

ASSIMILATION IN AMY TAN'S *THE KITCHEN GOD'S WIFE*

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Abstract: Assimilation of Chinese Americans may take the mode of China Doll, Anglo Conformity, or Cultural Pluralism. Each of those three modes appears in The Kitchen God's Wife in the way the main character starts out as a China Doll, turns into some sort of Anglo Conformity, and finally assumes an attitude of Cultural Pluralism.

Key Words: Orientalism, China Doll, Anglo Conformity, Cultural Pluralism.

INTRODUCTION

Actually a tremendous number of different modes could be expected to turn up during the reading of a novel on intermarriage, this essay, however, will limit itself to three major modes, i.e. the Orientalist's view of a Chinese woman as a China Doll, the second view that all Chinese woman must conform to Anglo-American patterns, and finally the current view of cultural pluralism in a Chinese American encounter.

A. The Orientalist's China Doll

One mode of assimilation that Edward Said's *Orientalism* points out is the Western construct of an Asian wife who sacrifices herself completely for her husband's life and career. Edward Said's *Orientalism* starts from three different concepts. First, 'Orientalism' is seen as a study of the Orient which includes *any* professional Western scholar studying, researching or teaching the 'Orient'. Second, as Said puts it, *Orientalism* also refers to any

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Westerner who has either imagined or written about the non-Western world. Third, Said concludes with his controversial theory that 'Orientalism' has become an enormous system which dictates anything that may be thought, written or imagined about the Orient. This third description which basically includes the first and the second concepts of 'Orientalism,' has initiated the historical point where the West speaks about the the East with a tendency to *dichotomize* the relationship between the 'Occident' and the 'Orient' into an "us—them" binary opposition, and then, to deliver the concept of the 'Other'; in referring to the Oriental 'character', 'mind' and so on (Clifford, 1988:258).

Said's final definition boils down to a concept of Orientalism very much like Foucault's sense of *discourse*. Sociolinguistically a discourse is always linked to the exercise of power. It is a system of meaning that serves to perpetuate the dominant social system. In every society, as Foucault writes it, 'the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by certain numbers of procedures whose role is to ward off its dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality' (Foucault, 1987:52). A discourse is actually a very biased cognitive system which restricts any way of *representation* in a given society. Orientalist discourses, for example, are usually very biased when they claim to *speak for* the 'less advanced' Orient, because they tend to represent the Orient as the lesser 'Other' of Western rationality. They tend to produce stereotypes about Orientals and the Orient, such as the crowded and dirty Chinese or Indian marketplace, the Moslem terrorist, the child-like native, or the mystical East. Along these lines, this essay will delve into the China Doll stereotype. This China Doll stereotype would most probably be interpreted by Said as confirming the idea that the West possesses a superiority over the East. It is interesting to trace how some people still believe that Chinese American women really want to live up to the Westerner's construct of being the exotic, diminutive, and all sacrificing woman. Way back in 1925, Earl D. Biggers, for example, created the character of China Doll in his popular Charlie Chan detective novels. Gary Okihiro characterizes China Doll as the archetype of Chinese woman who "was diminutive and deferential, and existed to serve men or the dominant group (1996:144). A classic example of the China Doll myth can be traced in Puccini's Italian opera *Madame Butterfly* (1904) or Alain Boublil's American musical *Miss Saigon* (1991). Both *Madame Butterfly* and *Miss Saigon*

deal with an Asian American relationship in which the female main character gives up everything for her American lover. The China Doll is usually portrayed as beautiful, young, thin, willowy, weak, subservient, demure, innocent, and soft spoken. In most stories she ends up running off with the white guy. Another frequent feature of the China Doll is her portrayal as a second class citizen who is lucky to get an education at all, let alone a fine education. In *The Karate Kid II*, Kimiko, the girl friend of Daniel, the main character, is the traditional Japanese flower. She is graceful, soft-spoken, and she lowers her eyes as Daniel passes. Although this movie is supposed to take place in present day (circa 1980s), Kimiko still embodies the traditional characteristics that make Daniel fall in love with her. The 'tea' scene best illustrates these qualities. The tea ceremony symbolizes love, and when she performs the ceremony with Daniel, it cements this image of innocence and traditionalism. The Kimiko character starkly contrasts to Daniel's last girlfriend who ends up dumping him for another guy. The movie is successful in showing that Kimiko is free to marry whom she chooses, rather than being betrothed as in the olden days; however, it perpetuates the stereotype that Asian women are these soft docile creatures that need to be saved from evil Japanese men. In the end, Kimiko does indeed need to be saved by Daniel from evil Japanese men.

