

In the American Society



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GISH JEN

The daughter of Chinese immigrants who came to America in the 1940s, Gish Jen (born Lillian Jen) grew up with her four siblings in the New York area. Her father was a civil engineer, and her mother was an elementary school teacher. After living in what Jen once described as the “working class” neighborhood of Yonkers, where she experienced bullying, her family moved to Scarsdale, an upscale suburb in Westchester County. There, she was delighted to find an extensive school library and enjoyed the range of books available to her. In 1977, Jen received a B.A. in English from Harvard; she was on a pre-med track, but she ended up taking a publishing job at Doubleday in New York after her graduation. When she attended and then dropped out of Stanford Business School, her parents cut her off financially and her mother stopped speaking to her (though they reconciled after one year). After completing her M.F.A. at the University of Iowa in 1983, Jen wrote her breakout story, “In the American Society.” Compelled by the character of Ralph Chang, she parlayed this short story into her first novel, *Typical American* (1991), followed by a sequel, *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996). Altogether, Jen has published eight books of fiction and nonfiction.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1943, Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act, a law limiting the number of Chinese immigrants allowed to enter the country. As a result, immigration from China increased over the next several years. When these immigrants arrived, especially after World War II and in the 1950s, they were met by an American society that valued conformity and prioritized economic prosperity. After 1965, when Congress amended the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 to allow more immigration from Asia, the number of Chinese immigrants again rose. Concurrently, residents of Chinatowns who could afford to move were decamping for the American suburbs, where there was more pressure to assimilate to a white, middle-class way of life. Ralph Chang’s struggle to balance these values against his own Chinese heritage throughout “In the American Society” can be understood against this social context.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Gish Jen’s writing is frequently viewed in the context of Chinese-American cultural heritage, and her first two novels—*Typical American* and *Mona in the Promised Land*—show Chinese-American characters contending with their American

surroundings. Critics often cite Amy Tan, author of *The Joy Luck Club*, Chang-Rae Lee (*Native Speaker*), and Mae Ng (*Eating Chinese Food Naked*) as Asian-American writers interested in similar subject matter as Gish Jen. Another writer exploring the immigrant experience in the United States is Jhumpa Lahiri, whose Pulitzer-Prize-winning short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* helped popularize the idea of immigrant stories and multiculturalism in fiction. According to Gish Jen herself, however, Jewish American authors have been most influential in her own development; she was exposed to authors like Grace Paley and Saul Bellow during her teenage years in Scarsdale, which has a significant Jewish population. Jen’s first novel *Typical American* shows structural similarities to Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March*, and the concept of criminals teaching moral lessons to protagonists—as Booker and Cedric do to Ralph Chang in “In the American Society”—is also found in Bellow’s *Herzog* and *Humboldt’s Gift*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** In the American Society
- **When Written:** Mid-1980s
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 1986
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Suburb in the Northeastern U.S.
- **Climax:** When Jeremy confronts Ralph Chang at his party, yelling, “WHO ARE YOU?”
- **Antagonist:** Jeremy Brothers
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Recurring Characters. Ralph Chang, Mrs. Chang, Callie, and Mona reappear in multiple Gish Jen short stories and novels. The short story “In the American Society” became the basis for Jen’s novel-length exploration of Ralph Chang’s life, *Typical American*, and its sequel, *Mona in the Promised Land*. Callie and Mona appear across several of Jen’s stories in *Who’s Irish?*

Name Change. In high school, Jen started going by “Gish” instead of “Lillian,” a reference to the American silent film actress Lillian Gish. Jen once expressed that the name “Lillian” didn’t fit her personality.



