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The Portrayal of China's Image in Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*

Wenhui Shi ^{1,*} and Xiaoying Hu ¹

¹ School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Ningxia University, Yinchuan, Ningxia, China

* Correspondence: Wenhui Shi, School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Ningxia University, Yinchuan, Ningxia, China

Abstract: This study takes Jade Snow Wong's novel *Fifth Chinese Daughter* as its research object. Employing the methods of close reading and textual analysis, it examines China's image in the work and the impacts of such portrayal from four perspectives: Chinese-style family education, traditional Chinese festivals, major traditional Chinese rituals, and Chinese food culture. The analysis concludes that Chinese culture exerted a profound influence on Jade Snow Wong's growth. By documenting the life of Jade Snow, a Chinese-American girl, before she turned 24, the novel narrates the protagonist's growth story and explores self-discovery and self-identity in the process of personal development. Throughout the protagonist's growth experience, numerous images related to China subtly shaped her personality, and influenced her cultural identity. Therefore, this study's analysis of China's image in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* holds practical significance for further research on Jade Snow Wong and her works.

Keywords: Jade Snow Wong; *Fifth Chinese Daughter*; China's image

1. Introduction

Jade Snow Wong (1922–2006) was born in Chinatown, San Francisco, USA. As a second-generation Chinese American, she became a representative writer of Chinese American literature and earned the respect of American mainstream society, as well as recognition from the Chinese community. Her autobiographical novel *Fifth Chinese Daughter* tells the story of her growth experience before the age of 24 from a third-person perspective. It is one of the pioneering works in Chinese American literature and holds a pivotal position. Currently, domestic and foreign scholars' research on *Fifth Chinese Daughter* mainly focuses on theme exploration, identity construction, cultural conflict, and comparative studies with other works, while there are relatively few studies analyzing the portrayal of China's image in the novel. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze China's image portrayed in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and its impacts from four aspects: Chinese-style family education model, traditional Chinese festivals, major traditional Chinese rituals, and Chinese food culture, which is of practical significance for further research on Jade Snow Wong and her works.

2. Chinese-Style Family Education Model

Since Jade Snow Wong's parents were first-generation Chinese American immigrants, many of their ideas originated from China's millennia-old cultural and institutional system. As a second-generation Chinese American born and raised in the United States, Jade Snow Wong's family education naturally followed the traditional Chinese family education model of her parents (first-generation Chinese Americans). Generally speaking, the protagonist Jade Snow's life in the Wong family was "carefree yet conventional; solemn yet contented" [1].

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Chinese family education emphasizes filial piety as the top priority. “Filial piety is the foundation of traditional Chinese society and culture, and it is the original core value and primary virtue of traditional Chinese culture” [2]. One manifestation of this in family education is that children should inform their parents of their plans to avoid causing them worry. In Jade Snow’s family, timely communication and consultation with her parents were very important. She was used to sharing her schedule with her parents before doing anything, including the expected time to go out and return, as well as who she would go out with. In addition, the Wong family’s culture emphasized respect and politeness towards elders, such as using appropriate titles when addressing them and avoiding calling them by their first names. Respect is expressed through polite communication to maintain harmonious relationships among family members. Chinese family education also stresses respect for teachers and the pursuit of knowledge. Before Jade Snow went to school, her parents always reminded her to obey her teachers and show them respect. Besides, being courteous to others is another important aspect of Chinese education, which requires treating anyone outside one’s own family as a guest. Therefore, the Wong children were taught not to quarrel with the children of the hired workers, as this was a form of politeness and respect towards guests. Chinese parents also educate their children to be cautious in their words and deeds: to think repeatedly before speaking, and to pay attention to the content and occasion. Jade Snow was not allowed to talk while eating at home, as Chinese people generally believe that talking during meals affects digestion; obscene stories are forbidden in Chinese families, and even making noise is highly inappropriate. Parents also care about their children’s interpersonal relationships—requiring them to make friends that meet certain standards, behave properly when interacting with friends, and strictly control social distance and time spent outside the home. This kind of Chinese family education gave Jade Snow a sense of propriety and attitude in dealing with people and things, laying a solid foundation for the cultivation of her excellent character.