The Karate Kid II gives further evidence that the stereotype of 'China Doll' is no longer limited to Chinese women but is constructed to apply to Asian women in general. A typical real life case is the Indonesian girl from Yogyakarta, who joined her Dutch husband to Amsterdam in the middle of 2000. She planned to be a batik printing teacher in the Netherlands, but could afford no time to realize her ambition, since she got busy taking care of her husband and her house, cooking, doing the laundry, and serving her old and completely dependent mother-in-law 24 hours a day.

B. Anglo-Conformity

Another mode of assimilation is defined by Milton Gordon's *Assimilation In America* as Anglo-Conformity. This mode stems from an Americanization movement during World War I, which desires to uproot immigrants from their native culture and make them over into Anglo Americans (Gordon, 1964). Most Americans, both those who favor and those who oppose assimilation, believe that for immigrants to assimilate, they must abandon their original cultural attributes and conform entirely to the behaviors and

customs of the majority of the native-born population. In the terminology of the armed forces, this represents a model of 'up or out': Either immigrants bring themselves 'up' to native cultural standards, or they are doomed to live 'out' of the charmed circle of the national culture.

The notion is not entirely far-fetched because this is exactly what assimilation demands in other societies. North African immigrants to France are, for example, expected to assimilate by abandoning their native folkways with alacrity. Official French policy has been zealous in making North African and other Muslim women give up wearing their chadors and, in the schools, instilling a disdain for North African and Muslim culture in their children. To varying degrees, most European countries that have had to absorb large numbers of immigrants since World War II interpret assimilation this way—an interpretation that has promoted national and ethnic disunity. However, some Asian countries have been noted to adopt this pattern on incoming immigrants too. One striking example was Indonesia during the reign of the Suharto regime (1967 – 1998), when all Chinese Indonesians were not allowed to use Chinese names, read or write Chinese language, and make any public show of any kind of Chinese traditional rituals. To learn how the people respond to this kind of assimilation pattern, we can again turn to interracial marriages as an indicator of how far people would conform to it. One case at hand is the English teacher at the British Council of Jakarta, who married a girl related to the palace of the Sultan of Yogyakarta, Indonesia in 1999. He advised that reducing one's cultural expectations to zero was the secret to surviving a multicultural marriage. His 'Yogyakarta Palace Conformity' sounds very much like the concept of 'Anglo Conformity.'

C. Cultural Pluralism

In America, however, assimilation has gradually no longer been defined as repudiating immigrant culture. Assimilation, American style has always been much more flexible and accommodating and, consequently, much more effective in achieving its purpose—to allow the United States to preserve its "national unity in the face of the influx of hordes of persons of scores of different nationalities," in the words of the sociologist Henry Fairchild. A popular way of getting hold of the assimilation idea has been to use a metaphor, and by far the most popular metaphor has been that of the "melting pot," a term introduced in Israel Zangwill's 1908 play of that name:

“There she lies, the great Melting-Pot—Listen! Can’t you hear the roaring and the bubbling?... Ah, what a stirring and a seething! Celt and Latin, Slav and Teuton, Greek and Syrian, black and yellow...Jew and Gentile....East and West, and North and South, the palm and the pine, the pole and the equator, the crescent and the cross—how the great Alchemist melts and fuses them with his purifying flame! Here shall they all unite to build the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of God (184 – 185).”

