

The Thematic Characteristics of First and Second Generation Chinese American Writers: Based on the Analysis of The Bonesetter's Daughter, Crazy Rich Asians, Everything You Never Told Me, and A Thousand Years of Good Prayers

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Abstract: Novels created by Chinese American writers are expected to reveal certain situations in Chinese American immigrant families. Family conflicts can be combined with more social problems, such as racial discrimination, gender discrimination, political suppression, and the discussion of ancestry and familyhood. First and second-generation Chinese American writers have different perspectives and techniques to blend family conflict with social problems, but their works also have features in common. The paper compares *Crazy Rich Asians*, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, and *Everything You Never Told Me* to analyze their plots, characters, and the backgrounds of their authors, respectively, to conclude these Chinese American writer's techniques similar, or variable, and the causes to such differences. In general, the writing methods of Chinese American writers and their techniques are closely related to their educational experience and cultural background. Different degrees of relation with Oriental culture and moral values lead to various points of view expressed in stories. A lack of knowledge of Asian traditions may lead to misinterpretation of certain behaviors, but this might also prompt writers to introduce the better part of Asian traditions. As writers often get inspiration from surrounding people and events, settings, plots, and characters can also be seen to reflect the writers' cultural and educational backgrounds.

Keywords: novel, Chinese American writers, thematic characteristics

1. Introduction

As a symbol of freedom of will and mixture of various cultural backgrounds, the USA is more than attractive for artistic and linguistic creators from the globe to utilize their talents. Having experienced centuries of slavery, feudalism, imperialism, and in some places, communism, Asian writers tend to have sharper views to hidden social inequalities than white residents. Their works usually contain oriental elements including but not limited to strict domestic disciplines, division between Asian-educated parents and western-educated children, or the continuous or sometimes doubtful pursuit of traditional culture. Many newborn generations in Asia find it difficult to comprehend what was shown in the books of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, for instance, for their stories were those

happened to their fathers and earlier generations. Novels written by the first generation of Chinese Americans, however, tell more comprehensive stories that cater to both Asian and western readers for having a combination of modern and traditional oriental elements. Excellent representatives of these two types of works are *Crazy Rich Asians* by Kevin Kwan, the *Bonesetter's Daughter* by Amy Tan, *Everything You Never Told Me* by Celeste Ng, and *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* by Yiyun Li.

Published in 2017, the book *Crazy Rich Asians* was expected by Kevin Kwan to 'introduce a contemporary Asia to a North American Audience'. [1] Inspired by the writer's own childhood experience in Singapore, *Crazy Rich Asians* told the story of Asia's rich and famous names under the disguise of the marriage of a young couple. As Rachel struggles to fit into the Asian society in which family names and wealth matter significantly more than plain effort and personal pride, she actively tries to break the restriction of the class despite her mother's teachings on methods to blend into the western society. [2] The novel reflects Rachel's inner struggle to balance Oriental and Western culture and traditions and to play a proper character in this culture clash.

Amy Tan, in contrast, is a representative of the second generation of Chinese American residents. Her works are usually about mother-daughter relationships and the experience of Chinese-Americans. In *the Bonesetter's Daughter*, teenage Ruth despises her mother's old-fashioned culture and tradition, regarding them as illiterate and conservative; when she comes of age, she gradually realizes her unique identity as an Asian offspring and has a part of the bonesetter's spirit. However, the efforts paid by Ruth are not recognized by elder members of the family, as they too, are unable to accept western culture. [3] As is depicted in the book, Asian-Americans eventually pick up their pride and confidence and learned to blend both cultures. Identity orientation and integration of the two cultures are the foundation on which these ethnic Chinese can continue to overcome the demons of trauma.

In *Everything You Never Told Me*, Celeste Ng combines both the problem of female education and racial problems. Lydia, the eldest daughter in the family, is given high expectations by her mother and suffers greatly under great academic pressure. Isolation from classmates and endless criticism from her mother eventually drag her down, while no one around notices her abnormality. [4] Characters in this novel have little direct relationship with Asian culture and tradition, but they are still expected to be inferior on some occasions while all members of the family attempt to fit into mainstream culture.

