

## Cultural Displacement of the Main Character in Ken Liu's *The Paper Menagerie*

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### Abstract:

The objective of this study is to analyse deeper the phenomenon that caused Jack to displace Chinese culture in *The Paper Menagerie*, a short story written by Ken Liu. This study employs new criticism theory to comprehend the plot, particularly the conflict faced by Jack. This study included a qualitative approach to collect and classify the data as a narrative and belongs to library research since the data taken from the short story and other related books and journal articles. The result shows that Jack displaces his Chinese culture as a form of his effort to be accepted in American society. His displacement happens due to external and internal conflicts. The external conflicts are migration from China to the new environment of Connecticut, America and cultural discrimination by his neighbour and friend. The external conflicts include his insecurities or inferior feelings, his Chinese cultural apathy and desire to fit into American society.

**Keywords:** multiculturalism, cultural displacement, Americanizing

### Abstrak:

Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisa lebih dalam fenomena yang menyebabkan Jack menggosok budaya Cina dalam *The Paper Menagerie*, sebuah cerita pendek yang ditulis oleh Ken Liu. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori kritik baru untuk memahami alur cerita, khususnya konflik yang dihadapi oleh Jack. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif untuk mengumpulkan dan mengklasifikasikan data dalam bentuk narasi dan termasuk dalam penelitian kepustakaan karena data diambil dari cerita pendek dan buku-buku serta artikel jurnal yang terkait. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Jack menggosok budaya Tionghoa sebagai bentuk usahanya untuk dapat diterima di masyarakat Amerika. Perpindahan tersebut terjadi karena adanya konflik eksternal dan internal. Konflik eksternal berupa migrasi dari Tiongkok ke lingkungan baru di Connecticut, Amerika dan diskriminasi budaya yang dilakukan oleh tetangga dan temannya. Konflik internal meliputi rasa tidak aman atau perasaan rendah diri, apatisme budaya Tionghoa, dan keinginan untuk menyesuaikan diri dengan masyarakat Amerika.

**Kata kunci:** multikulturalisme, perpindahan budaya, keterasingan budaya, ke-Amerika-an

## INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism is a popular phenomenon in today's globalized world and literature. It first appears in literature in the 1980s as a form of critique regarding the domination of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (Sabbah, 2021). However, this theme is still relevant today due to the increase in cross-cultural interaction resulting from several factors, including communication speed (Lodge, 1993). Multiculturalism is a trait or behaviour that respects differences in socio-cultural groups (Rosado, 1996). It comprehends the importance of appreciating and understanding diverse cultural identities, values, and beliefs.

On the other hand, there are several issues in multicultural literature, including cultural displacement. Cultural displacement occurs due to coercion or individual decisions related to physical dislocations from their homeland that cause changes in a person's social and psychological condition (Hafsi, 2018). In this situation, the person will experience an identity dilemma when facing a new culture different from the one he has always believed in. Furthermore, it can be said that the new residents experience culture shock toward different customs (Liguria, n.d.).

Cultural displacement is a form of reflection on world events, such as the refugee experience, which is still a world problem, and cultural stereotypes that become divisions between races, ethnicities, religions, and countries. Cultural displacement often occurs to diasporic people who reside in new areas outside the borders of their origin country (Ganesan, 2023).

In addition, there is a hidden reason regarding someone experiencing cultural dislocation. One of them is the trauma and social pressure received. Hence, Aturi (2018) argues that cultural stigma and mental illness also contribute to the experience of cultural displacement. Discussing cultural displacement is also relevant to the themes of alienation, identity, and trauma, which are all reflected in Ken Liu, Chinese-American writer, *The Paper Menagerie* Short Story.

The Paper Menagerie was published in 2011. The short story is popular among Americans and has won many awards, such as Nebula, Hugo, and the World Fantasy Award. The Paper Menagerie short story brings out the theme of cultural displacement, telling about Jack's character facing his identity dilemma. Jack, who is described as a

Chinese-American, is continuously displaced by the Chinese culture brought by his mother. Even though he accepted back his Chinese culture in his adult life, his hatred of Chinese culture before was strength. He distanced himself and created hatred toward his mother, along with cutting off all the cultures that became his identity as a child.

