

The Paper Menagerie



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KEN LIU

Ken Liu was born in Lanzhou, China, and moved to the United States as a child. He graduated from Harvard College in 1998 and from Harvard Law School in 2004. His first published short story, “The Carthaginian Rose,” appeared in *The Phobos Science Fiction Anthology Volume 1 – Empire of Dreams and Miracles* (2002). He has published two books of short stories, *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories* (2016) and *The Hidden Girl and Other Stories* (2020); three novels in his epic fantasy series the Dandelion Dynasty, *The Grace of Kings* (2015), *The Wall of Storms* (2016), and *The Veiled Throne* (2021); and one Star Wars tie-in collection, *The Legends of Luke Skywalker* (2017). Ken Liu is well regarded in the science fiction and fantasy writing community; among the many writing awards he has won, he received a Nebula Award, a Hugo Award, and a World Fantasy Award for his short story “The Paper Menagerie.” In addition to writing original fiction, Ken Liu is famous as a translator of Chinese science fiction, most notably Cixin Liu’s bestselling novel *The Three-Body Problem*, which was published in Chinese in 2008 and in English translation in 2014.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ken Liu mentions two major events of twentieth-century Chinese history in “The Paper Menagerie,” the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution. The Great Famine occurred in China between 1958 and 1962. The famine was man-made. Chairman Mao Zedong, the autocratic leader of the Chinese Communist Party, was enthusiastic about increasing crop yields. His subordinates, afraid to disappoint him, lied and inflated crop yield estimates. As a result, the amount of food taken from Chinese peasant farming communes for use in the cities was based on wildly inflated estimates of crop yields, and the peasants were left with not enough to eat. Most local officials were too afraid to reveal that the peasants were starving. Because the government covered up the deaths, the exact death-by-starvation count is not known, but some estimates suggest that more than 30 million people died during the famine. The Cultural Revolution occurred in China between 1966 and 1976. Chairman Mao Zedong inaugurated the Cultural Revolution to remove lingering capitalist and bourgeois tendencies from Communist China. During the subsequent purges, people accused of bourgeois or capitalist tendencies were abused, imprisoned, and sometimes executed.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Ken Liu is famous as a writer of science fiction and fantasy, influenced both by the SF/Fantasy tradition and by Chinese history and culture. His short story “The Paper Menagerie” is both a work of fantasy and a portrait of a Chinese immigrant mother’s relationship to her American son. Ken Liu’s Dandelion Dynasty novels, *The Grace of Kings*, *The Wall of Storms*, and *The Veiled Throne*, are likewise works of fantasy that draw on Chinese culture for inspiration. Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* is a famous autobiography about growing up Chinese American; like “The Paper Menagerie,” it uses Chinese history and folk culture to provide context for Chinese immigrant and Chinese American experiences. Cixin Liu’s Three-Body Problem trilogy, *The Three Body Problem*, *The Dark Forest*, and *Death’s End*, place science fiction tropes in the context of Chinese history and contemporary Chinese culture. Moreover, Ken Liu translated the Three-Body Problem trilogy from Chinese into English.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Paper Menagerie
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 2011
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story, Fantasy
- **Setting:** Connecticut
- **Climax:** Jack reads the letter his dead mother has written to him.
- **Antagonist:** Prejudice, racism
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Fantasy Fusion. Ken Liu coined the term “silkpunk” to describe his epic fantasy fiction inspired by East Asian history and culture.

Coming Soon. The next installment of Ken Liu’s Dandelion Dynasty trilogy, *Speaking Bones*, is slated for release in 2022.



PLOT SUMMARY

“The Paper Menagerie” describes the relationship between a biracial Chinese American boy, Jack, and his Chinese immigrant mother. When the story begins, a young Jack is crying. To comfort him, his mother makes him an origami tiger and breathes life into it. Later, she makes Jack more magical **paper animals** to play with.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Once, when Jack is a teenager and is no longer speaking to his mother, he asks his father how he and Jack's mother met. His father explains that they met in Hong Kong through an introduction service that matched American men with Asian women. Jack's father saw Jack's mother in a catalogue and then flew to Hong Kong to meet her. When he arrived, he learned that Jack's mother spoke very little English, so he hired a translator to mediate between them. Afterward, Jack's mother immigrated to the U.S. and married his father.

The story shifts back to when Jack is 10, after his family has just moved into a new neighborhood. Jack overhears two female neighbors exchanging racist gossip about his family, wondering why Jack's father married his mother and criticizing Jack's biracial looks. Later, a neighborhood boy named Mark comes over to Jack's house with an Obi-Wan Kenobi action figure. Jack shows Mark his paper animals, and Jack calls them "trash." When Jack's paper tiger knocks over and breaks Mark's action figure, Mark insults Jack's mother and tears up his tiger. Mark begins a campaign of racist bullying against Jack at school. In response, Jack boxes up his paper animals and refuses to respond to his mother when she speaks to him in Chinese. Because Jack won't respond to Chinese and criticizes his mother's English, they slowly stop speaking to each other.

When Jack is in college, his mother is hospitalized with cancer. He flies home to visit her. In the hospital, she asks Jack, if she dies, to take out his paper animals and remember her each year on *Qingming*, the Chinese Festival for the Dead. After Jack leaves, his mother dies. Later, Jack comes home again, with his girlfriend Susan, to help his father move. While packing, Susan finds and rescues the box containing Jack's paper animals. Jack notices the animals no longer contain the magic that allows them to move.

Two years later, on *Qingming*, Jack's paper tiger comes to life again, approaches Jack, and reveals a letter hidden in his insides. The letter is from Jack's mother, written in Chinese. Jack, who cannot read Chinese, travels downtown and finds a Chinese tourist to read the letter for him. The letter tells Jack the story of his mother's life: she was born to a poor Chinese family in the 1950s. Her mother taught her how to fold and animate paper animals, but when she was 10, both her parents died in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Human traffickers found her and sold her as a domestic slave in Hong Kong. When she was 16, to escape the family that had bought her, she signed up for the introduction service that set her up with Jack's father. At first, after immigrating to America, she felt extremely lonely, but when Jack was born, she felt happy, like her family had been returned to her. She ends the letter by asking Jack why he won't speak to her anymore. Jack asks the Chinese tourist to help him write the Chinese character for *ai*, meaning love, over and over on the letter. Then he folds the letter back into a tiger and goes home.