For all of its somewhat historical idealism, the melting-pot metaphor still represents the standard around which fervent proponents of assimilation have rallied over the years. According to the melting-pot metaphor, assimilation involved the fine-grained intermingling of diverse ethnicities and cultures into a single national ‘alloy’. If taken literally, this metaphor implies two things. The point most commonly taken is that the new human products of the melting pot would, of necessity, be culturally indistinguishable. Presumably every piece of metal taken from a melting pot should have the same chemical composition. Less frequently understood is the metaphor’s implication that natives and their indigenous cultural characteristics would also be irreversibly changed—blended beyond recognition—because they constituted the base material of the melting pot. These two corollaries of the melting-pot metaphor have long invited criticism by those who thought they were inconsistent with the ethnic realities of American society. Critics of the metaphor have spanned the ideological spectrum and mounted several different lines of attack on it. Empiricists submitted evidence that the melting pot wasn’t working as predicted and concluded, as did Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan in *Beyond the Melting Pot*, “The point about the melting pot...is that it did not happen” (1963:290). Other critics rejected the second corollary of the metaphor—that natives were changed by it, too—and saw no reason that native Americans should give up any part of their cultural attributes to “melt” into the alloy. If true assimilation were to occur, the criticism went, immigrants would have to abandon all their cultural baggage and conform to American ways. It is the immigrant, said Fairchild, representing the views of many Americans, who “must logically be thought of as being admitted into a going nationality, not as helping to build one” (ibid, 1963:122).”

A third strain of criticism was first voiced by sociologist Horace Kallen in the early part of the 20th century. Among the most prolific American scholars of ethnicity, Kallen argued that it was not only unrealistic but also cruel and harmful to force new immigrants to shed their familiar, lifelong

cultural attributes as the price of admission to American society. In place of the melting pot, he called for “cultural pluralism”. In Kallen’s words, as quoted by Milton Gordon, national policy should “seek to provide conditions under which each [group] might attain the cultural perfection that is proper to its kind. Kallen introduced the concept in 1916, only eight years after publication of Zangwill’s *The Melting Pot*, determined to challenge that work’s premises. Cultural pluralism rejects melting-pot assimilationism not on empirical grounds, but on ideological ones. Kallen and his followers believed that immigrants to the United States should not “melt” into a common national ethnic alloy but, rather, should steadfastly hang on to their cultural ethnicity and band together for social and political purposes even after generations of residence in the United States. As such, cultural pluralism is not an alternative theory of assimilation; it is a theory opposed to assimilation.

Cultural pluralism is, in fact, the philosophical antecedent of modern multiculturalism—or what is also known as “ethnic federalism”: official recognition of distinct, essentially fixed ethnic groups and the doling out of resources based on membership in an ethnic group. Ethnic federalism explicitly rejects the notion of a transcendent American identity, the old idea that out of ethnic diversity there would emerge a single, culturally unified people. Instead, the United States is to be viewed as a vast ethnic federation—Canada’s Anglo-French arrangement, raised to the nth power. Viewing ethnic Americans as members of a federation rather than a union, ethnic federalism, a.k.a. multiculturalism, asserts that ethnic Americans have the right to proportional representation in matters of power and privilege, the right to demand that their “native” culture and putative ethnic ancestors be accorded recognition and respect, and the right to function in their “native” language (even if it is not the language of their birth or they never learned to speak it), not just at home but in the public realm. Ethnic federalism is at all times an ideology of ethnic grievance and inevitably leads to and justifies ethnic conflict. All the nations that have ever embraced it, from Yugoslavia to Lebanon, from Belgium to Canada, have had to live with perpetual ethnic discord.

Kallen’s views, however, stop significantly short of contemporary multiculturalism in their demands on the larger “native” American society. For Kallen, cultural pluralism was a defensive strategy for “unassimilable” immigrant ethnic groups that required no accommodation by the larger society. Contemporary multiculturalists, on the other hand, by making cultural pluralism the basis of ethnic federalism, demand certain ethnic rights and concessions.

By emphasizing the failure of assimilation, multiculturalists hope to provide intellectual and political support for their policies. The multiculturalists' rejection of the melting pot idea is seen in the metaphors they propose in its place. Civil rights activist Jesse Jackson suggested that Americans are members of a "rainbow coalition". Former New York Mayor David Dinkins saw his constituents constituting a "gorgeous mosaic". Former Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm characterized America's ethnic groups as being like ingredients in a "salad bowl". Barbara Jordan, recent chairperson of the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, said: "We are more than a melting-pot; we are a kaleidoscope". These counter-metaphors all share a common premise: that ethnic groups in the United States may live side by side harmoniously, but on two conditions that overturn both assumptions of the melting-pot metaphor. First, immigrants (and Black Americans) should never have to (or maybe should not even want to) give up any of their original cultural attributes. Second, there never can or will be a single unified national identity that all Americans can relate to. These two principles are the foundations of cultural pluralism, the antithesis of assimilationism.