To determine the research gap, the researcher uses several prior studies that apply *The Paper Menagerie* as the main source, as follows:

In the first study, Jabeen et al. (2022) conducted research entitled *Magical Realism in Ken Liu's Short Story*. The researchers examine the magical realism narration technique used by Ken Liu in his three short stories; *The Paper Menagerie*, *The Literomancer* and *Good Hunting*, using the theory proposed by W.B. Faris. The researchers find that colonialism and preconception become the major themes in Liu's writing. Moreover, he involves magical aspects through Chinese culture and traditional characters, such as origami, literacy, and *huljing*, the Chinese mythological character.

The second study, by Salsabila and Nurholis (2024), entitled *Racial Discrimination Portrayed in The Paper Menagerie by Ken Liu*. The researcher uses the theory proposed by Newman to examine the type of discrimination and its impact on the victim. The researchers find that Jack experienced several forms of discrimination by the local Americans. There is physical abuse by Mark and verbal expression by his new neighbour. Furthermore, it is impacted on Jack's crisis identity. He cut off his Chinese culture, including stopping to speak Mandarin, distanced himself from his Chinese mother, and decided to claim that America is his only culture.

In the third study, Hang (2020) conducted research entitled *An Analysis of the Reconstruction of Chinese American Identity in The Paper Menagerie*. The researcher examines the main character's identity crisis and reconstruction and provides suggestions to solve identity dilemmas for Chinese Americans through the post-colonial perspective. The researcher finds that Jack faced cultural conflicts, the influence of American ideology, and racial discrimination that placed him in an identity dilemma problem. He also suggests that listening and appreciating culture is the primary way of identity reconstruction. It is the same as Jack accepting and reconciling with his half-culture after reading his mother's letter.

The fourth study, by Eklesia et al. (2022), is entitled *Analysis of Presupposition in Paper Menagerie Story by Ken Liu*. The researcher analyses the form of presupposition presented in the short story using Yule's perspective. The researcher finds that Liu has involved many presuppositions, including existential presupposition, verifiable presupposition, lexical presupposition, primary presupposition, non-genuine presupposition, and counter presupposition.

The fifth study, *Cultural Identity and Intertextual Discourse: A Study of Paper Menagerie* by Rouabhia (2024). The researcher explores the cultural identity and the dynamics of heritage languages. She argues that Ken Liu uses intertextuality through origins, the *Qingming* festival, cultural shift, and language barrier. Besides, discourse patterns applied to Jack's family environment form a generation gap, where Jack rejects Mandarin and stops communicating with his mother.

Although several studies have been conducted using *The Paper Menagerie short story*, most discuss racial issues. At the same time, the conflicts experienced by Jack are intriguing and need to be analyzed more deeply. Therefore, the researcher formulates the research problem of why Jack displaced his native culture. This study will focus on Jack's conflicts, including the cultural problem that leads him to displace his Chinese culture. The researcher hopes that through this study, the reader will comprehend and build sympathy to the factors that may lead to someone experiencing cultural displacement.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### New Criticism

New criticism views literary work based on what is expressed in the text. This means that, when interpreting literary writings, the reader only focuses on the text without considering the outside elements, such as the author and historical background. Tyson (2006) explains that the new criticism approach involves intensive reading of the literary text in order to discover the real written evidence to confirm the readers' perception. Furthermore, According to Aail and Wisal (2019), New Criticism ruled that "the content should be reflected in the form and structure, and the substance should be embedded within the form." It deduces that the theory prominently analyses the literary text. New Criticism also examines the formal elements of literary works, one them is the plot (Tyson, 2006).

Plot is a crucial element in a story because it contains the sequence of events. Staton in Sholihah (2021) states that an event influences another story from the beginning to the end. Therefore, the plot must be addressed. This function is to gain reader attention and emotional involvement in the story along with their understanding of the storyline. In this study, the researcher involves this intrinsic element to analyze Jack's reasons for his cultural displacement, particularly the conflicts within the plot.

### **Conflicts**

Nurgiyantoro (2009) argues that plot has three essential components. One of them is conflicts. Conflicts are the character's experiences. Wellek and Warren in Nurgiyantoro (2009) stated that conflict is a dramatic event that involves action and response. Conflicts are part of the plot since they are related to events, and particular events might lead the story into conflict. Conflict is important in narrative writing since the flow of conflict determines the story's plot.

Stanton in Nurgiyantoro (2009) divides conflicts into several categories, as follows:

#### ***External conflicts***

External conflicts are problems that involve a character with something outside him, such as other characters or the environment around them. External conflicts also include physical and social conflict. Physical conflict is caused by the character's events related to the natural environment, such as disasters and so on. Social conflict is caused by a character's relationship with another character. For example, a character of a story has a hatred toward another character.