PLOT SUMMARY

Mr. Chang, a Chinese immigrant and father of two daughters, takes over a pancake house in the American suburbs, hoping the business will eventually pay for his children's college tuition. The pancake house does succeed, and the Chang family gets rich "almost immediately." As a result of their newfound wealth, Mr. Chang and his wife Mrs. Chang undergo some lifestyle changes. He buys a reclining chair, and she stops working at the supermarket, instead becoming a housewife and developing an interest in "wallpaper, and espadrilles." Eventually, Mrs. Chang starts talking to her daughters Callie and Mona about joining the local country club. Mona encourages the idea, believing that her friend's mom will write the Changs the necessary recommendation letter. However, Mrs. Chang lets the idea go, claiming that Mr. Chang would be displeased and prioritizing her loyalty to him.

Having achieved some success, Mr. Chang starts emulating the practices of his wealthy grandfather, who was known in China for his generosity to the villagers. Mr. Chang starts giving out extra paychecks to his employees, but he expects their loyalty in return. When they start to quit, tired of the personal chores he asks them to do, the restaurant takes a downturn. Mr. Chang has difficulty hiring a new busboy, but he eventually employs Booker and Cedric, two undocumented Taiwanese workers in whom he sees his younger self. They are good workers, but their presence causes a stir in the kitchen. The head cook, Fernando, insists Cedric is a thief. When Fernando himself is found stealing meat, he blames Cedric for ratting him out and punches him. Mr. Chang fires Fernando, while Cedric stays on.

Meanwhile, Mona has let it slip to her friend Annie that the Changs want to join the country club. Annie's mom, Mrs. Lardner, visits Mrs. Chang and volunteers to write the reference letter, though some of her friendliness has a racist undertone, like calling the Changs "you people." Mrs. Chang is upset at the way the situation unfolds and gets angry at Mona, while Callie reveals that the country club has a racist history. Soon after, Mr. Chang comes home from work with the news that the immigration police have found and arrested Booker and Cedric (thanks to a police call from bitter Fernando). He bails them out and commits to finding them legal help, much to Mrs. Chang's chagrin. When they run away, leaving only a letter to Mr. Chang apologizing for not paying him back the bail money, Mr. Chang feels let down. The Changs are then rejected from the country club.

Mrs. Lardner then invites the Changs to a party for her friend Jeremy Brothers, where they will meet other country club members. Although Mr. Chang hates wearing a **suit jacket**, he buys one for the party. The family arrives and has some trouble mingling with the other guests. Drunk, Jeremy Brothers approaches Mr. Chang and starts harassing him, saying he doesn't know who he is, and finally yelling, "WHO ARE YOU?!"

Mrs. Lardner tries to fix the situation, but Jeremy continues to be insulting. He tells Mr. Chang he is overdressed and pulls off his suit jacket to read the label, making fun of the price tag that's still on. Mr. Chang, incensed, throws his suit jacket into the pool, and the family leaves Jeremy's party. Callie and Mona are proud of their father for standing up for himself. When Mr. Chang admits that his car and house keys are still in his suit pocket in the pool, the family decides to wait out the rest of the party at the pancake house.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Ralph Chang – Mr. Chang is the protagonist of "In the American Society." He is married to Mrs. Chang and the father of two daughters, Callie and Mona. A Chinese immigrant, Mr. Chang takes over a pancake house, and the business makes the family wealthy. Mr. Chang struggles to reconcile his Chinese business practices with American ways of life. Inspired by his grandfather's generosity as a wealthy man in a Chinese village, Mr. Chang believes in putting the needs of the community before the needs of his family. As a result, he doles out extra paychecks to his employees and interferes with legal proceedings against the undocumented workers Booker and Cedric. While he is clearly motivated to sustain the business, he also undermines his own success by placing unreasonable demands on his employees and causing them to quit. His family recognizes his stubbornness and sometimes pokes fun at it, but they honor his preferences, as he considers their loyalty a form of love. Mr. Chang's heated interaction with Jeremy Brothers and storming out of Jeremy's party suggest his refusal to fully assimilate to American society.

