

From C.Y. Lee to Shawn Wong: The Transnational Family and its Implicit Rules

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Abstract

Employing the distinction between explicit and implicit rules as formulated by psychoanalytic theorist and philosopher Slavoj Žižek, this article examines the way in which challenges toward an initial rule-based fantasy take place within transnational families. In particular, the article employs an implicit, unwritten rules framework to assess the effect of transpacific migration on the institution of family within the Chinese American diaspora as represented in post-World War II fiction by Asian Pacific authors C.Y. Lee and Shawn Wong. Suggesting five implicit rules underpinning Chinese American families, the article examines Lee's *The Flower Drum Song* to highlight early challenges to these rules before finding in Wong's *Homebase* an unflinching adherence to an implicit rule concerning reverence for ancestors. Wong has the advantage of writing in the wake of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act and of being in a position to trace more and more challenges to the initial fantasy following later waves of transpacific migration. His novel *American Knees* is then shown to epitomize the implicit rules being stretched almost to breaking point as, for instance, the criteria for spouse selection becomes no longer Chinese or partially Chinese or even Asian or partially Asian but Americanization.

Keywords: the family, implicit rules, transpacific, Chineseness, Slavoj Žižek

In the early to mid-1960s some American psychiatrists began to conceive of the family structure as governed by rules that were almost always implicit – for example, “Share your feelings and encourage others to share their feelings” or “Make decisions together as a family” (qtd. in Crane et. al 73). By the 1980s the focus shifted to the “constraining” aspect of implicit rules as empirical evidence began to point to their frequently negative impact – for example, they would often “impede communication, fragment relationships, and deter familial and personal growth” (ibid 74).

In Europe, in contrast to this pragmatic approach to the phenomena of implicit rules, psychoanalytic theorist and philosopher Slavoj Žižek in particular began to situate implicit rules in the broader context of “ideology” conceptualized as “social reality” structured by an “(unconscious) fantasy” (*The Sublime Object* 35). Envisaging the Law as obeyed “not because it is just, good or even beneficial, but simply *because it is the law*” (35) and correlating it with the rules underscoring social behaviour Žižek claimed that “Only to the already enlightened view does the universe of social customs and rules appear as a nonsensical ‘machine’ that must be

accepted as such” (87, 88). He was thus implicitly praising those individuals who, recognizing that the rules embodied in the Law may be actually “nonsensical,” proceed to follow implicit rules of their own.

Later, in *The Plague of Fantasies* (2009), Žižek made clear that human society as a whole is underpinned by both “explicit, public Law” and implicit rules which tend to be “transgressive” and “more coercive” (*The Plague* 38). According to Žižek, even if they do not directly counter rules specified in “explicit, public Law,” implicit rules will tend to augment explicit rules as further levels of implicit rules propel people to a greater and greater degree in the direction of “traversing” an initial fantasy (39). For Žižek, it is inevitable that at some point initial fantasies will have to adjust to streams of freshly-emerging implicit, unwritten rules as the system in which they are active struggles to maintain its existence; but this does not mean that the system itself has to collapse.

As an example, we could take sociologist George F. Murdock’s classic definition of the family in the 1960s as a unit which has to include “adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults” (1). Today thinkers like Pierre-Gilles Guéguen conceive of the family as both “legal institution” – providing explicit rules concerning, for example, divorce, patrimonial distribution, and child maintenance – and “social fact.” In this light, Murdock’s conception of the family would appear to be entirely sociological or in Žižek’s parlance “ideological” and portrayals of the family that combine a sociological and legal perspective would suggest that the family unit as defined by Murdock should be adjusted to accommodate implicit rules emerging later. This allows, for instance, for family units to be headed by same-sex couples. In many, especially Western, cultures today this last-named implicit rule has of course become explicit by virtue of being integrated into versions of public Law that have legalized gay marriage.

Here, although sometimes making reference to public Law as encapsulated, for instance, in the US’s 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, the focus is almost entirely in keeping with Žižek’s linking of ideology and implicit rules.¹ This perspective provides a paradigm for examining the way in which in the fiction of two Asian Pacific authors – Chin Yang Lee (generally referred to as C.Y. Lee) and Shawn Wong – has meditated on the evolution of the implicit rules underlying the fantasy that gave birth to the post-mid-twentieth-century Chinese American family following transpacific migration to the west coast of the US from China.

