

An Analysis of the Disillusioned American Dream in Gish Jen's *Typical American*

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Abstract—Gish Jen described in her first novel *Typical American* how the first generation of Chinese intellectuals overcame difficulties to accept American culture and value, and became typical Americans at last. In a consumer society, their fate is not optimistic. In the process of realizing American dream and pursuing money to show their values, they fell into spiritual vacancy and became the victims of consumer society. From the perspective of consumer culture, this paper discusses their American dream and explores the roots of the disillusioned American dream. This paper reveals that the causes of the disillusioned American dream are the influence of materialism in consumer society as well as the conflicts of Chinese and American culture. People in a consumer society desperately pursue material wealth but ignore the spiritual world. In order to avoid disillusionment of American dream, Chinese Americans should realize the hypocrisy of American dream. Instead of following the flow, they should learn to integrate Chinese and American cultures and enrich their spiritual world.

Index Terms—*Typical American*, American dream, consumer culture, culture conflict, disillusionment

I. INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism creates a more favorable environment to some Chinese American writers, who have brought Chinese American literature into the mainstream writing of American literature. In the past few years, Chinese American literature has been more and more popular. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the flourishing of Chinese American literature. Amy Tan, Gish Jen, Gus Lee, and David Wang Louie are called “The Gang of Four” in Chinese American Literature circle. Gish Jen (1955--) is undoubtedly one of the most well known ones.

Gish Jen is a contemporary American writer and a second generation Chinese American. She has written many famous works, which include four novels: *Typical American* (1991), *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), *The Love Wife* (2004), and *World and Town* (2010). She has also written a collection of short fiction, *Who's Irish* (2000). All of these books have received high praises in the U.S. *Typical American* is Gish Jen's first novel, which has received the National Book Critics Award. Although Gish was born in America, she portrays the cultural, social and monetary difficulty of the immigrants in *Typical American*. The plot is set around Chinese character, Ralph, and his transition from China to America. When he first arrives in America, he makes himself a list of promises. He will work hard to earn an engineering degree and intend to return to China after graduation. He will be nothing like the stereotypical American. But by the time his sister, Theresa, and Theresa's roommate, Helen (who later becomes Ralph's wife), save Ralph from his own carelessness, he has already sacrificed some of his own beliefs and dreams for American ones. Ralph learns American success through getting married, earning his doctorate in engineering, buying his first home, having two daughters, and receiving tenure with the university where he teaches. However, by this time, a millionaire conman has seduced him into the self-made man idea of the great American dream, which leads Ralph and Helen to open their own fried chicken restaurant, resulting in short-lived success and achievement that quite literally crumbles to financial ruin and family rivalry. By the end of the novel, the characters have sacrificed their Chinese morals to become the “typical Americans” they once mocked. And because of loss of trust between each other, the family's structure dissolves beyond all obvious repair. Ralph not only breaks his own promises but also nearly destroys his family in the process of material success, but at the end of the novel he realizes his faults and their family get together.

Since its publication, the theme, the disillusioned American dream presented in this novel has aroused the attention of many scholars. There are many studies about this topic. Pei Qiong and Hao Chengmiao have pointed out in their paper that the combination of highly material civilization with poorly spiritual civilization is the root of disillusioned American dream. (Pei & Hao, 2011, p.157-158) If there is no restriction of moral, American dream will be disillusioned. Hu Chunmei from Beijing Institute of Education has pointed out in her paper that the Chinese Confucianism and the American individualism lead to the disillusioned American dream. (Hu, 2011, P. 128-132) Though there are several researches about the disillusioned American dream in *Typical American*, they are not deep and systematic. This paper will explore the roots of disillusioned American dream from the perspective of consumer culture and cultural conflicts, and provide some suggestions for Chinese immigrants on how to live in America.

