

# Young immigrants and children of immigrants in two kinds and in the american essa...

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Tradition and culture is an important theme in immigrant literature, especially between generations. There is a certain anxiety that develops in the relationship between parents and children of immigrant cultures; the younger generation is eager to shuck the exotic, alienating traditions of their parent's host nation in order to fit in, while the older generation fears the ending of the traditions that helped define who they are and their culture. Meanwhile, these children of immigrants maintain a certain longing for their culture's traditions, creating a metaphysical tug-of-war that occurs within these divided family dynamics. These tensions and anxieties are reflected in Amy Tan's "Two Kinds" and Gish Jen's *In the American Society* – in both works, the chief conflict that must be resolved is the desire for children to break out on their own while still maintaining a coherent sense of identity. In Gish Jen's story "In the American Society," the relationship most concretely focused on is that of the immigrant and the country he means to assimilate into. The narrator's father, Ralph, is a traditional Chinese man, used to being his own boss, attempting to run a restaurant and fit into American culture. Though the young narrator herself encounters very few problems over the course of the story, this contrast between her ease in assimilation and her father's difficulty showcases the relationship both generations have to their host culture. The girl's father desperately wants to fit in with entrepreneurial spirit of America: "'Those Americans always saying it,' he told us. 'Smart guys thinking in advance'" (Jen 176). Taking this to heart, Ralph runs his business accordingly while still attempting to hold on to his old world assumptions of respect.

In showing himself to be an authoritative figure, he feels as though he is

fitting into America's business culture and his own family expectations: "as time went on and the business continued to thrive, my father started to talk about his grandfather and the village he had reigned over in China—things my father had never talked about when he worked for other people" (Jen 177). Of course, this ends up leading to cultural differences due to his eventual bad behavior and poor treatment of his workers: "in my father's mind, a family owed its head a degree of loyalty that left no room for dissent. To embrace what he embraced was to love; and to embrace something else was to betray him" (Jen 178). Through Ralph's perspective, Jin starts to show how the traditional attitudes and behaviors that were normal in China fail to pay off for him in America. Ralph is of the belief that hierarchy means everything in terms of respect: he is fond of saying "the province comes before the town, the town comes before the family" (Jen 183). This clashes with the American sense of individualism, which is why he rubs his workers, like Cedric and Booker, the wrong way.

There are two central scenarios to show Ralph's inability to fit into American culture: first, there is the restaurant, where his workers eventually start showing him disrespect due to his tyrannical management style, and secondly there is the cultural confusion that occurs in the country club at the second part of the story. His presence at the country club is proof that he is incapable of fully fitting in with American culture – he is far too overdressed for the casual pool party, and he is quickly offended by a drunk American who keeps asking him to translate Chinese and effectively making the Changs serve food. Eventually ashamed and humiliated by an altercation that sees him throwing his dinner jacket into the pool, he tells his girls that

they are “ good swimmers. Not like me” (Jin 185). This line is an incredibly important metaphor, and is the chief statement the story makes about immigrants and their children; here Ralph acknowledge that they will be able to navigate the ‘ waters’ of American society much better than he ever will. This is one of the chief complexities of the immigrant-child relationship; there is always a certain jealousy and expectation placed toward the child that they will succeed where they failed, creating a tension that survives in the parent-child relationship of immigrants.

This tension is explored much more explicitly in Amy Tan’s short story “ Two Kinds” within the novel *The Joy Luck Club*, in which Jing-mei Woo recounts a story from her childhood depicting her mother’s grooming of her into a budding musician and star. One of Woo’s first statements perfectly sums up the pressure of expectation that comes from the prospect of assimilation into American society:

“ My mother believed you could be anything you wanted to be in America. You could open a restaurant. You could work for the government and get good retirement. You could buy a house with almost no money down. You could become rich. You could become instantly famous” (Tan 132).