How far those highly idealistic concepts of pluralism are reflected in Amy Tan's novel can again be traced through the marriage between Chinese American main female characters and males of other ethnic groups. Marriage can, after all, be seen as a sort of "melting pot" or "mini federalism" between two different cultures. This melting pot aspect of marriage is brought up by Linda Hutcheon in *Cryptoethnicity*, when she states that "... I was not born a Hutcheon; I was born a Bortalotti. The fact of a hidden or, more accurately, a silenced marker of Italian heritage is one I share with a generation of women ... married at a time when social custom meant taking their husbands' surnames" (1997:247). If she had used the name Linda Bortalotti Hutcheon in her publications, she would have served as a good example of marriage as a mini federalism instead.

This essay will now turn to how those three modes of assimilation – the China Doll, Anglo Conformity, and Cultural Pluralism modes- appear in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*.

THE KITCHEN GOD'S WIFE: A CHINESE WOMAN'S EXPERIENCE IN ASSIMILATING AMERICA.

In this novel the reader witnesses how the main character Weili initially embodies the image of a China Doll wife, then slowly turns into a distinct

version of Anglo Conformity, and finally ends up with an attitude of Cultural Pluralism. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Amy Tan sets up a series of circumstances that makes it very natural for a woman to become a China Doll. Weili's first marriage to Wen Fu started as a means of escape rather than as a story of love. Wen Fu was, in fact, wooing Peanut, Weili's half sister, and Weili was acting as the go between to arrange secret messages and meetings for Peanut. However, when a marriage is finally proposed through Auntie Miao, the local matchmaker, the offer by the Wen parents is for Wen Fu to marry Weili (who is a daughter of the textile conglomerate Jiang Sao-yen) rather than Peanut (the daughter of Jiang's less successful brother). Suddenly, Weili finds herself dreaming of a home among loving family members, and escape her existence as a near orphan at her uncle's household. The pair of silver chopsticks Weili got from her father as part of the dowry signifies Weili's innocent mindset in how a wife should be. Like man and wife in ideal matrimony, the pair of chopsticks are of equal length and value, bound with a silver chain to keep the one from leaving the other. With the chopsticks in her fingers, young Weili imagines her role as wife, picking at imaginary morsels with the heavy silver chopsticks and feeding them to her husband's mouth. Ironically she actually clutches at nothing but imagination, since the silver chain that is to bind Wen Fu and her never materializes as Wen Fu keeps straying off to other women. The loving gesture of love signified by the chopsticks in her hand feeding her husband comes to nothing either. All she gets is abuse from her husband, but through most of her unhappy marriage Weili maintains the appearance of an ideal family. She keeps on clutching her silver chopsticks at imaginary morsels of happiness.

Weili's mindset of a China Doll should not come as weird since she was married off by her family at the tender age of eighteen. Even in the history of English literature, this China Doll total dedication to a 'Prince Charming' could be traced as far back as the fairy tale of Cinderella. In fact subtle parallels could be seen between Weili as the half orphan, staying at her uncle's house, and Peanut as the daughter of the house. Peanut was had over heels in love with Wen Fu, but it was Weili whom he proposed. Unfortunately, however, Wen Fu turned out to be a Bluebeard rather than a gentle, romantic Prince Charming. Even as her husband was constantly abusing her, Weili still professes the China Doll attitude where the wife completely sacrifices herself to her spouse without considering any happiness

of her own. During the end of the summer of 1937, the Chinese pilots were forced by the Japanese to retreat northward about 160 miles to Yangchow, and Weili, together with the other wives, followed their husband pilots by boat, as many roads and rails had been closed off by the Japanese. The pilot's quarters were very primitive, but the all-sacrificing wives, including Weili, prepared mixtures for sealing the dirty floor and replastering the mud brick walls to make the best of a war torn dwelling. So great was Weili's dedication to her husband that she prepared a luxurious welcome dinner for her homecoming husband and his friends, the first of many such meals after air combats. She had to use her own dowry money for the lavish food, since Wen Fu wasted all his air force salary on drinking and gambling. Even the Japanese attacks and her husband's abusive treatment did not stop Weili from clutching her silver chopsticks at imaginary happiness.