In the 1970s, and as a fledgling writer, Wong was a member of the famous *Aiiiiiiiii* group. In their Preface to *Aiiiiiiiii!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* the editors were very critical of “Americanized Chinese writers” like C.Y. Lee, accusing them of failing to portray the “sensibility” of Chinese Americans like they themselves who were “American-born” (x).² Wong and his fellow editors also lambasted writers like Lee for

relying too much on humorous portrayals of Asian stereotypes in order to ingratiate themselves with white readers, implying that Lee and others were taking some of the very serious issues facing Chinese Americans too lightly.³ Here I identify a serious side to Lee's writing, and I place his well-known novel *The Flower Drum Song* (1957) alongside Shawn Wong's two novels – *Homebase* (1979) and *American Knees* (1995) – in order to explore the role that implicit rules play in the thoughts and actions of individuals of Chinese origin living in the US up to and including the fourth generation.⁴

These implicit rules are conceived as follows: (i) husband and wife and all other members of the family should honour and respect Chinese ancestors; (ii) a would-be spouse should be ethnically Chinese and (iii) emotionally close to China; (iv) the authority of parents in selection of a spouse should be accepted, and it should not be assumed that husband and wife have to love each other; and (v) a would-be spouse should speak and understand Chinese (ideally the same dialect). This list is not intended to be exclusive.

A traditional structure consisting of implicit rules will of course be exposed to additional stress when the apposite individuals are geographically relocated. Anthropologist James Clifford aptly envisages “systems already constituted relationally, entering new relations through historical processes of displacement” (*Routes* 7). Thus, following wave after wave of transpacific migration and assimilation through more and more generations it is natural that the implicit rules constituting the original fantasy underlying the Chinese family system would become more and more difficult to maintain. This does not mean, however, that some of the traditional implicit rules will no longer exert a powerful hold on the Chinese American writer's imagination or that of the writer's central characters. The implicit rules framework applied first to Lee's *Flower Drum* and then Wong's two novels draws attention to the varying degrees to which Chinese American individuals living in the latter half of the twentieth century in the wake of transpacific migration maintain allegiance to or break away from the initial fantasy that gave birth to the Chinese American family unit.⁵

***Flower Drum*: Early Challenges to the Implicit Rules**

In *Flower Drum*, with its familiar-looking store fronts, restaurants, and tea shops, along with the sound made by mah-jong tiles, San Francisco's Chinatown quickly conspires to make Old Master Wang Chi-yang feel as at home as possible. His house is a flawless recreation of a residence in China, perhaps his own former home back in China, now only imaginary. His daily habits are identical to those he must have practised in China: drinking his traditional Chinese tea, enjoying his daily bowl of ginseng soup, lighting up his water-pipe, luxuriating in his Chinese miniature garden, and fastidiously reading through his daily ration of Chinese newspapers. His clothes

and even his servants are Chinese, speaking of course the same Chinese dialect as their master. For Master Wang, however, anything beyond the borders of Chinatown is a “foreign country” (11). Indeed, when one day he boldly ventures outside its perimeter he finds everything so unfamiliar, bizarre, and threatening that he quickly rushes back to the reassuring comforts of Chinatown and especially his home.

Living in in this way in Chinatown, Master Wang may be regarded as inhabiting what Palumbo-Liu calls “the liminal space of pre-Americanization” (101). He is a part of a specific wave of mid-twentieth-century Chinese immigrants who have crossed the Pacific to come to the United States, and who by sequestering themselves away from the predominantly white American culture that surrounds them, attempt to ignore the reality that this unfamiliar culture has already infiltrated their neighbourhoods. Endeavouring to minimize connections with the “new” culture, Master Wang may also be thought of as subconsciously trying to defy what Clifford calls the “norm” which constitutes “inter-cultural connection” (5). He is oblivious to the idea that as soon as he stepped off the boat, he had entered the transnational “contact zone” between the two cultures – Chinese and American – and for as long as he lives in the US he will inevitably be inhabiting that zone.

