

Paper Tigers and Broken Tongues: The Cost of Cultural Alienation in *The Paper Menagerie* (2011) by Ken Liu

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ABSTRACT

This analysis examines how external social pressures shape the representation of cultural alienation and influence the main character's actions and emotional development. Cultural alienation is a condition in which individuals distance themselves from their cultural origins under pressure to conform to a dominant culture. This phenomenon is often characterized by symptoms such as apathy, social isolation, and a sense of disorientation, typically arising from experiences of relocation or immigration. These themes are reflected in the experiences of Jack and his mother, characters of Chinese descent, in Ken Liu's short story *The Paper Menagerie* (2011). While living in the United States, they frequently encounter discrimination and social pressure, which ultimately leads Jack to reject his Chinese heritage that was passed down by his mother, to gain acceptance from his surrounding environment. This research is part of an intrinsic element study using a qualitative descriptive method, focusing on cultural alienation within its socio-cultural setting. The findings indicate that the social environment plays a significant role in shaping identity, as societal pressures may compel biracial individuals to distance themselves from their cultural roots to pursue social acceptance. The person who chooses to abandon their hereditary cultural values to fit in with the predominant culture in their surroundings risks forfeiting their cultural identity and becoming emotionally estranged from their loved ones.

Keywords: alienation, American, Chinese, culture, immigrant

ABSTRAK

*Alienasi budaya merupakan kondisi ketika individu mulai menjauh dari budaya asalnya akibat tekanan untuk menyesuaikan diri dengan budaya yang lebih dominan. Fenomena ini ditandai oleh berbagai gejala, seperti apatis, isolasi sosial, dan kehilangan arah, yang sering kali muncul akibat perpindahan tempat tinggal atau imigrasi. Hal ini tercermin dalam pengalaman tokoh Jack dan ibunya, yang berasal dari Tiongkok, dalam cerita *The Paper Menagerie* (2011) karya Ken Liu. Saat tinggal di Amerika, mereka kerap menghadapi perlakuan diskriminatif dan tekanan sosial, yang mendorong Jack untuk menjauh dari identitas budaya Tionghoa yang diwariskan ibunya demi diterima oleh lingkungan sekitarnya. Analisis ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana tekanan sosial eksternal membentuk representasi alienasi budaya serta dampaknya terhadap tindakan dan*

perkembangan emosional tokoh utama. Penelitian ini merupakan bagian dari penelitian unsur intrinsik dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, yang berfokus pada keterasingan budaya yang dilihat dari latar belakang sosial budaya. Hasil literature review ini menunjukkan bahwa lingkungan sosial berperan besar dalam membentuk identitas, di mana tekanan sosial dapat mendorong individu birasial menjauh dari budaya asal demi diterima oleh masyarakat. Individu yang memilih meninggalkan nilai-nilai budaya asal demi menyesuaikan diri dengan budaya yang mendominasi di lingkungan sosial berisiko menghadapi penghapusan identitas kultural dan keterasingan emosional dari orang-orang yang dicintainya.

Kata kunci: pengasingan, Amerika, Cina, budaya, imigran,

INTRODUCTION

Cultural alienation, according to Preetham (2020), is the act of disregarding one's own culture and showing a lack of interest in it while attempting to fit in or adopt the customs of the prevailing culture. Another argument from Cultural alienation is frequently caused by immigration, relocation, and displacement since these individuals seek values in different communities or countries. A finding highlighted some of the most severe indicators of cultural alienation. The following dimensions represent expressions of cultural alienation: apathy, ignorance, xenocentrism, social isolation, egocentrism, aimlessness, and rebellion (Alhamad et al., 2025; Al-Zahra & Nuwara, 2022; Shtiwi et al., 2019). One study conducted in Saudi Arabia aligned with previous statement by coming to the conclusion that when someone, especially young people, abandons Arab society practices and traditions, the attraction with Western customs and the loss of Islamic Arab identity follow, as demonstrated by actions like dressing in Western fashion and embracing fast-food culture, among other technologically driven trends (Alhamad et al, 2025; Al-Zahra & Nuwara, 2022). A 2019 survey conducted by Times Higher Education and approved by SDU-RIO in accordance with the Danish Data Protection Law found that 93% of social scientists agreed that literature frequently contains important insights into society and social life, indicating its potential to inform understanding of societal norms and human behavior. This suggests that reading a wide variety of literary works, in addition to studying

actual cases occurring in many places, can help one better understand the dire consequences of cultural alienation. In this instance, *The Paper Menagerie* (2011) is an ideal option for learning more about this topic because it offers substantial content on Chinese customs that is essential to its main characters.