When Weili nearly fell in love with another man, it was again only an affair of her imagination. Weili found a special friend in the shy and awkward Gan, a bachelor pilot. The relationship between Weili and Gan was subtly reflected in the two playing a game of "chicken-feather ball" in the moonlight. The ball flew back and forth as lightly and gently as their relationship, which ended before it grew into a deeper involvement. Brotherly Gan told her about his fear of a ghost that he first encountered eleven years ago in the Tiger year of 1926. The ghost warned him to make another appearance in the Tiger year of 1938, and during the time in between Gan would experience nine bad fates. So far Gan already met with eight of the predicted fates, as 1938 was approaching in four months.

Due to inferior combat skills and planes, one by one the pilots whom Weili and Wen Fu invited for dinner were killed – but never Wen Fu, because he cowardly turned away before every air battle engagement. Gan, however, was shot down during one of the air duels and died after two days of tearing pain. Weili's feelings for him did not stop with his death, she admitted years later to her daughter, "I claimed his love. He became like a ghost lover (Tan, 1989:256)." Whenever Wen Fu abused her, Weili found solace in her dream of Gan. She came to the belief that she herself was Gan's ninth fate, the sign for the ghost to claim him. True to the China Doll myth, Weili assumed all the blame of his death on herself.

Her brief encounter with Gan, however, started her to think "Why didn't I know that I had a choice?" (ibid, 1989:251). Weili could not help being a true China Doll, after growing up in a culture of patriarchy and

traditional female servitude that denied access not only to self-awareness, and self-actualization, but also to freedom of determining a happy marriage with a compatible partner. In her words, "I had never felt love from a man, or for a man. And that night I almost did. I felt the danger, that this was how you love someone..." (ibid, 1989:254). After Gan's death, however, Weili assumed the proper wifely mask to conceal her feelings for another man. Her silver chopsticks kept on feeding Wen Fu with morsels of marriage harmony that were never there.

Another important event to change Weili's attitude towards her husband takes place on her sudden return home after Danru's birth. When she found her bed occupied by Min, Wen Fu's pretty but uneducated mistress, Weili was surprised but quite happy to have someone else relieve her from Wen Fu's sexual demands. She let things take its course until Min got pregnant. That was the point when we actually see Weili trying to drop her China Doll position, and use Min's pregnancy as an excuse to request divorce and take her son, Danru, away to her father's house in Shanghai. Unfortunately, she was psychologically not ready yet to change her personality all of a sudden. Wen Fu simply tore up the divorce paper she had prepared. Maliciously, he finished whatever self-esteem Weili had, with his words: "When I want to divorce you, I will tell you. You don't tell me what to do." It was Min that Wen Fu kicked out of the house, and Weili found herself envying the release Min gained from her husband's bullying and exploitation. Nevertheless it was the first time Weili tried to be assertive and stop serving imaginary morsels of a perfect marriage with her silver chopsticks.

It seemed almost impossible for Weili to change into Anglo-Conformity, since she was brought up in her uncle's house at Tsungming island, an island countryside which "... On a map ... is only a little dot stuck in the water, close to nothing, cut off from everyone" (ibid, 1989:117). In such an isolated it would be hardly possible for Weili to be exposed to any other culture than her own patialistic one. The war, however, brought Weili into contact with new cultures. During the Christmas of 1941, the Americans at the Kunming airbase celebrated the success of the Flying Tigers with a victory dance party. There she "noticed someone unusual ... A Chinese man ... almost as tall as the Americans ... wearing an American-style uniform" and "... his English sounded genuine, just like a cowboy's" (ibid, 1989:386). As soon as she got over her surprise, Weili smiled and shook her head at Jimmy "To my eyes, you look Chinese. To my ears, you sound exactly like a foreigner"

(Tan, 1989:386). That was the first time she saw a Chinese with an American culture, an American Born Chinese. Jimmy was a translator with the United States Information Service. The women eagerly asked him to find Americanized versions of their Chinese names. On that night 'Weili' was renamed and reborn into 'Winnie,' as she danced in Jimmie's arms to the romantic music of "Moonlight Serenade."