Characters and plots in different stories of *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* vary greatly, but the settings of some stories have much in common. For instance, many stories can be concluded as: a main character's life gets ruined due to abuse from the government or misfortune during the cultural revolution. Imprisonment in *After a Life* breaks apart a family, and the mythologizing of leaders destroys the teenage years of a man, the powerful in *Persimmon* takes twelve lives, and in the headline story, the repressive atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution destroys Mr. Shi's family. [5] Another feature in this book is Yiyun Li's continuous use of Chinese proverbs and sayings, which add to the novel's reality.

The paper will discuss writing techniques or habits used in various Chinese American writers' works, as well as common elements and symbols these writers adapt differently. Analysis in the characteristics of heroes and heroines will occupy a major portion of the paper. To facilitate the analysis, I will divide Chinese American writers into two categories according to their years of experiencing western society. That is, separating the first-generation of Chinese Americans from second-generation Chinese American writers.

Based on the preceding, Kevin Kwan and Yiyun Li can both be concluded as first-generation Asian Americans. Their characters experience both oriental and western cultures, during which some may even fall victim of cultural gaps. Celeste Ng and Amy Tan, in contrast, are second-generation Asian

American writers. Their lack of experience of Asian languages and cultures might lead to their works being criticized as a deliberate attempt to curry favor with western ideology.

Studying the differences between the works of first-generation Asian American writers and those of second-generation writers may provide convenience in studying their different writing structures or possible topics that might be mentioned in the future. The discovery may also contribute to comparing a wider range of works, novels and prose included, created by writers with several cultural backgrounds.

2. Analysis on Different Characters and Plots Created by First Generation Asian-Americans

2.1. Kevin Kwan's Characters and Settings in *Crazy Rich Asians*

As a member of a wealthy and powerful Singaporean family, Kevin Kwan was raised in the upper society and enjoyed a childhood of great wealth. His great-grandfather was the founder of Singapore's oldest OCBC bank, and his grandfather was the first ophthalmologist in Singapore to receive orthodox education from Western Medical University. Nancy Kwan, the first female star to become famous in the western film industry, is also a member of this well-reputed family. As a result, according to Kevin Kwan himself in an interview, he admitted that the stories of *Crazy Rich Asians* all came from life experiences and that all characters were representatives of his friends. Experience like this offers a different perspective to see Asian Americans as wealthy and respected people, other than pitying them for their misfortune. Creating a story based on upper-class Singapore is more than a creative act for an Asian American writer.

Rachel Chu is a character who was invented by Kevin. Rachel Chu is an Asian woman who is entirely unversed in Asian culture. She gets along with her mother as a friend and can't quite read the punchline in 'Twenty Ways to Teach You to Identify Your Asian Parents'; she is tired of the standards and attitudes that Asian men have toward their dating partners and has set herself the guideline of 'not dating Asian guys'... .. However, this is also the case that she breaks her own arbitrary 'taboo', and falls in love with Nick, who comes from a wealthy Singaporean family. She did not expect that she would have to go through double 'culture shock': the collision of the values formed in Western culture with the traditional culture of the East is already enough of a dichotomy, not to mention the fact that what she had to face is the 'upper' society entirely out of touch with the ordinary lives.

It is precisely because of Kevin's background and because Kevin is a first-generation Chinese American that he was able to write a story about the collision of Eastern and Western cultures, as well as a love story of a wealthy family.

2.2. Yiyun Li's Characters and Plots in *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*

Yiyun Li was born in Beijing in 1972, when political situations were still unstable as the Cultural Revolution continued. Her birthplace provided her with relatively better education conditions as well as more opportunities, so she went to the US from Peking University to start her postgraduate studies. Experience in both 20th century China and 21st century US contributes to her unique view of political situations. She combines her own awareness of the tragedy of 1970s and 1960s ordinary people with her western perspective and vividly depicts dilemmas of international students and their aging conservative parents. 22 years living in China has allowed her to better fully restore the situation and construction of Chinese society.

Many of Yiyun Li's political discourses are considered to be clichés, but these flat phrases in her stories are, to a large extent, only our 'verbal' phrases, and we still rarely have the courage or the opportunity to have them appear intensively in a collection of short stories. The English language not only gives Yiyun Li an exotic gaze, but also gives her freedom of expression. Compared to Harkin,

Yiyun Li's expression is more peaceful, and the English she uses is quite readable, with rigorous sentences and some Chinese cultural thinking. This kind of expression should have more power. Many endings of Yiyun Li's characters in *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* are tragedies, for example, death or separation of closely related friends or lovers or family members.

