



## The Role of Culture in Ken Liu's Writing

by Jenny Huang

The short story collection "Paper Menagerie" by Ken Liu includes "Paper Menagerie" and many other short stories. In a considerable number of the stories, "culture" plays an important role. Since Liu himself is Chinese, most of the cultures mentioned in his stories are from Eastern Asia. But, regardless of what the cultures are, the factor of cultures in Liu's writing is a symbol of identity and way of life, his stories formed around these cultures can conjure up a picture for the readers of struggles, acceptance, love, and many more.

In the short story "Good Hunting", "culture" was being threatened by the rapidly developing technology and the constant changes around the world in general. In such situations, people were forced to adapt to the new way of life and find their balance between tradition and technology. This story is a perfect example of "culture" acting as people's way of life and identity in Ken Liu's writing because as the British men in the story forced the Chinese to give up their beliefs and traditions that they've been practicing for hundreds of years, they're significantly changing the Chinese' way and habit of living. For example, Liang, the main character's life was severely impacted since he is a demon hunter and depended on the old magic to keep a livelihood and a sense of continuity in his family, and as the old magic slowly disappears from the land because of the arrival of technology, everything in his world collapsed. He was able to go to Hong Kong and start over, but not everyone has the luck that he does. His father, for instance, didn't get the chance to make a fresh start, instead, he "spent his days sitting in the front room, Swallow Tail over his knees, staring out the door from dawn to dusk, as though he himself had turned into a statue." (58). Yan, the *hulijing's* daughter said in her conversation with Liang, "In this new age of steam and electricity... is anyone still in their true form?" (62). In my personal understanding, by saying "true form", Yan actually meant "identity" and "the state of living in the way that they are used to", which, in short, is "habit", "tradition", and "culture". Also, "Good Hunting" is one of the stories in which Liu writes about the concept of discrimination. The British are considering the Chinese inferior, in this case, because the Chinese aren't as industrialized as the British and are more concerned about their traditional beliefs. This exclusion between different cultures is also an idea that Liu more or less shows in a lot of his writing. It is not a very bright and cheering concept, but it does relate to the world today.

Other than "Good Hunting", "culture" is also significant in the story "Mono No Aware". This story is about the destruction of Earth caused by an asteroid and how a very small portion of people managed to escape on a spaceship called "the Hopeful", which is traveling to a distant galaxy to start everything all over again. The main character, Hiroto, is the only Japanese person that got the chance to go onto "the Hopeful", so he certainly is responsible for passing on the Japanese culture. Hiroto himself states, as a narrator, "Once every two weeks, I... come here to teach the children a little bit about Japan"(200). Retaining and passing on his culture has become a duty for Hiroto, a duty passed onto him by his parents, his sister, and almost everyone that has lived just like him in the country of Japan. The word "culture" here is far more than merely a language, forms of art, or pieces of history. Instead, it represents all the nostalgia and hope that millions of people have toward the world as "the



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Hammer”, the asteroid, is hanging overhead. Hiroto carries these hopes, which shaped him into who he is. His culture is all that he has learned, all that he had experienced, and all that he will pass on, and it forms his personality. A major part of Hiroto is his culture, but it’s also reasonable to say that he is part of the culture, too. When Hiroto is on the “umbrella” of “the Hopeful”, struggling with making a decision about what to do, he thought to himself, “and I see Mom, Mrs. Maeda, the prime minister, all our neighbors from Kurume, and all the people who waited with us in Kagoshima, in Kyushu, in all the Four Islands, all over Earth, and on the *Hopeful*. They looked expectantly at me, for me to do something”(213-214). At that moment, he is the hope of everyone on the “Hopeful”, he is being the hero, and he is writing down his own story. But behind this heroic moment of him, there are others, many others that form his culture, not just the Japanese culture, but Hiroto Shimizu’s culture. The culture is supporting him, and he is carrying on the culture; Unlike the case in “Good Hunting”, “culture” doesn’t only represent the identity and way of life of a single person in “Mono no Aware”, instead, it stands for the story weaved by many individuals together. As time and space blend, one’s culture can be a duty, but also hope and salvation.

Another story by Ken Liu, “Paper Menagerie”, is basically wrapped around the core idea of culture. The main character, Jack, lives in the suburbs of Connecticut while having a Chinese mother who is a mail-order bride and knows just about nothing about America. Others in the community don’t have an inclusive attitude toward Jack’s mother’s Chinese culture and viewed it as inferior. Mark, who is Jack’s classmate, expressed this discrimination rather thoroughly when he was at Jack’s house by calling Jack’s paper menagerie “stupid cheap Chinese garbage”(155) while carelessly tearing it apart. Just like “Good Hunting”, this story is a perfect example of the concept of discrimination and exclusions between different cultures which Ken Liu often presents in his writings. Besides that, culture performed a similar role in “Paper Menagerie” as in “Mono No Aware”, it’s a very crucial part of one’s identity that’s constructed by everything the person has experienced. In the letter that Jack’s mother wrote to Jack before she died, she says, “... We could together remake a small piece of everything that I loved and lost”(162). By the word “everything”, Jack’s mother is referring to the people she loved, the place she used to live, and all the seemingly unbreakable bonds between her world and her that were suddenly broken one day. And that is her culture. Through this short story, Liu conveys to the reader how incredibly significant one’s culture can be to him/her. The tangled-up culture was what made Jack’s life twisted when he was young, it also acted as a barrier in the family until Jack’s mother’s death. To some degree, for the characters in this story, their culture didn’t simply act as part of their identity but truly impacted their life.

In Ken Liu’s writing, the element of culture had always taken its place. In some stories, “culture” is the core idea, and in others, it’s just a bit of extra color. But, either way, by reading the story he created, the readers get the chance to really understand the beauty and importance of culture.