Mrs. Chang – Mrs. Chang is the wife of Mr. Chang and the mother of Callie and Mona. Before Mr. Chang became wealthy through the pancake house, she worked her way up to manager in a grocery store. Mrs. Chang is an independent woman who develops opinions about town issues like zoning and takes care of her own car maintenance. More recently, she turns her attention to material interests associated with well-to-do housewives, like interior decorating and nice shoes. In contrast to Mr. Chang, Mrs. Chang appears adept at fitting into her American surroundings. She charms the other guests at Jeremy Brothers's party, although it's clear that her social graces come at a cost to her sense of integrity (her conversation partner speaks knowingly about "the Orient" and attempts Chinese). Although she toys with the idea of joining the town country club at the beginning of the story, Mrs. Chang is fully aware of the challenges of being an immigrant in an American suburb. Her ultimate priority is loyalty to Mr. Chang, even when she knows that his bad business decisions will cost the family.

Callie – Callie is the oldest of the two Chang daughters. She is

quieter and more pensive than Mona, and it's also clear from her commentary that Callie feels stuck between her parents' Chinese world and her new American society. She is more aware than Mona of the racial inequalities in her hometown, as evidenced by her knowledge of the country club's discrimination against its Black applicants. Instead of speaking with Mona's brash confidence, she makes gentle suggestions and attempts comforting remarks to help her parents adjust to their new American environment. Although Mona claims early in the story that Mr. Chang does anything Callie wants, Mr. Chang becomes frustrated by her adherence to American ways, at one point criticizing her fear and wishing he'd had a son.

Mona – Mona is Callie's younger sister and Mr. Chang and Mrs. Chang's youngest daughter. She is highly assimilated into American life, as evidenced by her effortless friendship with Annie Lardner. Mona uses American slang and displays a breezy confidence that the Changs will get accepted into the country club. She takes more initiative than her sister Callie. However, her efforts usually backfire. Mona is the one who decides to fill a suggestion box at the restaurant full of fake customer complaints, hoping it will lead her father to hire more help and free her from working in the pancake house. Similarly, Mona tells her friend Annie that the Changs want to join the local country club, leading to an intrusive visit from Annie's mother Mrs. Lardner, who volunteers to write the Changs a reference letter.

Mrs. Lardner – Mrs. Lardner is the mother of Mona's friend Annie. She offers to write the Changs a recommendation letter to her country club, after Mona lets slip that her mother might want to join. Mrs. Lardner comes across as well-intentioned but ignorant. She is "honored and delighted" to write a reference letter for the Changs, but she shows no understanding of the country club's racist history. Her revelations about her own heritage—she confides in Mrs. Chang that her "natural father" was Jewish—are also tinged with prejudice, as she considers this fact "a secret," presumably because it would interfere with her own reputation among the country club set. Mrs. Lardner reveals the contrast between appearances and reality in American society. Her words show a willingness to include the Changs in her American community, but her actions—asking Callie to cater hors d'oeuvres, failing to integrate the Changs into the crowd at Jeremy Brothers's party—show a disregard for their actual well-being and sense of belonging.

Jeremy Brothers – Jeremy Brothers is Mrs. Lardner's friend, for whom she throws a "bon voyage bash" before he departs for a 6-month trip to Greece. At the party, it becomes clear that Jeremy is a drunken predator, and his racist behavior against Mr. Chang creates an unpleasant scene. Jeremy represents the stereotypically privileged male in American society. Besides being the story's antagonist, he serves as a foil to Mr. Chang. Where Mr. Chang is hard-working, Jeremy is frivolous and

leisurely; where Mr. Chang feels uncomfortable at the party filled with country club members, Jeremy is right at home; where Mr. Chang has his loving family surrounding him, Jeremy has alienated his loved ones. If Mr. Chang is most comfortable in "his own society," as Mrs. Chang claims, then Jeremy is the quintessential member of "the American society."

Booker – Booker is an undocumented Taiwanese immigrant who starts working as a busboy at Mr. Chang's pancake house. He proves to be a diligent and talented worker, but he's often out sick, leading Mr. Chang to hire Booker's undocumented friends like Cedric when Booker is out. Mr. Chang feels a strong sense of loyalty to Booker and Cedric, who remind him of his own struggles as a new immigrant in the U.S. He calls the two "my boys" and shows his loyalty by bailing them out of jail when the immigration police catch wind of their whereabouts. Although Booker (along with Cedric) initially praises Mr. Chang's legal savvy, he ultimately flees town before his trial, leaving only a letter thanking Mr. Chang for his generosity and apologizing for not paying back the bail money.