#### ***Internal conflicts***

Internal conflicts are problems that occur within a character's mind without involving external factors such as another character and any othe social field. Internal conflicts are usually shown through psychological. It is characterised on dilemma, the character situation in facing two values that are difficult or contrary to them. Feelings of confusion, anxiety and fear. Struggles in self-discovery to feelings of guilt or sense of regret.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Research Design

To conduct this research, the researcher used a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach is a research method that uses descriptive or narrative objects since the research object is presented as written text, that is *The Paper Menagerie* short story itself. Qualitative research reveals the data result using clear definitions and descriptions without involving number counting (Watkins, 2012). Which the data is taken from the written short story.

This qualitative research applies to library research. Library research collects data through reading books, journal articles, and other relevant text sources. Sarwono in Sari & Asmendri, (2020) states that library research studies reference books along with relevant findings from relevant previous studies to obtain a theoretical framework regarding the problem of a particular study. The primary data of this research is taken from *The Paper Menagerie* short story, while the secondary data is from journal articles and any other source related to the topic.

### Research Preparation

Before began this study, the researcher prepared several steps:

- Determining the literary work: The researcher decided on *The Paper Menagerie* by Ken Liu as the primary source.
- Studying the previous study: The researcher read the previous studies that analyze *The Paper Menagerie* short story to determine the research gap.
- Determining the study's focus: After defining the research gap, the researcher analyzed Jack's conflict as the focus.

### Data collection

In collecting the data, the researcher uses several steps as follows:

- Close reading: the researcher thoroughly read the short story in multiple times to comprehend Jack's conflicts as his complex reasons for dislocating Chinese culture
- Highlighting: The researcher highlighted each conversation, phrase, and description related to Jack's conflicts.
- Note-taking: The researcher noted the important element contributing to Jack's cultural displacement.

- Sources collecting: The researcher collected the relevant books and journal articles to support this study.

### **Data Analysis**

In examining the data, the researcher follows several steps:

- Identifying: After collecting the data, the researcher identified the data based on internal and external conflicts proposed by Nurgiyantoro (2009)
- Interpreting: the researcher elaborated on the identified data, particularly the conflicts that reflect Jack's reasons for displacing his Chinese culture
- Formulating findings: the researcher concluded that Jack's external and internal conflicts revealed in the discussion based on the New Criticism theory.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Migration**

Migration contributes to cultural change experience. Migration is the movement of people from one place to another, involving changes in residence and administrative matters such as village, city, district and state (Tsegay, 2023). Due to his movement to a new land, the migrant encounters a new culture that can be completely different from his culture before. Reddy and Viswanath (2019) state that migration is a problem that migration agencies face. Migrants unconsciously adopt the way of life of the people in their new environment, so cultural displacement occurs.

*The Paper Menagerie* carries out the story of Jack, who moved to his father's hometown, Connecticut, United States of America, when he was a child. It is shown through "When I was ten, we moved to a new house across town. Two of the women neighbours came by to welcome us" (Liu, 2011). Jack moved in with his parents. Jack is adept at communicating in English in his new environment, while his mother continued to use Mandarin. Hence, Jack's mother couldn't communicate with the neighbours who visited her new home. "Make yourselves at home. My wife doesn't speak much English, so don't think she's being rude for not talking to you." (Liu, 2011). Jack's migration is the beginning of his cultural dilemma process. In his new environment, he encounters the culture of American society, which is different from the culture he has always known.

## Racial Discrimination

Discrimination is the act of exclusion or different treatment of a person or group (Chen & Mallory, 2021). This happens because of several factors, including racial differences. In *The Paper Menagerie* short story, Jack faces discrimination in his new environment. The first discrimination is done by the two women who visited Jack's new house in Connecticut. The woman said something bad after seeing Jack's appearance, which has Chinese facial characteristics. They delivered unpleasant words such as. *"Something about the mixing never seems right. The child looks unfinished. Slanty eyes, white face. A little monster"* (Liu, 2011). The neighbour called Jack a little monster because he is different from other American boys.