Using the famous child actress Shirley Temple as a template, Jing-mei’s mother seeks to groom her child into the perfect American: beautiful, talented, skilled, etc. With this motivation, Tan shows the danger of expectation and the pressures of assimilation: The mother wants to essentially force her daughter out of a Chinese mindset and into an American one; while Jin’s Ralph simply assumes that his daughters are “ good swimmers,” Jing-mei’s mother attempts to force her to learn how to

swim (Shear 197). Jing-mei, because of her desire to meet her mother's approval, goes along with it at first: " In all of my imaginings I was filled with a sense that I would soon become perfect: My mother and father would adore me. I would be beyond reproach. I would never feel the need to sulk, or to clamor for anything" (Tan 133). However, in a moment of doubt where she hated herself, she soon realizes that she loves herself for who she is, and chooses to rebel against her mother's push for assimilation: " The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. She and I were the same. I had new thoughts, willful thoughts - or rather, thoughts filled with lots of won'ts. I won't let her change me, I promised myself. I won't be what I'm not" (Tan 134). This change of heart showcases the contradictory nature of the immigrant child – Tan's Jing-mei wants to show that she is nothing like her Chinese mother not by assimilating fully into American culture like she wants her to, but to retain her own sense of individuality: " I was so determined not to try, not to be anybody different" (Tan 138). While her mother wants her to chase the American Dream (thus achieving it for the mother by proxy), Jing-mei fights and refuses to cooperate by forgetting to practice her piano. This tension and refusal to learn culminates in the recital scene, in which Jing-mei's poor piano playing shames her mother (though the rest of the audience refuses to openly acknowledge her lack of skill). It is at this time that she gets a glimmer of guilt at what her rebellion is doing to her mother: " my mother's expression was what devastated me: a quiet, blank look that said she had lost everything" (Tan 140). In the subsequent fight, Jing-mei's mother returns to her strict Chinese demand for obedience and respect: "'Only two kinds of daughters,' she shouted in Chinese. ' Those who are

obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!’” (Tan 142). The notion of ‘two kinds’ is central to the immigrant parent-child conflict; American culture preaches individualism, while many immigrants’ native cultures preach humility and conformity: “Unlike my mother, I did not believe I could be anything I wanted to be, I could only be me” (Tan 142). Jing-mei’s mother wants her daughter to succeed and assimilate, but seems unaware of the fact that this would mean not having as much control over her daughter. This confluence of contradictory expectations and frustrations on the part of both parent and child leads to a unique set of tensions that is not necessarily found in non-immigrant families (Souris 122).

Upon her mother’s death several years later, Jing-ei finally realizes that her mother wanted her to grow up and succeed; this was the motivation behind her ostensibly overbearing tutelage. Jing-mei finds the old piano, with two pieces of music on it, which she tries to play: “‘Pleading Child’ was shorter but slower; ‘Perfectly Contented’ was longer but faster. And after I had played them both a few times, I realized they were two halves of the same song” (Tan 144). This imagery again speaks to the conflicts between mother and daughter, child vs. adult, and native vs. immigrant – in these scenarios, both people are attempting to figure out who they are. In this search for identity against the lens of a new culture, both immigrant parent and immigrant child attempt to figure out how they fit in an unfamiliar equation. In conclusion, both “Two Kinds” and “In An American Society” show the difficulties and complexities inherent to a parent-child relationship between immigrants acclimating to America. The older generation is shown to be

stubborn, authoritative, and frustrated when they cannot successfully assimilate into American society. They then project their hopes for a better assimilation onto their children, who often react with hostility and tension (as they want to follow the American perspective of seeking out their own individuality). Between Ralph's stubborn need for authority and Jing-mei's mother's need to control her children, the traditions of their native country are shown to backfire on the parents immensely; they just lead to resentment and defeat. The parents and children must then come to terms with their respective relationships with America in order to properly understand their relationship to each other. Ralph's peaceful admission that his children will assimilate better is a reconciliatory moment, while Jing-mei does not get that catharsis until after her mother (whom she resented) is dead.

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