

FIFTH CHINESE DAUGHTER: THE STORY OF A CHINESE AMERICAN GIRL'S COMING-OF-AGE IN AMERICA

Smaranda Ștefanovici
"Petru Maior" University of Tg. Mureș, Romania

***Abstract:** The paper will highlight cultural issues such as enculturation and acculturation in Jade Snow Wong's unique story of struggle and achievement. Balancing both, she reaches maturity, respectability and prominence. Through the rich details, she manages to light up a world within the world of America, where the members of a typical Chinese family can adapt themselves to American conditions and take their part in the national life of the United States without losing the essentials of the cultural heritage which they rightly prize.*

***Keywords:** enculturation, acculturation, female, person, biculturalism, balance.*

Cultural Enculturation and Acculturation

Kottak (2005, p. 209) defines 'acculturation' as "the exchange of cultural features that results when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first hand contact; the original cultural patterns of either or both groups may be altered, but the groups remain distinct".

'Enculturation' is defined by Grusek (2007, p. 547) as "the process by which a person learns the requirements of the culture by which he or she is surrounded, and acquires values and behaviors that are appropriate or necessary in that culture". Enculturation, thus, helps to mold an individual to become a member of society. Culture influences everything; it is an important factor in shaping identity. In the process of socialization, individuals learn the culture of their group through experience, observation, and instruction.

Whether anthropologists call it 'enculturation' (first-language culture) or 'acculturation' (second-language culture), psychological anthropology studies the relationship between individual and culture and, implicitly, its effects on personality development.

All people enculturate and acculturate, majorities and minorities, due to cultural contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of both groups. However, the focus of this article will be on the adjustments and changes experienced by the Chinese minority in response to their contact with the American majority.

The "American imaginary insists on the essential difference of racialized peoples" (Liu 2009, abstract) and draws on the persistent

interpenetration and interconnection of two seemingly polarized cultures. There is assimilation of Chinese in America and there are also introjections of Chinese cultural traditions and Confucian values in the American social, political, cultural and literary arenas to transform America in their imagined Chinese American dynamics. The Chinese-Americans, like Jade Snow Wong, knew they were different as women and as writers of color with dual racial and cultural heritage, but difference was not a weapon to impose inferiority. Rather, it was a base for unity. Racism encouraged them to fight through writing and to forge an identity through creation. Facing the dishonorable choice imposed on those who live between two worlds – “You must be the one or the other,” they declare with pride: “I shall be both.” (Suyin 1990, abstract) We discover with delight another state of being, another wholeness in the Chinese America created in their diasporic, hybrid and transnational imagination that makes boundaries of history, gender and race irrelevant in modern America.

Jade Snow Wong and Bicultural Heritage

A Chinese American female writer, J. S. Wong is one of the earliest writers to address the cultural tension that children of Asian immigrants face growing up in America. Her autobiography, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950), chronicles her struggle to balance Chinese and Western values. Her bicultural heritage and her reflections on what it means to be American make her reach maturity, respectability and prominence.

Wong was the fifth child of seven in a Chinese family that adhered strictly to traditional Confucian values. These values referred to the importance of family, the privilege of sons (in perpetuating the Chinese ancestral heritage) over the daughters, the latter fulfilling the domestic roles of wives and mothers.

A Person as Well as a Female

The traditional Chinese woman was chaste, had to obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage and her son after her husband’s death. She was dependent on her family, had no right to education, her role being restricted to domestic issues; she was a mere female, sexually discriminated and with no rights. The family mattered more than the individual. “I was constantly reminded to bring credit to my family and the name of ‘Wong’. A disgraceful deed would downgrade my family, not just myself”, Jade states in her autobiography.

Marriage and education as part of Chinese Confucianism are also detailed in the book. Jade’s parents wanted her “to marry a rich and

educated man from their ancestral village” while “no one of [her] high school girl classmates went on to college.”

She struggles to balance home, work and love. For that she combines features of a ‘traditional’ woman (fragile, delicate, submissive, easily dominated by male force, sense of duty to others, sense of sacrifice) with features of a ‘becoming’ woman (intelligent, viewing work as a necessity, independent spirit, taking interest in her career and not in her female domestic sphere, i.e. in marrying and having children, as her father tells her: “Our daughters leave home at marriage to give sons to their husbands’ families”).

