

Zoe Zdrodowski
Dr. Garvey
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Extinguishing the Red Candle to Ignite Freedom
Essay #2

Imagine a wedding and picture the bride. Chances are, she is wearing a white gown. The tradition of brides wearing white has been ingrained in our culture for so long that we rarely stop to question it—we simply cannot envision a bride in any other color. While these customs are beautiful parts of our culture, they also reveal how traditions by their very nature resist change. In “The Red Candle,” a chapter of Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club*, Lindo Jong manipulates three traditions to transform them from means of oppression into vehicles for reclaiming her autonomy. In so doing, Tan urges us to not look at tradition solely as a force of constraint, but also as a tool for empowerment.

Although the red candle symbolizes the unbreakable bond of tradition, Lindo is nevertheless able to subvert its authority by extinguishing it in order to escape her forced marriage. Lindo, promised to the boy Tyan-Yu at a young age, feels ineluctably trapped in an engagement she has no control over. Because Chinese families take as an auspicious sign a red candle's burning itself out over the course of the wedding night, Lindo sees an opportunity to extricate herself from her marriage. Lindo uses specific vocabulary to describe the candle like “seal,” “forever,” and “no excuses” to highlight the unyielding and permanent nature of this tradition (55). The candle is a harbinger of Lindo's future, one in which the stifling constraints of an arranged marriage and a fate decided without her consent slowly wear away her will to live. Lindo refuses to succumb to despair and instead adapts an oppressive symbol of her future into a tool for her advantage by navigating and manipulating tradition without allowing it to fully

constrain her. Still early in her journey to manipulate tradition, however; she remains afraid of defying tradition herself, admitting, “I was praying to Buddha, the goddess of mercy, and the full moon—to make that candle go out” (56). Lindo’s plea demonstrates her tentative rebellion against this sacrosanct tradition. Instead of escaping her situation with her own agency, Lindo passively asks for help and hopes that spirits will answer her call. Nevertheless, Lindo overcomes her initial reluctance and finally blows out the candle. She adds, “I immediately shivered with fear [...] but nothing happened” (56), the words “shivered” and “fear” capture Lindo’s internal struggle as she begins to challenge tradition, yet remains bound by its weight. Despite Lindo’s distress, neither her prayers nor her actions yield tangible results, yet the universe does not actively prevent her from taking the initiative and blowing the candle out. This moment marks a critical moment in Lindo’s evolving relationship with tradition; she begins to transform it from a source of fear and oppression into a foundation for empowerment.

By fabricating a dream invoking ancestral disapproval, Lindo manipulates the smothering weight of a tradition into a source of power and agency to free herself from her arranged marriage. After a servant relights the blown-out red candle and thwarts Lindo’s first attempt to defy tradition, Lindo plots new ways to escape her circumstances. She crafts a fake dream to “ma[ke] the Huangs think it was their idea to get rid of [her]” (59). Lindo wishes to redirect tradition’s authority away from governing her and instead use it as a vehicle for her escape. She further exploits the importance of ancestors in Chinese culture by choosing “an auspicious day” specifically associated with ancestral reflection to deliver her fabricated dream (59). By aligning her story with cultural expectations, Lindo reframes her rejection of the marriage as a dutiful act of filial piety and reclaims her autonomy through the very tradition that oppressed her. Lindo deepens her manipulation of tradition by attributing her dream directly to ancestral guidance. She

warns, “Our ancestors said Tyan-Yu would die if he stayed in this marriage!” (60). Lindo utilizes the same ancestral power that once bound her to Tyan-Yu and invokes that same revered authority of ancestors to instill fear in the Huangs. Her descriptions of her ancestors’ “cycle of destruction” and “signs” frame her escape as a fulfillment of tradition, and not a rebellion against it (61). After further strengthening her command of tradition, Lindo prepares to confront her mother-in-law and secure her freedom.

Lindo exploits her in-laws’ traditional patriarchal obsession with producing a male heir by persuading them to marry their son to a servant girl, whom she claims is of royal lineage and already pregnant with a child; the traditional values that initially serve as a major restriction on her freedom become, in Lindo’s hands, a tool for liberation. Early in her marriage, Lindo outwardly adheres to the rigid expectations placed on her, where her worth is based on her role in taking care of the house and her husband. She dutifully fulfills this role and states “In front of his parents, I was an obedient wife, just as they taught me” (57). When Lindo’s mother-in-law begins to expect a son, her malice towards Lindo intensifies. Her mother-in-law insists she “must concentrate and think of nothing but having babies” (57). This dehumanizing language reveals how patriarchal values explicitly define a woman’s role in her household; such values restrict Lindo’s individuality in favor of her reproductive function. Rather than succumbing, Lindo turns these suppressive values to her advantage. She devises a plan to finally exit her marriage by projecting the in-law’s stifling values onto a servant girl. Lindo remarks that the day of her plot “has a special meaning to someone looking for grandsons,” a subtle reference to the fact that she has been unable to provide her in-laws with the son they prize (60). Tyan-Yu’s family would rather have an illegitimate son than no son at all. By redirecting these values onto the servant girl, she convinces her in-laws that the servant girl is better suited to fulfill their expectations.

Lindo transforms the oppressive constraints of her marriage into tools for liberation, a clever manipulation that allows her to pursue her own dreams, free of an unwanted marriage.

Lindo narrates “The Red Candle” as a mother recounting a story to her daughter; she shares how she escaped her arranged marriage by manipulating rituals and values meant to constrain her. Through telling her story, Lindo passes down to her daughter not restrictive traditions, but the understanding that empowerment can be gained through the subversion of tradition itself. By reshaping three different traditions to serve her wishes, Lindo demonstrates that the power of tradition lies not in blind adherence, but in the ability to adapt it to one’s needs. Tan thus advocates for viewing tradition not exclusively as restrictive, but instead as a means of empowerment.

Works Cited

Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club*. Penguin Books, 2019.