Cedric – Cedric is Booker's friend and fellow Taiwanese immigrant, whom Mr. Chang hires when Booker is out sick, and then on a more regular basis. Cedric is a jokester, calling Mona and Callie "*shou hou*—skinny monkeys," then winking at them as he filches used cigarettes from ashtrays for a single puff. Despite his jocular personality, the rest of the kitchen turns against Cedric, possibly out of racism or a sense of displacement inside their restaurant. On the one hand, Cedric is an underdog struggling to make ends meet in the U.S. without employment papers. On the other hand, the kitchen's hostility against him introduces some doubt as to his honesty. This doubt remains after he and Booker run away to avoid trial without repaying their bail to Mr. Chang. Their letter, which calls Mr. Chang a great boss and thanks him, reveals loyalty to their manager without acknowledging the difficult situation they've put him in. Cedric's circumstances—and their effect on Mr. Chang—show the complexities of trying to succeed in American society as an immigrant worker.

Fernando – Fernando is the head cook at Mr. Chang's pancake house, who accuses Cedric of being a thief. It's possible that Fernando discriminates against Cedric based on his Taiwanese ethnicity or undocumented status. His attitude to Cedric portrays the growing racial tension in Mr. Chang's restaurant, while also sowing questions about Cedric's trustworthiness. When Fernando himself turns out to be the crook—he is caught stealing meat from the kitchen and suspects Cedric was the tip-off—it starts to seem like his accusations were also an attempt to deflect attention away from his own misdeeds. Mr. Chang fires him and promotes Cedric, whom Fernando punches in the mouth. As though physical violence were not enough of an affront, Fernando also calls the immigration police. His action leads to more hardship for Cedric, Booker, and Mr. Chang.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Annie – Annie is Mona’s friend and Mrs. Lardner’s daughter.



THEMES

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



THE DIFFICULTIES OF ASSIMILATION

In “In the American Society,” the Chang family contends with two opposing forces: the drive to assimilate into American life and the impulse to respect Chinese customs. Ralph Chang, a Chinese immigrant (and the narrator Callie’s father), takes over a pancake shop in hopes of saving money for his daughters’ college educations. His business quickly succeeds, and the Changs become wealthy. Before long, however, tensions arise between Mr. Chang and his employees as he tries to make Chinese practices work within an American context. Because Mrs. Chang is more highly assimilated than her husband, having already worked her way up to a managerial position at the supermarket where she’s employed, she wavers between acceptance of and frustration at Mr. Chang’s loyalty to Chinese customs. When he insists on doling out extra paychecks to employees in need, Mrs. Chang either sighs and tells her daughters, “Your father thinks this is still China,” or becomes incensed by his charity, yelling “But this here is the U–S–of–A!”

Mr. Chang’s allegiance to Chinese customs continues to affect his American business. He wants his employees to help him around his house, asking them to “fix radiators and trim hedges,” as loyal employees might have done in China. Feeling that they’re being treated like servants, his workers quit. Mr. Chang then hires fellow immigrants, who reveal they don’t have work permits. When they get arrested, Mr. Chang’s sense of loyalty leads him to pay his employees’ bail; however, they flee without fully paying him back, citing their fear of the American legal system. Mr. Chang’s difficulty reconciling his Chinese customs with American expectations culminates in the story’s final party scene. The rude, all-American Jeremy Brothers publicly humiliates Mr. Chang, whose family comes to his side before ditching the party with him for the pancake shop. This final gesture in “The American Society” implies that assimilating into American life—whether by running a successful business or joining a country club—does not shield immigrants like the Changs from hardship and discrimination. Indeed, Mr. Chang’s experiences throughout the story suggest that no matter how materially successful he becomes, he continues to be caught between Chinese and American cultural expectations.

