

“tradition versus modernity”

Sociology



“ Tradition versus Modernity" In The Serpent’s Tooth (Catherine Lim)

Tradition is defined as the elements of a particular culture that are passed down from one generation to another either by word of mouth or demonstration, such as their beliefs, practices, and modes of thought. On the other hand, modernity is a term that is related to urbanization; it refers to a more recent and contemporary quality of life, methods, and ideas. In *The Serpent’s Tooth* by Catherine Lim, the story takes place in the heart of Singapore. So, the theme of tradition versus modernity that will be discussed here are closely related to the Chinese society in the urban setting of Singapore. Tradition is portrayed mainly by Old Mother, whereas modernity is shown by other characters like Angela and Mark. There are several issues included in the topic of tradition versus modernity in *The Serpent’s Tooth*. Firstly, there was the issue of superstitious belief. Superstition is a set of beliefs that are not based on logical reasoning or knowledge, they are usually based on the fear of the unknown and are practiced to dispel or avoid any form of bad luck and misfortune. The practicality and rational of superstitious beliefs are rarely questioned by traditional people because it has been passed down to them from their ancestors and they consider them to be a part of their heritage. However, this changes with modernity because civilized people will begin to doubt and question the reliability of the rituals or actions influenced by superstition. In fact, most modern people will dub superstitious beliefs to be ridiculous and ‘ old-fashioned’. In the story, Angela hosted a grand birthday dinner for the Old Man but her dressing was scrutinized by Old Mother because the colour white is a sign of mourning and it seemed to be a reflection of the bad events that were about to follow — the Old Man’s death. Angela, of course, was insulted that her mother-in-law

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could say such a thing about her dress because it was pure silk and very expensive. In the Chinese society, most superstition are maintained and patronized by the temple mediums. Mediums will provide advice to the traditional Chinese folk who come to them for help, but modern people will feel that the mediums are making use of the naivety of others. For example, Ah Bock was the adopted son of Old Mother and his original name was Ah Hai. His name was changed because the word ‘ Hai’ had negative connotations and it was changed to something positive. A red string was tied around his wrist to complete the ritual of changing his mother. Old Mother willingly adopted him out of kindness although he was an abnormal child; according to the temple mediums, without the adoption, Ah Bock will surely die due to his illness. Angela could not fathom the reason behind Old Mother’s actions because the child was disabled and it was troublesome to take care of him. Also, it was the temple mediums that told Old Mother that her son, Wee Tiong was bad luck to her husband. Angela was strongly against the mediums and felt that they should be ‘ skinned alive’; whatever they tell Old Mother to do, Old Mother blindly followed their instructions, even if it involved mistreating her own son. The next issue that was brought up by this story is the emergence and repercussion of education. Tradition and education are two opposing schools of thought. Traditional people who are not so highly educated will tend to decipher and explain the natural events of the world based on their own understanding and intuition; on the other hand, modernized people will interpret the world through the lenses of Science. This contrast of opinions is highlighted in The Serpent’s Tooth , displayed by Old Mother and her grandchildren, Mark, Michelle and Michael. Old Mother enjoyed telling stories to her grandchildren, especially stories

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that are related to Chinese customs and beliefs. Although Michelle and Michael are thoroughly entertained by Old Mother's stories, a composition that was written by Mark portrayed his disapproval of his grandmother's fantasy stories. He openly criticized his grandmother's perception of the eclipse of the moon. This is because due to his level of education, he knows the real chain of events that lead to the occurrence of an eclipse. Old Mother's lack of education caused her to believe that the sudden vanishing of the moon is due to a dragon swallowing the moon. The ignorance and simplicity of Old Mother's mind and her complete disregard for scientific explanations perhaps fuelled Mark's irritation towards his grandmother. That ultimately caused him to openly ridicule his grandmother in his writing, which seemed to have the hidden objective of disconnecting himself from her beliefs so that he will not be associated with her whim and fancies. His composition was awarded first prize in an inter-school writing competition, symbolizing the conformity of the modern society towards his exact sentiments. Besides opening the eyes of modern people to the world of Science, education also reduces their naivety and makes them less gullible to deceptions. Old Mother was easily tricked of her gold chain in exchange for a 'magical' stone to cure Ah Bock and Angela was angrily disturbed that Old Mother could be robbed of all her jewellery. The third issue that will be discussed here is the evolution of medical practices. It is a part of tradition to use blends of natural herbs as medication; modern medicine uses pure chemical compounds. Chinese traditional medicine usually involves the process of boiling and brewing the herbs together to make herbal soup. Old Mother had the habit of brewing her medicine in the kitchen for hours; however, the pungent odour and the bubbling of the brew got on the nerves