Jack – Jack, the protagonist of "The Paper Menagerie," is the biracial son of a white American father and a Chinese immigrant mother. When Jack is a child, he has a close relationship with his mother. She makes him **paper animals** and breathes life into them, giving them a magic ability to move and play with him. Yet, after Jack overhears the racist gossip of two female neighbors and suffers racist bullying from his neighbor Mark, he turns against his mother. He boxes up the magic paper animals she has made for him and demands that she speak only English. Because Jack won't respond to his mother when she speaks Chinese and criticizes her English, they become estranged. By the time Jack is a high school student, they aren't speaking. When Jack is in college, his mother is hospitalized with cancer. He flies home to visit her, but even in the hospital, he is thinking about his job prospects, not his dying mother. When she asks him, if she dies, to take out his paper animals and remember her on *Qingming*, the Chinese Festival for the Dead, he avoids promising to do so. Yet after Jack's mother's death, Jack's girlfriend Susan finds and saves the paper animals. Two years later, on *Qingming*, the paper tiger that Jack's mother made for him comes to life and reveals to Jack a secret letter from his mother, written in Chinese. Jack finds a Chinese tourist to translate the letter for him. It contains the story of his mother's life and asks Jack why he's stopped speaking to her. After hearing the letter, Jack asks the tourist to help him write the Chinese character for *ai*, which means love, on the letter. Then he refolds the letter into a tiger and carries it home with him. These two final gestures show that Jack regrets his estrangement from his mother and his childhood rejection of his Chinese heritage.

Jack's Mother – Jack's mother is born in the 1950s in China. In early childhood, she learns from her mother how to fold paper into animals and breathe magic life into them. When she is ten, both her parents die in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Afterward, human traffickers find her and sell her as a domestic slave in Hong Kong. At age 16, to escape the family that bought her, she signs up for an introduction service that matches American men with Asian women. Through the introduction service, she meets Jack's father, marries him, and immigrates to America. At first, she feels isolated and misunderstood in America. After Jack is born, however, she feels happy and reconnected to the family she has lost. When Jack is a child, she is very close to him. She makes him the magic **paper animals** that her own mother taught her how to craft. Yet after Jack experiences racist bullying from a neighborhood boy, Mark, he turns against her and rejects his Chinese heritage: he demands she speak English, asks to eat only American food at home, and boxes up the paper animals. Jack's mother remains estranged from her son up until she dies of cancer while he is in college.

After her death, Jack finds a letter she has written to him, telling him the story of her life, explaining how much she loves him, and noting how hurt she is by his rejection. This letter reminds Jack of his love for his mother and reconciles him to his Chinese heritage.

Jack's Father – Jack's father is an American man who meets Jack's mother, a Chinese woman, through an introduction service that matches American men with Asian women. He first sees her in a catalogue of women put together by the introduction service. For a while, they exchange letters. Then he flies to Hong Kong to meet her. When he arrives, he discovers that the introduction service has been writing her letters for her, as she speaks very little English. To surmount the language barrier, he hires a translator. Jack's father and mother speak through the translator. Afterward, they marry and Jack's mother immigrates to the U.S. Although Jack's father cares enough about Jack's mother to hire a translator to speak with her, he does not support her adequately once they have moved to the U.S. When Jack demands that his mother stop speaking Chinese, Jack's father takes his son's side. When Jack rejects the **paper animals** his mother has made, Jack's father buys him new toys. After Jack and his mother stop speaking, Jack's father tries to reconcile them, but he fails. In a way, then, Jack's father represents Jack's American side, which hurts and fails to understand his Chinese immigrant mother.

Mark – Mark is Jack's childhood neighbor. One day, Mark brings an Obi-Wan Kenobi action figure to Jack's house. When Jack shows Mark his own toys, the **paper animals**, Mark calls them "trash." When Jack's magic paper tiger knocks over and breaks Mark's action figure, Mark hits Jack, insults Jack's mother, and tears up his tiger. Later, he subjects Jack to racist bullying at school. As a result of Mark's racist bullying, Jack rejects his mother and his Chinese heritage.

Susan – Susan is Jack's college girlfriend. After Jack's mother dies, she comes home to help Jack and Jack's father pack up the house. She finds the box of Jack's childhood **paper animals** and declares Jack's mother an "amazing artist." Later, she decorates her and Jack's shared apartment with the paper animals.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Two Female Neighbors – These two women are Jack's childhood neighbors. He overhears them exchanging racist gossip about his family, questioning why Jack's father married Jack's mother and criticizing Jack's biracial looks.

The Young Chinese Tourist – This young woman helps Jack by translating the letter that Jack's mother left for him.

occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



RACISM AND IDENTITY

In "The Paper Menagerie," a biracial American boy named Jack struggles with—and eventually embraces—his Chinese heritage, showing how his identity can be both a source of discomfort and of joy. When Jack is very young, he and his mother (who immigrated from China) are very close. He seems comfortable with his Chinese identity then, which is particularly apparent in his relationship to the **paper animals** that his mother makes—animals that she literally brings to life by breathing into them. Jack's mother learned this skill from her own mother back in China, who made the same kinds of toys when she was young, so the animals become an embodiment of Jack's Chinese lineage. When he's young, the animals—like his Chinese identity—are a source of joy, something he easily embraces.

However, once Jack is a little older, he begins to experience racism from neighbors and friends at school. In a particularly traumatic incident, a neighborhood boy named Mark disparages the paper toys for not being as good as his own plastic action figure and says something racist about Jack's family. After this, Jack puts his paper animals away for good and starts gravitating toward his white identity; he insists that his family start eating "American food" and stop speaking Chinese at home, which permanently estranges Jack from his mother. Jack's rejection of the paper toys marks a phase in his life when being Chinese is a source of torment and self-loathing; he feels that his Chinese identity, like the toys themselves, marks him as different and therefore makes him vulnerable. This only changes after Jack's mother's death, when Jack discovers that she wrote him a letter on the inside of his paper tiger in which she explained her own story of her life in China and in the U.S. She points out that his rejection of the paper animals and his refusal to speak Chinese at home hurt her, connecting this behavior to his hatred of himself. This reconnects Jack with his mother and helps him make peace with his own mixed-race identity. When he embraces the paper animals once more at the end of the story, it marks his more mature understanding of his identity; he understands the pain of experiencing racism, but he also knows that being half Chinese can bring him joy, comfort, and connection to his mother.