Ultimately, this culture clash will prevent him from assimilating fully.



SUCCESS, RACE, AND IMMIGRATION

At the beginning of “In the American Society,” the Chang family appears to attain the American dream. Mr. Chang takes over a successful pancake business, and the family gets rich. They purchase a station wagon with air conditioning, Mr. Chang enjoys a new recliner, and Mrs. Chang quits her supermarket job and starts taking an interest in “espadrilles, and wallpaper.” Soon, however, the realities of being an immigrant business owner start to puncture Mr. Chang’s success. For one thing, his employees take offense to his expectations of them. When Mr. Chang asks the headwaitress Gertrude to scratch his back, she quits and makes a racially insensitive remark, implying that Mr. Chang treats his workers more like slaves than paid employees. Despite Mr. Chang’s outward success, racial undertones seem to have emerged in the restaurant dynamics, hinting at greater disharmony to come.

The challenges presented by the U.S. immigration system also threaten to undermine Mr. Chang’s success. Because Mr. Chang empathizes with an undocumented immigrant named Booker, he hires him as a busboy. He understands Booker’s struggle—the busboy came to the U.S. on a student visa “but had run out of money and was now in a bind,” with only a fake Social Security card to his name—so Mr. Chang goes out of his way to help the new hire. Even though Booker and his undocumented friend Cedric prove to be good employees, the other staff resent them and claim Cedric is a crook. Before long, the head cook Fernando is stealing meat, there’s a fistfight, and the immigration authorities put Booker and Cedric in jail. Even though Mr. Chang himself doesn’t get in trouble for hiring the men, his failure to successfully advocate for them in the long run suggests that his sympathy to undocumented workers is a dead end for his business. The unfortunate turn of events at the pancake shop, spurred on by racial tensions in the kitchen and the reckoning of harsh immigration policies, illustrates that immigrant business owners aren’t fully in control of their own success. Rather, broader cultural and political pressures can make comfort and success precarious for immigrant business owners.



THE ILLUSION OF BELONGING

After Mr. Chang becomes wealthy from running his pancake shop, Mrs. Chang starts showing interest in joining the country club. She has reservations, such as the necessity of a referral letter from a current member, but her daughter Mona—who wants to swim in the country club pool—makes light of these concerns, telling her mother, “Annie’s mom’d write you a letter in a sec.” Soon after, Annie’s mom, Mrs. Lardner, shows up at the Changs’ house and

insists she would be “honored and delighted” to write a letter for “you people” (the Changs). She confides to Mrs. Chang, “It’s a secret of course, but [...] my natural father was Jewish. Can you see it? Just look at my skin.” From these remarks, it’s clear that Mrs. Lardner assumes that to be non-white or non-Christian is to have something to hide—hardly a comforting sentiment to share with her Chinese acquaintances. Moreover, her comparison between being secretly half-Jewish and being Chinese suggests that she sees some equivalence between her situation and the Changs’, but her conclusion is ill-conceived, as she is able to hide her heritage and join the country club, which the Changs cannot do.

After the Changs are declined membership in the country club, Mrs. Lardner invites them to a “bon voyage bash” she is throwing for her friend Jeremy Brothers, promising introductions to other country clubbers to help with future membership bids. When the Changs arrive, however, they are treated less like guests than imposters or service workers. One navy veteran speaks to Mrs. Chang about his time stationed “in the Orient” and attempts to speak Chinese; meanwhile, Mrs. Lardner corners Callie into serving hors d’oeuvres. The most egregious offense comes from Jeremy Brothers, who drunkenly shouts at Mr. Chang, “This is my party, *my party*, and I’ve never seen you before in my life,” before bellowing, “*WHO ARE YOU?*” Although Mrs. Lardner rushes over and Jeremy apologizes, their casually racist behavior sends a clear unwelcoming message and implies that the Changs will struggle to fit in no matter how successful they are in other ways. These scenes suggest that the sense of belonging immigrants might experience in the U.S. is often illusory and compromised by racist behavior, even from those who claim to accept them.