Winnie's mindset might have changed, but she has not reached the stage where a Chinese wife could insist on her rights. It is still unthinkable for her to just leave her husband and quit her marriage. Noticing Weili's enchantment for Jimmy Louie, Wen Fu called her all kinds of bad names as soon as they reached home, but this time Weili "...did not act afraid..." and "...let these insults roll over..." her (ibid, 1989:392). Enraged at Weili's newly acquired defiance, Wen Fu loudly bluffed "... I am divorcing you..." (ibid, 1989:392). He then threw down a piece of paper and commanded with his usual authority "Write that down". "My husband is divorcing me" (ibid, 1989:392). Weili, who has been reborn into 'Winnie', wrote out the divorce statement with silent joy. Unfortunately her triumph did not last long, Wen Fu cruelly threatened "...you are divorced... You have no husband. You have no home. You have no son" (ibid, 1989:393). The fear of losing her son took away all the fight out of her. Her humiliation, unfortunately, did not stop there. Wen Fu pointed his gun at her forced her to beg for his forgiveness, and finally raped her to show he had complete control of her.

The next day Weili did try to run away with her son, but Wen Fu was roaring in front of their hiding place the following day, took them home, and continued his abuse of Weili. This incident, however, was a strong sign that Weili would soon drop her China Doll attribute. She asserted full defiance by escaping again with her son and taking Jimmy as her lover. Taken to court by Wen Fu for deserting her marriage, she was sentenced to two-year imprisonment, unless she returned to her husband. Weili chose prison and completely brought an end to her China Doll existence.

After Auntie Du took her out of prison, Weili found out that Auntie Du had to sell all her jewelry, since the new Chinese currency was down to no value. To help out, Weili offered her ten pairs of wedding silver chopsticks, – an act signifying the end of picking at imaginary morsels of marriage bliss and feeding them to a husband's mouth. That was also the end of Weili's China Doll posture.

Though Winnie's breakaway from her feudal marriage took place in 1949, her dream of marrying an American and settling in the United States still lives on in the heart of many Asian women today. One way to see this is in the numerous on line dating services. A typical one to represent this case is the one of Maria (retrieved from www.love.com, February 2001).

Maria

Indonesia

City: Surabaya

Age: 32

Weight: 121lb, 55kg

Height: 5' 3", 160cm

Marital Status: single

Religion: Catholic

Education: B.A. in Business & Finance

Job Title: Accounting

Self Description: I am an educated and energetic Indonesian girl of Chinese descent in search of single male penpals (no children), who are educated/ professional, no drinker or smoker, and reside in America, Canada, or Europe, for friendship and possibly more. My interests include reading, exercising, cooking, singing, listening to music, seeing movies.

Though Maria is quite different from the less educated Weili, they had one thing in common. Both were going through a time of terrible economic recession where the prospects of a good life seemed very insecure for many people. When Weili left China, the Chinese currency collapsed, and security was almost non-existent. Maria was living in more or less the same situation when there were so much political conflicts and violence throughout Indonesia at the end of the 1990s. During such difficult times many people seem to share the dream of the Pilgrims who boarded the Mayflower in 1620 to find a better life in faraway lands.

In another famous novel of Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*, this version of American Dream takes on a very curious family tree diagram where the three mothers - Ying-ying, Lindo, and Suyuan - had a first husband in China and a second one in America.

Husband in China x Ying-ying x Clifford St. Clair (Husband in America)
Tyan-yu (husband in China) x Lindo x Tin Jong (husband in America)
Officer (husband in China) x Suyuan x Canning Woo (husband in
America)

This pattern of marriage could easily be added with Weili's marriage to Wen Fu, her husband in China, on the one hand, and to Jimmy, her American husband, on the other.

After moving to America, Weili naturally changed into a more American oriented culture, though as a first generation Chinese American, she would always maintain much of her Chinese nature. In the scene where Weili modifies the Kitchen God statue, Amy Tan pictures this cultural pluralism of Weili in a good natured, humorous tone. Winnie decides to find a substitute for the Kitchen God's picture in the little altar – hoping to find a completely new god, who inspires hope and recovery for her daughter's terminal sickness. She made her choice on a porcelain female statue, and to end all reference to the Kitchen God, who abused his wife, Weili names her Lady Sorrow-free. Weili painted the name in gold on the bottom. Pearl, her daughter, first discovered it when it was given to her. Weili told Pearl that she could put all her troubles to this hybrid Goddess: "She will listen. She will wash away everything sad with her tears. She will use her stick to chase away everything bad. See her name: Lady Sorrow-free, happiness winning over bitterness, no regrets in this world." Weili still maintained her Chinese God, but pragmatically modified it to suit her purpose better. Obviously Lady Sorrow-free was still a Chinese, though colored with a touch of American pragmatism now.