FAMILIAL LOVE AND ESTRANGEMENT

In "The Paper Menagerie," familial love is always vulnerable to estrangement or destruction, whether by large historical forces or by more personal failings. Thus, the story suggests that such love is inherently fragile. In a letter to her Chinese American son Jack, Jack's mother explains how larger forces destroyed her own



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes

family in China, before she immigrated to the U.S. Clearly, Jack's mother did have a family that loved her: her earliest memory is her own mother giving her the family's only remaining food during the Great Famine in China. Yet during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which pitted "brother against brother," both her parents died, and she was left an orphan. Jack's mother eventually fled orphanhood and exploitation through an introduction service, but Jack's comments on his father "buying" his mother from a catalogue suggests that whatever his mother found in the U.S., it wasn't genuine family. Furthermore, American racism tears apart Jack's own family: after overhearing his neighbors' racist gossip and suffering racist bullying at the hands of his classmates, Jack turns on his mother. Because he refuses to listen to her when she speaks Chinese and criticizes her English, they stop speaking to each other, becoming estranged until her death. Jack's father sides with him, reinforcing the idea that his parents' marriage wasn't founded on genuine love to begin with.

"The Paper Menagerie" also suggests that although families can't always be successfully rebuilt, remembrance can help heal estrangement. Though orphaned at the age of 10, Jack's mother continues to write letters to her dead parents, fold the letters into magical **paper cranes**, and send the cranes flying toward China. When Jack is a child, she includes him in this ritual. Similarly, after his mother's death, Jack partially reconciles with her by reading a letter she has left for him within a paper tiger and remembering her. In "The Paper Menagerie," then, elusive familial love often survives most strongly through remembrance of what's been lost.



LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION

In "The Paper Menagerie," acts of translation represent the desire for human connection and the attempt to understand other people. Early in the story, Jack asks his American father how he came to marry his Chinese mother, and Jack's father explains that he met Jack's mother through an introduction service. Initially, he believed that she spoke English because the introduction service told him so and wrote English letters to him on her behalf. When he flew to meet her in Hong Kong, however, he learned that she spoke almost no English. Rather than becoming angry, he hired a translator. This choice to translate and seek connection despite the language barrier, rather than give up on a possible relationship, eventually leads to Jack's father and mother marrying and having Jack. Similarly, when Jack finds a letter from his mother after her death, he immediately searches for a Chinese tourist to read it aloud, translating the letter from written to spoken Chinese. The speed with which Jack searches for a translator indicates his desire to connect with and understand his mother after her death.

By contrast, when characters in "The Paper Menagerie" refuse to translate, they are refusing connection and understanding.

For example, after his neighbor Mark subjects Jack to racist bullying, Jack refuses to translate for his mother the racist slur Mark called him and demands that she speak only English from then on. By ignoring her request for translation, Jack prevents her from understanding how he is suffering—a disconnect that damages their relationship for the rest of his mother's life. By marking moments of connection and disconnection between characters with successful or failed translations, "The Paper Menagerie" suggests that human connection demands hard work and even discomfort, and that the effort is worth it in order to build understanding.



ART VS. CONSUMER ITEMS

"The Paper Menagerie" defines true art by contrasting it with mere consumer items. When the main character Jack is young, his mother folds him **paper animals** out of leftover Christmas wrapping paper. She brings the animals to life by blowing into them, a skill she learned from her own mother back in China. Much later, after Jack's mother has died, Jack's girlfriend Susan finds the paper animals and declares that Jack's mother was "an amazing artist." The story contrasts Jack's paper animals with an Obi-Wan Kenobi action figure belonging to Jack's childhood neighbor Mark. Mark fails to appreciate the paper animals, calling them "trash." When Jack's paper tiger Laohu jumps on the Obi-Wan Kenobi action figure and breaks it, Mark tears up Laohu and begins bullying Jack. Later, Jack gives Mark a new Obi-Wan Kenobi action figure to substitute for the one broken. By contrasting the magical paper animals with the inert action figure, "The Paper Menagerie" suggests that real art is in some sense alive, whereas consumer items are dead; real art is created by an individual artist, whereas consumer items are mass produced; and real art is irreplaceable, whereas consumer items can be replaced.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



PAPER ANIMALS

In "The Paper Menagerie," the paper animals that Jack's mother makes for Jack symbolize his Chinese heritage. The paper animals are an artisanal specialty of Sigulu Village, where Jack's mother grew up in China; she learned to make them and animate them with her breath from her own mother. When Jack is a child, he helps his mother write letters to her dead parents back in China. His mother then folds the letter into a crane, animates it, and sends it flying to her own parents' graves. Thus, the paper animals literally travel between Jack in America and his ancestors in China.

Throughout “The Paper Menagerie,” Jack’s relationship to the paper animals tracks his relationship to his Chinese heritage. When he is young, he has an uncomplicated, positive relationship with both: he happily plays with the paper animals and speaks Chinese with his mother. As he grows older, Jack pushes his Chinese heritage away. A neighborhood boy, Mark, calls Jack’s paper animals “trash,” insults his mother, and subjects him to racist bullying. In response, Jack demands his mother speak English and boxes up his paper animals. By boxing up his paper animals, Jack is figuratively “boxing up” his Chinese heritage to assimilate into American culture. At the end of the story, Jack reconnects with his Chinese heritage through the intervention of his childhood paper tiger, Laohu. Laohu contains a letter that Jack’s mother wrote to him before her death. It explains his mother’s childhood in China and how, after Jack’s birth, he made her feel connected to the homeland and family she had lost. The letter inside Laohu reconciles Jack to his mother and his Chinese heritage: he writes the Chinese character for *ai*, meaning love, all over the letter, refolds the letter into the shape of a tiger, and tenderly carries it home with him. Thus Jack’s love for, rejection of, and reunification with his paper animals mirrors his love for, rejection of, and reunification with his Chinese heritage.

Christmas wrapping paper to comfort him. Whereas Jack’s father has simply left the room to avoid Jack’s crying, Jack’s mother proactively and creatively comforts him. Her tenacity in showing her love for him foreshadows how she will reach out to him over and over throughout the story despite the estrangement that threatens to tear them apart.

This passage also demonstrates that Jack’s mother is a resourceful artist. While many people simply throw out their Christmas wrapping paper after Christmas is over, Jack’s mother saves leftover paper and later turns it into something new and beautiful—and also something *alive*, since the origami animals come to life. In this way, the animals the difference between lifeless, disposable consumer items (which feature heavily in American culture) and unique cultural artifacts, which the story suggests are more valuable.

Finally, this passage introduces Jack’s biracial identity as the son of a white American father and Chinese immigrant mother. Because Jack’s Chinese mother makes him the paper animals and introduces them to him in Chinese, the reader associates the animals with Jack’s Chinese heritage. Indeed, Jack’s relationship to the animals throughout the story will parallel his increasingly fraught relationship with his Chinese heritage. Yet Jack’s mother is repurposing Christmas wrapping paper—a material associated with Christianity and Western culture—to make these traditional Chinese art objects, thus suggesting a potential synthesis of American and Chinese cultures for Jack.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Saga Press edition of *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories* published in 2016.

The Paper Menagerie Quotes


●● A little paper tiger stood on the table, the size of two fists placed together. The skin of the tiger was the pattern on the wrapping paper, white background with red candy canes and green Christmas trees.

[...]

“*Zhe jiao zhezhi*,” Mom said. *This is called origami.*

Related Characters: Jack’s Mother (speaker), Jack

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, young Jack has just been crying, and Jack’s mother has folded him a paper tiger out of leftover

●● The neighbors conversed in the living room, not trying to be particularly quiet.

“He seems like a normal enough man. Why did he do that?”

“Something about the mixing never seems right. The child looks unfinished. Slanty eyes, white face. A little monster.”

“Do you think *he* can speak English?”

The women hushed.

Related Characters: Two Female Neighbors (speaker), Jack, Jack’s Father, Jack’s Mother

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jack’s family has just moved, and two female neighbors visit them at their new house. Jack’s father briefly

leaves on an errand, and the neighbors begin to exchange racist gossip about Jack's family.

The passage is important because it's Jack's first memory of overt American racism. That the neighbors are "not trying to be particularly quiet" in their gossip suggests that they don't, at first, believe either Jack or his mother will be able to understand them. They don't understand that because Jack is biracial and has grown up in the U.S., he speaks English as well as Chinese. When one woman says that Jack's father "seems normal" and questions why he married Jack's mother, she is implying that marrying someone of another race or marrying an immigrant is abnormal behavior. When the other woman calls Jack a "monster," she is implying that Jack is monstrous simply because he's biracial.

Jack does not narrate his response to the women's racist gossip in the moment. Soon after this, however, he comes to hate that he looks like his mother and demands that his mother only speak English. His later reactions to American racism suggest that he internalizes the women's criticism of his appearance and culture. In addition, his later rejection of the Chinese language suggests that he sees being able to speak English as a defense against American racism, which explains why he wants his mother to speak English after he suffers more intense racist bullying.



●● Mark, one of the neighborhood boys, came over with his Star Wars action figures. Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber lit up and he could swing his arms and say, in a tinny voice, "Use the Force!" I didn't think the figure looked much like the real Obi-Wan at all.


Together, we watched him repeat this performance five times on the coffee table. "Can he do anything else?" I asked.

Mark was annoyed by my question. "Look at all the details," he said.

I looked at the details. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to say.

Related Characters: Mark, Jack (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 181-182

Explanation and Analysis


This passage occurs just after Jack has overheard his two


female neighbors exchanging racist gossip about his family. That Jack is willing to watch Mark's Obi-Wan Kenobi action figure do the same thing "five times" before asking whether it can do something else suggests that he is trying to make friends with Mark and doesn't want to offend him. At the same time, however, Jack is not impressed with the action figure. As a franchise tie-in toy, the action figure represents American consumer culture: a cheap, mass-produced item, which does not even resemble the character it is supposed to represent.

Although Jack's paper animals do not appear in this brief passage, Jack's lack of interest in the action figure suggests that at this point in the story, he still prefers the animals—unique, artistically produced items that derive from his Chinese heritage—to American consumer culture. Mark's annoyance that Jack is not impressed with his toy foreshadows conflict between them, likely due to this divide between American and Chinese culture.

●● Mark grabbed Laohu and his snarl was choked off as Mark crumpled him in his hand and tore him in half. He balled up the two pieces of paper and threw them at me. "Here's your stupid cheap Chinese garbage."

Related Characters: Mark, Jack (speaker), Jack's Mother

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jack and Mark are having a fight over their respective toys. Jack's paper tiger, Laohu, has knocked over and broken Mark's Obi-Wan Kenobi action figure. In response, Mark has insulted Jack's mother. Here, Mark's attack on Laohu is also an attack on Jack's Chinese heritage, as he calls Laohu "Chinese garbage." That Laohu can easily be torn in two suggests that Jack's relationship to his Chinese heritage is fragile and can be destroyed by American racism. In addition, that Mark tears Laohu into two pieces foreshadows how which Jack, responding to American racism, will separate his Chinese American identity into two pieces, hiding his Chinese side and embracing his American side.

The paper tiger represents not only Jack's Chinese heritage but also his mother's artistry. So, Mark's inability to see the

tiger's true value suggests that not every audience can appreciate true art, especially when it's unfamiliar and associated with a different culture. The tiger's fragility, meanwhile, suggests that art is delicate and must be protected if it is to survive.

☝ “English,” I said. “Speak English.”

She tried. “What happen?”

I pushed the chopsticks and the bowl before me away: stir-fried green peppers with five-spice beef. “We should eat American food.”

Dad tried to reason. “A lot of families cook Chinese sometimes.”

“We are not other families.” I looked at him. *Other families don't have moms who don't belong.*

He looked away. And then he put a hand on Mom's shoulder. “I'll get you a cookbook.”