The Paper Menagerie (2011), a fantasy realism by Ken Liu, explores the concept of cultural alienation through the gradual emotional and cultural detachment of its protagonist, Jack. The narrative presents alienation as an outcome largely shaped by external social pressures, particularly the pressure to assimilate into the dominant American culture. In this story, origami animals serve as an integral symbol of Chinese cultural identity, both linking the protagonist and his mother and setting him apart from his American neighbors. Jack's growing withdrawal from his Chinese origin is depicted as a reaction to his experiences with racial marginalization and his desire for social acceptance. This is evident in his decision to reject both the cultural symbols associated with his mother and the relationship itself, as reflected in his detachment from the origami animals and in rendering them inaccessible. That decision signals a deliberate disengagement from both his heritage and emotional ties. Additionally, the story emphasizes how Jack's lack of criticism from his immediate surroundings reinforces his alienation, enabling him to prioritize conformity over cultural continuity. Because of this, the narrative portrays cultural alienation as a socially manufactured process that results in

both loss of identity and familial separation, exposing the more profound emotional effects of assimilation that go beyond external cultural change.

Cultural alienation remains a prevalent topic in current research, as it continues to affect individuals perceived as different or who do not conform to standard societal norms. Studies have provided insight into the unique challenges biracial individuals face in establishing a sense of identity. A prominent framework for understanding this is Poston's (1990) Biracial Identity Development Model, which outlines five stages: personal identity, group categorization, enmeshment/denial, appreciation, and integration. This model helps explain how identity formation can be disrupted by societal and familial pressures (Braun et al., 2025). For instance, Black–Southeast Asian participants often struggled to affirm their multicultural identity due to prejudice from monoracial relatives due to differences in aspects such as physical appearance (Zamora & Padilla, 2024; Castillo et al., 2022). In *The Paper Menagerie* (2011), Ken Liu effectively conveys cultural alienation through the lens of a biracial child, Jack, who distances himself from his Chinese heritage to assimilate into American culture. This alienation stems from broader social influences, such as racism and pressure to conform, which cause the protagonist to repress certain traits.

The issue of cultural alienation has been discussed in several previous studies. One of them is a study by Sari T. et al. (2023) entitled “*Immigrant's Cultural Alienation in Elaine Chiew's Face*.” This study found that Yun, an elderly woman of Chinese descent who moved to London in Elaine Chiew's *Face*, experienced feelings of despair, loss of meaning, irregularity, isolation, and self-rejection. The findings of this study show that the cultural alienation experienced by elderly immigrants can lead them into an identity crisis. The second study was conducted by Dr. Shaikh Parvez Aslam (2021) entitled “*Cultural Alienation in Diaspora Writings: A Critical Analysis*.” This study

investigates how diaspora literature reflects the psychological and cultural alienation experienced by individuals who migrate from their home countries to foreign lands. Aslam analyzes the problems faced by immigrants, focusing on several literary works from South Asia, particularly India and Pakistan, which contain perspectives on cultural alienation. Another relevant study was conducted by Trisnawati et al. (2025) entitled “*Representation of Asian Women in Male-Dominated Work Environments in Gadis Kretek (2023) and Kill Boksoon (2023)*.” Although this study primarily focuses on gender representation, it reveals how female characters experience cultural displacement and alienation in patriarchal and male-dominated environments. This research shows that the media not only reflects social inequality but can also question and redefine it. This still aligns with the sense of inequality that Jack's mother feels in the short story *The Paper Menagerie* (2011) by Ken Liu.

To offer a different perspective, this paper examines the portrayal of cultural alienation, severely caused by external societal forces beyond the family as the setting, and how these factors shape the storyline, influencing the characters' actions and emotional development. Through Jack's perspective, the story reveals the severe consequences of alienation, including the loss of cultural heritage and the emotional estrangement from loved ones. Ultimately, the narrative offers a profound contemplation on the cost of abandoning one's cultural values in pursuit of social acceptance.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis of *The Paper Menagerie* (2011) by Ken Liu, focusing on the theme of cultural alienation. The analysis is guided by the concept of cultural alienation, defined as the estrangement individuals experience when they become disconnected from their cultural identity, values, or community.