She completed the Chinese school and was about to complete the American school and to become “a good homemaker” in accordance with the traditional pattern. But she remembered her father’s words regarding education: “Education is your path to freedom.” (1989, p. 108) Everyone in the family considered her more intelligent than any elder or younger brother or sister; all she needed was talent: “what you were born with – in combination with what you have learned.” (1989, p. 110) If, next to her status of a female (defined by her biological sex), she managed to acquire the right to being treated like a woman (defined by the cultural construction of gender), she would fulfill her American Dream. Whether belonging to the majority or the minority in the USA, she was aware of the new experiences she had, the new values and activities that were different from her parents’: “But daddy, I want to be more than an average Chinese American girl... I am a person besides being a female.” (1989, pp. 109-110) The equality sign she uses between ‘person’ and ‘female’ addresses the solution to the cultural tension that children of Asian American immigrants face growing up in America.

Jade Snow thus balances the conflict between the traditional role and the desire for self-development as a Chinese-American female immigrant. While the first part of the narrative is loaded with Confucian doctrine (“By habit, Jade Snow questioned aloud no more. She had been *trained* to make inquiry of Daddy with one question, and to accept his answer; she never asked twice.” - 1989, p. 109, emphasis added), gradually, through small but determined steps, she learns to become an independent person. The verbs “to decide, to obey, to think, to seek” replace more and more the verb “to train”. She started working outside their “factory home” which was the very first step towards self-governing. The three important steps in achieving the status of a “person” were: getting proper education, earning her living, and last but not least, making her own decisions: “She was making about twenty dollars a month and now paid for her own lunches, carfare, clothes, and all the other necessities of a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl.” (1989, p. 106) But to become a “person” she needed to fulfill her

“female” role as well, i.e. to do what she had been “trained” to do: “do the cooking and the light housework”, “all the familiar home chores”, “the entire management of a household”, “serving party dishes”, “washing dishes”, etc. However, a difference had occurred: physical and intellectual work, domestic and public sphere, now started to interfere.

She started being initiated into a new type of society, the American society, which gave importance and status to women’s identity as well. Jade spoke in this sense about the “horsy” family with “two equally ambitious and antagonistic daughters”, about “the political middle-aged couple” with “many men but few women around”, about “the apartment horse dwellers” with Arleen, “one little girl about three”, and about the Gilberts, “or rather Mrs. Gilbert... and the girls”. While Jade and her sisters had been taught not to be bold, these girls were concerned with being “well known and popular”.

When she was five, she had her first experience with a peddler who was selling drapery samples. She stole a colorful square simply because she wanted it so much and her mother refused to buy it for her. It was then that she decided she was going to have her own money.

Jade Snow showed another sign of individualism and independence when she got caught passing a note during a church sermon. This most humiliating Chinese school experience was also among the first signs of independence. Because of passing that note in the classroom she was nearly beaten by the instructor, but she defended her innocence and refused to hold out her hand until “she saw her colleagues held out as well.” (1989, p. 64) Then, she refused to curl her hair like the rest of the family.

A new feeling – the pride of personal creation was experienced when she was six and started attending the American school. She made her own butter following her teacher’s instructions.

Racial discrimination was also part of her American school experience; when she was called “Chinky”, she did not have the courage to react, simply bursting into tears.

Jade knew she belonged to a male-centered society and family. Her father and mother raised her to become an economical wife; to learn the meaning of money and how to keep the house, she was given money to buy groceries since she was a little child. But even then, a difference was spotted: Jade Snow never tried to bargain, as Mama often did according to the Chinese habit.

The next step, when she was six, was to cook rice which is “considered one of the principal accomplishments or requirements of any Chinese female” (1989, p. 57). Food is used as an ethnic sign, as Cynthia Wong argues (1993, p. 63). Jade, the narrator, takes the white reader on a gastronomic tour; she describes Chinese meals, takes pains to explain the

ritualistic significance of certain meals and folk beliefs about the medicinal properties of certain ingredients.