Related Characters: Jack, Jack's Mother, Jack's Father (speaker), Mark, Two Female Neighbors

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

Jack's neighbor Mark has subjected him to two weeks of racist bullying at school. In response to this racist bullying, Jack demands that his mother speak English and rejects the Chinese food she has made, internalizing the racism he has suffered and projecting it onto his mother. At the same time, however, his demand that his mother speak English may be related to the earlier incident in which he overheard two female neighbors exchanging racist gossip about his family that they assumed neither he nor his mother could understand. Since Jack and his mother were subjected to racism on the assumption that they couldn't understand English, Jack may believe that if his mother demonstrates a command of English, that will partially protect the family from racism.

This scene demonstrates estrangement both between Jack and his mother and between Jack's parents. The estrangement between Jack and his mother is clear: he rejects any attempt she makes to communicate in Chinese and demands that she speak English, which is not her first language. Given that language has been an important point of connection for them thus far, Jack's decision to cut off this part of their relationship (and their shared culture) is


significant. The lack of understanding between Jack's father and Jack's mother is more subtle, but also important. Although Jack's father initially tries to persuade Jack that it is fine for his mother to cook Chinese food, he quickly gives up. Instead of demanding that Jack respect his mother and embrace the Chinese half of his heritage, he says he will get her a cookbook so that she can learn to make American food. Jack's father's failure to defend his wife and accept her as she is illustrates how American racism can create estrangement even within close family relationships.

☝ Dad bought me a full set of Star Wars action figures. I gave the Obi-Wan Kenobi to Mark.

I packed the paper menagerie in a large shoe box and put it under the bed.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Jack's Father, Mark, Jack's Mother

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 184



Explanation and Analysis


This passage occurs after Jack has rejected his mother's Chinese cooking and demanded new toys to replace the paper animals she has made him. That Jack receives the same toys Mark has suggests that he is now actively trying to assimilate into American consumer culture. That he gives Mark his own Obi-Wan Kenobi action figure to replace the one Laohu broke suggests that he is still trying to make friends with Mark, despite the racist bullying Mark has subjected him to. In trying to make friends with Mark, Jack reveals that he does not blame Mark for the racist bullying. Instead, the story implies that Jack blames his Chinese mother and their Chinese heritage. The reader can see this implication in Jack boxing up and hiding his paper animals, which symbolize his Chinese heritage and which Mark insulted earlier in the story. By hiding his paper animals, Jack is trying to hide his culture, on the assumption that hiding his Chinese heritage will protect him from bullies and allow him to assimilate into American culture.

“If I don’t make it, don’t be too sad and hurt your health. Focus on your life. Just keep that box you have in the attic with you, and every year, at *Qingming*, just take it out and think about me. I’ll be with you always.”

Qingming was the Chinese Festival for the Dead. When I was very young, Mom used to write a letter on *Qingming* to her dead parents back in China, telling them the good news about the past year of her life in America. She would read the letter out loud to me, and if I made a comment about something, she would write it down in the letter too. Then she would fold the letter into a paper crane and release it, facing west. We would then watch as the crane flapped its crisp wings on its long journal west, toward the Pacific, toward China, toward the graves of Mom’s family.

Related Characters: Jack’s Mother, Jack (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after Jack’s mother is hospitalized while Jack is in college. Jack has flown home from school and is visiting her in the hospital. The passage reveals how entwined with Jack’s relationship to his mother and his Chinese heritage the paper animals really are. First, despite their estrangement, Jack’s mother is still asking him to remember her and promising that she will be with him in memory. It’s clear, then, that Jack’s rejection of her due to internalized racism has not quelled her motherly love for him. She expresses that love by asking Jack to remember her through the paper animals she has made for him.

Second, readers learn here that the paper animals have been not only figuratively but also physically connecting Jack to his Chinese heritage. When he was a child, he helped his mother write letters to her dead parents, which she folded into paper cranes, animated, and sent flying toward China. The paper animals travel between Jack and his Chinese grandparents and other relatives whom he has never met. This passage thus makes clearer the relationship between the paper animals and Jack’s connection to his Chinese family, and it also foreshadows the letter Jack will receive from his mother (which contains her life story) after she has died.


Susan found the shoe box in the attic. The paper menagerie, hidden in the uninsulated darkness of the attic for so long, had become brittle, and the bright wrapping paper patterns had faded.

“I’ve never seen origami like this,” Susan said. “Your mom was an amazing artist.”

The paper animals did not move. Perhaps whatever magic had animated them stopped when Mom died. Or perhaps I had only imagined that these paper constructions were once alive. The memory of children could not be trusted.

Related Characters: Susan, Jack (speaker), Jack’s Mother, Jack’s Father

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 187



Explanation and Analysis


This passage occurs after Jack’s mother has died, when Jack and his girlfriend Susan have come to help Jack’s father clean out the house. Jack is implicitly questioning whether the Chinese part of his identity has survived his mother’s death. The paper animals, which connect him to his mother and his Chinese heritage, have become “brittle” and lost their animation. As the paper animals have symbolized Jack’s Chinese heritage throughout the story, their fragility and lack of movement here suggest that perhaps that part of Jack died with his mother. Indeed, Jack feels so estranged from his Chinese heritage at this point in the story that he questions whether the paper animals ever truly had life.

Yet this passage also foreshadows Jack’s reevaluation of the paper animals later in the story. Susan, who seems unaware of the animals’ fraught symbolism for Jack, sees them simply as evidence that Jack’s mother was “an amazing artist.” By calling the paper animals art and rescuing them from the attic, Susan contradicts Jack’s earlier devaluation of the paper animals and of his Chinese culture.

I took the letter with me downtown, where I knew the Chinese tour buses stopped. I stopped every tourist, asking, “*Nin hui du zhongwen ma?*” *Can you read Chinese?* I hadn’t spoken Chinese in so long that I wasn’t sure if they understood.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Jack’s Mother

Related Themes:  


Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 188


Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jack has just discovered a letter (written in Chinese) from his dead mother hidden inside his paper tiger, Laohu. Rather than go through formal channels to find a translator, Jack asks strangers to figure out what his mother's letter says as quickly as possible. This strange behavior indicates how badly Jack wants to know what his mother has written to him. The passage thus implies that Jack regrets his estrangement from his mother and wants to reconnect with her, albeit after she has died.

In this passage, Jack is speaking Chinese again, after having refused to speak it during his adolescence and adulthood. That he speaks Chinese here again suggests that he is reconsidering his rejection of his Chinese culture. Furthermore, the fact that he has noticed and remembered where he could find Chinese tourists suggests that perhaps he has been curious about reconnecting with his Chinese heritage even before he received his mother's letter.