The data were collected through close and repeated readings of the text to identify narrative elements that reflect cultural alienation. These elements include character dialogue, narrative descriptions, symbolic objects, and key events that illustrate Jack's rejection of his Chinese heritage and his psychological conflict. Passages were selected based on their relevance to moments of cultural tension, emotional distance, or identity conflict.

To ensure analytical clarity, the identified data were categorized into thematic groups derived from the concept of cultural alienation. These categories include: (1) rejection of cultural identity, (2) linguistic disconnection, (3) familial estrangement, and (4) internal psychological conflict. Each category represents a specific dimension of cultural alienation and is used to organize and interpret the textual evidence.

The analysis is interpretive, focusing on how meaning is constructed within the text rather than on numerical measurement. Interpretations are supported by consistent patterns across multiple passages and reinforced by relevant theoretical perspectives. Supporting literature is used as a secondary reference to strengthen the interpretation, rather than as primary data.

After data collection, the selected passages were reduced to those most relevant to the research focus, then categorized and analyzed thematically. This study ultimately aims to reveal the psychological and emotional consequences of cultural alienation as experienced by the protagonist.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the cultural alienation of a Chinese-American child and his mother, who is from China and lives in the United States in Ken Liu's novel *The Paper Menagerie* (2011). The findings of this study indicate that Jack and his mother, a Chinese immigrant in the novel *The Paper Menagerie* (2011), experience cultural alienation characterized by difficulties in biculturalism, adaptation, assimilation, and cultural differences.

1. Biculturalism: Jack's Growth Through Abandonment of One's Culture

Bicultural identity involves an ongoing negotiation between two cultural systems, in which individuals seek to reconcile different values, practices, and expectations. However, this process does not always lead to balance. In many cases, individuals experience cultural alienation, a condition in which they feel disconnected from both their culture of origin and the dominant culture, which can lead to internal conflict and identity instability (Schwartz & Unger, 2010; Preetham, 2020). Rather than successfully integrating both identities, some individuals respond to this tension by rejecting one culture in favor of the other.

In Ken Liu's short story *The Paper Menagerie* (2011), the character Jack serves as a vivid representation of the struggle in forming a bicultural identity and the effects of cultural alienation. Jack is the son of a Chinese immigrant mother and an American father, and he grew up in a household where two cultures coexisted. Initially, Jack lives in harmony with his culture, enjoying Chinese folktales and the magical origami animals his mother crafts. However, as he grows older and faces social pressure from the dominant American culture, Jack begins to reject his Chinese heritage to gain acceptance from his peers and surroundings. These rejections become evident in his frequent, direct dismissals of his mother. "*Mom looked at Dad, not understanding. She looked back at me. 'Sha jiao chink?' What does chink mean? 'English,' I said. 'Speak English.'*" (Liu, 2011, p. 32) In this dialog, Jack begins to express his rejection of the Chinese language, marking the initial sign of his alienation from his mother's culture. The rejection is clear when his mother, unaware of the derogatory term "chink," innocently asks its meaning. Instead of offering explanation or empathy, Jack sternly commands her: "*Speak English.*" This brief yet powerful phrase carries both psychological and socio-cultural implications. Under social pressure to assimilate, Jack begins to internalize negative views of his mother's

culture. Language here becomes a symbolic marker of identity that Jack seeks to erase. By insisting that his mother speak English, he symbolically attempts to remove Chinese cultural influence from his life to achieve social acceptance and avoid stigma.

Repeatedly, Jack emphasizes that his mother should speak English, as if her native language is something shameful or inappropriate to preserve. This insistence not only underscores the generational tension within immigrant families but also reveals the depth of cultural alienation experienced by a child navigating bicultural conditions. Jack is not only rejecting his mother's language but also distancing himself from the emotional bonds, cultural values, and family history she represents. In several critical scenes, such as when his mother asks, “*Bu haochi?*” (*The food doesn't taste good?*) and “*Fashao la?*” (*Do you have a fever?*) Jack responds by shouting, “*Speak English!*” and even swats her hand away. He no longer perceives Mandarin as an expression of love or concern, but rather as a social obstacle that separates him from his American peers. His harsh responses reflect an internalized frustration, not just with his mother, but with his inability to fully accept his Chinese identity. He associates the Chinese language with “foreignness” that must be discarded for the sake of belonging. “*I pushed the chopsticks and the bowl before me away: stir-fried green peppers with five-spice beef. ‘We should eat American food.’*” (Liu, 2011, p. 32) This line represents a broader rejection of cultural identity by Jack, not just through language, but also through food, an essential element of cultural heritage. In *The Paper Menagerie* (2011), food symbolizes the love and tradition passed down by Jack's mother. Dishes such as stir-fried green peppers with five-spice beef are not only typical of Chinese cuisine but also reflect his mother's effort to maintain cultural continuity and care for her child through meaningful everyday rituals. When Jack rejects this meal and declares, “*We should eat American food,*” he symbolically denies his mother's culture and expresses a desire to adopt the dominant