II. THE PURSUIT AND DISILLUSIONMENT OF AMERICAN DREAM

The term, American dream is heard by us frequently. As a national ethos of the United States, American dream runs

through American history and reflects Americans' traditional values and ethnic spirits. It is a set of ideals in which freedom, opportunity for prosperity and success, and an upward social mobility can be achieved through hard work. American dream is not only about democracy, freedom and equality, but also about the dream of success by struggle. American dream is originated from colonial period. In the beginning, it has religious meaning. "The original American dream is based on building a 'new paradise on earth', and some ideal world." (Hu, 2011, p.128) American dream developed fast in 19 century. Based on Benjamin Franklin's utilitarianism, American dream advocates man could succeed depending on his ability and diligence no matter what his birth, ethnic and religion are. "People believe in middle class's dream: only by working hard, can one get social status and a happy family". (Hu, 2011, p.128) However, American dream becomes a secular trend nowadays. In America, people think that everyone wants success, which means living better than before and being superior to others. In terms of this desire of success, people trust competence and pursue materialism. In order to succeed, people don't care about others. Thus American dream becomes a reflection of individualism. Chinese Americans also wants success. In *Typical American*, the three main protagonists give up their traditional values to pursue individualism and are keen on material wealth to realize their American dream. However, we find in the novel their American dream does not bring them success and better life, but leads them into an embarrassed situation; they have to face disillusionment and frustration.

A. *The Pursuit and Disillusionment of Ralph's American Dream*

After the Sino-Japanese War, China was in a mess. Ralph's father sent him to America hoping Ralph to become successful there. Then Ralph was on the way to pursuing American dream. He set many goals, such as winning honor for his family, building his morals, acquiring the doctor degree but not becoming a typical American. He followed the rules and did everything with great care. But in this new world, he met with many difficulties. He wanted to get help from his professor about his continuous study for getting the doctor degree but was refused. Then Ralph forgot to renew his visa, the only valid proof of his identity. Ralph became a person without legal identity. In order to escape the search of the immigrant office, he began his frequent moving journey. It was really a hard time for him. But when he was driven into a corner, he met with his sister Theresa. He stayed in America with the help of Theresa and Helen. Theresa was a matchmaker in Ralph and Helen's marriage. Later, Ralph got the doctor degree. Through efforts, Ralph became a tenured professor at University at last. They moved out from an old house into a large and new house.

However, the joy of success satisfies Ralph for a while. After Ralph knew Grover, he realized that his success in study was inferior to Grover's fortune, which stimulated his affluent dream. Grover was an American-born Chinese. He was rich and wasted a lot. He was a typical upstart as well as a successful man that the American society flaunted. Grover's means of success was despicable. Tax evasion and swindle were his jugglery. Grover became Ralph's idol and controlled Ralph's mind. Then Ralph decided to give up his study and develop his future with Grover. Grover once owned a fried-chicken store which was in danger of collapsing, because the foundation of the store was rotted like wood. Grover sold it out but the new owner of the fried-chicken store found that and decided to charge Grover's fraud. In order to transfer the crisis, Ralph sold the store to Ralph without his knowledge. Ralph thus fell into Grover's trap. Grover's colorful description of Ralph's future motivated Ralph to work day and night. Ralph stayed with the cash machine to count money that he had owned. The sound of the cash machine even submerged the flirt of Grover and Helen.

While Ralph was content with his success of his fried-chicken store, the store collapsed. At last, Ralph had to close the fried-chicken store. When Ralph found it was Grover's fraud, he swore to kill Grover. But Ralph was timid and overcautious. He didn't kill Grover but was shamed by Grover because Grover told Ralph his dubious relationship with Helen. Ralph felt very angry and gave violence to Helen. After that, he drove on the way home but bumped against his sister Theresa. Theresa conked at hospital. Thus, the whole family is broken. Until the affluent dream disillusions, Ralph realizes that he is not himself he imagined. He has become a typical American he criticized in the past. America is not America he imagined.

Ralph pursues his degree dream, business dream and affluence dream. During the whole process of pursuing American dream, "Ralph embodies the traditional Chinese people who receive Chinese traditional education but with no American education, which lead him to receive American culture single-faceted; for example, he accepts Grover's money worship from dirty means". (Zhu & Xie, 2009, p.41) With the adding influence of American culture, Ralph's faces culture shock. He seems to get a double identity, in fact, he loses his own culture identity. Thus, his American dream disillusions at last.