Had Master Wang always lived as a bachelor, he might have had a better chance of circumnavigating any form of inter-cultural connection. The inevitability of such a connection becomes especially obvious because he lives as a member of a family – consisting of himself and his two sons, Wang Ta and Wang San. Being second-generation Americans, the two sons are largely able to avoid the immigrant’s anxieties connected to a sense of displacement; for they are much, much further along the path toward assimilation within what sociologists call “the host culture.”⁶

The difficulties involved in inter-cultural connection for first-generation immigrants to the US become particularly striking when, while talking to his deceased wife’s sister, Madam Tang, Master Wang quotes the Confucian idea that by the age of thirty, a man “should have established himself” (130). By this he means of course that a man should have settled down with a wife and child or children. One reason for this is because, as he says later, again quoting Confucius, a lack of descendants is “an offence to the ancestors” (211). Here we can see Master Wang as pointing to at least one implicit, unwritten rule for any Chinese American family member: he or she must carry on the tradition of showing honour and respect for the family’s ancestors, including of course respect for parents (rule i).

In *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature*, erin Khuê Ninh claims that “the construct of “filial obligation” defines the parent-child relation as a debtor-creditor relation, but within this system without contract or consent, the parent-creditor brings into being a child-debtor who can never repay the debt of

her own inception and rearing” (16). This idea may apply as well to sons as it does daughters; and as Ninh points out, it is “structural” rather than “financial” (ibid).

The notion that an offspring should endeavour to repay the debt owed to the father may be thought of as an implicit rule playing a role in *Flower Drum*. One way that a son like Wang Ta can begin to repay the debt to his father, Master Wang, is through consistently demonstrating filial piety (rule i). Within the Chinese American family paradigm in the context of marriage the chances of this happening may well increase if a potential spouse is at least ethnically Chinese (rule ii) as well as emotionally close to China (rule iii).⁷

In what will become a common practice in Chinese American literature in *Flower Drum* a patriarch endeavours to find a Chinese spouse for his offspring. Thus, for Wang Ta, conspiring with a Chinese herb doctor, Master Wang uses a go-between in Hong Kong to import a potential bride from China. He receives a photograph of a young woman whom he deems, “not bad-looking [...] born in the year of the Rabbit” and shows it to his wife’s sister, Madam Tang, who approves of the girl because “she is slightly plump” which is “desirable” as “plumpness is a sign of fertility” (130). Madam Tang then strongly supports her brother-in-law’s plan, especially as it could minimize the risk of her nephew falling into the wrong hands: “since her money was going to eventually fertilize this family tree, she felt that it was part of her responsibility to see that no undesirable weeds and creepers become entangled with the tree and absorb its fertilizer” (131). Pre-eminent among these undesirables would of course be a non-Chinese bride – in violation of implicit rule ii.

Problems come to a head when the son, Wang Ta, explicitly challenges another unwritten rule that his father is desperately trying to impose: the rule that brides should be selected by the more knowledgeable and experienced older generation (rule iv). When Wang Ta announces that he has already found a woman to marry, his father says simply, “Finding the right woman is not your business [...] That responsibility rests on the shoulders of the parents who are more experienced in this matter.” Perhaps indicating some degree of assimilation into the host culture Wang Ta boldly remonstrates, “But a wife is like a man’s shadow; if you do not mind, I would like to choose her myself” (211).

Here Wang Ta is violating what Žižek calls the implicit, unwritten rule that such rules themselves are not supposed to ever be articulated explicitly (“Ideology” 2). One way of understanding the confrontation between the father, Master Wang, and the son, Wang Ta, in *Flower Drum*, therefore, is that both violate this implicit rule. It is implicit because even in China the rules that father and son are arguing about were never a part of official, public law. When Wang Ta challenges the arrangements made by his father he uses an implicit rule from the host

culture that offspring should be able to choose spouses for themselves to counter the father's desire to follow a fantasy, an implicit rule that is part of his heritage which gives authority in these matters to the parent (rule iv).

Clearly as the son insists on a bride of his own choosing, unwritten rule iv is not travelling well; but there is some hope for rule ii because the young woman whom Wang Ta intends to marry, Ma Li, the singer of the flower drum song, is 100% Chinese. During the argument, however, although he labels Wang Ta “no longer Chinese” and an “unfilial dog” (215) for threatening to choose his own bride, Master Wang already begins to compromise when he reasons that even if the son is determined to choose for himself, his choice must at least be approved by the parent.

