

The Hidden Labor of Women in Gish Jen's *Typical American*

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Abstract:

This essay examines the contributions of Helen and Theresa as immigrant women in Gish Jen's *Typical American*, chiefly their work as women in post-World War II America and their ability to pursue the American dream without a complete loss of their Chinese identity. As they become "typical" Americans, Helen and Theresa remain cognizant of cultural tension and forge meaningful connections to their ancestral past under the pressure to assimilate. This essay explores those connections in how Helen and Theresa keep a Chinese home and virtues, including an obligation to family, academic success, and the preservation of relationships. Unlike Ralph, Helen and Theresa draw from an experience of limitations in China, which enables them to navigate boundaries and pressures in American life. Through Helen and Theresa, Jen insinuates that the pursuit of the American dream obscures the contributions and labor of immigrant women. Their unrecognized efforts, whether providing a culturally rich home, financial support, family care, or supportive relationships, provide discreet and inconspicuous stability to the Chang family.

Keywords: Gish Jen, *Typical American*, Asian-American, American dream, Chinese immigration

Ralph's destructive pursuit of the American dream drives the narrative in Gish Jen's *Typical American*. But Jen's novel is family story with much to be understood from the labor of Helen and Theresa. These women belong to a newer, post-war class of Chinese immigrants, which for the first time includes educated and adroit women. Living in the gendered culture of post-War America, Helen and Theresa work without recognition, as the strong, capable, and practical providers of the Chang family, not Ralph. Furthermore, as Ralph erases his multicultural identity in America, Helen and Theresa labor to create a Chinese-American home. They acclimate Chinese virtues to their American context, including obligation to family, academic success, and the preservation of relationships, even when damaged by adultery and avarice. As their work is shrouded by the social expectations of post-War America, so is their burden as immigrant women. Both women must navigate the limitations of race and gender to survive, redeem Ralph, and preserve their family's cultural identity and standard of living in America. In *Typical American*, Jen suggests that the pursuit of the American dream is blind to the contributions and labor of immigrant women.

These women save the Chang family, compensate for Ralph's failures, and navigate the prejudices of race and gender. Through Helen and Theresa, Jen insinuates that immigrant women make the "house hold" (Jen 1991, 59).

A New Class of Chinese Immigrants

Ralph, Theresa, and Helen Chang do not resemble typical Chinese immigrant characters in the canon of American literature. Jen's Chinese characters are not working-class railroad laborers, restaurant owners, or professionals in exile. They have entered the United States as students and come from upper-class, educated backgrounds (Zhou 1999, 151). Ralph and Theresa are children of an "upright scholar [and] ex-government official" (Jen 1991, 4). Likewise, Helen belongs to a wealthy Nationalist family who had money for education and doctors (Jen 1991, 61-62). Jen writes with an economically and socially diverse Chinese-American community in mind, enabling her to include deft women like Helen and Theresa. These women come to the United States to study, not to become wives for laborers. This prefigures Helen and Theresa's transformation into resourceful and constructive characters, who are much more successful at solving problems than Ralph. It further foreshadows their assimilation and transformational multicultural identity in the United States.

Historically, it became easier for Chinese families to immigrate to the United States during the 1940s. Rigid immigration restrictions like the Chinese Exclusion Act were repealed in 1943 and Congress allowed Chinese residents to naturalize, ending the past practice of excluding Chinese women (Zhou 1999, 151, R. Lee 1999, 45). These policies furthered the economic diversity of Chinese-American families in the United States, thus creating a privileged and educated immigrant class to which the Changs belong.

Rachel Lee, in her book *The Americas of Asian American Literature* writes, "Cold War politics created a category of political refugees that enabled some five thousand graduate students [...] to seek asylum in the United States" (R. Lee 1999, 46). Much is owed to Lee's work in this essay to put *Typical American* in historical context and the gendered social structure of post-war America. It is important to note that Jen's novel is not a single story of Ralph Chang, but the story of a family. She writes with the history of family immigration in mind, anchoring her narrative in real recorded events. Jen constructs a story in which the Changs recreate a Chinese family in America, an impossible task without the women of this novel.