Second, cultural discrimination is shown in Mark's character. Mark is Jack's friend and neighbour. One day, Mark visited Jack with Obi-Wan toys and asked Jack to show him his favourite toys. Then Jack came with *Laouhu*, tiger origami. Mark insulted him, saying, *"That doesn't look like a tiger at all. Your Mom makes toys for you from trash?"* (Liu, 2011). He mocked and disrespected Jack's paper menagerie, part of Chinese culture. He even destroyed and tore *Laouhu* into pieces, and continuing to bully Jack at school as shown through *"My fight with Mark didn't end there. Mark was popular at school. I never want to think again about the two weeks that followed"* (Liu, 2011).

Furthermore, Mark also insulted Jack's Chinese mother. Jack's father met his wife through a catalogue containing photos and descriptions of brides from different races. Jack's father decided to choose the peasant Chinese girl and live with her until Jack was born. Mark also criticised that the Obi-Wan toy destroyed by *Laohu* was more expensive than his mother's price in the catalogue. It was done by saying mother by saying, *"This was very expensive! You can't even find it in the stores now. It probably cost more than what your Dad paid for your Mom!"* (Liu, 2011). Moreover, Jack's neighbours secretly talked about it as well: *"He seems like a normal enough man. Why did he do that?"* the word 'that' refers to Jack's father's decision to choose a wife in that way.

These words and traits can be deduced as cultural discrimination. As relates to Nurhadi and Assidiqi (2019), discrimination is a negative and harmful treatment towards a minority or inferior race. On the other hand, the sequence of events affected Jack's hatred of Chinese culture, which his mother still maintains.

## Insecurities

Insecurity is someone's unhappy emotional state. It contains such emotional inconsistency, anxiety, and feelings of rejection (Kumar Dey et al., 2018). Insecure in social situations is a lack of confidence and worry about the other's judgement. In *The Paper Menagerie* short story, Jack's insecurity is caused by the feeling of self-difference from other Americans. This also leads him to alienate his Chinese culture as well.

The first insecurity in young Jack is when he realizes that the origami animals are just paper. He feels that the toys are weak compared to Mark's. "*I had never thought of Laohu as trash. But looking at him now, he was just a piece of wrapping paper.*" (Liu, 2011). The sentence explains that after Mark insulted the origami, Jack slowly agreed. He no longer adored the origami and saw the toys as a wrapping paper.

Besides, Jack also denied his physical appearance, which inherited her mother's features. Jack is the biracial child of a Chinese-American couple. So, it is normal for him to have Chinese facial features. In this story, Jack is described as having slanted eyes, white skin, and straight hair, which his Chinese mother inherited. In the mother's letter in the paper that used to fold *Laohu* the tiger origami, she wrote about the resemblance between her and Jack as follows, "*Son, I know that you do not like your Chinese eyes, which are my eyes. I know that you do not like your Chinese hair, which is my hair,*" (Liu, 2011). The quotation above shows that Jack had black and straight Chinese hair from his mother.

Consequently, Jack's physical specimens strongly characterize him as Chinese rather than American, but Jack denies that he resembles his mother's face. "*At dinner, I asked Dad, 'Do I have a chink face?'*" (Liu, 2011). The sentence asks his father if he is of Chinese descent, but he answers 'no'. This was done to calm Jack, who was being bullied. Jack said the second sentence when he saw his mother, who was singing Chinese. "*We had nothing in common. I said nothing and went to the bathroom. I looked into the mirror. I look nothing like her*" (Liu, 2011). He mumbled to himself and wondered why he had a Chinese mother, thinking they were not similar. He still denies that Chinese blood and culture are also part of him.

In addition, Jack also felt ashamed of his family, especially his mother. He lashed out at his mother for putting his picture in a magazine to be bought as a wife. "*What kind of woman puts herself into a catalogue so that she can be bought? The high school me thought I*

*knew so much about everything. Contempt felt good, like wine.*" (Liu, 2011). His arrogant nature made Jack ignore his mother's reasons for the right. He also stopped talking to his mother and kept his distance until adulthood. He kept wondering about his fate that he has a Chinese mother, which is distinctive from all American mothers. *"singing a song in Chinese to herself. It was hard for me to believe that she gave birth to me. We had nothing in common. She might as well be from the Moon."* The sentences show how Jack hates and ashamed being the son of a Chinese mother in America. It deduces that Jack's inner conflicts lead him to displace his Chinese culture and his insecurity toward traditional culture toys, appearance, and his mother.