In terms of values, the family education Jade Snow received reflected the image of Chinese people being honest and trustworthy, courageous in taking responsibility, good at self-reflection, grateful, and eager to learn. Honesty and trustworthiness are among the universal ethical pursuits of humanity. Since ancient times, China has placed great importance on education in honesty and trustworthiness. When Jade Snow was a child, she once stole something from a peddler and was severely disciplined by her father—from then on, she kept the principle of integrity in mind. One night, Jade Snow and her younger sister Jade Precious Stone went to help their eldest sister with work and returned home later than the agreed time. Even though their eldest sister had called their father to inform him that the two sisters would be back a little late because there was a lot of work to do, the two sisters still could not escape their father’s punishment. Through this, their father made them understand the importance of keeping one’s word. In addition, in Chinese families, children are taught to be responsible and courageous in taking on duties when doing anything, especially the elder children in the family. When Jade Snow and her younger sister got into trouble, Jade Snow had to take full responsibility because, as the elder sister, she should set a good example for her younger sister. Starting from the age of 11, Jade Snow began to share household chores with her mother; she was willing to sacrifice her own playtime to help reduce her mother’s burden. Furthermore, Chinese children are taught to learn self-reflection as they grow up. When Jade Snow had a conflict with others, her parents always criticized her first and asked her to reflect on her mistakes. They also educated her that, as a girl, she should not fight back when harmed—this also reflects the aforementioned Chinese image of being cautious in behavior. Chinese people also emphasize being grateful. Jade Snow’s supervisor wanted her to cook a Chinese meal for the musicians who came to perform at the school. Since the supervisor had given Jade

Snow great support and help in her life and studies, Jade Snow's family actively helped her plan the menu, prepare the necessary ingredients, and work together to make this happen as a way to repay the supervisor's kindness. Finally, Chinese parents also educate their children to value the learning of knowledge. Jade Snow's father took great pains to select schools for her, sending her to both a Chinese school and an English school to learn Chinese and Western knowledge and culture respectively, ensuring that she received the education she deserved as much as possible. The Chinese family education on values that Jade Snow received played a crucial role in her social life and career development (winning essay competitions and starting her pottery career) when she grew up.

During the period when she did housework in a white family, Jade Snow had the opportunity to observe the lifestyle of American families. Her reflections on the white family model reflected the Chinese family model from a side perspective: Before expressing opinions, family members should first consider whether they are being respectful and appropriate; the emotional expression between parents and children is relatively implicit—they rarely use straightforward words or body language to express love or apology; discipline for children is almost solved only through severe punishment, ignoring the role of explanation. This reflects the parents' earnest expectations for their children, hoping that this will make the children correct their mistakes as soon as possible and develop good habits. At home, the husband controls the family's financial power, and the mother always agrees with the decisions made by the father; the individual personalities of Chinese family members need to be hidden and not revealed, with everything focused on achieving a harmonious situation. Chinese parents take great pains for their children, arranging every aspect of their children's lives properly, and do not give positive evaluations of their children's achievements. This is because Chinese parents believe that modesty is a virtue, and praising children will make them become arrogant and complacent, affecting their future development.

Under the Chinese family model and family education, Jade Snow benefited a lot and developed excellent qualities such as filial piety to parents, modesty and courtesy, caution in words and deeds, and honesty and trustworthiness. However, at the same time, during her growth in the Wong family, she also lost the development of her individuality and freedom. During the period when she entered the white family to earn tuition fees, she felt the differences between Chinese and Western family models and family education. This made her continue to reflect through observation, and then seek a self-identity more suitable for survival in a dual cultural context: returning to the Wong family to be a traditional Chinese girl, while becoming an independent individual in another aspect of her life.