Jen's personal life informs the setting and characters of *Typical American* as well. She sets this novel in post-World War II New York City, her birthplace and "the symbolic heart of the United States" (Cheveresan 2013, 116). Much like her protagonists, Jen's family immigrated to the United States during the Communist Revolution in China. Her father worked as a professor of engineering like Ralph and Old Chao (Matsukawa 1993, 111). Jen was born in 1955 and experienced the political and cultural tension of the Cold War, 1950s consumer culture, extensive pressure to conform, and "*Leave It to Beaver* family idealism" (R. Lee, 1999 44). These are the same social circumstances Ralph, Helen, and Theresa face in *Typical American*. Jen draws from her

upbringing to create characters who reflect the changing Chinese community in New York while ensuring the Changs experience the broader cultural pressures of post-war, middle-class white America. Ralph, Helen, and Theresa are not excluded from the “pressures of assimilation, greed, and self-interest” (D. Lee 2000, 220). In fact, their interaction with these forces drives the plot of *Typical American*.

The critical writing that deals with Ralph’s corruption and praises Jen’s prose, leaves the development of Helen and Theresa’s characters largely overlooked. Some, like Vivian Gornick’s review “Innocents abroad,” declare characters like Helen and Theresa emotionally unformed, psychologically non-existent, and “uprooted innocents cast down on the greedy, indifferent streets of New York.” Further she writes, “From beginning to end they are only the sum of their immigrant circumstances” (Gornick 1991, 14). Quite simply, such an opinion ignores Helen’s emotional transformation in America. Jen writes that Helen “officially accepted what already seemed true - that she had indeed crossed a violent, black ocean; and that it was time to make herself as at home in her exile as she could” (Jen 1991, 63). How can an emotionally unformed character develop confidence, pride, and strength? Similarly, Theresa’s relationship with Ralph or her affair with Old Chao is rich with psychosocial interpretation. This reviewer has allowed Ralph’s fall from grace to cloud the nuance and strength of these women and their necessity in telling an authentic immigrant story.

Assimilation: Confucius, Benjamin Franklin, or both?

A major theme that Jen explores in *Typical American* is assimilation and multicultural identity. She opens her novel with the claim “It’s an American story,” but the tug between philosophies, “Confucius and Benjamin Franklin,” gives *Typical American* its tension (Jen 1991, 3; A.R. Lee 1994, 272). As Ralph, Helen, and Theresa adjust to American life, each becomes a form of the “typical American” they initially find distasteful and at odds with their Chinese worldview. However, one must be careful to take into account that *Typical American* challenges the understanding of assimilation as the submission of one monolithic culture to another. As Jeffery F.L. Partridge points out, “Chinese-American identity, as suggested in this novel, is a dynamic process of hybridity that is ongoing and riddled with remembrance, invention, and reimagination” (2009, 182).

Helen and Theresa grasp this dynamic process of reinvention in a way Ralph does not. As they make sense of America, they rethink meaningful connections to Chinese culture in spite of their steady American conversion. In this way, their assimilation is a different type of transformation than Ralph’s. As they become “typical” Americans, Helen and Theresa prioritize relationships and roles such as the obedient wife and dutiful sister. Yet, Theresa commits to education and recognizes the snare set by quick money-making and shallow self-promotion. Helen keeps China alive in her apartments and home, but discovers her own agency as she literally keeps their apartments from crumbling.

Moreover, the influence of both women on Ralph is juxtaposed with Grover’s hyper-masculine

and overly individualist influence, in which he has erased any trace of his Chinese cultural identity. Helen and Theresa, when removed from the social structure of China, handle moral crisis and identity change because they have blended many of the expectations and values of Chinese culture in their emerging American identity. This is especially true in the way each woman provides for and saves Ralph from the consequences of his actions.

Deliverance for Ralph

Ralph's appearance in New York City marks the first time he is removed from Chinese culture and the protective influence of his family. He is on his own and struggling badly. This is not the case with Helen and Theresa. At first, Ralph can't speak English well enough to register himself for graduate school. When he finds someone kind enough to help, the secretary at the Foreign Student Affairs Office, he "falls in love" with her. While teaching her some simple Chinese phrases, Ralph realizes, "So little of what he knew counted here" (Jen 1991, 12). In China, explains Zhou, "individual identities are hard facts based on who your parents are and what tier of the social hierarchy you and your family belong to in terms of inheritance and achievements" (Zhou 1999, 157). In the United States, Ralph's family connections are unheard-of and powerless. Ralph does not know how to interact with people who are different and what treatment he can expect in return.