B. *The Pursuit and Disillusionment of Helen's American Dream*

Helen is a traditional Chinese woman, who is oppressed by her husband at home. Helen endures this, because a traditional Chinese woman is obedient and submitted to her husband. Helen follows Chinese tradition and provides great care to her husband, such as dinner, soup, tea and household duties, while Ralph still yells at Helen for her breath, silence, and whatever he isn't satisfied with. At last, Ralph even abuses his wife physically. Helen doesn't get love from her husband, that is to say, Ralph doesn't give mutual respect to his wife. This leads Helen to betray his husband and begin to accept Grover's love.

At first, Helen resisted American culture, but gradually she was conquered by American consumer culture. She liked American magazines, newspapers, radio and so on. She secretly read the magazines about ladies' clothing and hid the

magazines on the mat. She was eager to purchase a house in the suburbs with a big dining room for the family. After Ralph got the doctor degree, their living conditions became better. They bought a new car. Ralph brought their family to go for a drive in Connecticut. They saw luxury houses there. The tour brings many dreams to them. They also dreamed of having a beautiful house, especially Helen. “‘It’s so beautiful. It’s so beautiful’, she repeated”. (Jen, 1991, p.115) Every weekend, she had a house tour. Thus, Helen got familiar with different kinds of house fast. After Ralph became a lifetime professor, they moved onto a new house. When their business was prosperous, besides paying for the expense of store and new house, Helen also bought new furniture such as household appliances, gridiron, clothing, bridge table and so on. At Janis’s party, Grover was attracted by Helen. It was their first meet. Helen, a married woman, not only didn’t feel angry with Grover’s unbridled behavior, but also felt great honor. She thought she fell in love with Grover.

Grover’s love for Helen doesn’t last long, because Grover doesn’t really love her. Grover only wants to meet his own needs. He destroys Ralph and Helen’s business at last. Helen wants to pursue true love and better life like a typical American, but she doesn’t get rid of the traditional Chinese woman’s lower status, and doesn’t really know American culture, thus her failure is unavoidable.

C. *The Pursuit and Disillusionment of Theresa’s American Dream*

Theresa also didn’t agree with American culture at first. She followed traditional Chinese cultures, though she received western education since she was young. She helped her brother Ralph when he had difficulties and was a matchmaker in the marriage between Ralph and Helen. She contributed much to her family. She was more excellent than his brother in study and got a doctor degree in America smoothly. Yet, in a traditional Chinese family, people pay much attention to man’s success but not woman. Ralph also agreed with this point. So considering her brother’s feeling, Theresa always maintained her brother’s dignity. For example, in order to keep her brother’s dignity, she lied that her scholarship was canceled because her brother didn’t get the scholarship. When Ralph had difficulties in getting lifetime professor and paying for the rent fee but he was still blind confident, Theresa stopped Henry to criticize Ralph. She sacrificed her rest time to do part-time job undertaking fee of his brother. “Theresa maintained Ralph’s authority and dignity”. (Li, 2008, p.90) She never wanted to contradict her brother. She thought that man was the patriarch in a family. But her brother never cared about her feelings. In order to help her brother, she received Henry’s love, but Theresa’s affair with Henry was immoral, because Henry had his own family. Paper couldn’t wrap fire, and everyone knew at last. Other Chinese Americans mocked her, even her brother did so. At last, she was run over by Ralph’s car and fell into coma. As the critics remarks, “Theresa only dealt with the economic problem for Chang’s family, but the identity of Chang’s family still had problems”. (Yan, 2012, p.68)

III. THE CAUSES OF THE DISILLUSIONED AMERICAN DREAM

The author of this paper thinks one cause of disillusioned American dream is the influence of consumer culture, and the conflicts between Chinese tradition and American culture are the other factor contributing to the disillusionment of American dream. In spite of the great freedom in America, Chinese Americans still have some limitations, which are their original cultures. The conflicts will influence the success of pursuing American dream. In fact, the two sides are ambivalent and difficult to achieve at the same time.