3. Chinese Traditional Festivals

The important status of Chinese traditional festivals in Chinese traditional culture is self-evident. Traditional festivals are not only a concentrated display of national culture but also a concentrated expression of national emotions. They play a vital role in enhancing national cohesion. Although Jade Snow's family immigrated to the United States, many Chinese people living in San Francisco like them still maintained the habit of celebrating Chinese traditional festivals. Especially during the Spring Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival, Jade Snow had the opportunity to celebrate the festivals happily with her family and the residents in Chinatown, experiencing the joyful festive atmosphere. This was also an important reason why Jade Snow, a second-generation Chinese American, felt happy to be a daughter of Chinese descent.

"For overseas Chinese, the Spring Festival is a traditional festival shared with their compatriots in China. It is an important carrier for inheriting and spreading national culture and maintaining national identity" [3]. The author Jade Snow Wong devoted a large part of her novel to describing the preparations and celebration activities of Chinese people for the Spring Festival, aiming to record and inherit the excellent traditional

Chinese culture. Although living in a foreign land, the fact that Chinese people at home and abroad celebrate the Spring Festival together fully reflects the common cultural memories and shared feelings of homeland among Chinese compatriots.

In her work *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Jade Snow Wong mentioned that a few days before the official Spring Festival, Chinese people would make thorough preparations for the New Year. The mother would do a thorough house cleaning, cleaning and washing everything in the house. Children also had to take a bath and put on new clothes, which symbolized getting rid of the old and welcoming the new. People had to keep in mind certain taboos: children should not be scolded during the Spring Festival, otherwise they would be scolded frequently in the new year; unpleasant topics like death should not be discussed, otherwise it would bring bad luck to the coming year. Therefore, during the Spring Festival, people always kept a happy mood when they met, tried to avoid disputes, and said complimentary and blessing words.

In the first week of the New Year, Chinese people received guests at home. The house had to be kept spotless, with fruit plates filled with candies, fruits and melon seeds prepared at all times, and new potted plants placed in the rooms. All these items symbolized auspiciousness, representing “a new life, a prosperous life and a sweet life” [4]. Chinese children would receive red envelopes from elders during the Spring Festival, which represented the elders’ best wishes for the children in the new year. During the festival, the streets were also decorated in a festive style, and people would go to the streets to feel the joyful atmosphere of the festival. The streets and shops were crowded with people, and everyone looked relaxed and carefree. No matter what difficulties they were facing at the moment, Chinese people always temporarily forgot them during the Spring Festival, enjoyed this once-a-year leisure time, and wished for good luck in the new year. Every day on the street, trained acrobats performed lion dances. Residents would also cooperate by hanging red paper with money and lettuce leaves in front of their doors, allowing the “lions” to jump up and get the rewards. When the “lions” got the rewards, the owners of the houses would set off firecrackers to welcome the “lions” and drive away evil spirits at the same time. Jade Snow loved the lion dance performances; the exciting drumbeats, colors and rhythms were unforgettable to her. Chinese people would have a sumptuous dinner to “start the year”, and this grand celebration also came to a successful end with a dinner called “seeking good luck”. Jade Snow’s father would cook his signature dishes on the day of “starting the year” and prepare some time-consuming dishes for the “seeking good luck” dinner. During the Spring Festival, people would also exchange delicious foods, which varied according to prices and family customs. This practice also served as an exchange of good wishes for each other in the new year.

The 15th day of the eighth lunar month is another traditional Chinese festival—the Mid-Autumn Festival. The “round moon on this day symbolizes completeness and satisfaction, which meets people’s expectation for reunion” [5]. Therefore, Chinese people would make round moon cakes with thick sweet fillings during the Mid-Autumn Festival, eating moon cakes, drinking tea and admiring the full moon. There were many kinds of fillings for moon cakes, and Jade Snow’s favorite was the five-nut moon cake. Moon cakes were relatively large; in China, they were usually cut into 16 or 32 pieces, enough for a person to sit leisurely, eating moon cakes and drinking tea for a whole afternoon. On this day, Jade Snow’s grandfather would also specially prepare a rice porridge dinner to entertain friends and hired workers, reuniting with them and providing them with positive emotional value.