While sticking to family principles taught by Confucius, Jade started observing American principles as well, such as the right to education and to invest in “intelligent mothers” (1989, p. 14). Since she was a girl, she had no independence of choice and decision. Painting was great fun, because no one told Jade Snow what to do or how to do it (1989, p. 18). Besides, learning offered her intellectual satisfaction. Intelligent as she was, she was promoted two grades.

The more she grew up, the more conscious she became of “foreign” American ways that specifically involved a choice of action, were she to fulfill her childhood dream to have money and independence. She resembled Grandmother, a woman of courage, whose lesson on how plant life develops aroused in her an appreciation for growing things. The same is with people. Just like plants, people can adjust or not to new conditions. By transplanting the best, her Grandmother said, “we will discard the weak ones, just as in life those who do not try are left behind.” (1989, p. 32) Seize the opportunity and learn hard was her Grandmother’s advice.

At twelve, she was qualified to enter high school. It was another period of experiments. She did chores at home (such as washing her brother’s underwear) which brought her very first money, around three dollars every month, that gave her a wonderful feeling of freedom.

Family is more important than the individual in China. As such, in Chinese names, one’s family name appears first, then the middle name and one’s first name comes last. However, Jade Snow put her family name last and her maiden name first, dissociating herself from this tradition and emphasizing her need to be considered an individual. While her sister, Jade Precious Stone was concerned with hairdos, manicures, and make-up, she rejected them as frivolous. She was being taught the fundamentals of being a good wife and, during this time, began her struggle to be recognized as an individual by her family and society. She argued her right to become a person, although her brother laughed at her dream of becoming a dressmaker saying that she lacked imagination and personality.

The nine years of Chinese study were foundation years. The training period was over. It was the beginning of a new status, that of a “person”. Using what she had been taught at home (to be honest, diligent, to follow her best judgment and conscience, not to be greedy in her work, to be trustworthy, etc.), Jade started on the difficult road of emancipation, a hard climb that would bring her contentment and fulfillment.

From submissive (“Daddy is fair and knows better”), she started making decisions on her own. From dependent (“Would you help me to

meet the college expenses”), she reached economic independence by working in seven American homes. She mixed her traditional culture (enculturation) with the newly acquired culture (acculturation) to build up a new identity. She did her best to use this new working background to build up a new identity: “so she continued to keep people’s houses clean, exhausted herself studying, ignored her family, got straight A’s except in physical education.” (1989, p. 111) Home started losing its meaning. Jade, the small, lone female, a “kitchen fixture” in the American families she was working for, ignored her traditional home atmosphere and talks about the new experiences which she did not confess at home anymore. A new home began to attract her attention:

It was a home where children were heard as well as seen; where parents considered who was right or wrong, rather than who should be respected; where birthday parties were a tradition, complete with lighted birthday cakes, where the husband kissed his wife and the parents kissed their children, where the Christmas holidays meant fruit cake, cookies, presents, and gay parties; where the family was actually concerned with having fun together and going out to play together; where the problems and difficulties of domestic life and children’s discipline were untangled, perhaps after tears, but also after explanations; where the husband turned over his pay check to his wife to pay the bills; and where, above all, each member, even down to including the dog appeared to have the inalienable right to assert his *individuality* – in fact, where that was expected – in an atmosphere of natural affection. (1989, pp. 113-114, emphasis added)

In this assault of new sentiments, however, she claimed the support of God to “take care of His share in bringing her college education to reality” (1989, p. 111).

She remembered her first dance and “date” with Joe. Lost in fear at the beginning, she gained confidence in Joe, and, ultimately, in herself. She started mixing with friends without a “chaperone”. After graduation, she planned to go to university. She told her Daddy that she had made up her mind to enter junior college in San Francisco. She would find a steady job to pay for her expenses through university.

At the university, there were only two girls in a class of more than fifty men. A cultural experience she had at her college course of Sociology brought her near final recognition as a person by her family. The instructor discussed the relationship of parents and children, emphasizing children’s individuality and rights: “Parents can no longer demand unquestioning obedience from their children. They should do their best to understand.” (1989, p. 125) Later, she translated the idea into terms of her own experience. She was an individual (a person) with rights, too, besides being

a Chinese daughter (a female). Could her parents, she wondered, forget the fact that “she would soon become a woman in new America, not a woman in old China?” (1989, p. 125) That her parents might be wrong was a devastating thought for her. She decided, in her own interest, to try “to open their minds to modern truths” (1989, p. 126).