### **Cultural Apathy**

Apathy is a careless and nonchalant trait. Kamaledin Mousavi and Ahmadi Milasi (2022) argue that apathy is a neglectful trait toward law and social environment. Which can be applied to cultural apathy as a careless trait of a particular culture. Cultural apathy is Jack's inner conflict, which is carried out in *The Paper Menagerie* short story and drives Jack to the Chinese cultural displacement. While Jack's actions towards his mother mainly show this trait. It happened when Jack was rude to his mother for not speaking English. The mother said *"If I say 'love,' I feel here."* She pointed to her lips. *"If I say 'ai,' I feel here."* (Liu, 2011). She put her hand over her heart." This means his mother is emotionally attached to Chinese culture, including Mandarin. Therefore, when she says ai, her emotional connection is deeper toward her Chinese identity rather than the word love, that feels just on the surface.

Even though his mother already said the reason for her Mandarin use, Jack did not care and let his apathy grow bigger; even his father could not help. One day, his father encouraged him to talk with his mother and not be so rude. However, Jack arrogantly rejected it. *"One time, when I was in high school, I asked Dad about the details. He was trying to get me to speak to Mom again."*, *"You shouldn't treat your mother that way," Dad said. But he couldn't look me in the eyes as he said it.*" (Liu, 2011). The sentence uttered by the father reflects that no matter how much the mother cherishes her Chinese culture, Jack doesn't remember it anymore. He still distanced himself.

After stopping using Mandarin, Jack's mother still preserves her culture through traditional Chinese songs and clothes. This shows her great love for her Chinese

heritage. However, Jack chose to ignore her. Deep down in his heart, he does not like it and chooses to ignore it. Instead of considering his mother's feelings. "*when I came home and saw her tiny body busily moving about in the kitchen, singing a song in Chinese to herself, it was hard for me to believe that she gave birth to me.*" (Liu, 2011). The sentences show that Jack does not recognize his mother's cultural and emotional sacrifices. He does not understand her perspective and only focuses on his desires. The above discussion highly deduces that Jack's cultural apathy has become one of several factors that drive him to regard Chinese culture.

### **Desire to fits in**

The conflict sequence made Jack realize that Chinese culture is weak in American society. Therefore, he insisted on fitting into American culture by rejecting Chinese culture. First, Jack insisted to have American modern toys. Even though, the young Jack used to adore Chinese traditional toys and origami animals made by his mother, but after he moved to Connecticut, he wanted modern Star Wars toys just like Mark's toys that he had already shown to Jack. "*And I want some real toys. Dad bought me a full set of Star Wars action figures*" (Liu, 2011). Jack disrespectly threw his only toys, saved them in the shoe box, and kept them in the attic without ever using them again.

Second, Jack asked his mother to cook American food. "*We should eat American food.*" (Liu, 2011). His father calms him by saying that Chinese food is popular and many families eat Asian food. Additionally, Jack demanded American food no matter what and did not want to feel different from Americans. It is shown through "*We are not other families.*" (Liu, 2011).

Thirdly, Jack forced his mother to speak English and stop using Mandarin when talking to him. Even though his mother knew no English other than hello and goodbye, Jack didn't care. "*English, I said. Speak English. English, I said, raising my voice. Speak English.*" He intentionally did this act so that he would not be considered a Chinese family in American society. This became a major factor in Jack's fractured relationship with his mother. It results in Jack completely erasing Chinese culture as his identity and Americanizing himself, which is shown through "*I would hurry on to my room, where I could continue my all-American pursuit happiness.*" (Liu, 2011). Those actions strongly deduce that Jack has displaced his Chinese culture.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, Jack displaced his Chinese culture in order to mingle with American society without considering as a foreigner. It can be seen through external and internal conflicts he faced. The external conflict is his migration from China to America, so he encounters an entirely different culture. In addition, racial discrimination treatment experienced by his neighbour and friend is also categorized as an external conflict.

At the same time, the internal conflicts reflected on his insecurity and inferior feeling of being subculture in American society, shown through his toys, appearance and his mother. Therefore, he distance himself from his mother emotionally and culturally so that he can be accepted as an American. Moreover, his cultural apathy toward Chinese heritage support his cultural displacement. Lastly, the external conflict is depicted by Jack's desire to fit into American culture by replacing his origami toys with Chinese food and forcing the mother to speak English. Those conflicts unwittingly made Jack far from his original identity, namely Chinese culture, and adopted American culture.

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