Jade Snow felt lucky to be a daughter of Chinese descent during these two Chinese traditional festivals. On the one hand, people felt the joyful festive atmosphere during the festivals, which embodied the good wishes of Chinese people. On the other hand, it also allowed people to relax physically and mentally during a short break. Although they were Chinese Americans far away from their homeland, they still retained the traditional festival customs, which fully demonstrated the profound heritage and influence of

traditional Chinese culture. At the same time, this also reflected the importance and necessity of continuously enhancing cultural confidence in China and carrying forward the excellent traditional Chinese culture.

4. Major Traditional Chinese Rites

China is a nation that values a sense of ritual, and behind various rites lie distinct cultural implications. “Many of our social activities are intended to strengthen the collective memory between us and other members of a social group, so as to maintain the group’s cohesion” [6]. Even Chinese people living in Chinatown in the United States, far from their homeland, still share the same collective memory as other Chinese people, which is reflected in various ritual activities. The author Jade Snow Wong devoted a large part of her book to describing wedding, childbirth, and funeral rites. These three types of rites are also referred to by scholars as ritualistic family communication. They hold special and important positions in Chinese families and constitute a key part of family life [7]. From the traditional Chinese rites described by Jade Snow Wong, we can also perceive the inheritance of Chinese culture and the continuation of the Chinese national spirit among Chinese Americans.

“Traditional Chinese marriage customs embody the characteristic of being dominated by others”. In the early 20th century, China still followed old traditions; free marriage was not advocated, and a matchmaker was essential for a man and a woman to marry. The matchmaker played an indispensable role in this process—she would compare the swing of long braids when walking and help the two parties negotiate the betrothal money. Marriage was a major life event that required serious treatment, and the wedding date had to be determined through fortune-telling. When a girl reached marriageable age but remained unmarried, she would be urged by her mother. Traditional Chinese thought held that a woman’s life was only complete if she entered marriage and became a wife and mother [8]. Jade Snow’s mother told her that marriage was a normal and inevitable experience; an old maid who did not marry was abnormal, and others would even curse her to “have no permanent home for her soul forever” [9].

Other wedding principles depended on local customs. Generally, before the wedding, the bride had to cry loudly in her boudoir for several consecutive days, intended to show others the sorrow of leaving her family. On the bride’s bed sheet, there were peanuts, oranges, dates, and lychee seeds—all symbols of a new life and fertility. During the wedding, the bride was teased by guests through traditional Chinese games, but she had to remain gentle and quiet. The gifts sent by guests were given to the groom. According to custom, the groom, accompanied by relatives and friends, would open the gifts, and the bride had to be present but was not allowed to touch them. Only after that were the gifts handed to the bride; after checking them, she would tie each gift one by one with a red ribbon. At the dinner party, guests would congratulate the groom on marrying a new wife, but no one would wish the bride happiness. The bride should not eat at her own banquet—she was busy serving tea and had no time to eat. In contrast, the groom did not need to do so much. The purpose of these customs was to make the bride obedient and suppress her individuality.

However, the wedding of Jade Snow’s fourth sister was not a fully traditional Chinese wedding. As her mother described, some brides in traditional Chinese weddings had experiences that were hard to understand. Just as Jade Snow’s father explained, “through oral transmission from generation to generation, the symbolic meanings in Chinese legends have lost their origins and true significance” [10]. When explaining Chinese wedding customs to Jade Snow, her mother added at the end that although there were aspects of the rites worth discussing, it was undeniable that “the way Chinese families handle affairs is natural and orderly, which strengthens the family’s strength” [11]. At her fourth sister’s wedding, Jade Snow acted more like a critical onlooker; she kept reflecting on the meaning of these rites through observation. Compared with men,

traditional Chinese weddings imposed higher requirements on women, and this series of rites was mainly intended to help women complete their identity transformation as soon as possible—from an obedient and proper girl to a virtuous wife and good mother who submitted to her husband's family.

