

THE OLD PATTERN AND THE CREATION OF THE NEW MASCULINE IDENTITY IN JULIE WU'S NOVEL

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ABSTRACT. *The Old Pattern and the Creation of the New Masculine Identity in Julie Wu's Novel.* This paper analyses the way in which Julie Wu transforms Saburo or Tong Chia-lin, the main character of her novel, into a true man. Unlike the great Chinese American author and critic Frank Chin, Julie Wu does not turn her character into a militant hero by developing his *wu* nature, but transforms him into a Taiwanese American scholar after developing his *wen* nature, through many years of studying and numerous sacrifices both in Taiwan and the United States of America.

Keywords: *Julie Wu, Frank Chin, wen, masculine identity, third son.*

REZUMAT. *Vechiul model și crearea noii identități masculine în romanul lui Julie Wu.* Lucrarea de față analizează modul în care Julie Wu reușește să-și transforme personajul central al romanului ei, Saburo sau Tong Chia-lin, într-un bărbat adevărat. Spre deosebire de marele critic și scriitor sino-american Frank Chin, Julie Wu nu apelează la transformarea personajului ei într-un erou combatant prin dezvoltarea naturii *wu*, ci își transformă personajul într-un remarcabil învățat taiwanezo-american care și-a dezvoltat natura *wen*, după mulți ani de studiu și sacrificii în Taiwan și Statele Unite ale Americii.

Cuvinte cheie: *Julie Wu, Frank Chin, wen, identitate masculină, al treilea fiu.*

Often readers will pick up a book that has won numerous literary awards from the bookstore or library with the expectation that these prizes guarantee the quality of that book, and that its subject matter will be contemporary and interesting. Unfortunately, this type of selection eschews

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less famous novels written by authors who are part of minority groups in their society, because they describe scenes in which that ethnic group behave differently from the rest of society, demonstrating traits less appealing to the general public, due to the fact that the public needs additional historical and cultural information in order to understand why minority groups are acting differently from the majority, and this extraneous information usually makes the reader disengage.

Although novels written by authors from a minority group are harder to understand and take a bit longer to read, due to the additional information that a reader must know, they also offer more satisfaction than reading a novel about a well-known historical event or culture, because the reading will reveal an unknown perspective of the world with each new page.

The novels written by authors such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan made the Chinese American culture well known in the world, in general, and in the United States, in particular, because the writers have won numerous prizes for their works. Unfortunately, there are numerous other novels written by Chinese Americans that are not taken into account based not on lack of information or poor writing, but because their authors did not win renowned prizes for their books. At least Chinese American ethnic literature has two important and well known representatives who are part of the canon of universal literature, due to the prizes they have won and the audience they have acquired. However, Taiwanese American ethnic literature exists in a quasi-anonymous state and still struggles to be recognized by a larger audience.

When starting to read Taiwanese American novels, one can see that although their authors did not win numerous prizes, these works depict extraordinary and deeply moving scenes either from the hard lives of the Taiwanese as citizens of the Japanese Empire or the Republic of China, or from their lives as immigrants in the United States. Among these lesser known Taiwanese American authors, Julie Wu is the most appreciated writer in academic circles, due to her complex storytelling and intricate historical and cultural background.

For example, in the novel *The Third Son* she not only depicts all the possible situations through which a Taiwanese man from 1940 could have lived through before emigrating to America, but she also emphasizes the possible identity crisis of a Taiwanese third son, caused by the influence of Chinese culture and Confucian ethics. This influence enforces the importance of the first son, who should be the son who inherits everything and has the chance to realize himself due to the education that his family must invest in, as he is to be, traditionally, the pillar of the new family and the person who will take care of his parents.

In Julie Wu's aforementioned novel the reader will discover the transformation of Saburo, or Tong Chia-lin, the third son of a Taiwanese political

leader, from an ignored son into a successful professor and researcher in the United States. His father strives to keep himself in power during the Japanese occupation and after the occupation of Taiwan by the forces of Chiang Kai-Shek, under the banner of the Republic of China, as well as preserve the values of the traditional family, while ignoring his third son based on his birth order.