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of Mooi Lan and Angela. To make things worse, Mooi Lan reported to Angela that Old Mother has been giving some of the brew to Michael. Angela, not wanting her children to be affected by the traditional ways of Old Mother, was furious and told Old Mother that Michael was already getting sufficient supplements from his father — a recognized doctor that abided by Western medical practices. Nevertheless, the effectiveness between the two medical methods was debatable since Old Mother has cured others with her traditional medicine in the past. For example, she once gave fresh entrails of a cockroach to cure the swollen, infected ear of her neighbour’s child. In another case, she cured Ah Bock’s backache by giving him a new-born furless mouse wrapped with salted vegetable leaves to swallow whole. Last but not least, the issue of materialism was very prominent in *The Serpent’s Tooth*. Materialism is defined as the theory that states that physical matters and worldly possessions are the scales to weigh one’s value in life. To some people, the term carries much negative connotation and one who is materialistic is usually judged to be greedy and self-centered. Tradition emphasizes more on ethical and moral values, and when one is materialistic, one runs the risk of moral, ethical, as well as spiritual degradation. However, this degradation should not be universally implied to everyone who is materialistic because although Angela was very materialistic, she was still kind and sympathetic to others and used her wealth to show her concern and provide for those who are in need. Therefore, in my opinion, in this story, materialism is not a definite evil characteristic of the modern society, but it is a characteristic that spawns much misunderstanding between the two — tradition and modernity. Angela might have thought that it was a kind and thoughtful gesture to buy a pretty lacquer box for Old Mother to keep all her

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jewellery in; but to Old Mother, the box would have been unnecessary and not as practical to hide her jewellery in. At the end of the story after Old Mother passed away, Angela discovered that Old Mother's jewellery were back in her old blue bag and stuffed in a pillow. This is a typical case of 'one man's meat is another man's poison' because Old Mother did not appreciate the value of the box as much as Angela did and this showed how they value material objects differently. Despite the differences between tradition and modernity, there was, to a certain extent, a level of tolerance and balance between them. Although Old Mother was not happy with the Western coffin and Angela felt that she was being very unreasonable, a Chinese coffin was bought to replace the 'modern and useless' one. Another incident happened during Old Mother's stay at Angela's house whereby Old Mother refused to eat anything that came in contact with beef. Albeit the trouble that Angela had to go through to accommodate Old Mother's wishes, she made arrangements for the family to eat beef at separate times as to not offend Old Mother. The real question is, however, who will be the victor — tradition or modernity? When Old Mother was at her death bed, she gave a list of requests to her children in regards to her coffin, burial place, and distribution of jewellery. It is ironic that even after her death, her wishes were not entirely fulfilled — her wish to be buried was not followed through due to government policy, and her jewellery was not given to Ah Bock. Modernity had the last say in the end. But in spite of the efforts to dampen and ignore tradition, there are still modern people who fear some elements of tradition, such as Wee Tiong who believed that there were 'forces at work' and he did not want to 'unleash' them, and Angela who did not believe in the spirit of the Old Man and yet she still feared his wandering eyes in his photo that

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always seem to be staring at her. Therefore, as long as there are still elements of tradition among the members of the society, the ‘ war’ between tradition and modernity will be a constant and never-ending one. As for which one of them will prevail, the answer to that is still unknown; however, whether it is the former or the latter, people should also remember to take a step back once in a while in this fast-paced world to value the rich cultural heritage that we have because after all, it is the history that has brought us to the present.