LOYALTY AND FAMILY

For the Chang family, loyalty is a core value, albeit one that is applied unevenly. Within the Changs’ marriage, loyalty is paramount and equal to love in importance. After Mrs. Chang voices her hesitation about moving forward with the country club idea, citing her husband’s distaste for wearing **suit jackets** and joining “the American society,” Callie notes, “My mother could not simply up and do as she pleased. For to embrace what my father embraced was to love him; and to embrace something else was to betray him.” In other words, for Mrs. Chang to join the country club anyway would be a disloyal act and a demonstration that she doesn’t really love Mr. Chang.

Mrs. Chang’s loyalty to her husband holds steady, even when his employment practices undermine the family’s security. Ultimately, then, Mr. Chang’s definition of loyalty differs from his wife’s. He feels the deepest sense of duty towards his employees and fellow Chinese immigrants, even when their behavior threatens his family’s livelihood. For example, he gives

his workers extra money beyond what they’ve earned, and he endangers the pancake shop by hiring undocumented Booker and Cedric. When Booker and Cedric are caught by police, Mr. Chang bails them out of jail and tries to seek legal help. “What about your family?” Mrs. Chang demands. “What about your wife?” She is angry about the risks he’s taking, but once her husband makes up his mind, she just “scrutinize[s] her hem,” a gesture that underscores her submission to her husband’s judgment. When it turns out that neither Booker nor Cedric feel particularly loyal to Mr. Chang—they run away to avoid trial—Mr. Chang is left to consider what loyalty means to him in his new American society. However, the end of the story—when Mr. Chang and his family leave Jeremy Brothers’s disastrous party, his daughters complimenting his performance and Mrs. Chang taking responsibility for the mishap—suggests that his family’s loyalty is what Mr. Chang can count on most.



SYMBOLS

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



SUIT JACKET

Mr. Chang’s uncomfortable suit jacket symbolizes the unpleasant experience of trying to fit into American society. He shops for the jacket with Mrs. Chang so that he’ll have an appropriate outfit to wear to the going-away party for Jeremy Brothers. However, it’s clear from earlier in the story that he dislikes wearing jackets; when Mrs. Chang daydreams about country club membership, she and her daughters all laugh at the imagined sight of Mr. Chang in a jacket to meet the country club dress code. Mr. Chang “had no use for nice clothes, and would wear only ten-year-old shirts, with grease-spotted pants.” Interestingly, Callie reveals this fact right before Mrs. Chang says, “Your father doesn’t believe in joining the American society,” drawing a parallel between the clothes Mr. Chang dislikes and the society he doesn’t fully want to join.

Because the suit jacket is oversized and uncomfortable on him, Mr. Chang leaves on the price tag and claims he might visit the tailor for better sizing. These gestures reveal his ambivalence not only towards his new outfit, but towards attending Jeremy’s party and joining the American society that this party represents. When Jeremy rudely rips off Mr. Chang’s jacket at the event, making fun of the “one hundred twelve-fifty” on the price tag, he might as well be taunting Mr. Chang’s inability to fit in to American society. Although the incident is humiliating for Mr. Chang, the removal of the suit jacket is also liberating. It’s as though Jeremy has unburdened Mr. Chang, tearing away any illusions about the American society of which his guest is already skeptical. At the end of the story, with the suit jacket

floating in the pool, Mr. Chang is no longer contorting himself to fit into an American identity. With this newfound freedom, he leaves the party in high spirits.

“For to embrace what my father embraced was to love him; and to embrace something else was to betray him.”



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Who's Irish?: Stories* published in 2000.

His Own Society Quotes

“Your father doesn't believe in joining the American society,” said my mother. “He wants to have his own society.”