 *You know what the Chinese think is the saddest feeling in the world? It's for a child to finally grow the desire to take care of his parents, only to realize that they were long gone.*

Related Characters: Jack's Mother (speaker), Jack


Related Themes: 

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs toward the end of Jack's mother's letter to him. In the letter, she has told him the story of her life: how both her parents died during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, how she was sold as a domestic slave in Hong Kong, and how she joined the "introduction" (match-making) service that matched her with Jack's father in order to escape that slavery and immigrate to the U.S. At this point in the letter, Jack's mother is explicitly reflecting on how she wishes she could have cared for her own parents but was prevented from doing so by large historical forces. Yet, given Jack's haste to translate the letter from his mother, the story is suggesting that Jack has also realized, too late,

that he wishes he could have cared for his own mother better. The story thus parallels the loss of Jack's mother's parents in the Chinese Cultural Revolution with Jack's estrangement from his mother due to the American racism he internalized as a child and adolescent.

 The young woman handed the paper back to me. I could not bear to look into her face.

Without looking up, I asked for her help in tracing out the character for *ai* on the paper below Mom's letter. I wrote the character again and again on the paper, intertwining my pen strokes with her words.

The young woman reached out and put a hand on my shoulder. Then she got up and left, leaving me alone with my mother.

Following the creases, I refolded the paper back into Laohu. I cradled him in the crook of my arm, and as he purred, we began the walk home.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Jack's Mother

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

The young woman whom Jack found to read his mother's letter for him has just finished reading it to him. This passage conveys Jack's attempt to reconcile with his mother and his embrace of his Chinese heritage.

First, Jack clearly wants to reconcile with his mother: that he cannot look at the woman who translated the letter for him suggests that he is ashamed of his past behavior toward his mother and wishes he could change it. When he asks for help writing the Chinese character that means "love" onto the letter, he is expressing his love for his mother, which he did not express to her during her lifetime. Crucially, he is expressing his love in Chinese, which he previously demanded that his mother not speak. His use of Chinese thus suggests both an apology and a desire for connection.

Second, Jack is reconnecting here with his Chinese heritage. The reader can see this reconnection overtly in Jack's seeking a Chinese woman who can read his mother's letter for him and in his writing the Chinese character for love on his mother's letter. The reader can also see this in the tenderness with which Jack treats the paper tiger, Laohu: he "cradle[s]" Laohu as he carries him home, a word

choice that suggests gentle treatment for a treasured object. Since the paper animals have represented Jack's Chinese heritage throughout the story, Jack's tenderness

toward the paper tiger at the end of the story shows that he is embracing his Chinese heritage once more.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE PAPER MENAGERIE

One day, as a young child, Jack won't stop crying. In response, his mother begins making him a tiger out of wrapping paper left over from Christmas. Interested, Jack stops crying. When his mother finishes the tiger, she breathes into it, which brings the **paper tiger** to life. Jack tries to touch the tiger. It leaps on his finger and roars at him, which makes him laugh. In Chinese, his mother explains that what she has just done is origami.

Jack's father first saw his mother in a catalog from an "introduction service." As a teenager, Jack learns the details from his father, who is trying to get him to speak to his mother again. Jack's parents exchanged letters through the introduction service. When Jack's father traveled to Hong Kong to meet her, however, he learned the introduction service had been writing her letters for her, because she spoke almost no English. To communicate with her, he hired a woman to translate between them. Jack's mother and father spoke to each other through the translator. Afterward, Jack's father traveled back to the U.S. and arranged for Jack's mother to immigrate. The next year, Jack was born.

Back in Jack's childhood, after making Jack the **tiger**, his mother makes more origami animals for him. The origami water buffalo, which "want[s] to wallow, like a real buffalo," leaps into some soy sauce and damages his legs. Laohu—the origami tiger—is damaged when a bird he is stalking in the backyard fights back. Jack puts his origami shark in water, but it unfolds back into "a wet piece of paper," so his mother folds him another shark, this one made of tinfoil and able to swim in water.

In making Jack a tiger out of leftover Christmas paper, Jack's mother is repurposing something mass-produced and disposable into something special and irreplaceable. Moreover, the fact that the paper tiger comes to life introduces a magical realist element to the story and literalizes the idea that art is alive, whereas consumer items (like the wrapping paper) are lifeless. From this interaction, it's clear that Jack and his mother are close, and that their Chinese culture (which they share through language and through traditions like origami) is something that brings Jack joy at this stage in his life.



The fact that Jack's parents used an "introduction" (match-making) service suggests that they both longed to connect with another person, to the point that they were willing to overcome geographical and linguistic hurdles to do so. This passage reveals that Jack is no longer speaking to his mother when he's a teenager—whereas language (and, by extension, their Chinese culture) connected them during Jack's childhood, this part of their relationship has since been cut off, though it's not clear why. In contrast to Jack, who refuses to speak to his mother, Jack's father was so interested in speaking with her when they first met that he hired a translator to overcome the language barrier. That Jack's mother and father did eventually marry suggests that it's possible for determined people to overcome linguistic and cultural differences to connect with one another.



Jack's mother's willingness to make him so many paper animals shows how deeply she cares for him, and also how important it is to her for Jack to have this small connection to his Chinese heritage. Indeed, the paper animals symbolize Jack's relationship with his Chinese heritage—and the damage, repair, and transformation that various animals undergo in this passage foreshadow the tumultuous relationship Jack will have with his culture as he grows up.



Jack's family moves when he is 10 years old. Two female neighbors visit them. While the neighbors are visiting, Jack's father leaves to deal with some bills. While his father is gone, Jack overhears the neighbors sharing racist gossip about his family. One woman questions why his father married his mother in the first place, while the other says that racial "mixing" makes Jack look like a "monster." Then the two women come into the living room where Jack is reading. One asks him his name; when he tells her, she says the name Jack "doesn't sound very Chinesey." Then Jack's mother enters the room, and the four of them wait in silence until Jack's father returns.