A. *The Influence of Consumer Culture on Chinese American*

A “consumer culture” is one whose economy is defined by the buying and spending of consumer. Consumer culture is close to capitalism and materialism because it is driven by money. When the Industrial Revolution made mass consumption possible, consumerism was an effective political option to sustain a healthy, balanced economy. In a consumer society, people are surrounded by materialism. Materialism is a philosophy that puts the importance of physical objects before spiritual ones. After the World War, America became rich and went into the fast developing period. The prosperity of economy and the improvement of living conditions pushed America to go into a consumer society. The United States is the most obvious example of a consumer culture. The negative aspect of consumer culture is that it is shallow and drives people not just to meet their needs but to acquire status symbols, expensive things to demonstrate the owner’s ability. Instead of fulfilling spiritual or aesthetic desires, a consumer culture pursues external riches. In a consumer society, people pursue money and material. They think money is everything. They realize their value by their fortunes. However, the crazy pursuit leads to the vacancy of people’s soul.

United States is such a consumer society full of substance, where people pursue material comforts. We see all the Chinese immigrants in *Typical American* willingly or unwillingly accept the values of consumer society while pursuing their American dream. When arriving in America, Ralph resisted the temptations of the material world, “learning with walking and eating”. (Jen, 1991, p.8) He prepared to return home to serve the country and honor his parents after graduation. After the liberation of Chinese Mainland in 1949, due to the domestic political situation, Ralph as the son of KMT government official was forced to remain in the United States and agree with the values of the consumer society for a living. At first he “refused to join the U.S. citizenship”. (Jen, 1991, p.23) Later, he had to move again and again to avoid being searched due to visa problem. Because of economic problem, he could only go to the grocery store or thrift store shopping. The lamp he bought was broken. Later, “his problems go worse” (Jen, 1991, p.14) and “more and more serious”. (Jen, 1991, p.14) He had no choice but to work in Chinese restaurant and slaughter animals in the basement. His

survival was a problem, let alone his dream of a doctorate. The mockery of consumer society made him miserable. When his last hope of continuing to complete the doctoral degree was rejected, his world fell apart. He had nothing. So he slept, overate day and night, and even wanted to take his own life.

It's just the suffering in the United States that made Ralph have a strong desire to change the situation. He and Grover Ding who was the representative of consumer society hit it off. Grover's fortune history was a get-rich-quick secret that Ralph sought after. Grover worked as a painter, drove the taxi, washed dishes in a restaurant, and sung in karaoke. He collected certain savings to invest mines, real estate, clothing, food, toys and other industries, and then his business became bigger. "Everything would happen, this is the United States". (Jen, 1991, p.42) Self-made millionaire Grover was a hero in Ralph's heart without doubt. Since then, Ralph started to pursue fortune through Grover's guidelines. He bought a chicken restaurant from Grover, quit coveted tenured professorship and decided to run a business.

Theresa is very tradition in her inner heart, but after many years in the United States, she gradually agreed with the values of the consumer society. When educating children, Ralph told them that the most important thing in the United States was "money". "In this country if you have money, you can do everything you want, if you don't have any money, you can do nothing, you are just Chinaman! "It's that simple." (Jen, 1991, p.199) Theresa was very angry that Ralph instilled worship of money on his two nieces. Although she did not agree with what his brother did, she still kept silent. Because this is reality, "She has seen the poor how to be treated in the hospital, they just wait to die." (Jen, 1991, p.200) After people got rich, they wanted to buy cars and houses, because in consumer society, "car is a symbol of status and identity. In addition, car is also a symbol of efficiency, speed, pleasure and stimulus". (Wang, 2001, p.216) House is the material form of home. It is not only "a place for shelter", but also "a sign or a symbol of people's social status, identity, character and style". (Wang, 2011, p.213-214) To live on in a consumer society, Theresa had to adjust herself. She bought red high heels to meet Grover, because she saw other girls in America also wearing like that. Her high heels don't match with her high figure and her clothes, but in order to live she has to wear high heels though she doesn't want to wear. Theresa's affair with Henry is also influenced by consumer culture.