Jade Snow’s Declaration of Independence and Sense of Balance

Her ascent towards emancipation was drawing to a climax. For the first time in her life, she invited a man, Joe, to a movie. Daddy was bewildered at his daughter’s daring behavior, as she had never before left the house without her parents’ permission. Jade’s rebuff was prompt and unexpected:

I am too old to whip. I am too old to be treated as a child. I can now think for myself, and you and Mama should not demand unquestioning obedience from me. You should understand me. There was a time in America when parents raised children to make them work, but now the foreigners regard them as individuals with rights of their own. I have worked too, but now I am *an individual besides being your fifth daughter*. (1989, p. 128, emphasis added)

The “unfilial theory” that she lies out comes against Confucian theory that honors the family before any personal whims. She has the power to fight both parents. It is her *declaration of independence*. They must give her the freedom to find some answers for herself.

Her father accused her of having lost her sense of balance: “You are shameless. Your skin is yellow. Your features are forever Chinese. We are content with our proven ways. Do not try to force foreign ideas into my home. Go. You will one day tell us sorrowfully that you have been mistaken.” (1989, p. 130)

After this open rebellion, difficult times came for Jade. It had been simple to have her parents tell her what was right and what was wrong; it was simple to decide for herself. There had to be a *middle way*. “There was good to be gained from both concepts if she could extract and retain her own personally applicable combination.” (1989, p. 131) Books could not guide her in that search for balance between the pull from two cultures. It was not an easy task but the pride and the determination learned from home would help her “sift both and make her decisions alone” (1989, p. 132).

She started expressing herself through theme writing. She soon discovered that thinking in Chinese and writing in English about her people brought her higher grades. The more aware she became of herself and her personal world, the more aware she became of the surrounding world.

At eighteen, she was chosen as Commencement speaker, being ranked among the first ten-top students. She also earned a check for fifty dollars as the most outstanding woman student of the Junior Colleges in California. At graduation, she was elected to be the salutatorian, where she praised the college for having developed [their] "initiative, fair-play, and self-expression," for having given [them] "tools for thinking and analyzing." (1989, p. 135) But the most effective application of this education for an American-Chinese would be in China. "You must have confidence that I shall remain true to the spirit of your teachings. I shall bring back to you the new knowledge of whatever I learn" (1989, p. 130), she tells her family. For the first time, her parents were there and seemed to recognize and accept her.

After graduation, Jade Snow pondered the chances to realize her dream of completing her college education at the state university now that she had been denied a scholarship. She didn't want to go to an exclusive school to acquire "American social graces". She simply wanted to develop intellectually. Advised by Joe, she tried Mills College, a girls' school. Although lonely, she was happy in her miniature penthouse. She invited non-Chinese friends to dinner when, for the first time, she could present delightful aspects of the Chinese culture.

An instructor had a significant impact on her development: he taught her a new concept, individual training; he taught her to replace her ability to memorize lecture notes by analyzing and evaluating skills, "to think", in other words.

Another opportunity to link her past to her present learning was offered to her on her preparation for a term paper when she compared the English and Chinese treatment of novels.

A Spectator, as well as a Participant

She was not anymore a mere spectator. She could claim now to be a participant as well (having the role of a dancer, hostess, etc.) in the American way of life.

Another cultural experience was her new interest in western art which she seemed not to be aware of before. The physical education teacher, with whom she became close friend, was responsible for her personal creative expression: "You have above-average ability with your hands ... you should develop your ability with your hands, if only for your greater personal enjoyment in life." (1989, p. 175) Hence, she started attending the evening course on "Tools and Materials" offered by the Art Department; besides the joy of creating (which she had not felt since the fishing trips during her childhood), the course developed individual ingenuity by leaving students to make mistakes and learn from them and by encouraging them to

work out problems by themselves, instead of giving them ready answers. The articles were reaching out and speaking to her, hence her developing “feeling” for art, “an inspiration for good pottery, and the knowledge that sober, hard work was the most important quality of all” (1989, p. 178).