Because he comes from wealth, Ralph does not have the skill set to survive in New York. He is used to someone providing for him. It is clear from Ralph's lack of language acquisition and study that he is not a serious academic. Jen writes, "Was it beneath a scholar to hate the alphabet? Anyway, he did" (Jen 1991, 9). Also, he does not keep his immigration paperwork up to date, which results in Ralph dropping out of school and running from the authorities. When Old Chao gives him sensible advice, "Better go see the foreign student advisor [...] Better bring Fitt some candy," Ralph bungles it (Jen 1991, 27). Even when Professor Pinkus, who *likes* Ralph, becomes chairman of the Engineering department, Ralph cannot advocate for himself. He is intimidated; these situations would have been handled for him by someone else in China. So, Ralph follows Pinkus's daughter around instead, thinking she would be easier to talk to, less intimidating, and hopefully like the Cammy, the secretary (Zhou 1999, 154). When Pinkus finds out Ralph has been following his daughter, he castigates him, "We don't sneak around! We have morals! You keep hanging around my daughter, I'll shoot you!" (Jen 1991, 40). Even after this incident, Ralph still doesn't understand that he must *learn* to survive. He returns to his apartment, sleeps away his problems, and will not get out of bed.

Notably, Ralph languishes in America because he severs his connection to other Chinese immigrants. Ralph is "a loner who rejects the Chinatown experience" (Cheveresan 2013, 125). He is from an upper-class Chinese family and wants nothing to do with working-class Chinese immigrants. Ralph cannot stand cheap apartments either; he considers them unfit for a man of his social class. Similarly, he eschews Old Chao and his cohort of Chinese scholars. Jen explains, "Ralph became for

them a funny set of ears that came up sometimes, a lesson about falling for foreign devils. And for Ralph, on his side, they became another lost family” (Jen 1991, 32). Little Lou, perhaps Ralph’s only admirer in the group, tracked him throughout his many relocations and brought gifts and news. But insensible Ralph does not return Lou’s friendship. Unsurprisingly when he realizes that he misses Lou, Ralph waits for him, “but Little Lou didn’t come, didn’t come, didn’t come; and then Ralph didn’t care anymore if he came or not” (Jen 1991, 42). Ralph’s self-isolation erodes his identity and his connection to a Chinese community who is figuring out how to survive and adapt in America. Jen asks, “Who was he? It was years before Ralph even knew to ask himself those questions; and then it was only to find he didn’t know the answers” (Jen 1991, 178). What little self-concept and existential awareness Ralph had was obliterated in New York.

However, he is saved from the consequences of his poor choices, for the first of many times, when Theresa finds him slumped over a park bench. The chapter which contains this scene is called “Deliverance” because “Ralph believed himself not so much rescued as delivered.” Jen goes on, “Ralph was so astounded [...] that in springing up to welcome her, he knocked her over, so that she fell to the sidewalk and sprained her ankle” (Jen 1991, 46). Ralph depends on Theresa like a religious man relies on God. He is lost without her. This important passage further foreshadows the harm Theresa will suffer when she returns to save Ralph again after the Chicken Palace bankruptcy.

Ralph’s “miracle” certainly includes being taken in by Theresa and Helen from that park bench, but it doubles as deliverance from the consequences of his self-isolation, his rejection of scholarly pursuits, and his shirking of family responsibility. The noble scholar who “was going to be first in his class, and was not going home until he had his doctorate rolled up to hand his father” had moved far from his ideals (Jen 1991, 6). The further east Ralph journeyed from China, the more he transformed into a new, but confused western person (Cheveresan 2013, 121). Ralph-in-America abandons his Chinese community, his decision to study, and his responsibility to bring honor to his family in exchange for quick-profit and emulation of Grover Ding, a Chinese-American who is not obstructed by heritage or filial responsibilities. Theresa and Helen, out of their obligation to family and relationship, will bear the consequences of Ralph’s actions in order to save him and preserve the Chang family.

Freedom and Limitations

While Ralph turns weaker and flounders away from China, Helen and Theresa become strong and flourish. Helen discovers that she can fix things, has a knack for homemaking, and pushes the family toward homeownership. Theresa maintains the moral authority of the family, manages a stressful, but successful career, and supports the family financially. These women labor and their standard of living rises. However, unlike Ralph, these women realize there are limits to their newfound freedoms. Not everything is possible in post-War America. New American freedoms force the characters in *Typical American* to reconsider their identities (Zhou 1999, 156). Because Helen and Theresa understand that gender and generation determine one’s place in China, they also recognize the limitations of gender and race in the United States (R. Lee, 1999 60). Helen and

Theresa can navigate these challenges and identity crises in ways Ralph cannot because they can still hear “an old culture talking. Everywhere there are limits” (Jen 1991, 4).