The Third Son is not an exotic novel about a mysterious stranger, the main character here is a Taiwanese immigrant, who lives as an expatriate in the United States of America, and it is not a novel about the conversion to Christianity of that immigrant either. Julie Wu constructed a complex novel in which she makes the social hardships that a younger son has to endure known to the world by following Frank Chin's advice from the *Preface of Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (xii). She also illustrates how hard it is for a Taiwanese immigrant to live like an American man, because he is still tied to his family in Taiwan even long after he left for America, due to the fact that social Confucian ethics is profoundly imprinted in his way of being.

The opening scene takes place during World War II when Taiwan was under Japanese rule, because after more than two centuries in which the Chinese were the true rulers of the land, the weakened Chinese Empire had to offer the territories of Taiwan, Penghu and Liaodong Peninsula to the new superior regional power, the Japanese Empire, after the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) at the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1868-1947) (Roy 17- 33). In this context, Julie Wu illustrates the harsh life of Taiwanese citizens under this new regime, because although they had given up their Chinese names and language and adopted the Japanese names and language, they were still considered as inferior to Japanese citizens and they were only allowed little autonomy (3-4).

At the beginning of the novel, the main character has a Japanese name, Saburo, because his father wanted to preserve his status as an accepted leader and have a good job in a society ruled by the Japanese, although he had ancestors from Mainland China (3). But Saburo was not an ordinary third son who was predestined by the Gods to have a normal life as a second-rate Japanese citizen. He recognized that "I was different, somehow, from my brothers. I was different from these children all around me in their neat rows, filling their kanji into little boxes" (4-5). But at this stage he only perceives his differences, but could not manifest his identity, as his parents punish him for each deviation from the life of an ordinary third son.

Saburo grew up in a community where "favoritism of the oldest son (*lao da*) was common throughout [Chinese] Han society" (Brown 203), because parents believed that the oldest son would grow faster, get a good position in society and a decent job more quickly, and would be able to take care of them in their old age in exchange for their wealth. Therefore, being the third son

meant that Saburo would be discriminated against by the other family members, because his family considered that his older brother was meant to be the one who would become successful and take care of the parents. It is of no surprise that his brother and sisters received the best treatment, received the best food and would be permitted the expense of learning at home with a private tutor during their time in isolation, with no access to schools, while he was eating only steam bread, and was not permitted to learn alongside his brother, for fear that he would hold his older brother back.

Moreover, he could not protest his parents' traditionalist attitude since Confucian ethics imposed upon him the virtue of filial piety, i.e. to recognize his parents' effort to raise him and to be grateful, as well as the second tenet, which says that a son should obey his father in all regards (Ng 25).

Due to the social norms of that time and place, Saburo is the obedient third son, who accepts to be beaten by his parents for no apparent reason. Therefore, he might be compared to an effeminate man, who lost his manliness, like the Indians, who were perceived by the British colonials as womanly because they were "physically, intellectually, and morally, soft, frail, weak or cowardly" (Krishnaswamy 295), but in this particular case Saburo is not perceived as a woman by a colonial force, but by his own parents, due to the social conventions.

Fortunately, Saburo's luck will change the day a snake bites him, because the snake, a symbol of wisdom, made him need his cousin Toru's help. Toru offered him the treatment for the bite, but he also offered him advice to study hard, as this could get him anywhere, and respect the rules, because the teachers and people would see in him an honest and wise man (24-25). Moreover, because Saburo intuitively knew when it was going to rain, his cousin offered him a Japanese book entitled *The Earth* to encourage Saburo to develop his knowledge of the science of geography. Therefore, one can state that this encounter between Toru and Saburo is a key point in the latter's journey to change his luck and become a true man, as his cousin deduced from the knowledge he showed that Saburo was not an unintelligent boy, but a neglected and unmotivated child, and he provided the necessary advice to prompt Saburo's change.

