author wishes to convey. We are able to realize along with Jack how much has been lost. The rejection of the mother’s culture through most of his life has left him unable to preserve his mother’s memories and experiences.