Such a pluralistic approach to their traditional Chinese heritage is not uncommon among Chinese American women nowadays. The kind of expectation found in dating services vividly signifies this attitude of Chinese American women. One such example runs as follows:

This pretty Chinese lady is of good health. She is honest, steady, cultured, and career oriented. This lady has an engineering degree. She is now a housekeeper in Houston and is working hard on her English in order to move ahead with her career. Her skin is fair and smooth. Her hobby is doing exercise.
She is looking for a Chinese man or an American man who appreciates Chinese culture and Chinese food. The ideal man should be between

50 to 60. The man should be healthy, optimistic, and financially stable. She appreciates honesty and faithfulness (retrieved from www.love.com, February 2001).

The woman still maintains her Chinese culture and cooking but compliments them with a pragmatic “financially stable” expectation, and the way she “appreciates honesty and faithfulness” shows that she is no longer a China Doll type. Another American trait she shares with the Americanized Weili is her determination to be an independent woman. Though she longs for a ‘financially stable’ husband, she still wants to be independent by claiming herself as being ‘career oriented’ and she actually demonstrates this determination by her willingness to work as a housekeeper. This is completely different from the young China Doll Weili who puts all her hopes of happiness in serving Wen Fu with her silver chopsticks.

Actually, the urge of becoming an independent woman has been deeply embedded in Amy Tan’s Weili throughout the whole story. Even when she was still a China Doll, Weili had access to a bank account of four thousand yuan, deposited in a Shanghai Bank by her father when she got married. In fact, it was this deposit that enabled Weili to hire a lawyer to process her divorce, and during her eight-year of marriage she drew heavily from this account to relieve the hardships of wartime depression. When she was ready to run to the United States to join Jimmy Louie, it was again three small ingots, given by her father, that enabled her to carry out her plan. After her marriage with Jimmy, her second husband, Weili started a florist business with Hulan rather than relying solely on her husband’s salary. This underlying motif of financial independence signifies that Weili unconsciously carries a wish to cease being a China Doll wife and to quit picking at imaginary morsels with silver chopsticks and feeding them to her husbands’ mouth.

With the second generation Chinese Americans in *The Kitchen God Wife*, things are even more different. There seems to be more important things to occupy them than the issue of assimilation. Pearl’s terminal illness has given no room for cultural conflict with Phil, her Caucasian husband. She is more concerned with the thoughts that “... I can still walk. I still take out garbage. And sometimes I *can* actually forget ... that I am living in a limbo land called remission” (Tan, 1989:25). Apparently her cancer is a much bigger issue to struggle with.



CONCLUSION

To sum up, the China Doll concept does not seem to me to be a fully Westerner's construct of trying to impose their superiority over Easterners, as many Orientalists would like to claim. Instead it could well be a product of the Asian feudal culture of the time. It is a feudalism discouraging daughters to equip themselves with the necessary education or inheritance to be independent. Among Chinese Indonesians, for example, there is still a belief that it is not necessary for a girl to have a university degree since a highly educated girl would only scare off young men from proposing them. Neither is a daughter's high education useful for the family business, since it is the son, rather than the daughter, that will be the one to inherit it. Such a culture would most probably program its daughters to become China Dolls.

The metamorphosis of an Asian woman into some sort of Anglo Conformity or Cultural Pluralism seems still to be taking place in Asia nowadays. An Asian woman going through an experience like Weili's and her feudally abusive husband might quite probably share an American Dream with a Jimmy Louie to find a better life. If she then decides to move to America, it is again natural for a woman like Weili, or any other Asian woman, to adopt the American way, though not completely willing to let go of her ancestral culture. She might turn up with the sort of Cultural Pluralism that is often reflected in such a hybrid cultural symbol as Lady Sorrow-free.

Unlike her mother, however, Pearl, reveals a different experience of intercultural relationship. She never grew up in the Jiang's prewar household in Shanghai, and was never programmed to be a China Doll. It never seems to have crossed her mind to follow her mother's pattern of going from one mode of assimilation to another. There are other graver issues of life for her and her Caucasian husband to face. For Indonesians engaged in a 21st century intercultural relationship, Pearl might serve as a very good model – there are bigger social and economic problems that would-be mixed couples may have to give priority to.

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