If we say that Ralph and Theresa were forced to accept the consumer culture, his wife Helen, friend Henry Zhao and Henry's wife Janice Zhao thought their ideals were what the Americans were pursuing. Their daily topic was about how to pursue the material wealth such as cars, houses, clothing, etc. Henry won a car in the church draw. Then he sold it and got a new one. He studied very hard to get a doctor's degree, tenured professorship and was promoted to the head of the unit with a car and a house. At first, Helen boycotted American culture, but she was gradually conquered by the American consumer culture. She began to like American magazine, newspapers and radio. She read American magazines about women's clothes on the sly and hid them under the mat. She was eager to buy a house in the suburbs with a large restaurant for the whole family. She and Janice regarded the ideals and standards of American women as a direction. The improvement of material conditions brought them a better chance of survival with Ralph getting the doctor degree. Ralph bought a car and drove the whole family to the beautiful Connecticut, which made them generate many new fantasies. "One day, they will live in such a house with a yard and a garage. The longing they say out is strengthened, especially Helen; she said over and over again". (Jen, 1991, p.135) They saw the houses every weekend and Helen was familiar with the style and structure of various houses quickly. When Ralph became the tenured professor, they finally bought a new house they desired and moved away from the crumbling rental housing. When their business was booming, Helen often bought much furniture such as household products, grills, velveteen skirt, bridge table, plastic package of food products and album. They were also ready to go to the Grand Canyon to play. They invited Grover for dinner again and again and Grover gave them some ideas while laughing and singing constantly. Grover became their fetish and the words of Grover guided their actions. Helen just worshiped Grover as her husband, because Grover was rich. When Helen knew Grover was a villain, she still missed Grover with his leer, wealth and elegance. That is the magic of material.

B. *The Conflicts between Chinese Culture and American Culture*

Though the Chinese immigrants in *Typical American* accept consumer culture, it is not easy for them to integrate into American society, because Chinese tradition and value still have an influence on them. They are caught between two cultures. From Ralph, the culture conflicts can be seen easily. He is a potential American, but he is influenced by Chinese Confucianism. For example, when he got the doctor degree, he excitedly called his father and mother and even said to the principal that he wanted his parents were present. Chinese people are eager to succeed in study and bring glory to his family. Thus, the Chinese tradition still influences him. The contradiction of Chinese Confucianism and American individualism leads to the disillusionment of American dream. The Chinese Confucianism emphasizes responsibility and the spirit of group and society, while individualism attaches much importance to the personality, freedom, self-sufficiency and self-power. Ralph chooses to follow American individualism, he even sacrifices his wife, family and everything to open the fried-chicken store, but Chinese Confucianism emphasizes the value of considering others first. He loses traditional Chinese quality. He pursues his degree dream, business dream and affluence dream. During the whole process of pursuing American dream, "Ralph embodies the traditional Chinese people who received traditional Chinese education but with no American education, which led him to receive American culture single-faceted; for example, he accepted Grover's money worship from dirty means". (Zhu & Xie, 2009, p.41) With the adding influence of American culture, Ralph's faces culture shock. He seems to get a double identity, in fact, he loses his own culture identity. Thus, his American dream disillusioned at last.

Helen is a traditional Chinese woman, following many Chinese traditions. She is a housewife in her family. She cooks for his family, does household duties, and takes care of them. She submits to her husband and never wants to resist her husband's rudeness to her. These are Chinese culture's characteristics. But in American society, she is gradually influenced by American culture. She is eager to escape from her husband's rule and follows what she wants. Hence, she accepts Grover's touch and love. She keeps the immoral affair with Grover. These show the conflicts of two cultures. The contradiction leads to the disillusioned American dream.