Helen, on the other hand, changes in America. She becomes confident, proud, and strong. In China, she had been doted on, being the surviving sister of twins and “blessed with just enough lingering, sometimes serious illness to win her much fuss” (Jen 1991, 61). Helen is sweet-natured, light-footed, and docile, but her nature is challenged in New York. When the family moves into a deteriorating apartment complex, the Changs are demoralized by their crumbling home. Ralph, the engineer, lodges several complaints to their super, Pete, about crumbling plaster, cracks, leaks, and no heat; however, Pete ignores him. When the boiler finally breaks, the men come up empty handed. Pete has deserted the building and Ralph lays wrapped in his blankets, useless even with an extensive engineering education.

Helen decides to take on these problems herself. This comes as a surprise to Ralph and Theresa. The not-so-frail Helen climbs through trapdoors to assess roof leaks, hires a plumber, scrapes the loose paint, and decoratively disguises cracks with furniture. Helen has been secretly reading homemaking magazines and practicing her newfound knowledge. It is also Helen who recognizes the importance of home ownership in feeling like an American. Jen states

People think you set foot in America and you become an American instantly. For the characters in my book, it takes awhile to become an American and it's not so much becoming a citizen that makes them feel American, it's something like buying a house. (Satz 1993, 133)

For Helen, “It was as if, once she'd resigned herself to her new world, something had taken her over – a drive to make it hers” (Jen 1991, 76). Theresa admires Helen and thinks, “What different kinds of intelligences in the world [...] what mattered in China was not necessarily what mattered here” (Jen 1991, 81). Helen is assimilating.

Theresa, already accomplished in China, thrives impressively in America. She is the *de facto* head of the family. Theresa studies medicine, a field dominated by white, American men. Notably, she wins a scholarship, an incredible feat for a Chinese woman in 1940s America. Overall, Theresa proves herself to be a hard-working physician, often foregoing sleep to work long, overnight shifts. But the long hours were not Theresa's greatest difficulty; Jen explains, “What was hardest about training, for Theresa, was having to sleep in that dank, little room the interns all shared, with men” (Jen 1991, 147). She is the only woman, and likely the only Chinese immigrant, which is hard for her. But Theresa persists in traveling this untrodden ground. Practically, her career allows her to provide for the family financially, first while Ralph finishes his Ph.D. and then with the purchase of their suburban home. It is only when Ralph underreports his income that he is able to declare financial independence from Theresa. When he achieves this, Ralph treats her so poorly that she decides to leave the family house. However, when Theresa moves out, her absence is a palpable cavity; she is terribly missed by Helen and the girls. Her empty room even bothered Ralph, a testament to Theresa's influence and magnanimity.

The characters in this novel all deal with tension between freedom and limitations. Jen begins *Typical American* with “It’s an American story,” evoking America as a land of reinvention, opportunity, and the pursuit of happiness (Jen 1991, 3). Each character is free to interpret what that means as they recast themselves. Theresa pursues a successful career, but buries herself in work, masking insecurities about being undesirable and unmarried. These anxieties uncloak themselves in her affair with Old Chao. Helen desires a home of her own making, but compulsively measures herself against the polished, magazine image of American life. She becomes obsessed with appearances, social class, and material status. Ralph wants the reputation of a powerful, respected, and charismatic man, but loses himself to greed, money, and power. Jen quickly follows her opening lines with the Chinese proverbs *Ting de jian*, one listens and hears, and *Ting bu jian*, one listens and fails to hear (Jen 1991, 4). Even the chapter is called, “A Boy with His Hands Over His Ears.” Each of these characters’ ability to see, hear, and understand life in America is limited. Jen writes, “People hear what they can, see what they can, do what they can; that’s the understanding” (Jen 1991, 4). By the end of the novel, Helen and Theresa can still *ting de jian*, listen and hear. Ralph, on the other hand, cannot understand that he will never be accepted as an American in spite of adopting American ways. He does not comprehend that he is still limited in the land of the free.

Though they undoubtedly possess more freedom in the United States, Theresa and Helen face more limitations than Ralph because they are women. As in China, wives in post-War America were expected to submit to their husbands. Ralph is upset and uncomfortable with Helen for being more handy and useful than him, the engineer, around the house. Moreover, Helen wins praise and approval from Theresa, which really angers him. Helen suffers Ralph’s anger over not knowing how to be a husband. Ralph laments, “He wished there was someone to ask...He wished he were in China, where if there turned out to be something wrong with the marriage he could always take a concubine” (Jen 1991, 69). Early on, Ralph is concerned about Helen’s reticence and secret keeping. He convinces himself that she could be hiding an illness, which leads to his obsession with her breathing. Helen’s quiet demeanor and secret magazines are benign, but she submits to his breathing lessons.