At graduation time, she received Honor and Distinction for her merits as a student in Economics and Sociology. Growing up was not a happy release from domination, as she witnessed, but could be serious and painful with responsibility. She knew that she was ready now for a full-time job. As a Navy Commander’s typist-clerk, she was now part of the American work world – commonly known as “a man’s world” (1989, p. 192). While until then she hardly knew about men, now, as part of her daily routine, she was attentive to the way they thought, talked, and worked, thus developing confidence in dealing and working with men.

Another challenge for her was her participation in a contest for launching a ship which won her honor in the American world and pride in Chinatown. The success assembled the entire Wong family “for the first time in pride of the fifth daughter” (1989, p. 198).

A *dual pattern*, combining the new interests and the old familiar comforts was established. She made her own decisions, her parents no longer interfered but, from childhood habit, she continued to tell them about her friends (e.g. Jade Harp). She had back aches and decided to be operated on, which was going to cost a lot and would take her out of work for at least two months.

The end of the autobiography reinforces the need for biculturalism: “Jade Snow was moving with increasing confidence and pleasure in the Western world, but she was also taking pleasure in rediscovering her Chinese community.” (1989, p. 211) She knew it was not very polite for a young Chinese woman to be forward with a stranger; yet, she spoke with the shoe man about fertilizers, and she dared to compete for an equal salary in a man’s world. She finally accepted advice from a colleague who tipped her off about finding a job in a field in which her “sex will not be considered before [her] ability” (1989, p. 234). That made her decide to spend the money saved for a master’s degree in social service for paying for a pottery studio. With the support of the guild president (she went to work for the US Navy) she was learning not only about pottery by making it, but also about operating a business. When she had over 300 pieces, she decided that “at 23 she was ready to begin her pottery business.” Unlike the Chinese custom to have a middleman for handling such transactions, she took the task on herself.

Her family did not prevent her from having her own way, but they did not help her either. Although few people might find the idea successful, she, Jade Snow, the daughter of a conservative family, managed to run a

business alone. She managed to have her own studio open to public view and she was able to succeed through white sponsorship (encouragement of white patrons, customers). Eventually, she was finally appreciated by the patriarch because she made money from her pottery business.

The end of the autobiography reveals both Daddy and Jade's contentment and pride. He retold Jade about a letter he had received from his cousin when he first came to America in which he acknowledged the degrading position the Chinese culture had pushed its women to. And he compared this position with that in the American culture where women are entitled to freedom and individuality. Through this letter, Daddy, implicitly, claims his stand to have contributed to his daughter's taking advantage of this "Christian opportunity", as he calls the American opportunity.

"I shall be Both"

Though Jade Snow Wong considers herself primarily a ceramic artist, her autobiography, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, remains significant because it introduces a successful integration of Chinese and Western values. Through the rich details, Jade Snow Wong manages to light up a world within the world of America, where the members of a typical Chinese family can adapt themselves to American conditions and take part in the national life of the United States without losing the essentials of the cultural heritage which they rightly prize. Although some later writers have criticized her for promoting a need to reject Chinese culture, J. S. Wong is rightly seen by other writers as an early model for the evolution of American cultural identity and, implicitly, for the empowerment of relevant cultural concepts, such as enculturation and acculturation, in the context of widespread cultural exchanges between majority and minority groups.

References

- Grusek, J. E. & P. D. Hastings (eds.) (2007), *Handbook of Socialization: Theory and Research*, New York, London: Guilford Press.
- Kottak, C. Ph. (2005), *Windows on Humanity. A Concise Introduction to Anthropology*, New York: McGraw Hill.
- Liu, X. (2009), "Imagined Chinese America---In the Diaspora Consciousness of Chinese American Women Writers", available at http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p113712_index.html.
- Suyin, H. (1990), *Tigers and Butterflies: Selected Writings on Politics, Culture and Society*, London: Earthscan.
- Wong, S. C. (1993), *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Wong, J. S. (1989), *Fifth Chinese Daughter (FCD)*, Seattle & London: University of Washington Press.