In the closing pages as Wang Ta becomes part of another family – consisting of himself, his new bride, May Li, and her father, Old Man Li – Master Wang begins to feel himself unbearably alone but finds some solace in the thought that May Li, a recent émigré, is at least Chinese. He yearns, however, for the presence of family members, reflecting that “At his age, he should live in a house full of offspring. Not that he wanted [...] waves of children tottering in and out of his room, but he must have a feeling that he is not alone, a feeling that he was forever surrounded by his own flesh and blood” (234-35). In *Flower Drum* there are already signs that the traditional Chinese family system may one day collapse although it weathers the storm here in that by marrying a Chinese woman, a second generation Chinese American adheres to the fantasy of intermarriage between Chinese (rule ii).

Homebase: Honouring the Implicit Rule Concerning Roots

In “Melancholy and the Act” Žižek provides an example of a possible conflict triggered by unwritten rules when he describes members of ethnic groups who refuse to follow an unwritten rule that members of such groups should never turn their backs on their tradition but instead should endeavour to preserve what he calls “the melancholic attachment to their lost roots” (658). Although Žižek has no particular interest in Chinese Americans, his drawing attention to unwritten/implicit rules about roots dovetails well with accounts of Chinese migration to the US and its aftermath.

For generations beyond the first generation of Chinese immigrants, there may be no memory of the homeland, but China is still likely to exert what Walter S. H. Lim calls a “tenacious hold” on Chinese Americans, especially because of “the pressure” stemming from “the Confucian morality of filial piety” (5). This idea certainly played a part in Lee's *Flower Drum*, but Wong's *Homebase* offers a far more extensive and deeper meditation on this issue and captures the melancholy frequently associated with “lost roots.”

A fourth generation Chinese American, Rainsford Chan, the narrator and protagonist of *Homebase*, is able to avoid the pressure from parents in relation to marital arrangements as he quickly becomes an orphan. Losing his father when he was seven and his mother at fifteen, from a tender age Rainsford sees himself to a large extent as separate from family: “You are more alone at fifteen than any other age. No lovers. Without a father, mother, brother, sister, there is nothing except your own energy that keeps loneliness and pity at arm’s length” (78). Although he sometimes invokes a blond-haired fifteen-year-old bride, he implies that rather than being a real person, this figure whom he labels simply “Body” (66) may simply be the product of his wishful imagination. As long as she is imaginary, Rainsford has not violated implicit rules ii-iv.

The implicit rules concerning marriage, however, have of course played a role in Rainsford’s parents’ courtship and marriage. When his parents first met, as a fairly recent immigrant his mother was shocked to find that her potential husband did not even understand Chinese and dismissed the young man’s claim that he was “third-generation Chinese” by retorting, “You are not Chinese” (9, 10). Rainsford’s father’s not understanding any Chinese may have been one of the reasons why after the wedding, Rainsford’s mother’s family in China disowned her, “orphaned” her, and informed her that “China was closed to her, that it was no longer her home” (ibid.) By marrying a man who can neither speak nor understand Chinese, Rainsford’s mother had violated rule iv.

Homebase, however, is essentially Rainsford’s story; so if we assume that he is unmarried, we see filial piety as expressed less within marriage and more in relation to cross-generational blood ties – especially between sons and fathers. Even as an adult, Rainsford persistently yearns for his father – and not only his father, but also his grandfather and great-grandfather. He sees very clearly that he has followed in particular in the footsteps of this great-grandfather who, as one of the constructors of the first transcontinental railroad “had begun a tradition of orphaned men in this country” (8). Rainsford is profoundly aware that he is “the direct descendant of that original fatherless and motherless immigrant” (8-9).

Although in “Against Diaspora” critic Shu-mei Shih claims that roots can be place-based rather than ancestor-based (46), Rainsford in *Homebase* may be thought of as persistently endeavouring to bridge the two – as if by visiting certain places he can reconnect with his ancestral roots. This way of thinking is in line with rule i. Although Rainsford is not standing alongside a wife and other family members to follow rule i, he himself not only maintains a connection with ancestors by honouring and respecting them, he goes beyond that to also empathize with them. By thinking and feeling as if he and the ancestor are the same person, he offers a subtle refinement of rule i.