Ralph has a reputation for abusing Helen, and when he becomes violent, Helen bears his rage. When the family rushes Theresa to the hospital after Ralph runs her over, even “The nurses know him [...] they know all about him, everyone knows” (Jen 1991, 282). Ralph thinks a man should always be in control. Jen expresses, “He had never dreamed a person could be so powerless in his power,” and he keeps repeating, “I’m the father of this family! Do you hear me? The father, not the son!” (Jen 1991, 74). He tries to control Helen by beating, choking, and throwing her through a window, and she endures it. She must bear the burden of a culture which tacitly accepts violence against women.

Paradoxically, Helen has learned to find her voice using silence. Jen explains, “When Helen taught the girls how to talk, she’d teach them when not to continue, as she put it. It was a polite way of making a point, she said, but the girls knew that by point she meant barb” (Jen 1991, 135). Likewise, Jen admits that, “I am still the daughter of immigrants [...] It was a very long time before

I was able to hear my own voice” (D. Lee 2000, 222). Jen suggests that immigrant women have little room to express a wish, choice, or opinion. Helen cannot confront Ralph because he will beat her, not hear her. Thus, she is forced to channel her anger indirectly. Helen’s choice “not to continue” is a strategy of discontinuity employed by Asian women to disrupt American garrulousness (R. Lee 1999, 64). If Helen cannot confront Ralph with speech, she will do it with silence. “In [Helen’s] household,” writes Jen, “silence had teeth” (Jen 1991, 135).

Theresa also labors against limitations because she is a woman. Though she is an accomplished student and doctor, she cannot take pleasure in her success without emasculating Ralph. When Theresa announces that she has won a scholarship for medical school, Ralph perceives it as a rivalry and sulks. He is shamed by her success, which causes Theresa to lie about her scholarship being cancelled to preserve Ralph’s pride. Ralph cannot be the head of the household if Theresa is conspicuously successful and bankrolling the family. So, she lies to maintain old world norms.

Theresa also faces onerous pressure to marry. Jen explains that Theresa is not delicate and feminine like Helen, “Theresa turned out a giantess – five seven! With feet that entered the room before she did [...] she’d also taken up baseball – with her father’s permission – so now that she strolled when she walked” (Jen 1991, 47). Because she is perceived as ugly and masculine in Chinese culture, Theresa has found marriage a challenging prospect. In China, her family failed to secure matrimony with a banker’s son after he got a good look at her. Likewise, Helen and Janis attempt to match Theresa with one of Old Chao’s colleagues and then with Grover, resulting in two more dead ends. She finally finds love with Old Chao, a married man. Old Chao loves Theresa for her true self, and they have an affair. When Ralph, Helen, and the Chinese-American community discover their romance, Theresa is shamed, not Old Chao. The community considers Theresa Old Chao’s mistress, because “in China, if there turned out to be something wrong with the marriage [a man] could always take a concubine” (Jen 1991, 69). Though Old Chao truly loves her, Theresa is confined in this situation too.

Moreover, both women must endure Ralph’s loafing and freeloading in their post-war American context. Ralph is blind to the labor behind America’s self-made enterprises (R. Lee 1999, 57). Jen writes of Ralph’s new-found belief in “imagineering” or self-making,

He pictured himself able to do what he would. And to an amazing extent, his imagineering worked! No bread and fish, but he noticed that his bit of athlete’s foot had gone away; that he thought more clearly; that he could will certain foods to appear in the icebox. (Jen 1991, 89)

Ralph believes that he is healing himself and causing food to appear by the “miracle” outlined in *The Power of Positive Thinking*. He forgets that Theresa’s medical training clears up his athlete’s foot and that Helen stocks the icebox with food. Later, Ralph is stung by a bee right between his eyes. “His swollen-headedness becomes an apt metaphor for his search for godlike stature, yet also posing a barrier to any increased insight into the self” (R. Lee 1999, 57). Helen and Theresa are bound to Ralph by blood and marriage, and are not free to credit themselves with their

accomplishments. Their efforts to sustain the home go unnoticed and unappreciated by Ralph. In spite laboring to increase the family's standard of living, their work is screened by Ralph's pursuits, however foolish they appear.