The two female neighbors share racist gossip about Jack's family only after Jack's father has gone, suggesting that they don't want to be overheard by someone who can understand them but don't believe American-born Jack can understand English. The neighbor who is surprised that Jack's name isn't Chinese reveals that she thinks of Jack as fully Chinese because he has a Chinese mother—even though he also has an American father and lives in the U.S. This is an early instance of Jack's Chinese heritage being used against him rather than being something that he finds joy and pride in. The fact that the neighbors, Jack, and his mother wait in silence again calls attention to the power of language to unite people, but also to divide people.



A boy named Mark visits Jack's house. He brings an Obi-Wan Kenobi action figure. Jack isn't impressed by the action figure, so Mark asks to see his toys. Jack shows him the **origami tiger** Laohu. At first, Jack introduces Laohu to Mark in Chinese, but then he uses English. Seeing that Laohu is made of wrapping paper, Mark calls him "trash." Laohu jumps on Mark's action figure and breaks it. When Jack laughs, Mark hits him, complaining that the toy cost a lot of money: "It probably cost more than what your dad paid for your mom!" Laohu attacks Mark, who rips Laohu in two and leaves. Jack tries to repair Laohu.

Mark's Obi-Wan Kenobi action figure is a product of American consumer culture. At this point, Jack has no desire to assimilate wholly to American culture: he prefers the paper animals his mother has created, art based in her Chinese heritage. Jack does try to connect with Mark, introducing him to Laohu in Chinese and then translating into English, but Mark can't appreciate Laohu, hinting at his prejudiced attitude toward cultures that are different from his own. When Laohu breaks Mark's action figure, Mark becomes overtly offensive and destructive. Given that Laohu symbolizes Jack's relationship to his Chinese heritage, the damage that Mark does to Laohu foreshadows a shift in how Jack view his culture.



For two weeks at school, Mark bullies Jack. When Jack comes home, his mother asks him a question in Chinese, but he ignores her. When he, his father, and his mother are having dinner, Jack asks whether he has a "chink face." His father, who realizes Jack is being bullied because he's half Chinese, says no. In Chinese, his mother asks about the racial slur "chink." Jack demands that she speak English and that the family start eating "American food." Twice more his mother asks him questions in Chinese, and twice more he demands she speak English.

Jack's question about his appearance suggests that other students have been bullying him for being biracial and directing racist slurs at him. That Jack ignores his mother's questions and refuses to translate the racial slur for her suggests a breakdown in communication between them, as a willingness to speak the same language or translate has been integral to their relationship thus far. Finally, Jack's demands that his mother speak English and his insistence that they start eating "American food" show how the racist bullying he has endured is affecting him: American racism is turning him against his Chinese heritage.



Jack's father takes Jack's side in the argument, insisting that his mother speak English so that Jack can assimilate. Jack's mother tries to explain that when she says the Chinese word for love, she feels it in her heart, whereas when she says the English word for love, she only feels it on her lips. Jack's father reminds her that she's in the U.S. She deflates, "like the water buffalo when **Laohu** used to pounce on him and squeeze the air of life out of him." Jack demands new toys.

That Jack's father takes Jack's side suggests he doesn't fully understand or appreciate his wife's immigrant identity. Rather than believing that Americans should accept her the way she is, he believes that she should conform to American culture. Though Jack's mother tries to explain her strong emotional connection to her heritage and language, Jack's father rejects her explanation. The simile comparing Jack's mother to the paper water buffalo she folded for Jack reminds readers both that the animals represent Jack's Chinese heritage and that that heritage is under attack. Jack's demand for new toys—his rejection of the paper animals his mother has made for him—shows that he is beginning to reject his Chinese culture.



Jack's father gets him Star Wars action figures, including an Obi-Wan Kenobi figure like the one that **Laohu** broke. Jack gives his Obi-Wan Kenobi to Mark. He packs his origami animals in a box and puts them away, first under his bed and then in the attic.

By buying Jack American toys to replace his paper animals, Jack's father cooperates in Jack's rejection of his Chinese heritage and Jack's estrangement from his mother. That Jack gives Mark a replacement Obi-Wan Kenobi action figure suggests that he mistakenly blames his mother, and not Mark, for Mark's racist bullying. It also shows that American consumer items like action figures are easily replaceable, in contrast to art items like the origami animals that are unique and irreplaceable. When Jack boxes up his paper animals and hides them, meanwhile, he is figuratively boxing up and hiding his Chinese heritage to assimilate into American culture.



Because Jack refuses to answer his mother when she speaks Chinese and corrects her usage when she speaks English, she largely no longer speaks to him. For a while, she continues making him **origami animals**, but he puts them all in the box in the attic. Eventually, she stops making the animals too. Jack begins to feel that they have "nothing in common."

Jack insists that his mother assimilate to American culture, but at the same time he rejects her attempts at assimilation by harshly criticizing her English. It seems that nothing she can do will be good enough for him. At first, Jack's mother tries to keep him connected to his Chinese heritage by continuing to make him paper animals. After he continues to reject her, however, she seems to give up. Jack's thought that he has "nothing in common" with his mother reflects a total estrangement from both her and their shared culture.



When Jack is in college, his mother is hospitalized with cancer. Jack and his father come to visit her, but Jack's thoughts remain preoccupied by the corporate recruiters he was meeting back on campus. Jack's mother asks Jack, in the event that she dies, to take out his box of **origami animals** each year on *Qingming*, "the Chinese Festival for the Dead." Jack blows her off, but she insists.

At this point, Jack fully identifies with stereotypical American culture: even at his mother's deathbed, he is focused on work and financial success. His mother attempts to connect him to his Chinese heritage one more time by asking him to take out his paper animals and remember her if she dies, but he avoids answering her request.



When Jack tries to comfort his mother, she begins speaking Chinese, and he remembers the dinner when she explained to him and his father that she feels the Chinese word for love in her heart. Jack tells her to be quiet. While he's flying back to college, she dies.

That Jack tries to comfort his mother, despite their estrangement, suggests that he may still love her after all. Similarly, his memory of her explaining her emotional connection to the Chinese language suggests that he may understand, deep down, how much he hurt her by demanding that she speak English. Nevertheless, Jack tells her to be quiet rather than encouraging her to speak, which suggests that he isn't ready to acknowledge how much he has hurt her, nor is he ready to reconnect with his Chinese heritage.



