

CHARACTER ANALYSIS ESSAY

In Chinese

In traditional Chinese culture, the individual is defined by the family. The Chinese "Self" consists of a person's entire family, from his predecessors to his progeny. The mark of a man is not how much he can accomplish by himself, but rather how much his family can earn as a whole. American culture defines "Self" literally as what it means in the English language: the individual. Thus, when immigrants cross over from Chinese to American culture, they face a dilemma of whether to pursue individualistic fulfillment or to remain loyal to their traditional roles in the family. In Gish Jen's novel, *Typical American*, one such immigrant, Ralph Chang, submits to the selfish and materialistic promises of the American Dream but discovers that the money which he aims to earn can never bring him the happiness which comes with the love of his own family. Ralph first comes to America as a man determined to make his parents proud by earning a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering.

However, he soon becomes lured by the promise of quick wealth in the fast food business and puts his family second in priority to earning money. When Ralph's restaurant fails, though, he realizes not only that happiness can never be bought even in America, but also that personal satisfaction can be achieved by simply embracing the family which he already has. Ralph travels full circle, from traditional, devoted family man to individualistic American dreamer, and back again, in his journey to find what makes him happy.

Ralph begins his life in America as a conventional Chinese man with a deep reverence for his parents and a sincere appreciation for his family. In 1947, Ralph's father sends him to America to earn an education. Ralph, a pious young man, mentally prepares for his new life by making determined vows to himself: "On the way to America, Yifeng studied. He reviewed his math, his physics, his English, struggling for long hours with his broken-backed books, and as the boat rocked and pitched he set out two main goals for himself. He was going to be first in his class, -and he was not going home until he had his doctorate rolled up to hand his father" (6). Yifeng (Ralph) is much like any other Chinese boy, unquestioningly respectful towards his father, his main role model and mentor. He wants to study hard to get a good start so that he can someday make his family proud by bringing back a degree. He does not know what lies ahead for him in America, but he is determined not to take his focus off of his studies. After years of hard work, Ralph finally earns the mechanical engineering Ph.D., which he promised to show his father. By this time, though, Ralph is already busy starting his own family. He marries a Chinese woman named Helen and they have two daughters, Callie-and Mona. Like many new immigrants, they move to a small apartment in New York City. Even though he has toiled for years as a student and still earns no money, Ralph finds joy in having the company of his family: "'Family member means not allowed to leave.' Ralph wagged his finger at the girls. 'We are family,' echoed Helen. 'Team,' said Ralph. 'We should have a name. The Chinese Yankees. Call Chang-kees for short.' 'Chang-kees!' Everyone laughed" (127). Ralph and Helen teach their daughters that a family is a team where nobody is allowed to leave. Even though they are poor, the Changs find comfort and laughter in loving each other. Thus far, the Changs seem to be the typical working-class immigrant family. They do not have much materially, but they depend on each other for strength and support. Ralph's duty as the man is to pass on his traditional Chinese values to the next generation. Since he succeeds in teaching his daughters about the importance of family cohesion, he fulfills his duty to his family, thereby satisfying himself as an individual.

Conclusion:

Ralph Chang's search for contentment begins and ends at the same place, his own family. Back in China, his duties, his obligations, and his happiness all revolved around his parents and relatives. He comes to America as a Chinese boy traveling abroad to earn honor for his family back home. Along the way he meets con man Grover Ding, a personification of the evils of American capitalistic opportunity and the dark side of Ralph's own psyche. Ralph falls victim to his own greed and tears himself away from the only world he knew as a boy, his own family. He transforms into a heartless man until the shock of failure brings him back to where he began, his own family. Gish Jen employs the Taoist philosophy that life is circular to portray Ralph Chang's search for fulfillment. Ralph balances the Yin of his traditional Chinese family values with the Yang of his independent American will to find personal satisfaction. Ralph is a Typical American seeking self-fulfillment, but he finds it in a typical Chinese place, his own home.