Culture conflict is also reflected in Theresa. During her internship in hospital, she was harassed by her patients. She had traditional Chinese morality, so she rejected the harassment. That is the reflection of Chinese culture. During her living in this modern society she gradually changed. One time, she accepted other doctors' leer and she also sent her leer to them. In this free society, she also wanted to escape the traditional rules and followed her heart to live, but Chinese traditions always urged her. Caught in the cultural conflicts, Theresa was confused and couldn't achieve a balance between two ideologies. And this is one of the reason for their disillusioned American dream.

IV. HOW TO SURVIVE OR SUCCEED IN AMERICAN?

In American society, Chinese Americans want to succeed there. During the process, they also need pay much attention to some important aspects. Only by doing so, could they succeed in America.

They need care about the integration of Chinese and American culture. If they just keep one culture, they can't live there as the protagonist. When Ralph arrived in America, he reminded himself of following the Chinese traditions but not becoming a typical America. Thus he underwent many difficulties. He gradually realized that he couldn't live there. Then he threw away Chinese traditions and followed America values. He failed at last. Thus the integration of Chinese and American culture is very important. They need have the sense of multiculturalism. They should remember their own cultural characteristics and follow them; meanwhile, they have to learn to absorb the virtues of western culture.

"Since World War II, Americans have fallen." (Jen, 1991. p.67) Grover is one of the victims of consumer society. The magic weapon that made him become wealthy was to defraud to make money unscrupulously without moral restraint. Chinese immigrants shouldn't follow the flow. Though in consumer society most people pursue material wealth, Chinese immigrants need to have their own thinking and suitable pursuit. Ralph wants to get a doctor degree at first. Through efforts, he achieves his goal and also becomes a lifetime professor. In fact, he achieves success and realizes his America dream at this point. Later, he follows the flow to get more money and gives up what he has earned to open the fried-chicken store. If he is content with what he owns and doesn't envy others fortune, he will not fail and lose everything at last. Thus, sometimes people need to walk their own way and shouldn't be blind to follow others.

In a consumer society, people are addicted to obtaining money. They do everything for money, and ignore their inner value. In a consumer society, if people are poor in spiritual world, they will do anything by any kind of means in order to succeed. At last, they will lose themselves and become money-oriented. However, a successful person is not measured by money, but by their spiritual world. A successful person is really the giant in their spiritual world. Thus, to succeed in a consumer society, people need to build their spiritual world and meet their spiritual desires. Anyone who ignores spiritual world will not get real success. And this is what Gish Jen wants to tell us in this novel.

V. CONCLUSION

"This is an American story," (Jen, 1991, p.3) Gish Jen said at the beginning of *Typical American*. Because Jen thought the Chang' family had more characteristics than anyone. At the beginning, *Typical American* describes the difference between the Chang' family and other people who followed the different path. But they became the typical American at the end of the novel. They lost a lot, even the most valuable family due to blind worship and the pursuit for money and material wealth. Gish Jen hopes "Typical American is regarded as a story of all Americans, not just one immigrant story; she hopes it can help us recognize our story and reality." (Li, 2008, p.91) Gish Jen wants to explore deeper and broader theme to describe the misery not only about Chinese immigrants, but also the entire human society. She wants to reveal the effect that materialism brings to the human civilization. If we do not pay attention to our spiritual world, the future of human beings may have to face the desert of the spirit.

In this novel, Gish Jen is pinning her hopes on the part of the essence of traditional Chinese culture, and Theresa is her ideal representative. Gish Jen arranges Theresa to save Ralph, even all ethnic minorities. Theresa, a devoted family and independent woman with a decent job, not only retained the Chinese diligence, kindness and strong responsibility for family, but also absorbed the western exploration spirit. She was strong-willed, independent and had the courage to pursue. The eastern and western culture and values are mixed with each other in her body. At the end of the novel, Gish Jen makes Theresa awake and lets Ralph take heart, which not only lit new hope for the Chang family, but point the way to break through the constraint of consumer culture. From Theresa, we can see if Chinese want to survive in the United States, they should abandon the patriarchal ideas, absorb the essence of Chinese and Western culture and establish their cultural identity.

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