After his mother's death, Jack's father decides to sell their house. Jack and his girlfriend Susan fly home to help him prepare for the sale. While cleaning out the attic, Susan finds the box full of the **origami animals** that Jack's mother made for him. She declares that Jack's mother was an "amazing artist." Jack reflects that the animals don't move anymore. He isn't sure whether they've stopped moving because his mother died or because they never could and, as a child, he simply believed that they did.

Unlike Jack, his girlfriend Susan is able to recognize that the paper animals Jack's mother folded are works of art. The high value she places on the paper animals foreshadows that Jack may reevaluate them in the future. When Jack notes that the paper animals no longer move, he is implicitly wondering whether his mother's death has permanently severed his connection to his Chinese heritage.



Two years later, Jack sees sharks on TV and remembers his mother making an **origami shark** for him out of tinfoil. He hears a noise—it's Laohu, moving around. Susan has put Jack's origami animals throughout their shared apartment, and Jack realizes that his mother must have repaired Laohu after Mark destroyed him. After playing with Jack for a moment, Laohu "unfold[s] himself," and Jack sees that his mother wrote a letter to him in Chinese on Laohu's insides. Jack searches online and realizes that it's *Qingming*, the day his mother asked him to use the origami animals to remember her.

That Jack's mother repaired Laohu after Mark ripped him suggests that the paper animals she made were irreplaceable art objects, worthy of repair, rather than consumer objects that could easily be replaced—something that Susan also seems to appreciate. It also suggests that she never truly gave up on reconnecting Jack with his Chinese heritage. When Laohu comes alive, it implies that Jack's mother's death didn't sever his connection to his Chinese heritage—he is still connected to that heritage through his memory of his mother.



Jack, who can't read Chinese, travels downtown and accosts Chinese tourists for help reading the letter. A young female tourist helps him. The letter begins with Jack's mother acknowledging their estrangement. She writes that because of her illness, she has decided to communicate with him. She explains that when she dies, the **origami animals** she made for him will stop moving; however, Jack can reanimate them by thinking of her on *Qingming*. She also explains that she wrote to him in Chinese, even though he doesn't speak it, because she wants "to write with all [her] heart."

The speed with which Jack seeks out someone capable of translating the letter from written to spoken Chinese for him shows how much he wants to reconnect with his mother now that she has died. Again, language serves as an important point of connection between characters, even transcending time and death to bring them closer. Jack's mother's explanation that the paper animals will come alive when he remembers her affirms that, despite her death, she still connects him to his Chinese heritage. Her decision to write to him in Chinese, despite his adolescent demands that she use only English, shows how important her Chinese identity was to her, and how appreciating their shared Chinese culture is central to Jack fully understanding and valuing her.



Jack's mother writes him "the story of [her] life." She was born in China to a poor family in the late 1950s. In her early childhood, the Great Famine killed 30 million Chinese people, but her family survived. When she was a child, her mother taught her how to fold and breathe life into **paper animals**. In 1966, during the Cultural Revolution, her family was declared "enemies of the people" and "struggled against." Her mother committed suicide, and her father was kidnapped and never seen again. Jack's mother, then 10 years old, ran away and tried to travel to Hong Kong, where her mother's brother lived.

On the way to Hong Kong, human traffickers found Jack's mother. They brought her to Hong Kong and sold her as a domestic slave to the Chin family. The Chin family regularly beat her—for her own mistakes, for their sons' mistakes, and for trying to learn English. Jack's mother spent six years as a domestic slave. Then one day in the market, a woman told her that if she didn't escape the Chin family, Mr. Chin would begin sexually abusing her. The woman suggested that Jack's mother marry an American man to escape the Chins. That was why she ended up working with the introduction service that connected her with Jack's father.

Despite her gratitude to Jack's father, Jack's mother felt isolated in the U.S. because, as she says, "no one understood me, and I understood nothing." After Jack was born, however, she felt that Jack connected her to the family and country she had lost. She loved teaching him to speak Chinese and to animate **paper animals**. Jack brought her closer to Jack's father, and it also made her miss her own parents. She says, "You know what the Chinese think is the saddest feeling in the world? It's for a child to finally grow the desire to take care of his parents, only to realize that they were long gone."

Jack's mother concludes the letter by acknowledging Jack's racial self-hatred, his dislike of the Chinese features that he shares with her. She asks him to acknowledge how he hurt her when, after the happiness his birth brought her, he refused to speak with her or listen to her speaking to him in Chinese. She asks him why he has been behaving in this way.

Jack's mother is trying to give Jack the historical context to understand the choices she made in her life. To do so, she has to explain large historical events such as the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution in China. Her explanations suggest that large historical events indelibly shape not only world history but people's private lives. Meanwhile, that her own mother taught her how to fold and animate paper animals suggests that the animals are a traditional Chinese art, thereby connecting Jack more closely to his Chinese heritage than even he knew.



Jack's mother's early life was full of terrible hardship. Not only was she orphaned, but she was also enslaved, economically exploited, and physically abused. She worked with the introduction service that matched her with Jack's father not to find love, but to escape the possibility of sexual abuse. Thus, Jack's mother is explaining to Jack how historical events beyond her control destroyed her family and estranged her from human connection.



As a Chinese immigrant who spoke little English, Jack's mother felt confused and isolated. She reveals to Jack that their relationship was a two-way street: not only did she connect him to his Chinese heritage, but after he was born, he helped connect her to hers. By teaching him to speak Chinese and making him paper animals, she kept her memories of her own parents alive. Yet her relationship with him also reminded her of her forced separation from her own family and country, which she lost due to historical events beyond her control.



Jack's mother accurately diagnoses the reason for Jack's estrangement from her: due to the racist bullying he suffered, he internalized American racism and came to hate his Chinese side. By pointing out how much he has hurt her, she stands up for herself and criticizes him blaming her for the racism he faced, which was beyond her control.



When the letter ends, Jack requests that the woman who translated it help him write the character for *ai*, the Chinese word for love. He writes the character for *ai* all over his mother's letter. After that, the translator leaves. Jack folds his mother's letter so that it becomes **Laohu** again and carries Laohu home.

By writing the word for love in Chinese, Jack is attempting to express his love for his mother and reconnect with her and their shared culture after their death. Moreover, refolding Laohu and bringing him home is a way of cherishing his Chinese heritage. Thus, at the end of the story, Jack reconciles with his mother's memory and reaffirms his connection to the Chinese side of his family.





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