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Ambiguous Cultural Politics of Ken Liu's "The Paper Menagerie"

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[Abstract]

This essay examines the ambiguous cultural politics of Ken Liu's short story "The Paper Menagerie," focusing on how the narrative generates empathy for immigrant suffering while containing it in aestheticized, mediated forms that limit political subversion. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's *fort-da* paradigm, the essay demonstrates how the plot's oscillation between presence and absence maps the second-generation immigrant's conflicted relationship to cultural inheritance. It also employs thing theory to explore how the origami animals function as fragile repositories of diasporic memory, simultaneously treasured in the private sphere and devalued in the racialized public sphere. The interlocking concepts of postmemory and translation are also mobilized to illuminate how linguistic incongruity—specifically the mother's inability to speak English, the son's inability to read Chinese, and the reliance on a tourist translator—produces a safe distance from cultural trauma, enabling retrospective empathy without destabilizing the present. By integrating these psychoanalytic, material, and linguistic perspectives, this essay reconsiders Liu's work in terms of multiculturalism, assimilation, and the politics of memory, claiming that

its enduring effect of cultural politics lies in rendering visible the contradictions of diasporic identity without resolving them.

Key Words: fort-da mechanism, diasporic memory, intergenerational trauma, cultural mediation, Asian American literature

I. Introduction

Ken Liu's celebrated short story "The Paper Menagerie" occupies a distinctive place in twenty-first-century Asian American literature, not only because it was the first work to win the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Awards, but also for its remarkable synthesis of diasporic history and magical realism. The story unfolds as the recollection of Jack, a second-generation Chinese American whose fraught relationship with his immigrant mother is mediated through the origami animals she folds from recycled wrapping paper and animates with her breath. These creatures, which "shared her breath, and thus moved with her life" (26) and thus what he calls "her magic," serve both as companions and conduits to the veiled truths of her past in mainland China before emigrating to the United States. In its transition from enchantment to repudiation to belated reconciliation, I argue in what follows, the narrative represents an ambiguous cultural politics, a mode of fictional storytelling that fosters empathetic identification with immigrant suffering while simultaneously containing that empathy in a particular aestheticized form that does not necessarily translate into political critique or transformative action. In doing so, the story enables a broader range of readers regardless of their racial or cultural background, conditions, or actual/possible conflicts to engage with it in safety, maintaining an

emotional connection to its painful experiences while keeping them at a comfortable distance.

The plot structure of "The Paper Menagerie" may appear deceptively simple, but its symbolic feature is more intricate than it seems to be. Asian American cultural productions "contradict the resolution of the citizen to the nation" by revealing "the contradictions of Asian American formation" (Lowe 9). Liu's story seem to typically embody these contradictions through the figure of Jack, who reflects the double bind of second-generation immigrant life caught between the pull of cultural inheritance and the pressure to assimilate into the dominant racial and linguistic order, a tension widely recognized as a shared ontological and epistemological condition of Asian American experience (Eng and Han 344; Chu 24). What is particularly distinctive about Liu's work, however, is that while it represents this double bind, it simultaneously adopts a subtle cultural-political strategy that positions the second-generation immigrant at a safe remove from the pull of cultural inheritance. In other words, cultural inheritance in "The Paper Menagerie" is rendered paradoxically present in the mode of absence; even when it exists, it exists in such a way that its presence poses no existential threat to, nor imposes any risk upon, the lived reality of the character's everyday life.

The paradoxical interplay of presence and absence shaping Jack's relationship to his mother's posthumous cultural legacy can be elucidated through Sigmund Freud's concept of fort-da game. Freud describes his grandson's repetitive game of throwing away and retrieving a wooden reel, accompanied by the words fort (gone) and da (there), as a means of mastering maternal absence (14-15). In Liu's narrative, this oscillation gradually manifests as Jack's alternation between embracing and rejecting his mother's origami and, by extension, her cultural heritage. In early childhood, he "laughed, startled, and stroked its back" when Laohu pounced at his finger (26) and

in adolescence, he demands “Speak English!” and seals the paper menagerie in a shoebox “as far away from my room as possible” (33). Then in adulthood, he finds Laohu restored and bearing a letter in his mother’s “awkward, childish handwriting” (38).

Jack’s relationship with his mother also illustrates the effect of fort-da paradigm. Unable to speak English fluently and never fully assimilated into American culture and thus refusing assimilation and visibly marked as different from white Americans, his mother became, in both childhood and adulthood, a figure toward whom Jack harbored hostility and from whom he maintained both psychological and physical distance. Yet it is only after her death, through the accidental discovery of her past, that this distance is narrowed. Because she is already gone, their reconciliation unfolds only in one direction, under the condition of her absence. It is in this sense that every significant act of recovery in the story, between first-generation and second-generation, past and present, homeland and adopted land, is mediated by loss and belatedness. It is noteworthy that Liu renders this dynamic as a transformation of such loss into a safe, retrospective absence, one that does not threaten the stability of Jack’s assimilated present.