American lifestyle. His rejection is not merely about taste but about discarding the cultural and emotional significance attached to the food. By pushing away the bowl, he pushes away the identity and love that it represents. This act illustrates how the pressure to assimilate can lead to shame about one's cultural background and drive bicultural individuals to suppress it in exchange for social acceptance (Francot et al., 2024).

Furthermore, Jack's statement “*And I want some real toys*” explicitly expresses his rejection of the handmade toys crafted by his mother, the origami animals made with heartfelt care and affection. These toys, rooted in Chinese tradition, could be seen as symbols of familial warmth and cultural creativity. Yet Jack no longer regards them as valuable. He sees them as inferior to the modern toys his American peers possess. This desire to conform to dominant cultural norms not only highlights his struggle for acceptance but also reflects his growing cultural alienation, leading him to distance himself from his cultural roots.

Later a new paper animal would appear on my nightstand and try to cuddle up to me. I caught them, squeezed them until the air went out of them, and then stuffed them away in the box in the attic. (Liu, 2011, p. 34)

By destroying and hiding the paper animals, Jack symbolically suppresses the emotional and cultural connection he shares with his mother. These toys are not merely objects; they are extensions of his mother's love and her cultural heritage. However, for Jack, who has begun to internalize Western ideals and standards, they are no longer of value. His wish for “real toys” reflects more than material desire; it's an expression of his need to be accepted and seen as part of the dominant American culture, one that he deems more valid and desirable at the time..

2. Cultural Alienation: Oppression as the Driving Force of Adaptation

Cultural Cultural alienation refers to the process of diminishing interest in and disrespect for one's culture of origin, and to encouraging oneself to become part of the dominant culture (Preetham, 2020). In Ken Liu's *The Paper Menagerie* (2011), Jack's experience as a biracial child of a Chinese immigrant mother and American father demonstrates how racist social expectations that portray his Chinese origin as different from the majority culture led to cultural alienation rather than being a personal decision. At the beginning of the story, Jack's close relationship with his mother reflects the early stage of cultural identification, in which his Chinese heritage was experienced as a natural part of his daily life, not as a form of social difference. At first, Jack did not feel different from the other people who lived there at that time. The racist remarks thrown by the neighbors marked the first moment when Jack's mixed-race identity began to be seen differently socially, thus placing Jack into a context of exclusion before he could even fully comprehend its implications. When they labeled or referred to Jack as an 'unfinished' child or even a 'little monster' (Liu, 2011, p. 30), they were not just being rude but applying a colonial perspective that viewed mixed-race identity as a form of biological error in physical traits. By portraying his Chinese features as physical flaws, this discourse diminishes interest in his own heritage (Preetham, 2020). In addition, their astonishment at the fact that Jack could speak English and their rejection of his name, which was considered not sufficiently "*Chinese*", refer to sociolinguistic erasure.

Furthermore, Jack began to feel ashamed of his Chinese culture when he played with Mark, a boy from his neighborhood. The conflict between Mark and Jack serves as a material metaphor for the clash between Western consumerism and traditional heritage. When Mark labels Jack's magical origami as "trash" and throws the broken Laohu while saying "*Here's your stupid cheap Chinese garbage*" (Liu, 2011, p. 31), he is devaluing the cultural labor of Jack's mother. The physical destruction of Laohu symbolizes the fragility of a mixed identity when

confronted with the more dominant Western culture. Instead of a simple children's fight, this scene illustrates how there is social pressure forcing mixed-race individuals to conform to one racial identity over another by literally depicting the "garbage" status of a non-dominant culture in a particular place. This marks a turning point in Jack's growing desire to distance himself from the cultural background associated with social rejection.

Jack's efforts to alter his speech and demeanor are indicative of an identity negotiation process in which conformity to the dominant culture is used as a strategy to achieve social acceptance. In the story, Liu also shows Jack's confusion about his half-American, half-Chinese self. Jack even asked his father, "*At dinner I asked Dad, 'Do I have a chink face?'*" (Liu, 2011, p. 32). Jack's question about whether he has a "*chink face*" illustrates the internalization of racial categories, which shows how external prejudice becomes integrated into self-perception during the identity formation process of a person with biracial race (Weaver & Masalehdan, 2020). This instance captures the conflict many biracial people feel when they are forced to align with a single cultural identity rather than preserve a blended sense of identity. Jack's confusion about his biracial identity became a significant factor shaping a deepening sense of shame toward his cultural heritage from the Chinese side. Rather than reflecting his personal reaction, this confusion illustrates the social pressure many biracial individuals face when trying to conform to a dominant identity in their environment to gain acceptance (Weaver & Masalehdan, 2020). As a result, Jack began to distance himself from aspects of Chinese culture taught by his mother, indicating that his rejection of his Chinese heritage was a response to external expectations rather than his own. This tension is evident in his relationship with his mother, especially in Jack's refusal to respond when she tries to speak to him in Chinese. Her silence in response to her mother's question, "*Bu haochi?*" (Liu, 2011, p. 32), reflects more than just a moment of teenage rebellion, but a form of symbolic rejection of the linguistic markers of her cultural identity. Similarly,

Jack's insistence that his mother speak English demonstrates his effort to reposition himself within the dominant cultural sphere by distancing himself from a language other than the dominant one. Through these interactions, Liu illustrates how external pressures within the family gradually transform linguistic differences into a source of emotional distance between mother and child.

Jack's mother and father are also a little confused about coping with Jack's change in attitude. As they individually deal with racism and discrimination related to being a part of an interracial family, parental responses to discrimination often shape how children negotiate their cultural identity (Hunt, 2023). The father's decision to support Jack's request to assimilate linguistically reinforces the priority of social acceptance over the preservation of cultural heritage within the family context, as evidenced in the father's narrative when he asked his wife to speak English as Jack requested: *“Speak English to him,” Dad said to Mom. “You knew this was going to happen someday. What did you expect?”* (Liu, 2011, p. 33). Furthermore, Jack's father also responded with emphasis: *“You have to,” Dad said. “I’ve been too easy on you. Jack needs to fit in.”* (Liu, 2011, p. 33).

Liu writes in *The Paper Menagerie* (2011) that Jack's initial rejection of his mother's Chinese heritage did not occur in isolation, but was quietly encouraged and reinforced by his father, who placed a higher priority on Western assimilation than cultural preservation. Thus, instead of telling and teaching Jack that his racial differences are not a problem and to maintain his culture, Jack's father supports his son's request for his wife to change the customs and habits of the Chinese culture. As stated by Manzi et al. (2012), parental responses to external social pressures can shape adolescents' identity formation by encouraging adaptation to the dominant culture. In this case, the father's willingness to prioritize English over Chinese indirectly legitimizes assimilation, as the family

contributes to the marginalization of the mother's cultural identity within the household. His father's words about how she should speak English seem to imply that his wife's cultural difference is a flaw that must be corrected for the sake of family harmony and social acceptance. By doing so, the father legitimizes Jack's discomfort and inadvertently legitimizes the erasure of his wife's cultural identity.

Over time, Jack gradually distanced himself from all forms of Chinese cultural practices taught by his mother in response to the ongoing social pressure he faced in a Western-dominated environment. His decision to stop using Chinese and even to ignore the paper animal toys not only reflects a change in personal preferences but also represents an effort to conform to dominant cultural expectations to avoid ongoing social exclusion. This distance is evident in his refusal to respond when his mother spoke to him in Chinese. His reaction to his mother, who was not fluent in English, shows how language differences can become a source of embarrassment rather than a bridge of connection, indicating the internalization of a dominant culture that positions languages other than the dominant one as socially inferior. In response to the rejection, Jack's mother began to change her behavior to conform to what she perceived as her American mother's expectations. Slowly, Jack's forced adaptation to his social environment changed him, making him isolated and distant from his own mother. His mother also realized that her Chinese race was the cause of her son's social rejection, so he changed and rebelled, which seemed to be a wall in the mother-child relationship between her and Jack. The pressure from Jack's social environment also influenced his mother to change. A parent's actions are motivated by the emotions evoked by seeing a picture of their own child. While negative emotions hinder a proper parental approach to a child, positive emotions promote it (Hada, 2024). In this case, Jack's mother is affected by Jack's

emotions, who demands that she be like the American mothers in their social environment. She could have taught Jack that losing their Chinese culture is not the only way to fit in their new social environment.

3. Assimilation: American Lifestyle as the Loss of Identity

Assimilation refers to the process by which individuals or groups adopt the customs, values, and behaviors of the dominant culture, sometimes at the expense of their own cultural heritage. (Oxford Review, 2024) This is based on individuals' or groups' decision to replace the behaviors and beliefs of their culture of origin with those of the host culture (J. Lechuga, 2011). This process can occur voluntarily or involuntarily, influenced by social, economic, or political factors (Oxford Review, 2024). In Ken Liu's novel *The Paper Menagerie* (2011), cultural assimilation is illustrated by Jack's efforts to adopt American customs, values, and behaviors, thereby severing his emotional and cultural ties to China. This is most clearly articulated in the confrontation between Jack's parents.

"Mom looked at him. 'If I say 'love,' I feel here.' She pointed to her lips. 'If I say 'ai,' I feel here.' She put her hand over her heart. Dad shook his head. 'You are in America.'" (Liu, 2011, p.33)

This action shows that even within the family, assimilation can be a dominant process that forces one's identity to surrender. Additionally, the act of confirming the assimilation process underway in Jack's family is shown in *"You are in America,"* which proves that he is leaving behind cultural values and feelings that only his mother can express in her native language. Jack's mother's statement, *"If I say 'ai,' I feel here." She put her hand over her heart,* showing that language is a container of meaning that cannot be replaced literally. This scene illustrates the discrepancy between linguistic translation and emotional experience. Jack's mother distinguishes between "love" and "ai" not as equivalent words, but as feelings manifested in different parts of the body. Here, language functions as Stuart Hall

conceptualizes it: a system of representation that does not merely reflect meaning but also produces it. Hall (1997) states that representation is the way meaning is given to the things depicted. In this sense, "ai" is not merely the Mandarin version of "love," but a culturally embedded affect that cannot be fully translated into English without losing meaning.

Jack's assimilation process is also evident when he discards the origami toys his mother gave him.

Dad bought me a full set of Star Wars action figures. I gave the Obi-Wan Kenobi to Mark. I packed the paper menagerie into a large shoebox and put it under the bed. The next morning, the animals had escaped and taken over their old favorite spots in my room. I caught them all and put them back into the shoebox, taping the lid shut. But the animals made so much noise in the box that I finally shoved it into the corner of the attic as far away from my room as possible. (Liu, 2011, p.33)

Jack consciously discarded the origami toys, which were symbols of his mother's cultural heritage. He replaced them with Star Wars toys, which are products of dominant American popular culture. The process of assimilation often requires a person to abandon aspects of their home culture in order to fully adopt the new culture (Kim in Huda et al., 2026). By hiding the origami, Jack was trying to erase his Chinese identity so he would appear like other American children.

Furthermore, another instance of assimilation is evident when Jack rejects Chinese and corrects his mother when she speaks English. *"If Mom spoke to me in Chinese, I refused to answer her. After a while, she tried to use more English. But her accent and broken sentences embarrassed me. I tried to correct her."* (Liu, 2011, p.33). Hamidi (2023) states that every language has its own unique characteristics that reflect its people and culture. Within each language, there are words that reflect the culture of that community. This makes language a key pillar of cultural identity. By refusing to speak Mandarin and forcing his mother to speak

English despite her difficulties, Jack is engaging in linguistic assimilation.

Assimilation is no longer just a survival strategy in a social environment, but rather a process of erasing the cultural and emotional heritage that should be an important part of Jack's identity as a mixed-race child. Jack's assimilation process, which begins with a desire to be accepted, eventually becomes a form of total erasure of his emotional and cultural heritage.

4. Cultural Differences: The Invisible Wall Between Jack and His Mother

The difference in growing-up environment between Jack and his mother was a significant factor in their strained relationship, coupled with the racism they received from their neighbors. This difference in upbringing creates a gap in understanding for his mother; love is shown through sacrifice, through language, food, and meaningful paper toys. For Jack, love and identity had to conform to the norms of the dominant culture to avoid feeling alienated.