Chinese people are accustomed to celebrating a baby's one-month anniversary (full moon celebration), and a grand ceremony is even held especially when the newborn is a boy. This is to share the good news with relatives and friends, congratulate the newborn on healthy growth, and pray for blessings for him. Before the ceremony, the newborn's family would send paper bags filled with delicious food to friends and invite them to eat red-dyed eggs and pig's trotters. On the day of the full moon feast, the baby was taken out of the house for the first time. Guests would greet the newborn and his mother and give red envelopes to the newborn. The full moon feast for her younger brother Forgiveness from Heaven was a festive occasion that Jade Snow had never experienced before. When she was preparing for the feast, she heard the news that "such festive occasions are only held when a son is born" [12]. However, she also gradually realized that she and her sisters still received the family's love and care, even though their roles and experiences in the family might be different from those of their newborn brother. Just as the author Jade Snow Wong said in an interview with Zhang Ziqing, "I love Chinese culture, so I have always been very sensitive to this tradition of my Chinese culture", which made Jade Snow feel the differences brought by her identity as a woman during her growth [13].

"A funeral is a meaningful farewell activity that humans hold for their kind who have lost their natural lives", and traditional Chinese funeral rites also have their unique significance. Similar to the wedding date, the funeral time was also determined through divination, aiming to ensure that the deceased's soul could live in harmony with other ghosts after returning home. On the funeral day, Buddhist monks would perform rituals to help the deceased's soul transcend. A large open-top truck loaded with wreaths tied with white elegiac couplets followed, and a special truck carrying the deceased's clothes would transport the clothes to an oven beside the tomb and burn them. This was because people believed that "the rising black smoke would return to the deceased's soul". People specially assigned to the front and back of the funeral procession scattered yellow paper money along the street, which was "used to bribe the evil ghosts lurking everywhere, so that they would not detain the deceased's soul and let it ascend to heaven". After the procession dispersed, friends who attended the funeral would receive white envelopes [14]. Those who received the white envelopes had to immediately buy candy instead of other things to "sweeten the taste" [15]. Chinese people have great respect for the souls of the deceased, especially for their departed relatives. They always want to ensure that the rites are flawless, so that the deceased can live a better life in the afterlife than before. Moreover, they also make wishes to the deceased's soul, asking the deceased to help the living live a better life in the invisible world.

5. Chinese Food Culture

Chinese people advocate the concept that "food is the paramount necessity of the people". Food is not only people's most basic physiological need but also closely connected with history and culture. According to Hao Yu's view, "Food structure is constrained by factors such as historical culture and geographical environment, and bears the symbolic significance of national cultural connotations" [16]. Chinese food has had a profound impact on Jade Snow's growth—it not only helped her build a bridge for communication with the outside world but also inspired her sense of pride in Chinese culture.

The eating habits of Chinese people mainly focus on cooked and hot food. In terms of daily diet, Jade Snow would enjoy a hearty breakfast before going to school: warm steamed rice, salted fish cooked with peanut oil and ginger slices, mustard soup, and

sliced pork stewed with preserved egg slices. Food could also serve as a means of communication between parents and children. When Jade Snow and her younger sister Jade Precious Stone felt wronged, their father cooked fried tofu with sea bass and green onions, sprinkled with white sugar, and used this dish instead of a hug to comfort the two sisters. On special days, the types of Chinese food are particularly abundant, and they also contain different cultural meanings. Chinese people use food as a medium to connect and communicate with relatives and friends. When celebrating her younger brother Forgiveness from Heaven's full moon, the Wong family treated relatives and friends to pig's trotters, chicken, and red-dyed eggs. Inviting others to eat red-dyed eggs implies announcing the good news of the baby's birth to relatives and friends; in addition, the color red represents a lively and festive atmosphere. During the Spring Festival, to celebrate the arrival of the new year, the importance of food is greatly emphasized. People exchange delicious foods to convey their best wishes for each other in the new year, which usually include sweet pudding, salty pudding, rice dumplings, and spiced strips. Chinese people usually hold a sumptuous dinner to "start the year", and on this day, Jade Snow's father would cook his signature dishes: chicken mixed with lychee and roast duck. In the first week of the new year, Chinese families entertain guests with a variety of foods, many of which are not commonly seen on the dining table on ordinary days. A dinner called "seeking good luck" would be held on the seventh day of the new year to end the grand Spring Festival celebrations, and Jade Snow's father would cook dried vegetables stir-fried with oysters and other time-consuming dishes. Besides, the food used to celebrate the Mid-Autumn Festival represents Chinese people's desire for reunion. Chinese families make large moon cakes with thick sweet fillings, and Jade Snow's grandfather would also prepare a rice porridge dinner to entertain friends and hired workers, giving them the warmth of home.

The preparation methods of Chinese dishes are mainly based on personal taste, basic principles, and common sense, with no fixed proportions. However, Chinese people have high requirements for cooking rice: the amount of rice, rice washing, the amount of water added, and the heat for cooking all have strict standards and certain skills. Nevertheless, Jade Snow's father also had a good way to remedy burnt rice. Staple foods occupy a very important position in Chinese eating habits, and rice is one of them. The Wong family was very picky when selecting rice. Jade Snow's father believed that rice was the "root of life" and a staple food eaten twice a day, so he would buy the desired rice regardless of the price. In addition, Chinese cooking takes the pursuit of delicious taste as the primary requirement, and strives to achieve the goal of "taking taste as the foundation and the most delicious taste as the best" [17]. Therefore, Chinese people like to add various seasonings when cooking and use different cooking methods to create different flavors. When Chinese people praise a friend for cooking well, they always say "the taste is excellent!".

Following her supervisor's suggestion, Jade Snow invited friends to the supervisor's home as guests. She cooked fried eggs and stir-fried beef with tomatoes for her friends, and introduced Chinese culture to non-Chinese people—this made her very happy and proud. When the college supervisor once again encouraged Jade Snow to treat the musicians who came to perform at the school with Chinese food, she entertained them with sweet and sour pork with pineapple, stir-fried beef with bean sprouts, and Chinese melon soup, which received unanimous praise. These two experiences of Jade Snow showing Chinese food to non-Chinese people both enhanced non-Chinese people's understanding of Chinese culture and gave Jade Snow great confidence. "It further encouraged Jade Snow Wong to expand her social circle, bravely step into American society, and gradually transform from an onlooker of American society to a participant, communicating equally with others in American society" [18].

6. Conclusion

The portrayal of China's image in the works of Chinese American writers reflects their acceptance of Chinese culture and also demonstrates their exploration of their own cultural identity. It is worth noting that Jade Snow Wong, as a second-generation Chinese American writer, grew up under the background of the values of the American mainstream society, with her parents instilling in her what they believed to be correct Chinese culture and ideological concepts. Jade Snow Wong herself had no direct personal experience of Chinese culture. Therefore, as Zhan Qiao pointed out, Chinese American writers, from a unique perspective that is different from both American mainstream literature and Chinese local literature, portray China's image as a literary imagination of China. Just as Jade Snow Wong herself said, she wrote to "help people better understand the contributions made by Chinese people, so that the achievements of Chinese people will be recognized in the Western world". Thus, she portrayed typical aspects of China's image in a relaxed and interesting style. Once the novel was published, the American mainstream society developed a strong interest in China and Chinese culture, which enhanced white people's understanding of Chinese people and also made Chinese American literature emerge in American mainstream literature.

There are many more portrayals of China's image in the novel *Fifth Chinese Daughter* by the author Jade Snow Wong, such as Chinese philosophical thoughts, Chinese etiquette for receiving guests, traditional Chinese medicine, and herbal medicines. Compared with the four aspects mentioned in this paper, these elements are not given much space in the novel, but they all reflect the influence of Chinese culture on Jade Snow Wong's growth. This enabled her to find a moderate path suitable for herself in the dual cultural context and explore her own cultural identity. It is precisely the positive aspects embodied by these China's images that brought her a sense of pride and shaped the excellent qualities in her. As she herself said, "I found that my Chinese demeanor is the most suitable". Therefore, if we look at Jade Snow Wong and her works from the perspective of historical materialism without prejudice, we will still consider her a writer with extremely high influence, and *Fifth Chinese Daughter* still holds an irreplaceable position in the field of Chinese American literature.

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