The fort-da mechanism thus structures not only Jack’s personal psychology but also the broader cultural politics of diasporic inheritance, where the second generation’s recovery of heritage is often mediated by loss and belatedness. In Liu’s narrativization, this relationship between loss and belatedness becomes the basis for a cultural politics in which the latter enables the former to function as a safe, retrospective loss, one that can be nostalgically contemplated without posing any disruptive challenge to the lived conditions of the present. This relationship between loss and belatedness aligns closely with Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory, yet it narrativizes a mode of postmemory that is rendered safe. Postmemory refers to

"the relationship that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before, to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (5). Jack encounters his mother's life story only when he reads her final letter. Its account begins with the famine in Sigulu Village, where she recalls, "my mother eating dirt so that she could fill her belly and leave the last bit of flour for me" (39), continues through the Cultural Revolution, and extends to her years of servitude in Hong Kong. Yet this narrative arrives only belatedly, when the possibility of dialogue or material restitution has already been foreclosed. In Liu's fiction, belatedness functions not simply as tragic pathos but as a productive transformation: loss becomes a safely distanced absence that allows Jack to cultivate nostalgia without jeopardizing the coherence of his assimilated present

This article argues that the ambiguous cultural politics of "The Paper Menagerie" stem from its simultaneous illumination and containment of the contradictions inherent in second-generation immigrant identity. Deploying the fort-da mechanism, using material objects as repositories of cultural memory, and staging both linguistic and temporal mediations, the story reconstructs a mode of inheritance that is emotionally resonant yet politically circumscribed. At the intersection of trauma theory, diaspora studies, material culture, and translation studies, Liu's work embodies the constitutive tensions between survival and expression, recognition and erasure, that mark a distinctive shift in contemporary Asian American literature, particularly in the twenty-first century. The psychoanalytic and diasporic dimensions of the fort-da game reveal how Jack's repeated rejection and recovery of his mother's gift inscribes a pattern of cultural negotiation that remains trapped within cycles of loss. The politics of material mediation embodied in the origami animals, simultaneously treasured artifacts and reminders of shame, demonstrate how cultural

inheritance becomes aestheticized and contained within safe, consumable forms. Meanwhile, the role of linguistic incongruity and translation produces a deliberate distance from cultural knowledge, allowing the protagonist (and by extension, the reader) to approach immigrant suffering through layers of mediation that soften its political implications. Through these interwoven dynamics, I argue, Liu's narrative generates deep empathy for immigrant suffering while containing it within a multiculturalist framework that privileges aesthetic appreciation over political disruption.

II. Trauma, Memory, and the Fort-Da Mechanism in Diasporic Context

The structural and emotional dynamics of "The Paper Menagerie" operates through a sustained oscillation that Sigmund Freud famously theorized as the fort-da game, a repetitive act of casting away and retrieving an object in order to master the anxiety of maternal absence (14-15). For Freud's grandson, Ernst, the wooden reel thrown across the room, accompanied by the utterances "fort" ("gone") and "da" ("there"), transforms the passive experience of loss into an active drama of disappearance and return. This eighteen-month-old child, confronting his mother's daily departures, converts helplessness into agency through ritualized repetition. The game represents not merely a coping mechanism but a fundamental psychic operation. In other words, the transformation of traumatic passivity into symbolic mastery, wherein the subject rehearses loss in order to survive it. Yet as Freud himself acknowledged, this mastery remains perpetually incomplete. Hence, the compulsion to repeat signals both an attempt at control and the impossibility of achieving it fully.

Liu refracts this psychoanalytic schema through the specific historical and cultural predicament of the diasporic condition, where the "objects" in question are not generic toys but origami animals folded from recycled wrapping paper such as Christmas paper, gift wrap, even foil from cigarette packages breathed into life through an act that merges maternal care with cultural magic, and imbued with the condensed weight of both personal trauma and collective histories of displacement. The particular materiality of these objects matters profoundly: they are fashioned from the detritus of American consumer culture yet animated by a distinctly Chinese practice of paper-folding that dates back to the Song Dynasty. This juxtaposition of materials, American waste transformed through Chinese craft, already encodes the story's central tension between assimilation and preservation, between the demands of the new world and the memories of the old.

These creatures transcend their status as mere playthings or even conventional transitional objects in the Winnicottian sense; they "shared her breath, and thus moved with her life" (26), embodying not only the literal vitality of *qi* in Chinese cosmology, animating principle that flows through all living things, but also an intimate bodily substance that, once transferred, forges an enduring and irreversible bond between maker and recipient. The act of breathing life into paper carries profound cultural resonance and thus when Jack's mother animates the origami animals with her breath, she performs a quotidian miracle that collapses the epistemological and ontological boundaries between the material and the spiritual, the inanimate and the living. This transfer of breath, warm, moist, carrying the scent of her body, creates an intersubjective atmosphere where self and other, subject and object, become permeable to one another in the cultural context of Chinese identity.