Toru's guidance of Saburo on the path of learning and respecting his teachers in order to become a scholar, is one of the two possible initiation paths through which Chinese men in Imperial China had to pass to be acknowledged as true adult men. The great Chinese theoretician Kam Louie points out that men, in ancient and medieval patriarchal China, had to cultivate the *wen* nature, which meant they had to have high literary, philosophical and cultural achievements, or the *wu* nature, which meant they had to practice martial arts perfectly, have a good physical condition and be capable of abstinence, in order to become extraordinary individuals of the upper echelons on the social scale (10-11).

While “the macho hero represented in terms such as *yingxiong* (outstanding male) and *haohan* (good fellow) is counterbalanced by softer, cerebral made tradition – the *caizi* (the talented scholar) and the *wenren* (the cultured man)” (Kam 8).

American authors of Chinese origin like Frank Chin, Gus Lee and Louis Chu have preferred to portray the adventures of characters who develop their wu nature, as this type of character is seen by the white community as being more masculine than a character that becomes an intellectual. Therefore, these authors take into consideration Frank Chin’s advice to rehabilitate the old model presented in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Art of War* and *The Water Margins*, a model which proposes a hero who is loyal to his family, friends or king and has to fight to avenge them, to return home or in order to keep a promise to them (xxxvi-xxxix), and distance themselves from the white masculine model presented in movies, where the hero has a built body and his dominance is asserted through his looks or physical strength, but does not have a higher reason to fight for, such as a promise of loyalty to someone or a Confucian duty of loyalty (Dyer 262-263).

Unlike authors who presented images of the new Chinese hero in American society, Julie Wu has preferred, like Gish Jen in *Typical American*, to represent the evolution of an effeminate man who transforms himself through learning and the American experience into a true scholar, a member of the high society, similar to the scholar in the Chinese Empire. This preference may be explained through the idea that this type of character demonstrates that the Chinese and Taiwanese can become men without the need of becoming violent or use physical force, because “if Chinese American men use the Asian heroic dispensation to promote male aggression, they may risk remaking themselves in the image of their oppressors” (Cheung 182), but if they are depicted as intellectuals who respect women, are smart and have money, they may show that they have adapted to American society without leaving behind their manhood or without becoming violent men.

Although his mother only hired a teacher for his older brother and sister, the teacher, Sato, realized Saburo was intelligent although previous teachers categorized him as mediocre in the best case, because he had been reaching the solutions of complicated problems in an intuitive manner (28). Therefore, Sato asked Saburo’s mother to make her youngest son attend classes. In the beginning, she agreed, but the older brother became jealous and told the mother that Saburo was slowing him down, which made her withdraw Saburo from Sato’s courses arguing that “some sons are more deserving than others” (29) and that Kazuo, the older brother, is the one who should get a better education than Saburo. This was not the only instance where Saburo had to suffer because of his older brother, as

he was condemned to be humiliated by his older brother as a third son. Although the older brother, Kazuo, had received a better education and more help from his family so as to follow his dream, he was jealous of his little brother because he was smarter than him.

Unfortunately, after World War II the tense political situation in China degenerated into the continuation of the Chinese Civil War (1927-1950) where the armies of the government formed by the Chinese Nationalist Party (*Zhōngguó Guómíndǎng*), led by Chiang Kai-shek, fought against the armies of the Communist Party of China (*Zhōngguó Gòngchǎndǎng*), led by Mao Zedong, even though they had collaborated to defeat the Japanese invaders during the war (Chaurasia 165). This new break out of the civil war after World War II came as no surprise because the national government who obtained the power in the 1911 revolution excluded the Communist from the government by massacring communist party leaders and supporters in 1927 and continued doing so after the war as well (Chaurasia 131-136, 162). This faction was the League of Common Alliance (Tóngménghuì) founded by Sun Yat-sen in 1905 with the help of military forces and the support of regional governors, and in 1911 they forced the Qing emperor and government to resign. Furthermore, by 1949 the Communists managed to take control of mainland China and the government formed by the *Zhōngguó Guómíndǎng* was forced to retreat in the groups of islands situated in the South China Sea (Taiwan, Penghu, Kinme and Matsu) where they continued to govern the small territory of the Republic of China, a state with limited recognition in the world (Chaurasia 165).

Despite the change of regime, almost everything remained the same, because the Chinese from the mainland went about the tasks of governing in the same authoritarian manner as the Japanese. The only change was that they used Mandarin Chinese and everyone had to have a Chinese name. Therefore, Saburo became Tong Chia-lin, the third son of a mainlander's family, who still had to endure discrimination.

Although Tong Chia-lin's family discriminated against him, he took Toru's advice to follow the rules and make a better life for himself by learning and becoming an educated person who could visit the world. Unfortunately, in an act of rebellion, Chia-lin, makes a caricature of his mainlander teacher and is caught, which leads to his expulsion from a select middle school. Fortunately, his cousin Toru managed to convince the principal of the school that the punishment was too harsh and that the teacher was influenced by the riots of the locals against mainlanders. However, Chia-lin was too disappointed to continue and follow his dream and chose to further his education not at an upper-level high school, which could have granted him access to the Taiwanese University, but at the Provincial Taipei Institute of Technology in order to study science. Moreover, his disappointment increases after his older brother starts to date

his childhood girlfriend and after he burns an English textbook he had borrowed from his cousin's room.

Tong Chia-lin was disappointed and desperate, because he thought he could make something of himself by learning, but he failed because he was a rebel and a third son, who did not deserve a home teacher and encouragement, as per social norms. Moreover, his precious secret love from childhood was stolen by his older brother, whom he had to respect, because Kazuo was the hope of the family. At such a crucial moment, his cousin steps in again and tells him that "limits can be surpassed" (79), which gives Chia-lin hope to survive his military service and to continue his path of building a beautiful life.

Chia-lin takes Toru's advice and when he returns after completing his time in the military, he finds out that his brother's girlfriend had left him. He rushes to the girl's side and asks her to marry him, arguing that he hopes he will take the exam for an American study scholarship, which could grant him the opportunity of becoming important. She accepts not because he could improve his social status in the future, but because she loves him.

In this case, even as a married man with a wife expecting a child, Chia-lin is not yet considered a true man, because he is the third son of the family in which solely the first son is important and therefore has to endure his parents' harsh judgment of him. Another reason for not being considered a true man is due to his low-income job at Taikong, which paid ten times less than what his wife, Yoshiko, had earned at the bank before quitting and marrying him. Fortunately, he had listened to his cousin's suggestion of developing through learning, because "limits can be surpassed" (79) and after a harsh program of study, he presented himself at the examination. He manages to pass it and he is put on the list of persons eligible to go to America and study.

Tong Chia-lin does not go to America to become the fearless hero, who survives numerous adventures in order to return to Taiwan a man, instead his purpose is to study and become a true American man and scholar in order to bring his wife to him and live a beautiful life together. When he departs for America he is unsure he will be able to become an American and have his wife emigrate as well and continue to live there. His other option is to study in America and return to Taiwan and live there for the rest of his life, because unlike other students, his father had given him money to study pharmacy for only a year, so that he would come back to Taiwan, become a pharmacist and repay his debt, because he is still considered the third son and not worthy of money for study like his older brother, and his parents offered it to him as a loan.

After Tong Chia-lin arrives in America, he decides to study Electronic Science, and not Pharmacy, due to his inclination towards machines and his intuition that space programs will be further developed in the future. Because he chose to focus on his *wen* nature, becoming a scholar, and his field of study,

he was recognized as a valuable individual, even if he had to prove himself. He was tested twice before being accepted to work on Professor John Gleason's project, first when he came to give something to Professor Ni Wen-Chong at Michigan University (158) and later, when he came to see Professor Gleason in order to get hired (229). Unfortunately, he did not get hired at Michigan University because all the available positions had been taken in the meantime, but professor Gleason offered him the chance to work on a rocket project through an unpaid internship and get his name on the paper being written about the project and he accepted, as he wanted to remain in America and be an American.

Tong Chia-lin is not portrayed as a usual Taiwanese immigrant who goes to university in order to listen and mechanically repeat what they are told, or to talk to his male peers only, because he speaks up and talks about his problems to the department head from the South Dakota University School of Mines, which none of the other Chinese students did, as they only "sit in the corner talking among themselves" (174). Moreover, he does not take traditionally female jobs as washing dishes or laundry work like other Taiwanese immigrants. Therefore, he is not effeminizing himself, but he applies for a job in a factory, where he is hired to repair radios, traditionally considered a man's job, and this small aspect makes him different from others in the same situation, by showing he wants to be an American man, not a Taiwanese effeminized man.

After Chia-lin receives the unique opportunity to teach a course on electromagnetism, because "the teaching fellow has had to leave suddenly" (Wu 240), he starts to teach differently from what his professor instructed, because he does not want to be a common professor, as other Taiwanese immigrants would be, but desires to be a true scholar who showcases the breadth of his knowledge. Therefore, he consults several textbooks and tries to teach by showing the applicability of each theory.

Although Chia-lin continued to encounter problems, like his brother's friends mingling in his life and trying to stop his advancement by lying that he had plagiarized his lab work, that he is subversive to the Taiwanese government, and maybe by telling the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service that his wife is sick with tuberculosis, he managed to survive and find a solution each time, like a true disciple of Sun Tzu. He defeated his older brother by sending his father the letter in which Kazuo thanks his friend for making Chia-lin's life harder.

In the final chapters, after his wife comes to America and he becomes a PhD student, his true Taiwanese American manliness becomes evident when he confronts his father and tells him to let his wife sleep because his pregnant wife is tired. Unfortunately, it was too late, because his second son died at birth soon after, probably because of this episode when his father bothered his wife. Moreover, his first son had to pass through a couple of traumatic years

before coming to America, in which he was probably deprived of food and his aunts treated him badly because he was the son of the third son. Nevertheless, he did become a true Taiwanese American man, standing up to his father and showing him that he is not a third son anymore, but the true head of a family, a scholar and a self-made man. Therefore, he had abandoned the path of the Old World in which everything is decided by social ethics, described as "thoughtless repetition, relieving a person of the burden of reflection, self-examination, and free will" (Wu 296) and embraced the belief that everybody can be an accomplished man, even the third son, not only the oldest son.

Finally, but not least important, when analyzing Chai-lin's wish to bring his wife to the United States to enjoy freedom from social ethics, a reader may assume this is a woman's way of thinking, because only she or a soft man would be sentimental enough to bring his spouse to the new country, whereas a true Asian man would have sent her the money to survive alongside his birth family. However, a closer reader would see that Chai-lin behaves like an American man, who buys his woman's freedom through his influence, which common poor Asian men cannot (Shimizu 50). Chia-lin brings Yoshiko to America in order to escape the social problems of Taiwan and to build a traditional America family of that period, where the father is the bread-winner and the mother is a home-maker. This is the final step towards becoming a truly accomplished man.

In conclusion, it may be said that Julie Wu's novel is not only about the transformation of the hero from a Taiwanese immigrant, who is a third son forever neglected and set aside by his family, into a good looking and dominating American man, but also about the evolution of Tong Chia-lin/Saburo from his status as a helpless Taiwanese third son who can only fail to the status of successful son and scholar, which was achieved by developing one of the two fundamental natures of man in traditional China, the *wen* nature, i.e. the scholarly nature of the man.

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