Additionally, Helen and Theresa face racial and cultural subordination in the United States. Ralph does too, but he is still the "boy with his hands over his ears," and does not recognize it as it happens to him. As the Changs chide their absent super Pete in their first apartment, Theresa begins to realize the dangers of racial stereotyping. "We were wrong to say 'Typical American' [...]. Over and over she explained that Pete was a person, like them" (Jen 1991, 74). Further, Theresa becomes aware of social class in America by observing the medical care patients would receive and comes to believe that "to be non-white in this society was indeed to need education, accomplishment – some source of dignity. A white person was by definition somebody. Other people needed, across their hearts, one steel rib" (Jen 1991, 200). Ralph by contrast, lectures his daughters, "Money. In this country, you have money, you can do anything. You have no money, you are nobody. You are Chinaman" (Jen 1991, 199). Theresa and Ralph both discover limitations and racial barriers of being Chinese in America, but Ralph believes that, if he assimilates to a certain degree, those limitations will disappear. Theresa recognizes that even with accomplishment, she will need a "steel rib" protecting her heart. She considers racial prejudice to be inescapable and knows she will never be considered a white-American's equal.

While Helen and Theresa remain aware of these limitations throughout the novel, Ralph doesn't begin to question them until his life has fallen apart. Ralph realizes, "He could not always see, could not always hear. He was not what he made up his mind to be. A man was the sum of his limits; freedom only made him see how much so. America was no America" (Jen 1991, 296). Ralph's idea of America is a place without limitations, which is his major misconception. He cannot understand how he has failed after learning English, earning a Ph.D., becoming a citizen, owning a home, starting a business, and even training a dog. Cheveresan explains that Ralph, "succumbs to the pressures of a system that is far less ideal and accommodating than he used to believe" (Cheveresan 2013, 122). At the end of the novel, Ralph has still not truly "listened and heard" life's lessons about freedom and limitations in China and America. As he remembers Theresa and Old Chao spinning in their wading pools, Jen writes, "Were these people he knew? [...] Who could begin to say what he meant, what had happened, and what he'd done" (Jen 1991, 296)? Ralph does not know himself or his family; he is still the boy with his hands over his ears, listening but failing to hear. It will again fall to Helen and Theresa to put things back together.

Keepers of the Home

Home, another theme in *Typical American*, reveals the tension between Chinese and American culture and the hidden labor of women. Helen and Theresa are the keepers of the home, and with it, Chinese culture. Yet, many "typical" American ideas come to roost in the Chang household. The Chang family's many apartments and suburban home serve as a place to preserve

and practice Chinese customs, speak freely about their grievances with Americans, and shelter against anti-immigrant prejudice. Ralph and Theresa even try to reconstruct their ancestral home in America through Ralph's marriage to Helen (Satz 1993, 133). Conversely Grover's influence on Ralph is antithetical to Theresa and Helen's; it represents a loss of home and profiting from home ownership without actually inhabiting one (R. Lee 1999, 54).

In New York, Helen and Theresa have preserved a Chinese microcosm inside of their apartment. When Ralph peers inside for the first time, he sees Helen "and around her, China" (Jen 1991, 56). Ralph notices "the scrolls, the shoes by the door, the calendar, and the lidded cups of tea." He immediately finds Helen "so familiar;" she is his ideal Chinese mate, petite, subservient, and attentive to his needs. Then, when Helen cooks Oxtail soup for Ralph, Jen writes, "it inflamed more than abated his homesickness [...] Her cooking was so agonizingly close to that of his family's old cook that his stomach ached with resemblance, even as his mouth thrilled" (Jen 1991, 56-57). Ralph had been languishing for months, cut off from his countrymen, cuisine, and customs. Meanwhile, Helen and Theresa prospered. They are successful students, living well, and dutifully hunting for Ralph. When they shelter him, he finds sensational comfort in their company. At the apartment, Ralph returns to a familiar world of Chinese expectations, a world cultivated by Helen and Theresa. These women nourish Ralph, find him a drafting job, and arrange a marriage for him. Helen and Theresa are the strong, capable, and practical providers that Ralph is not and cannot be in America. Jen remarks, "In China, one lived in one's family house. In America, one could always name whose house he was in; and to live in a house not one's own was to be less of a man" (Jen 1991, 283). This is Helen and Theresa's house, a fact that will haunt Ralph into the destructive tutelage of Grover Ding. Jen even titles one of the chapters "Helen's House" to make this point.