This corporeal bond positions the origami animals as more than sentimental keepsakes or even conventional cultural artifacts; they become what Pierre Nora

terms “lieux de mémoire,” a particular site where memory reifies and secretes itself, especially when “milieux de mémoire,” or environments of memory, no longer exist (7). For Nora, such a site emerges precisely at the moment when lived tradition gives way to self-conscious commemoration, when memory ceases to be spontaneous and becomes instead archaeological, archival, desperate to preserve what is already slipping away. In “The Paper Menagerie,” the origami animals function as precisely such crystallizations: they are repositories of the Chinese immigrant mother’s history that cannot be spoken directly, containers for experiences too painful or inassimilable to transmit through conventional narrative. This archival function becomes legible through Jack’s embodied encounters with the paper menagerie.”

His early interactions with Laohu that is the paper tiger that “pounced at [his] finger” and “gave a tinny roar” (26) are not merely moments of childhood enchantment or familial warmth but formative engagements with a living archive of cultural transmission. When young Jack watches Laohu come alive, he witnesses more than magic; he participates in a mode of cultural inheritance that bypasses language and operates through touch, breath, and play. The tiger becomes his companion, eating from his rice bowl, purring against his face at night, engaging in elaborate games that require no translation. This prelinguistic intimacy represents a form of cultural transmission that precedes and exceeds the symbolic order—a semiotic realm where meaning circulates through rhythm, tone, and gesture rather than through fixed signification (24). The paper menagerie thus constitutes an alternative pedagogy, one that teaches heritage through embodied practice rather than explicit instruction, through affective attachment rather than cognitive understanding.

Jack’s earliest encounters with Laohu are moments of unambiguous presence. He “laughed, startled, and stroked its back” as it purred (26). This da-phase represents a moment of cultural intimacy and intersubjective reciprocity, prior to the intrusion of

racial shame. As objects operate as "condensations of memory and affect" that mediate between personal history and material form (Brown 4), so does Laohu. In Jack's childhood, the tiger functions as precisely such a condensation, that is, a tactile embodiment of maternal love and ethnic heritage. That the animals are made from discarded wrapping paper also underscores Silvia Federici's insight into reproductive labor as a site where creativity and survival intersect (42). The mother's craft emerges from thrift yet produces affective and symbolic richness for her son. This scene thus encodes the paradoxical cultural politics whereby racialized maternal labor serves as both the devalued foundation and the primary mechanism of cultural transmission

Yet the moment of cultural intimacy and reciprocity proves fragile. The break comes with the violence of racialized derision when Jack's friend Mark saw the patched and worn Laohu, he sneers, "That doesn't look like a tiger at all. Your Mom makes toys for you from trash?" (31). The insult reframes the tiger from a singular vessel of memory into disposable refuse, stripping away its affective value in a single stroke. Mark's tearing of Laohu literalizes the destruction of maternal culture; as Sara Ahmed argues, emotions "stick" to objects in ways that shape their social value (11), and here the tiger becomes saturated with shame rather than love. Jack, internalizing this contempt, sees it as "really just a piece of wrapping paper" (31). What was once *da* becomes *fort*: an abrupt severing of affective connection that soon extends to the repudiation of his mother's language and cultural practices. In other words, the shame that adheres to the object begins to migrate to the speaker and her speech, preparing the ground for a broader disavowal of maternal culture. This shift is not merely personal but systemic, reflecting melancholia of assimilation, in which the rejection of heritage is structured by broader racial and economic hierarchies. The *fort* phase thus signals an internalized revaluation of objects, language, and kinship

through the lens of dominant cultural capital.

This revaluation—the fort phase—soon extends beyond objects to language itself. At the dinner table, his mother’s Chinese words “Bu haochi?” is met with Jack’s raised-voice command, “Speak English!” (33). It is nothing but a decisive act of linguistic disavowal that aligns him with the assimilative pressures of the dominant racial order. David Eng and Shinhee Han describe such disavowal as symptomatic of “racial melancholia,” in which Asian American subjects “cleave to Whiteness” while cultivating hostility toward their own racial origins (344). By sealing the paper menagerie “as far away from my room as possible” (33), Jack appears to end the cycle altogether, placing himself at a safe remove from the pull of cultural inheritance. Here, the rejection of both language and object becomes an attempt to stabilize identity through subtraction, an erasure of difference that promises social belonging but at the cost of familial intimacy. In doing so, Jack engages in a form of “self-translation” (Spivak 180), rewriting himself into the idioms of the dominant and thereby displacing the mother tongue.

Yet Freud’s insight that repetition compulsion operates beneath conscious volition (19) prevents this closure from becoming permanent. Years later, after his mother’s death, Jack discovers Laohu in the attic. The tiger’s “tail twitched” and it “pounced playfully” (38) as though animated once more, initiating an unbidden return to da. This belated re-engagement is mediated not by shared living memory but by the postmemorial logic Marianne Hirsch describes as the second generation’s relation to traumatic pasts “so deeply imprinted ... as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (5). Postmemory here functions through empathic unsettlement (LaCapra 41), where the inheritor’s emotional identification is tempered by the awareness that the experience is not truly their own. The return is therefore both intimate and estranged, marked by the paradox that what feels recovered has in fact always been

mediated.