The title *Homebase* is ironic because a “homebase” or “home plate” in baseball terms is precisely what Rainsford lacks. He has little sense of where he started out from or of any base to which he needs to return. His sense of “home” is as vague as the home in the song he remembers his father teaching him when they lived in Guam: “Home on the Range” (4). His relentless need to drive may be thought of as in keeping with a search for his ancestors to compensate for his never really feeling at home.

Critic Hsuan L. Hsu explains that as he drives, Rainsford is “searching for traces of his Chinese American ancestors” and that his decision to drive through certain landscapes based on his being “in search of his historical and ancestral roots” helps to explain his “traumatic sense of homelessness” (288, 293). Rainsford himself is aware that when he first started driving, he drove in part,

To keep from settling down into the dreams of Father and Mother. But in the end
my life was nothing unless I pursued their lives, pursued the life of my grandfather,
my great-grandfather. (10)

Although in this passage, Rainsford mentions his mother, throughout his reflections he invariably emphasizes the paternal line. As he drives, he relishes above all the psychological presence of his father: “With my father’s spirit I am driving at night” (26). Behind this spirit lurks the spirit of his grandfather and great grandfather – so that Rainsford himself, his father, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather each serve as metonyms for the four generations. The previous generations of fathers are so deeply-ingrained in Rainsford’s memory that at times they all seem to be “the same man” (85).

Visiting one of the islands which had served as a holding bay for FOB immigrants freshly arrived from China, Rainsford encounters an Indian man from Acoma Pueblo with whom he is connected through Chinese ancestry. “My ancestors came from China thirty thousand years ago” (82) says the Indian, who then proceeds to urge Rainsford to go out and look for his own place. “This is your country,” he says, “Go out and make yourself at home” (83). According to the Indian, Rainsford needs to literally claim a piece of American land just as the Chinese inhabitants of the cells had figuratively claimed their minuscule portions of the land through the paintings they created on the walls (84).

At the beginning of the novel Rainsford explains,

I was named after my great-grandfather’s town, the town he first settled in when
he came to California from China: Rainsford, California. Rainsford Chan (Chan
is short for California). Rainsford doesn’t exist anymore. (3-4)

Rainsford goes on to recount how his great-grandfather's generation was "driven out of the West and chased back to San Francisco" (4) and as this was happening many Chinese settlements simply ceased to exist. Rainsford's knowledge of this helps to explain why later as an adult, as critic Sau-ling Cynthia Wong points out, he spends so much time trying to "put places back on the map of Chinese America" (145).

Rainsford's imaginative linking, in particular the landscape of the American West to his Chinese ancestry, receives its apotheosis in the final chapter in his description of skiing through a canyon, which reminds him of his great-grandfather plodding through sand (95). Having been so frequently uplifted by the thought, "I am my father's son" (39), it is appropriate that he closes the novel recalling words he had written while in a canyon which he calls his father's canyon:

We are old enough to haunt this land like an Indian who laid down to rest and his body became the outline of the horizon. This is my father's canyon. See his head reclining! That peak is his nose, that cliff his chin, and his folded arms are summits. (96)

In *Homebase* then the family is conceptualized not along the lines of old sociology textbooks' definition of the family unit as consisting of "one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults" but as a long line of paternal ancestors deeply ingrained in the protagonist's mind while being at the same time an indelible part of the American landscape.

Readers may finish the novel with a keen grasp of Rainsford's loneliness which is unlike that suddenly felt by Old Master Wang at the end of *Drum Song*. Rainsford has experienced it since he was a boy. Why else would he write an essay for his English class entitled "Heritage is a Lonely Place" (48-50)? One difference between Master Wang and Rainsford, however, is that while the former obsesses about implicit rules concerning marital arrangements, the latter diligently follows one implicit rule only – connect with ancestry. We may recall Rainsford's imagining himself asking his grandfather as they visit a lagoon together: "How many stones did you throw out into the sea when you decided that this was the place for roots?" (51). By the time a Chinese American family reaches its fourth generation, the roots planted by its Chinese American ancestors have had substantial time to grow, especially if they have been fertilized by liberal doses of filial piety.