In the letter Jack's mother gave him, she recounted her family background and past before she married an American and settled there. She grew up as a Chinese citizen in Sigulu Village, Hebei Province, in the 1960s, during which time China experienced tragic events such as war, the Great Famine, and the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. However, she also shared that Sigulu is famous for its *zhezhi* paper craft, which comes to life and is used by local residents. The quote “*This was practical magic in the life of the village. We made paper birds to chase grasshoppers away from the fields, and paper tigers to keep away the mice.*” (Liu, 2011, p. 39) indicates how the mother considers papercraft a functional tool for survival that is rich in memories. She introduced papercraft to Jack not merely to give him a toy, but to build a warm, comforting home like the one she once knew in her hometown. However, Jack is unable to figure out his mother's intentions, instead perceiving them as unusual and

embarrassing in America's modern environment. This difference in interpretation made Jack feel disconnected, which, in turn, worsened their bond. When he was a child, Jack loved paper crafts, but as he grew older and became more familiar with his neighborhood's culture, he felt it isolated him from the surrounding community.

Additionally, Jack is the son of Chinese immigrants who grew up in America surrounded by Western culture, English, and a more modern lifestyle. According to Luembe (2024), cultural alienation occurs when a group feels separated from its own way of life, including the values, customs, language, or traditions that have been part of its identity. This is what happened to Jack when his mother raised him with Chinese values amid a surrounding society that could not appreciate differences. As he grew up, he realized that his habits were different from his friends', and he began to think that the Chinese culture that his mother brought was no better than Western culture. He eventually began to hate everything related to Chinese culture. For example, when Jack heard his mother singing a Chinese song, he decided to quickly go to his room so he wouldn't have to hear it anymore. The phrase “*She might as well be from the Moon*” (Liu, 2011, p. 34) suggests that Jack's individualistic American environment led him to lose empathy and to view his mother's singing as a weird object or a strange figure he watches from a distance, rather than as cultural heritage. “*I would hurry on to my room, where I could continue my all-American pursuit of happiness.*” (Liu, 2011, p. 34) This phrase shows that Jack's behavior of locking himself in his room symbolizes his rejection of his hybrid identity. He feels that to be happy in America, he must isolate himself from anything associated with Chinese culture.

Jack also added dialog that showed that he felt different from the people around him. “*We are not other families.' I looked at him. Other families don't have Moms who don't belong.*” (Liu, 2011, p. 32) This indicates that he rejects the culture taught by his mother because he wants to fit into society and be “normal” among

his American friends. His mother feels that Jack is out of her league and prefers to conform to American culture. The consequences of Jack's cultural alienation are evident in his mother's final letter: "*Why won't you talk to me, son? The pain makes it hard to write.*" (Liu, 2011, p. 42) His mother was literally sick, but the word "pain" here can also symbolically refer to the emotional pain caused by his years of rejection. All the disappointments that separated them stemmed from cultural differences that developed in their shared living environment.

CONCLUSION

Cultural alienation, as seen in Ken Liu's *The Paper Menagerie* (2011), is not merely an abstract concept but a deeply personal and emotional experience, particularly for individuals navigating bicultural identities. Through Jack's character, Liu demonstrates how the desire for social acceptance and fear of marginalization can lead individuals to reject their heritage. Jack's gradual abandonment of Chinese traditions, language, and familial bonds is a poignant representation of the psychological cost of assimilation. His rejection of his mother's cooking, language, and handmade paper animals reveals how cultural alienation often begins subtly but intensifies over time, especially when influenced by external pressures like racial taunts and a dominant society's standards.

This story sheds light on the broader implications of cultural alienation as a phenomenon driven not only by internal conflict but also by systemic oppression and societal expectations. The rejection of one's heritage, while seemingly a personal choice, is often a survival mechanism shaped by a desire to belong and escape ridicule. Liu's portrayal of Jack's journey from childhood harmony to emotional detachment serves as a powerful reminder of the silent losses that often accompany assimilation, such as family, tradition, and identity.

By exploring *The Paper Menagerie* (2011), readers gain a deeper understanding of how cultural alienation can fracture familial relationships and lead to lasting regret. It

reflects a universal struggle for belonging faced by many bicultural individuals, especially those born to immigrant parents. Thus, literature like Liu's not only enriches our understanding of cultural identity but also acts as a mirror to the real-world consequences of alienation, making it an essential resource for studying the emotional weight of cultural disconnection.

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