His mother's life story, born in famine-stricken Hebei, watching her own mother "eating dirt so that she could fill her belly and leave the last bit of flour for me" (39), surviving the Cultural Revolution, enduring years of servitude in Hong Kong, finally reaches him only through a letter folded into Laohu's body (39-41). This delayed transmission matters profoundly. Jack receives his mother's testimony only after her death, when the suffering she endured can no longer be addressed or remedied. Elizabeth Povinelli's critique of "late liberalism" illuminates the political stakes of such belatedness: acknowledgment that arrives after the conditions of suffering have ended can mourn without materially altering the inequalities that produced it (17). Liu's narrative positions this belatedness as both a site of loss and a paradoxical guarantee of safety; heritage is recovered only when it can no longer destabilize the assimilated present. That safety, however, is bought at the price of political urgency, for the moment of possible intervention has already passed. In this way, the story dramatizes how memory can become a commodity of reconciliation rather than a catalyst for change.

The letter's material form makes this temporality tangible. Cathy Caruth observes that trauma is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" and returns belatedly as a wound that insists on being heard (4). The creased wrapping paper on which the mother writes bears both the physical imprint of her craft and the psychic burden of unspoken history. Her confession—"I still haven't told you the story of my life" (39)—underscores the urgency of a transmission repeatedly deferred. The juxtaposition of joyful memories, such as "little dragons zooming across the sky ... to scare away all the bad memories" (39), with harrowing recollections of starvation collapses the distance between presence and absence, mirroring the *fort-da* rhythm within a single breath. By embedding this oscillation within the very texture

of the narrative, Liu stages what Walter Benjamin calls the “afterlife” of the text (75), where meaning is preserved through transformation.

The mother explicitly frames Jack’s years of rejection and silence as a reprise of her own dispossession: “I felt I was losing everything all over again” (42). Her words suture Jack’s private refusal to a longer genealogy of loss encompassing famine, political turmoil, coerced labor, and linguistic estrangement, so that his silence repeats, rather than merely echoes, the historical pattern. LaCapra’s distinction between “acting out” and “working through” clarifies the stakes here. Jack’s earlier repudiations, such as sealing the menagerie and policing his mother’s English, enact an unprocessed shame characteristic of acting out, whereas his encounter with the translated letter gestures toward the labor of working through without fully accomplishing it (142–43). The recovery therefore remains suspended, poised between the desire to reconnect and the impossibility of restoring what is gone. This suspension illustrates a negative dialectics, where contradiction is not synthesized into closure but allowed to persist as tension, keeping the wound open as a condition for thought rather than sealing it (Adorno 6).

This belated movement toward repair is itself routed through the politics of language. Jack’s earlier insistence on English and his inability to read Chinese instantiate Rey Chow’s notion of Protestant ethnic, a strategic performance of assimilability that often requires the renunciation of linguistic inheritance for dominant approval (107). Yet understanding the letter depends on a stranger’s translation, an intimacy which is “the most intimate act of reading” and yet unavoidably transformative of the original (Spivak 179). The circuit mirrors the fort-da rhythm: Chinese identity is cast away (fort) in the name of belonging, then retrieved (da) in altered form, signifying the state of being preserved only through necessary loss. As Venuti notes, the historical “invisibility” of the translator

naturalizes this transformation and can obscure the asymmetries structuring cultural exchange (1). In this instance, the translator's invisibility also screens the very forces such as racialized monolingual norms, classed access to heritage learning, immigration histories, that make such mediation necessary in the first place.

Placed alongside earlier, canonized Asian American narratives of belated reconciliation as represented in in Jing-mei's posthumous journey to meet her half-sisters in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, or the discovered testimony in Lan Samantha Chang's *Hunger*, Liu's story insists that such returns are constitutively partial. The original interlocutor has vanished; recovery proceeds through objects, documents, and mediated speech that can register attachment but cannot restore coeval life. The final image of Jack refolding Laohu and beginning "the walk home" (42) represents this ambivalence. The return to da is real, as the tiger purrs, but the animating breath is gone, replaced by Jack's tears. The scene stages the diasporic outcome of the fort-da cycle: reconnection is possible, but only in a form already marked by absence, an affective resolution that soothes without undoing the conditions that produced the loss in the first place.

Psychoanalytically, Freudian "mastery" is never secured; what endures is the oscillation itself as a negative dialectics (6), that is, a principled refusal to reconcile presence and absence into synthesis. For the diasporic subject, this unresolved rhythm is not pathology but the very condition of cultural memory: inheritance arrives only partially and at a remove, preserving what it receives precisely by transforming it. In Liu's rendering, the persistence of this back-and-forth resists the seduction of neat narrative closure and compels readers to inhabit a charged interval where loss and recovery, estrangement and intimacy, persist together without reconciliation. In this ethically productive non-closure lies the story's force: memory remains alive not by sealing the wound, but by keeping it open to future readings and responsibilities.

III. Material Memory and the Politics of Mediation

In “The Paper Menagerie,” paper transcends its conventional status as a passive surface for inscription to become an active medium that fundamentally shapes how memory is carried, felt, transmitted, and ultimately judged. The story’s central conceit that discarded wrapping paper can be transformed into living creatures through maternal breath and craft establishes paper as a substance that mediates between worlds: between China and America, between past and present, between the living and the dead, between memory and forgetting. Because paper possesses the paradoxical quality of being simultaneously foldable yet fragile, as it can store inscriptions and maintain shape for years while remaining vulnerable to the slightest moisture, as when Jack’s tears threaten to dissolve Laohu (26), it functions as a regulatory mechanism that controls proximity to painful histories.