American Knees: Further Stretching of Implicit Rules

Although Wong may have written his second novel, *American Knees*, partly in response to his late wife's request for fiction which she did not feel the need to annotate and which she could read at the beach, the novel continues

the serious meditation on family and related issues affecting Chinese Americans highlighted in *Homebase*.⁸ Wong's second novel also looks back to some of the implicit rules concerning marriage that were crucial in *Flower Drum*. Perhaps foremost among these is implicit rule (iv), which indicates that the expertise and knowledge of a member or members of a previous generation should be respected and followed when a potential spouse is to be selected for a member of the younger generation.

In *American Knees* this rule is turned on its head not only because bride selection becomes an issue for a father but also because the father even turns to the son for advice. One evening, widower Woodrow ("Wood") Ding announces to his son, Raymond Ding, that he intends to go to China to find himself a wife and proposes that Raymond accompany him, "You can help me pick her out. She'd be your stepmother, after all" and continues, "I need a wife. I need to be married. I'm kind of lonely, you know, especially with you gone" (108).

As Raymond is then shown examples of "picture brides" by his father, the scene becomes reminiscent of *Flower Drum*'s Madam Tang being shown a photograph of a potential Chinese bride by her brother-in-law. In both contexts there is a reliance on intermediaries – the contact in Hong Kong and the Chinese herbalist in San Francisco in *Flower Drum*; the "matchmaker" in *American Knees* – but in the latter the person from whom advice is sought is shown several photographs rather than one. Furthermore, unlike Madam Tang who seems to know that one should single out possible child-bearing attributes, Raymond is completely baffled about how to judge a picture bride. He finds himself wondering about "Bone structure? Large peasant feet? A strong back? [...] Nice ass" (111). Another difference is that although Chinese tradition is mentioned in the passage in *American Knees*, it is only mentioned irreverently: "we narrow it down," says Wood, "check the families, birth dates, superstitious Chinese stuff, and make the trip" (111). Going to China was of course not so easy for the earlier American Chinese generations.

Wood Ding does, however, follow Old Master Wang in disassociating marriage from love. In *Flower Drum* Master Wang's assumption that parents know best when choosing a spouse for an offspring implicitly rules out marriage based on the son's falling in love. In *American Knees* when Raymond jokes with the father about the latter going to China and perhaps "falling in love," the father dismisses the idea: "Falling in love – that's your problem. My life is much more simple" (164). It is "simple" in that he is still trying to follow some of the Chinese American family's implicit rules: for instance, for the spouse to be ethnically Chinese (rule ii) and emotionally close to China (rule iii). Although by turning to the possible wisdom of the son the father reverses rule iv, Wood nevertheless tries to rely on the whole on the superior wisdom of elders when choosing a spouse in the sense that

the older generations implicitly see unwritten rules ii and iii as a sounder basis for marriage than the idea of being in love.

Much later in the novel after Wood has spent some time in the hospital following a suspected minor stroke, Raymond shows him some photos of potential brides, but Wood has no recollection of his plan to go to China to find a wife and assumes Raymond must be talking about his own plan. Looking at the pictures, Wood says to his son, “Well, they are all beautiful, but it’s modern times. You should pick out your own wife” (221). Wood now finds the idea of his going to China to find a bride absurd: “Look, son, you go to China if you want. I’m not going. Helen was my wife, and that’s enough” (221).

In his marriage to Helen, who was a “Chinese from China” (19), Wood had no doubt followed the implicit rules quite rigidly – certainly she would have been fluent in Chinese (rule iv). After Helen passed away Wood told Raymond, “Family means more to her than anything. She depends on you to keep the family alive” (19). The confusion of present and past tense – Wood means “meant more to her than anything” – points to Raymond’s mother’s ongoing presence accompanied by certain “Chinese” expectations about how a son should live his life.

The protagonist in *American Knees* is the son, Raymond, not the father, and as might be expected the son, the member of the later generation, becomes a far greater violator of the implicit rules. Although Raymond begins well by marrying Darlene, an American Chinese, on the opening page of the novel he is served with divorce papers and already starts thinking of himself as a “lapsed Chinese.” He wonders, “What good was a good Chinese son without a Chinese family in which to practise his legendary Chinese filial duty” (3). During the wedding, Raymond had imagined a voice, “Your dead mother would have wanted it this way” (7), but seven years later his father tells him candidly, “I’m happy your mother wasn’t around to see you get divorced” (19). Raymond has violated another implicit rule not listed earlier: once a Chinese husband and wife are married, they should stay married.

Rainsford in *Homebase* may have imagined his Chinese ancestors (especially male) looking on favourably at his attempts at filial piety, but Raymond in *American Knees*, following the divorce from his Chinese American wife, sees himself as becoming “free from the filial duties of a Chinese son but not from a hidden grief” (58). Indeed, after the divorce had been finalized, an “ominous” thought had entered Raymond’s mind – he could become “the first in his thin branch of the family tree not to be married to a Chinese” (15). As he is then himself in a relationship with Aurora Crane – half-white, half-Japanese – his new potential wife has become not even half-Chinese but at least half-Asian. Aurora herself even senses that for Raymond, the more a potential spouse’s family is Asian, the better for him. Near the point of break-up, she sees Raymond as having an advantage over

her: “his family was more Asian” (53). Following Aurora’s idea that he would be more suited to a woman more Asian than she is, when Raymond becomes involved with Betty, a Vietnamese immigrant, one might think that she is a better match.

The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which led to a substantial increase in immigration from countries including China, had not only made it easier to continue the tradition of marriage between members of the same ancestry but had also provided Asian men with a far greater pool of Asian women to choose from.⁹ Thus, Raymond has more opportunities to find a potential spouse who, if not Chinese, is at least Asian. He could of course best follow the implicit rules pertaining to a Chinese American family if like Darlene his future spouse is Chinese; the next best thing would be for her to be half-Chinese, if that is not possible then the paradigm shifts to Asian or at least half-Asian.

Late in her relationship with Raymond, however, sensing that he still longs for Aurora, Betty introduces another idea: “Maybe you can live in Aurora’s world better than mine. I’m an immigrant and my parents are immigrants. She fits into your family better than I do” (197). Raymond may be influenced by this new factor – how long has the potential spouse and her family been in America? From the moment Betty had first spoken to her mother about a date with a “Chinese” (156), cultural ancestry has clearly been an essential factor in her relationship with Raymond. As Partridge in his Introduction points out, “while looking the part of the Asian couple who have everything in common, [Raymond and Betty] are in fact culturally worlds apart” (xv). Indeed, Raymond and Betty’s relationship flounders partly because of Raymond’s lingering attachment to Aurora but perhaps more importantly because his ancestors have been in America for such a long time and because he has become so American.

While visiting his father in the hospital, sitting on a terrace outside a cafeteria discussing with Aurora the picture bride idea and his father’s possible trip to China, Raymond exclaims, “My father was born here; he doesn’t know how to take care of a Chinese wife” (201). Here again, a character is conscious of degrees of Americanization. Wood has become “too American” to marry a Chinese woman from China and Raymond is “too American” to marry a Vietnamese immigrant. Raymond’s father always approved of Aurora, and at the end of the novel, Raymond’s marrying her remains a strong possibility. A future family with Aurora would have a lesser degree of Asianness than a family with Betty, and, as a building, it might have stronger foundations because after all, Raymond is a “lapsed Chinese” (3) and he and Aurora have far more firmly-established American roots.¹⁰ In *American Knees* the implicit rules for the Chinese American family have been stretched almost to breaking point following changes in US immigration law and subsequent adjustment of implicit rules.

For the Prism of Implicit Rules

Although as a member of the Aiiieeeee group, he had been critical of first generation Chinese American writers like Lee for their reliance on humour and Asian stereotypes, about two decades later in *American Knees* Wong often writes with tongue in cheek while making use of similar stereotypes. In both his and Lee's work, however, seriousness is also very apparent especially in their depictions of the stereotypical Chinese family paradigm as it influences Chinese Americans. As we have seen, the two writers offer different perspectives on the system that makes up the Chinese American family's implicit rules. In his novels, Wong has an advantage over Lee in being able to portray members of later generations who are no longer plagued by exclusionary immigration laws and are the beneficiaries in particular of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. Wong seizes this opportunity in particular in *American Knees* in which he shows quite clearly how Chinese American individuals manifesting fluctuating degrees of Chineseness can display more boldness in the way they position themselves in relation to the original fantasy of the Chinese family. In his depictions of the Chinese American transnational family, Lee's *Flower Drum* shows how the implicit rules about marriage in Chinese culture begin to be questioned, especially by the young generation. In Wong's *Homebase*, perhaps surprisingly, the rule about commitment to ancestry powerfully reasserts itself. *American Knees* represents a return to *Flower Drum* in highlighting implicit rules about spouse selection. Ironically, a son becomes involved in selecting a wife for his father. The son then eventually establishes an even greater distance from the implicit rules underpinning the initial fantasy by hinting at a preference for a potential spouse who embodies a high degree of Americanization.

While acknowledging that "we tend to ignore the existence of implicit, unwritten rules" ("Ideology" 2), Žižek also stresses that "Although they [implicit rules] are never explicitly stated, disobeying them can have dire consequences" ("Melancholy" 657). To a far greater extent than Lee, Wong demonstrates that as members of transnational Chinese American families begin to challenge the implicit rules underlying the Chinese family structure, their actions may well be regarded as transgressive; but for the characters concerned and even for the families to which they belong the effects of such behaviour may ultimately be more liberating than detrimental. Rebellion may lead to a generally beneficial modification of the dominant implicit rules and to an overall adjustment of the ideology that structured the initial fantasy that gave birth to the rules in the first place. The novels by C.Y. Lee and Shawn Wong examined here demonstrate quite vividly the evolution of the largely-inherited implicit rules underscoring the Chinese American family following transpacific migration. These novels

also imply that in fiction all around the world the thoughts and behaviours of individuals in transnational families may be better understood when observed through the prism of implicit rules.

Notes

¹ In “Ideology” Žižek defines “ideology” as equivalent to “implicit, unwritten rules” (“Ideology” 2).

² Wong pointed out later in an interview with Jeffrey F. L. Partridge that he himself accepted responsibility for all that was written in the Preface because while all the editors had contributed different parts to it, he had “edited them down into one voice” (96).

³ Wong would become very well-versed in the issues facing Chinese and other Asian Americans as is evident after *Aiiiiieeee* not only in his fiction but also his spending most of his life working as a faculty member in a university. He also became one of the founding members of the now well-established academic discipline of Asian American Studies.

⁴ Here the term “diaspora” is preferred to “ethnic Chinese” because as Shu-mei Shih points out, the term “ethnic Chinese” is too general as it covers a vast range of ethnicities (more than fifty-six) and languages (32).

⁵ Lee’s novel *The Flower Drum Song* is referred to here as *Flower Drum*. It should not be confused with *Flower Drum Song*, the popular Rodgers and Hammerstein musical version of the novel.

⁶ In *Sons of the Yellow Emperor* Lynn Pan writes, “It was perfectly natural for the first-generation of immigrants to harbor mixed feelings about their continued expatriation, and it was only with the emergence of a second generation – the native born, or at least native-educated children of immigrant parents--that the vacillation, the sense of displacement was overcome [...] The newcomer or ‘greenhorn’ marked the boundary between greater or lesser Chineseness. He was a distinct figure, creature of another world” (107).

⁷ One way in which Pan distinguishes between Chinese Americans is on the basis of “emotional distance from China” or the extent to which an individual of Chinese descent “psychologically [...] remains a citizen of the country left behind” (283, 284). I will suggest another implicit rule (rule v) – that a potential spouse should speak Chinese – based partly on Pan’s singling out language as “the very core of the Chinese identity” (287).

⁸ On the novel’s possibly light-hearted genesis in Vicki Tsuchida’s request for a book suitable for reading at the beach, see Partridge ix.

⁹ The Immigration and Nationality Act got rid of the old quota system which favoured immigration from countries in Northern and Western Europe and made it easier for Asian American family members to petition for more family members to be able to immigrate to the US. See www.history.com.

¹⁰ Earlier, using the metaphor of the family as a building, Wood, an engineer, had expressed his approval of the union between Raymond and Aurora on the basis that like a good building their relationship incorporated “structural redundancy” (107). Raymond contrasts this “tensile strength and stability” with the rigidity associated with “the project of building a ‘real’ Chinese family with a ‘real’ Chinese wife” (227).

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