Theresa and Helen create a home where the Chang family can uphold Chinese morality and proper conduct. A Chinese home allows them to freely practice traditional ways and sanctimoniously consign wild or unexplainable conduct as "typical American." "Typical American no-good,' Ralph would say; Theresa, 'Typical American don't-know-how-to-get-along'; and Helen, wistfully, 'typical American just-want-to-be-the-center-of-things" (Jen 1991, 67). The Changs' insistence on proper moral conduct forms the core of their Chinese identity (Zhou 1999, 154). Because they can be Chinese at home, they have a secure place to criticize, condemn, mock, or stereotype Americans like Pete, their negligent building super. With wry humor Jen writes, "Imagine that – that they could see in a foreign country, what was what" (Jen 1991, 68). Jen suggests that these immigrants underestimate their own cultural misunderstanding partly because home has become a place for Ralph, Helen, and Theresa to cling to Chinese values under the constant pressure of assimilation.

Likewise in their home, the Changs shelter from outside prejudices they encounter as immigrants. As Ralph, Helen, and Theresa wade into American life, their interest in baseball becomes a reminder that they are very different. When Ralph decides to call the family the Chang-

kees after the New York Yankees, “Ralph, Helen, and Theresa simultaneously affiliate and disaffiliate with that national pastime and the national team whose name acts as a metonym for Americans as a whole” (R. Lee 1999, 49). As the family attempts an outing, they have a troubling experience. Jen writes, “The one time they went to an actual game, people had called them names and told them to go back to their laundry” (Jen 1991, 127). In response, the family buys a used television and watches games from home, withdrawing into a space free from racist put-downs. They disguise this distancing under artificial reasons like, “More comfortable. More convenient,” but in truth, they opt for televised games because they will not encounter hostile Americans in their apartment (Jen 1991, 128). Ralph did not benefit from such relief on his own. On the run from the Foreign Student Office and the Department of immigration, he realized that, “He missed his home, missed having a place that was his home [...] the world he had lost waxed valuable in the losing, like an unwon love” (Jen 1991, 33). Theresa and Helen make this valuable world possible in America.

Before and after Ralph’s meteoric and disastrous pursuit of the American dream, Helen and Theresa hold the family homes together. It is a theme explored in Helen’s maintenance of the dilapidated apartments and the broken suburban home. The dilapidated buildings in *Typical American* highlight the unsustainability, unattainability, and instability of the American dream (Eubanks 2016, 140-141). The role of maintenance in the homes, a symbol of family life, is taken up by the women. Helen quite literally fixes cracks, investigates roof leaks, and finds repairmen when necessary. Also, it is only with Theresa’s financial support that the Changs are able to buy their “beautiful, perfect, brand-new” suburban home (Jen 1991, 152). As the buildings break, the women take action to keep the homes from falling apart, mirroring their labor in keeping the family itself from crumbling. Because of these lasting connections to Chinese culture, Helen and Theresa make “the house hold” under the pressure of Ralph’s self-made greed and dereliction of his ancestral past (Jen 1991, 59). In the end the buildings crumble and the suburban home is sold, but the family remains intact, even for Ralph. He is even welcome to visit Theresa in the hospital after nearly killing her in blind rage, which would be an incomprehensible privilege in American culture. But in a filial home, it is indicative of Helen and Theresa’s commitment to the roles of obedient wife and dutiful sister.

In her interview with Martha Satz, Jen explains that after Helen and Theresa establish themselves in New York and find Ralph, Ralph and Theresa attempt to reconstruct their Chinese family via marriage (Satz 1993, 133). The marriage creates “enormous enthusiasm for their new arrangement” (Jen 1991, 64). Jen writes, “How right did it all seem! That Ralph should marry [Helen], friend of Theresa – it was just as their parents would have had it” (Jen 1991, 64). This is not an American marriage based on love; Helen and Ralph barely know each other. Sceptically, Ralph doesn’t propose until Helen can get her “crystal chicken just right, and her red cooked carp, too” (Jen 1991, 57). It is an arranged marriage to generate stability. Arranged marriages are expected in China, as explained in Helen’s backstory, “Helen’s parents reassured her, *we’ll find* you someone nice” (Jen 1991, 62).

Clearly Theresa is the architect of this arranged marriage. She is the older, more responsible sibling and demonstrably dutiful to her family, unlike Ralph. She is keeping her American home Chinese. Jen illustrates this point in a conversation between Theresa and Ralph

“You know, someone at school was talking the other day about a person who took his house apart, and moved it, and then rebuilt it, just the way it was.”