This material specificity is crucial to understanding what I term safe inheritance: a mode of intergenerational transmission that preserves the past while carefully modulating its affective impact, transforming potentially overwhelming trauma into something that can be held, contemplated, and even cherished without shattering the carefully constructed equilibrium of the assimilated present. Such mediated encounters with historical suffering can enable an empathic unsettlement without requiring full identification or re-traumatization. The paper menagerie thus operates as a technology of measured distance, which is close enough to feel the weight of history, distant enough to maintain psychic integrity.

This measured distance begins with the very origins of the paper animals, which emerge not from deliberate artistic intention but from immediate practical need. Confronted with a crying child, the mother reaches for what is available, which is the saved wrapping paper from the top of the refrigerator that she transforms into a

tiger to calm young Jack (26). This seemingly minor detail encodes a complex politics of value that runs throughout the narrative. The practice of salvaging and repurposing consumer detritus represents the art of living on a damaged planet, the creative strategies through which marginalized subjects transform capitalism's waste into resources for survival and meaning-making. For Jack's mother, who arrives in America through a mail-order bride arrangement carrying nothing but the clothes on her back, the hoarding and transformation of wrapping paper represents both economic necessity and cultural resistance. Such practices of "making do" begin in material scarcity but often generate an aesthetic and affective surplus that exceeds mere survival, producing beauty, connection, and cultural continuity from the fragments of consumer society (Wong 13).

The gendered dimension of this labor reveals another layer of the story's material politics. The systematic devaluation of care work and domestic craft within capitalist economies, despite their essential role in both biological and cultural reproduction, shapes how we understand the mother's creative labor (Federici 8). When the mother folds animals from discarded paper, she performs resistant labor, work that maintains life and meaning against forces of erasure. Each fold thus carries not only pattern and color but also accumulated time, embodied skill, and affective investment. The paper bears the oils from her fingers, the warmth of her hands, the rhythm of her breathing. These traces transform cheap material into what cultural anthropology recognizes as "singularized commodities," objects withdrawn from market exchange and invested with biographical meaning (Kopytoff 73). The transformation from trash to treasure enacts a revaluation that challenges dominant hierarchies of worth, suggesting that value emerges not from market price but from the labor of care and the density of memory an object can hold.

The narrative structure of "The Paper Menagerie" deliberately privileges embodied

encounter over cognitive understanding, organizing Jack's relationship to his heritage first through sensory experience and only belatedly through explicit historical knowledge. His early bond with Laohu unfolds entirely through the autonomy of affect, preconscious intensities that circulate between bodies before being captured by language or meaning (Massumi 96). The tiger's purr vibrates against Jack's cheek; its paper body rustles with each movement; its weight, however slight, presses warm against his sleeping face (26). These tactile exchanges constitute a sort of intercorporeality in phenomenological term, a primordial connection between bodies that precedes and exceeds symbolic communication. Through play with Laohu, Jack absorbs cultural knowledge through his skin, muscles, and nerves rather than through explicit instruction.

The origami animals oscillate between different modes of being in ways that thing theory helps illuminate. In their initial state, they function as objects integrated seamlessly into Jack's childhood world, which are tools for play, sources of comfort, extensions of maternal presence. But when Mark's cruelty ("Your Mom makes toys for you from trash?") ruptures this integration, the animals suddenly become things that "assert their presence and power" by becoming problematic, by standing out from their backgrounds (Brown 4-5). This transformation from object to thing marks the moment when the paper menagerie can no longer circulate innocently in Jack's life but must be consciously accepted or rejected, embraced or repudiated. The distinction between "archive" and "repertoire" further illuminates how the paper menagerie transmits cultural memory through embodied practice rather than documented knowledge. While the archive privileges written texts, maps, and literary works that can be separated from their producers, the repertoire consists of embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing. In short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge (Taylor 20). The

mother's paper-folding represents repertoire par excellence: knowledge carried in the hands, passed through demonstration and mimicry, inseparable from the body that performs it.

As the narrative progresses, the origami animals accumulate a visible history of damage and mending that transforms them into complex material texts. The buffalo's legs wrapped in saran wrap, the shark's fin reinforced with Christmas tinfoil, Laohu's ear held together with tape (28-29), each repair inscribes a specific moment of injury and recovery into the paper's surface. These patches create a palimpsest, a layered text where earlier inscriptions remain visible beneath later additions, creating temporal depth within a single surface. The repairs tell multiple stories simultaneously: they record the violence of children's play, the persistence of maternal care, the fragility of paper under the pressure of love, and the possibility of continuity through transformation rather than despite it.