Because she lived through a period of political turmoil in China, her story is full of death, separation and tragedy. It is precisely because of her experience that her story is politically critical and full of political remarks.

3. Analysis on Different Characters and Plots Created by Second-generation Asian-Americans

3.1. Celeste Ng's Characters and Settings in *Everything You Never Told Me*

Written by a second-generation Asian-American, *Everything You Never Told Me* contains little Oriental cultural and educational elements and, therefore, depicts slight cultural contradiction within the family. Discrimination and isolation of people with Eastern backgrounds or multicultural backgrounds are underlying in this novel. Lydia is unconsciously discriminated against because of her Asian look and her "Asian" behaviors, like being quiet and hardworking, refusing to socialize, and being alone all the time, although she is an ordinary American child.

However, as a white mother, she still unconsciously reveals herself to be protective of her mixed-race child and sometimes is unable to conceal the mild discrimination against Asians. At one time, she hopes her daughter to prove her own value as an Asian girl; at the same time, she fears her child's mixed identity would hinder her own development, and thus avoids mentioning this sensitive topic as much as possible.

Celeste Ng grew up in Ohio and Pennsylvania as the daughter of two Hong Kong immigrants and received a college education at Harvard. Having achieved a master's degree in creative writing at the University of Michigan, she created and published several novels and proses in magazines before working on *Everything You Never Told Me*. Unlike first-generation Asian American writers who spent years learning English as a second language, second-generation writers like Celeste Ng are fully immersed in the English environment and are less worried about cultural clashes. Their view to judge immigrant families is also different from that of first-generation Asian American writers.

3.2. Amy Tan's Characters and Settings in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*

This novel is filled with misunderstandings between people and the resulting tragedies. There is no denying that many of the contradictions in the book are caused by cultural differences or divisions in perception, but inadequate communication is also an important factor in widening the gap between family members. Misunderstandings between Ruth's mother's traditional parenting philosophy and Ruth's rebellious characteristic widens the gap between mother as daughter at first. The same plot of misunderstanding occurs among Lu Ling and her mother, 'precious auntie'. The daughter, too, was first eager to pursue "freedom", but eventually changes her mind and carefully takes on the duties as a mother. The influence of ancestral identity remains powerful after decades and is even more memorable in a strange land. The judgement of many characters is even affected by ancestral identity, which in fact is a symbol of family concept and ancient Chinese virtues. In the writing of Amy Tan, every character seems to have their own complex experience of life. What they are born to bear are not simply the hatred to some family or individual, nor are they destined to suffer from the prejudice of skin and eye color. These characters inherit and develop from the elements of their parents and ancestors, which make their stories more vivid and complex to tell.

Amy Tan was also born and raised in a completely western environment and also majored in literature-related fields in college, which prepared a lot for her later creations. As a second-generation

Chinese American, she has little direct relationship with ancient Chinese traditions and conservative habits, and the only source she is able to learn them is through her mother. Therefore, the relationships of daughter and mother are of great importance in her novels. Both in the novel and in reality, Chinese mothers are expected to pass down what they knew at a young age to their sons and daughters to preserve tradition. During the process, misunderstandings happen, which indicates contradictions between the two generations and eventually direct to mutual understanding and love.

4. Conclusion

In short, both first and second-generation Asian American writers reveal the unavoidable contradiction between Asian parents and American children, the misunderstandings, big or small. To be more specific, the conflict lies between traditional conservative Oriental values and liberal western characteristics.

What seems to divide the two generations of Asian-American writers might be the personal traits and the complexity of personal experiences. First-generation Chinese Americans have to solve the problem of writing in a second language before mastering it. Their childhood in Asian countries might also have some influence on their later lives in America. For instance, they might still unconsciously preserve some Asian habits while making judgments. To get fully acknowledged as a Chinese American writer, they usually pay more effort. For second-generation Chinese Americans, however, language is no longer a barrier. Instead, they lack a direct connection with Asian lifestyle and moral values. What is exposed to them are usually the habits of their parents, which might form stereotypes and have to be solved. Elements that are thought to represent Chinese culture are possibly to appear in works of second-generation Chinese-American writers due to a lack of understanding, such as red lanterns to represent every crucial event. At the same time, unaware discrimination and misinterpretation of Chinese culture might lead to either the avoidance of mentioning certain plots or the eagerness to introduce “good” Oriental characteristics and cultures to readers.

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