“That’s like us, and our family,” Theresa agreed.

“The odd thing was that the house had a leak. So why did the man move it, if it had a leak? That’s the question. Also, he had always hated the inside of it. Too small.”

“Well,” said Theresa, “leaks or no leaks, maybe he was used to it.”

“I guess,” said Ralph, uncertainly. (Jen 1991, 64-65)

This story reveals Ralph’s reservations about his life in China, while Theresa accepts its flaws and limitations. Early in the novel, Jen reveals that Ralph’s parents are disappointed with him and elated with Theresa. Ralph’s father chides him as a “lazy” and “stupid” student; “What do you do besides eat and sleep all day?” he barks. Jen also explains that Ralph was instructed to “study his Older Sister” (Jen 1991, 4). Life in America was meant to be liberating for Ralph. He planned to return to China with a Ph.D. to make his family proud, but Ralph has failed and is under the custody of Theresa, his family, once again. Theresa provides China for Ralph – a dutiful relative, an arranged marriage, shelter and food – but like the man in the story, he has always resented it.

Though Helen and Theresa manage to preserve a remnant of China for Ralph and themselves, it crumbles under the undermining influence of Grover. Jen reveals that Grover, while Chinese-American, only speaks English. When Janis describes Grover to Helen, she explains, “His family has been here for so many generations, I don’t think he even knows what province he’s from. And what does it matter anymore? He’s rich” (Jen 1991, 86). Grover represents a total loss of Chinese values and identity to assimilation. He refuses to be identified by his ancestry and hometown, responding to Ralph’s query, ““You’re hometown is where?”” with “I’ll let you in on a little secret. In this country, the question to ask is, ‘So what do you do for a living?’” (Jen 1991, 105). Instead of using a home for the preservation of identity and tradition, he uses it to make money, ultimately capitalizing on Ralph and Helen’s desire to own a home. Grover “has mastered American home ownership as a profit-making scheme” (R. Lee 1999, 54). In this way, he is able to draw Ralph further from ancestral duties, family relationships, and education, the very values embodied by Theresa.

Likewise, Grover is also disconnected from the influence of women, which makes him an interesting antithesis to Helen and Theresa. His influence shatters the Chang home by moving Ralph from scholarly pursuits and ancestral responsibilities into unstable, illegal, and unsustainable money-making. Because of Grover, Ralph leaves his tenured professorship to start a fried chicken restaurant. Grover teaches Ralph to cheat by underreporting his earnings on the cash register tapes. While Ralph calculates in a locked room, Grover teaches Helen to cheat on

Ralph. His relationships with women in *Typical American* are chiefly sexual, with the seduction of Helen as the pinnacle of his rakish behavior. Even after Janis and Helen fail to pair Grover and Theresa, he unexpectedly licks her when the two are alone (Jen 1991, 206). Grover's disinterest in Theresa foreshadows Ralph's rejection of ancestral duty, family relationships, and powerful women (R. Lee 1999, 62). Masculine Grover drives fast, overindulges, takes what he wants, and refuses limitations. Such limitlessness proves too tempting for an emasculated Ralph.

While Ralph's self-destruction looms large in *Typical American*, much is to be gleaned from careful consideration of Helen and Theresa. Belonging to a new class of educated and capable immigrants which includes women, Helen and Theresa pursue the American dream without losing touch of Chinese culture and virtues, including an obligation to family, academic success, and the preservation of relationships. These women are cognizant of cultural tension and the need to recast meaningful connections to their past under the pressure to assimilate. Conversely, Ralph loses all semblance of filial piety and scholarly success in his emulation of Grover Ding's perilous and unethical self-making. Helen and Theresa save Ralph's life when they take him into their home, reversing his self-isolation from Chinese traditions and community and returning him to a family setting. The home which they create serves as a place to preserve and practice Chinese ways, speak freely about "typical" American behavior, and shelter against anti-immigrant prejudice. These cultural limits contrast with American freedom, but these limits form Helen and Theresa's identities and allow them to navigate the boundaries of gender and race without losing their sense of self. Because they can still hear "an old culture talking," Helen and Theresa understand that "everywhere there are limits," even in America (Jen 1991, 4). Through Helen and Theresa, Jen insinuates that the pursuit of the American dream conceals the contributions and labor of immigrant women. Their efforts, whether providing a secure home, financial support, family care, or supportive relationships, provide discreet and inconspicuous stability. Without Helen and Theresa, the roof leaks, the plaster cracks, and the men forget where they come from.

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