The practice of mending resonates with the craft of repair, a form of material engagement that acknowledges damage while refusing disposal. In Japanese aesthetics, this principle finds expression in *kintsugi*, where broken pottery is mended with gold, making the repair itself a site of beauty. While Jack's mother uses transparent tape rather than gold, her repairs similarly refuse to hide damage, instead incorporating it into the object's ongoing life. Each mended tear becomes a trace of imperial debris, material evidence of historical violence that persists in the present. The taped ear speaks to the precarity of immigrant life, where precious objects must survive in hostile environments, protected only by improvised solutions and persistent care. This dynamic of damage and repair parallels the condition of translation itself: "The task of the translator is to facilitate love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay" (Spivak 179). Like translation, repair preserves

by transforming, maintaining continuity through alteration rather than stasis.

The story's climactic moment of mediation occurs when Laohu literally unfolds from three-dimensional creature into two-dimensional text, revealing the mother's letter written in "dense Chinese script" (38). This transformation stages the trace structure of the sign, the way meaning always refers to something absent, something that was there but is no longer (Derrida 70). The creases that once formed Laohu's body now intersect with columns of Chinese characters, creating a doubled inscription where the memory of the tiger's form ghosts through the mother's words. Paper thus reveals itself as simultaneously object and text, bearing both the physical memory of its folds and the semantic content of its inscriptions. The mother's handwriting, which is described as "awkward, childish," adds another layer of mediation, suggesting she learned to write late, perhaps in the Hong Kong years mentioned in her letter, making her literacy itself a mark of displacement and adaptation.

The chain of mediation extends further when Jack must seek external help to access his mother's words. Unable to read Chinese despite his heritage, he requires a stranger's translation, adding yet another remove from the original text. The full sequence runs: lived experience → memory → Chinese writing → folded origami → years of storage → unfolding → visual encounter with illegible script → stranger's translation → oral delivery → Jack's final comprehension. Each transformation in this chain introduces noises such as distortions, selections, and interpretations that alter the original signal. The concept of the translator's "invisibility" reveals how translation practices in the Anglo-American tradition tend to efface these mediations, creating an illusion of transparency that obscures the power relations embedded in linguistic transfer (Venuti 1). The stranger who translates the mother's letter remains nameless and faceless in the narrative, their interpretive labor disappeared into the

seemingly direct communication between mother and son. Yet this mediation also enables connection across irreparable difference. What Jack receives is simultaneously his mother's voice and not her voice, which is intimate because it travels through her hand and breath, distant because it arrives filtered through multiple transformations.

The narrative strategy maintains the particular politics of translation, an awareness that translation is never neutral but always embedded in histories of power (Niranjana 48). Certain terms remain untranslated or only lightly glossed in the text: "Laohu" appears sometimes as "tiger," sometimes in romanized Chinese; "Qingming" is mentioned but not explained; the mother's Chinese exclamations stand without translation. This selective untranslation creates a foreignizing effect that resists complete domestication (Venuti 20). By preserving these moments of linguistic opacity, Liu prevents the text from becoming too comfortable for monolingual English readers while still maintaining enough transparency for emotional connection. This calibrated opacity serves a crucial function in the story's cultural politics. Complete translation would perform conceptual conquest, which is the forced transformation of non-Western concepts into Western categories. Complete untranslation, however, would create "stranger fetishism," the exotic other who remains wholly alien and thus consumable as pure difference (Ahmed 5). The narrative navigates between these poles by maintaining "the right to opacity," the right to be understood without being entirely transparent, to maintain difference without becoming incomprehensible (Glissant 194).

The paper menagerie ultimately demonstrates how materiality meters the intensity of historical transmission, creating buffers that enable encounter without overwhelming. Paper's specific qualities, especially its ability to hold form while remaining vulnerable, to bear inscription while threatening dissolution, make it an ideal medium for safe inheritance. The final scene depicts this dynamic: when Jack

refolds Laohu and begins “the walk home” (42), he neither fully embraces nor entirely rejects his mother’s legacy. Instead, he carefully reconstitutes the tiger’s form, handling it gently enough to preserve its fragile structure while maintaining enough distance to avoid the complete identification that might destabilize his American life. This concluding gesture encapsulates the notion of material mediation as a technology of calibrated proximity. In other words, paper does not merely carry memory. Rather, it regulates the conditions under which memory can be encountered, determining how close one may come, for how long, and in what form.

Through its attention to paper’s material properties and the chains of mediation it enables, “The Paper Menagerie” reveals how safe inheritance operates not through denial or full embrace but through carefully managed encounters that preserve both connection and distance. The story suggests that for second-generation subjects navigating between cultures, such mediation is not a diminishment of authentic experience but rather the only form in which experience can be preserved and passed on. In this reading, the paper menagerie becomes a figure for diasporic memory itself: fragile yet persistent, transformed yet recognizable, intimate yet mediated, present yet always marked by absence. The story neither condemns Jack’s need for distance nor celebrates it as resolution. Instead, it presents material mediation as a structural necessity for diasporic subjects who must negotiate between irreconcilable worlds, where the shoebox that stores the menagerie, the tape that holds Laohu together, and the translation that makes the letter legible are not failures of direct transmission but enabling conditions for any transmission at all.

IV. Translation and the Politics of Safe Distance

The climactic scene in "The Paper Menagerie" hinges on an act of translation that is as politically charged as it is narratively cathartic. Jack, unable to read the dense Chinese characters in his mother's letter, turns to "a young woman" he meets outside his home and asks her to translate it into English (38). This moment reveals the narrative's deep investment in mediated connection: the mother's voice cannot reach the son directly, either through shared language or unmediated memory. Instead, it arrives filtered through the voice, vocabulary, and interpretive choices of a stranger. This linguistic disjunction is not a mere plot device but a structural condition of the diasporic fort-da cycle; return is possible only through the safe remove of translation, which transforms the immediacy of traumatic history into a digestible narrative (Hirsch 5).

That safety is anchored in the asymmetry of linguistic competence. The mother's inability to speak fluent English mirrors the son's illiteracy in Chinese, creating a mutual opacity within the family unit. This opacity functions both as a wound and a shield. In Jack's adolescence, it underwrites the confrontational dinner-table scene in which he demands, "Speak English!" (33), aligning himself with dominant linguistic norms and rejecting the embodied intimacy of the mother tongue. In adulthood, however, the same linguistic gap permits a buffered re-entry into his mother's story. As Povinelli observes in her critique of "late liberal" multiculturalism, reconciliation often occurs in contexts where historical injuries are acknowledged but contained, ensuring that the recognition "does not disrupt the ongoing organization of social difference" (17). The translation scene embodies this dynamic: Jack can receive the full arc of his mother's trauma, but only after her death, only through another's mediation, and only in a language that is his own.

From the perspective of the politics of mediation, this act of translation mirrors the material transformations already encoded in the origami animals. Just as the creases and repairs mark the paper as a palimpsest of care and injury, the translated letter bears the imprint of interpretive transformation. Walter Benjamin's concept of translation as the "afterlife" of a text, never identical to the original but a continuation in altered form, underscores that Jack receives not his mother's letter *per se*, but an Anglophone afterlife of it (75). The fact that this afterlife is his only point of access further reveals the conservative cultural politics at work: the past is rendered legible only when filtered through the dominant linguistic frame, thus preserving its emotional resonance while neutralizing its disruptive potential (Chu 102).

The translation's embodied logistics as depicted in Jack approaching a tourist on the street also underscore the randomness and detachment of this cultural transmission. The mother's life story, rich with famine, political upheaval, and personal sacrifice, is entrusted to an uninvested intermediary whose role is purely functional. Spivak's insistence that translation is an inherently intimate act of reading is complicated here: the intimacy lies not between mother and son but between the stranger and the text, producing a paradox in which the deepest familial confession bypasses the familial relationship altogether. This bypass, far from accidental, exemplifies the psychic splitting of racial melancholia: the simultaneous desire for and repudiation of racial-cultural inheritance.

The scene also reframes the *fort-da* rhythm itself. In Freud's original paradigm, the return (*da*) restores a sense of mastery over absence (*fort*) (14-15). In Liu's diasporic reworking, however, the return is permanently mediated; the "there" is always "there through someone else." The mother's voice reaches Jack not as a direct restoration of lost intimacy, but as a mediated echo, much like Laohu's

reanimation through tears rather than breath. This displacement means that the fort-da oscillation never resolves into mastery, aligning instead with the notion of negative dialectics, where contradiction is sustained rather than overcome (Adorno 6).

Furthermore, the translation's temporal belatedness compounds its spatial and linguistic distance. The mother's narrative including her childhood in famine-stricken Hebei, survival through the Cultural Revolution, and years of domestic servitude is recounted only when it can no longer reshape Jack's life in real time. Cathy Caruth's observation that trauma is "experienced too soon ... to be fully known" and thus returns belatedly (4) resonates here: the belatedness allows the narrative to be received without reactivating the urgency or instability of the original events. This is the politics of safe distance; trauma transformed into history, history transformed into story, story transformed into translation, each step attenuating its potential to unsettle the present.

Finally, this scene positions translation as both a bridge and a barrier in diasporic cultural politics. It enables access to otherwise inaccessible narratives, but it does so in a way that reinscribes the dominance of the receiving language and its attendant cultural frames. Venuti's critique of domesticating translation, rendering the foreign familiar to preserve readerly comfort, applies here (16). The English version of the mother's story, which is translated by a non-native Chinese speaker of English, offers Jack comfort and closure, but only because its raw linguistic and historical alterity has been domesticated into the idioms of his own life. This is reconciliation without risk, empathy without destabilization, that is, a hallmark of the conservative multicultural politics that Liu's narrative represents craftily.

V. Conclusion

It is notable that Liu's "The Paper Menagerie" has achieved a striking cultural presence, which has been widely anthologized and frequently assigned as an accessible entry point to contemporary Asian American literature. Its reception has been largely celebratory, with critics and general readers praising its emotional force and its theme of maternal devotion. Precisely this salient accessibility, however, calls for scrutiny. As Viet Thanh Nguyen reminds us, "all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory" (4). When historical trauma is rendered in forms calibrated for affective resonance and aesthetic pleasure, it risks domestication, absorbed by a cultural marketplace that prefers catharsis to critique. Liu's orchestration of intimacy and distance poses the unsettling question that animates this study: does the posthumous reconciliation the story stages, achieved without confronting the structures that produced the estrangement, offer comfort at the expense of political engagement?