Related Characters: Mrs. Chang, Callie (speaker), Mr. Ralph Chang

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

For the first time in the story, Mrs. Chang explicitly states that her husband would rather maintain the Chinese customs he knows than adopt American traditions. Her remark comes during the first conversation she has with her daughter about joining the town country club. Among other hang-ups—the cost, the waiting list, the lack of tennis or golf players in the Chang family—Mrs. Chang knows that her husband won't want to wear a suit jacket for dinner, as required at the club. To explain his preferences, she draws a contrast between American society and Mr. Chang's “own society.”

The use of the phrase “his own society,” however, is ambiguous in its meaning. Mrs. Chang might be saying that Mr. Chang prefers Chinese society, which he left behind when he immigrated to the U.S. She could also be communicating that, by “his own society,” Mr. Chang means that he wants to be in the company of a group he himself has created: his family. This interpretation can also be extended to include those employees at the pancake house, whom he wishes were more loyal to him and considered themselves to be part of “his own society.” Either way, this quote furthers the author's point that culture clashes make assimilation especially complicated, highlighting the conflict that often exists between one's loyalty to countrymen and to family.

Related Characters: Callie (speaker), Mr. Ralph Chang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears in Callie's narration of the country club scene. After Mona flippantly says that Mrs. Chang should go to dinner at the country club without Mr. Chang (who won't want to abide by the dress code), Callie shows the futility of that concept by clarifying that the entire family cares what Mr. Chang thinks. In fact, their whole concept of familial love is rooted in the idea of loyalty: that is, embracing what Mr. Chang embraces.

The equivalence between loyalty and familial love informs the rest of the story. As a guiding principle, the Changs remain loyal to each other; even when one spouse occasionally keeps a secret (as Mrs. Chang does with the country club application, and Mr. Chang does with hiring Booker and Cedric), full transparency between them is eventually restored. The philosophy of loyalty expressed in this quotation foreshadows the end of the story, when the entire Chang family unites and leaves Jeremy Brothers's party in support of Mr. Chang.

There were occasions when the clear running truth seemed to eddy, when he would pinch the vinyl of his chair up into little peaks and wonder if he was doing things right. But with time he would always smooth the peaks back down; and when business started to slide in the spring, he kept on like a horse in his ways.

Related Characters: Callie (speaker), Mr. Ralph Chang

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

This is the only time in the story when Mr. Chang appears to question his own judgment before being forced by circumstances to do so. These lines come after employees start quitting their work at the pancake house due to Mr.

Chang's unreasonable expectations that they do personal tasks for him. In her narration, Callie observes Mr. Chang's stubbornness, but she also reveals that "the clear running truth seems to eddy," meaning that Mr. Chang occasionally wonders if he is making the right choices. During these moments of self-doubt, he pinches his chair vinyl into "little peaks." As the rest of the passage explains, though, these moments are fleeting. Eventually, Mr. Chang "would always smooth the peaks back down," meaning he would stand by his convictions "like a horse in his ways."

This observation about Mr. Chang develops his character. He is portrayed here as being obstinate but not hopelessly so—he has the ability to introspect and think critically. His behavior throughout the rest of the story largely follows the pattern laid out by this quotation. Decisions like supporting Booker and Cedric through their legal troubles illustrate Mr. Chang's stubborn side, but moments of doubt—like keeping the price tag on his suit jacket for the party—also reveal themselves.

“You know, the Chinese have a saying,” said my mother. “To do nothing is better than to overdo. You mean well, but you tell me now what will happen.”

Related Characters: Mrs. Chang, Callie (speaker), Mona

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Chang's interpretation of Mona's lack of propriety—Mona tells her friend Annie Lardner that the Changs are considering joining the country club, and Mrs. Lardner pays a surprise visit as a result—relies on the wisdom of a Chinese saying. It is an interesting choice for Mrs. Chang to reference a Chinese adage, as, in a way, Mona has behaved in a distinctly American way by trying to further assimilate her family into town life. Mrs. Chang's words imply that she is not only angry at her daughter for overstepping and creating what might become a problem; she also recognizes Mona's efforts as alien to Chinese ideals. Mona's *faux pas* becomes an occasion for Mrs. