

Drawing Strength from Weakness---Ambiguity in Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea*

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Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* published in 1961 exposes the social plight of the Chinatown community in New York in the 1940s. At that time the Chinatown community was largely a "bachelor's society" populated by men whose poverty forced them to leave wives and families until they could be supported in America. And ever since the passing of Chinese Exclusion Act in America in 1882, it had been increasingly difficult for the Chinese immigrants to get reunification with their family members and Chinese females was especially excluded, which made the Chinese immigrants very difficult to find their spouses. The novel exposes and arouses sympathy for Chinese immigrants and protests America society's indifference to their poverty, isolation and despair. But apart from these, the author still manages to find embers of hope in the moribund Chinese ghetto by ambiguous suggestion.

In the novel, Mei Qi, a Cantonese who used to live in Guang Dong province in China is married to Ben Loy, a bachelor in the Chinatown community in New York as is arranged by both of their parents. Mei's coming changes the dull atmosphere of Chinatown community at that moment and makes many men lust after her. Mei actually was not happy after her marriage because her husband had the illness of impotence and she thought he was not considerate to her. Ah Song, a bachelor in the community, seduces Mei Qi and has an affair with her. In order to get revenge, Ben Loy slices off Ah Song's ear and consequently is persecuted by him. But finally he is defeated by the Wang Association, Ben Loy's paternal family association, and was forced to withdraw his charges. Subsequently he was banished from New York for a period of five years. During this process, the primordial family ties in the ethnic enclave of Chinatown are strengthened. It shows how strongly the family associations in Chinatown can function to prevent external intervention. In a sense, it can be seen as a sign of the persistence of Chinatown community tradition. Yet at the same time, both Wah Gay, Ben Loy's father, and Lee Gong, Mei Qi's father are obliged to leave. Wah Gay goes to Aurora, Chicago where his brother has a Chinese restaurant and Lee Gong goes to his cousin's poultry market in Sacramento by the logic of saving face.

Their departure symbolizes the disintegration of the old way of life in New York's Chinatown, as marked by the sale of the Money Come Club, a gambling den owned by Wah Gay as a gathering place for the Chinese immigrants to play Mah-jong. The club has been a haven for the suppressed, homeless, and aging bachelors. Following the sale of the club, as Lee Gong says, "the club no longer represented home to him. The club house was gone. The life and game of mah-jong were gone". The author seems to signal that a departure from the past is a necessary step to adjust into American mainstream society for the marginalized Chinese immigrants. When Wah Gay and Lee Gong say to each other, "see you again, grandpa" before they leave New York, they have the grim thought in their hearts that "in all probability, they will not see each other again". Yet neither of them is able to face up to the reality of Mei Qi's bearing another man--Ah Song's child. Wah Gay still believes strongly that Ah Song's relation with his daughter-in-law is his "misfortune", while Lee Gong curses "that no good daughter of his" and considers her to be "the cause of all". The two old men's remarks reveal how little they have recognized about themselves and how firmly they cling to their illusions. Such ambiguous and inconsistent attitude towards traditional Chinese culture provokes the readers to think together with the author of a way out of the dilemma for the inhabitants in Chinatown.

In the final episodes of the novel, Ben Loy and Mei Oi finally moved from New York's Chinatown to San Francisco's to free themselves from parental control and get a new start for their relationship. Their life seems to move on to a new track. As is depicted in the novel, "for the first time Ben Loy knew and enjoyed emancipation. New frontiers, new people, new times, new ideas unfolded. He had come to a new golden mountain". For Mei Oi, "the move from San Francisco was for her as it was for Ben Loy, a break from the stern supervision of the parental eye". In spite of their marital difficulties, the couple tries to be understanding and compassionate to each other and the birth of Mei's son draws them closer. These changes signify the crumbling of the order in the old bachelor society and the increased freedom for the new generation. With the restoration of their intimacy and the birth of the son, a new beginning of the Chinese American community in the United States built around family life and children rather than primordial family ties is on the horizon. But the changes in Ben Loy and Mei Oi's life are more provisional and ambiguous than they appear to be. For example, even after they moved to San Francisco, Ben Loy's impotence plagues him with shame and he suffers from an "inner torture" over not being the real father of the child. And though Mei Oi pretends she does not care about her husband's impotence on the surface, she still feels "terror and resentment" at the thought that her husband's "lack of manliness" may be permanent. While the young couple may feel that they have freed themselves from parental supervision, such supervision has largely existed in name only.

As can be seen in the novel, though Wah Gay has planned to let his son live in isolation from New York's temptation, his son still had no problem in contact with "loose women". Similarly, Lee Gong, in spite of all his parental duty to Mei Oi, knew nothing of his daughter's affair with Ah Song until gossip about his daughter's pregnancy reached his ears. In fact, their parental supervision to a large extent is only lip service and they did only what is customary for a father. Their children's behavior seemed little impeded by their supervision. Ben Loy finally regained his potency, which could be directly attributed to the medical use of tea prescribed by a Chinese herbalist. Yet the essential factor that transforms the marital relationship in San Francisco is not merely because of locale (for Loy and Mei Oi still live in a Chinatown), nor is it merely because Ben Loy has eaten large quantities of bitter tea. The underlying factor behind these superficial reasons is that the gender obligations between the two parties have become a matter of negotiation which involves the mutual adjustment of both parties. Ben Loy does not abandon his traditional male role as the decision maker and provider of the family, but he does realize that a relationship with his wife demands that he acknowledge and respond to Mei Oi's voice, rights, and sexual needs. Ben Loy had "for the first time willingly and without ill feeling or reluctance discussed his physical condition with Mei Oi". Mei Oi has made similar adjustment. Also for the first time, "Mei Oi felt both a desire and a responsibility of sharing her husband's problems." Now the impotence becomes something negotiable and their marriage becomes an active thing which needs the mutual efforts of both parties rather than a given thing arranged by their parents. So the adjustments and changes within the family seem to be a necessary step for the Chinese immigrants to adapt into the mainstream society. Yet during this process they are sure to encounter many problems and have to solve many contradictions.

Finally, contradictory implications can be drawn from the birth of Mei Qi's child. Both Ben Loy and Mei Oi and their parents wanted a child desperately which indicates how firmly they cling to traditional Chinese culture. Child is something concerns the continuity of their family line which is greatly emphasized in traditional Chinese culture. But what is noteworthy is that the baby is not the legitimate child of Ben Loy and Mei Oi. The acceptance of this illegitimate child by Ben Loy and its grandparents shows the subversion of traditional culture. With the arrival of the baby, the couple is blessed with a tie that drew them closer to each other. "Sacrifices for the baby were made cheerfully and enthusiastically by the new parties". The birth of the baby brews understanding and compassion between Ben Loy and Mei Oi. But the baby remains a constant reminder of Mei Oi's infidelity to her husband and of Ben Loy's sexual impotence. The child has as much the force to drive the couple together as it does to drive them apart.

Chu's portrayal of the Chinatown community is full of inconsistencies and contradictions. On one level, these ambiguities reveal how the Chinatown community attempts to recover itself from the consequences of social, political, and economic discrimination in America's "affluent" society. They clearly and sharply show how difficult it is for the Chinatown inhabitants to adjust into the mainstream's society of America with the passing of Chinese Exclusion Act in America in 1882. On another, it clearly suggests Chu's difficulty in finding a convincing solution to the Chinatown's unsolved problems.

Although he is not the person responsible for solving the social problems, he contributed his share as a novelist with high social responsibility and indicated his opinion and solution in the novel. And presumably, the unrealized solution to the Chinatown's problems gives him certain autonomy within which he could deal with the physically and mentally sick Ben Loy and the decaying New York Chinatown community, and thus provides a textual solution for the plight which entrapped the Chinatown inhabitants. The shimmering hope provided by Chu gives Chinatown people strength to shake off their weakness and make adjustments to be assimilated to the mainstream society of America.