The closing image is tender and telling. After receiving his mother's life story through the mediated voice of a stranger, Jack refolds Laohu, cradles the tiger in the crook of his arm, and begins "the walk home" as the paper animal purrs (42). The moment is tactile and intimate, yet shadowed by the knowledge that the breath animating Laohu is gone, replaced by Jack's tears. This substitution illustrates the book's central claim: the story generates a deep empathy for immigrant suffering while containing that empathy within aestheticized, belated, and mediated forms that avoid unsettling the sociopolitical conditions that produced the suffering. Emotional closure, in other words, arrives bound to the very limits that make such closure possible.

The plot's material and linguistic pathways reinforce this containment. The origami

animals begin as joyful conduits of intergenerational connection, are violently discarded after an episode of racialized shaming, and reappear only after the mother's death. The return carries affective richness but structural constraint: the original interlocutor is gone; reciprocal dialogue is foreclosed. The mother's letter travels a chain of transformations: life to narrative, narrative to origami, origami to unfolded paper, Chinese to English. Then each stage exemplifies translation as an act of distanced reading that inevitably privatizes its source. The material culture of the text intensifies this ambivalence. Creased, brittle paper mirrors the precariousness of diasporic memory; patches and tape make each animal a palimpsest of care and injury. Yet the animals' handmade, recycled nature also exposes them to a racialized political economy in which noncommodified, culturally specific artifacts can be dismissed as "stupid cheap Chinese garbage" (31). What is a repository of meaning within the family can be readily devalued outside it.

Jack's reanimation of Laohu with tears aligns him privately with his mother's heritage, but only once it is safe, once the mother can no longer demand action or change. Here the narrative's fort-da logic clarifies itself: return (da) is permitted only after loss (fort) has neutralized the potential for conflict or transformation. Politically, this risks exemplifying a management of difference in which past injuries are acknowledged while present inequalities remain intact. The story thus offers an emotionally powerful closure without political disruption, modeling a mode of multicultural reconciliation that is moving yet structurally conservative.

And yet Liu also resists what Adorno warns against as the false unity of reconciliation (6). By leaving the fort-da cycle unresolved, allowing Laohu's purr to signify at once continuity and irrevocable change, the story preserves contradiction rather than smoothing it into harmony. This refusal to "solve" intergenerational estrangement aligns with LaCapra's call for "working through" rather than "acting

out” trauma, acknowledging loss while resisting premature synthesis (144). Within a broader lineage of Asian American intergenerational narratives, Liu introduces speculative elements (animated origami, breath as life force) that dramatize the psychic labor of cultural preservation while sidestepping the demand for ethnographic realism. The achievement, then, is not a reconciliation of contradictions but their legible staging.

All told, what remains is a productive unease. By deploying the fort-da mechanism, elaborating a politics of material mediation, and dramatizing the safe distancing of translation, the story invites readers to dwell in the liminal spaces between presence and absence, intimacy and estrangement, recovery and loss. At the same time, it models the very processes by which cultural memory can be aestheticized and depoliticized, warning that the beauty of mediated inheritance can coexist with, and even obscure, the structural forces that necessitate such mediation. In this unresolved tension between preserving the past as a safe artifact and reckoning with the disruptive potential of unassimilated histories, the paper tiger continues to purr.

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국문초록

켄 리우의 「종이 동물원」에 나타난 모호한 문화 정치학

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본고는 켄 리우의 단편 소설 「종이 동물원」 ("The Paper Menagerie")에서 이민자 고통에 대한 깊은 공감을 생성하면서 그 공감을 미학화되고 매개된 형태 속에 구조적으로 포섭함으로써 정치적 교란을 제한하는 서사 전략의 특징을 분석한다. 프로이트의 포트-다(fort-da) 도식을 적용하여 작품의 서사가 현존과 부재 사이를 진동하는 양상이 2세 이민자의 문화유산에 대한 갈등적 관계를 어떻게 재현하는지 고찰한다. 또한 사물 이론을 적용하여 종이 동물들이 사적 영역에서는 소중한 디아스포라적 기억의 저장소로 기능하면서 인종화된 공적 영역에서는 평가절하되는 취약한 물질적 매개체로 작동하는 방식을 고찰한다. 이어서 상호 연결된 포스트메모리(postmemory)와 번역 개념을 통해 어머니의 영어 구사 불능, 아들의 중국어 문해력 결여와 관광객 번역자에 의존하는 언어적 비대응이 문화적 트라우마로부터의 안전한 거리를 만들어냄으로써 현재를 불안정하게 만들지 않는 범위 내에서 과거에 대한 회고적 공감을 가능케 하는 서사 구조의 의미를 조명한다. 정신분석적·물질적·언어적 관점을 통합함으로써 본고는 리우의 작품을 다문화주의, 동화, 기억의 정치학의 관점에서 그 의미를 재논의하고 그의 작품의 문화정치학적 효과가 디아스포라적 정체성의 내적 모순을 해결하지 않으면서 가시화하는 데 있다고 주장한다.

주제어: 포트-다 메커니즘, 디아스포라적 기억, 세대 간 트라우마, 문화적 매개, 아시아계 미국 문학

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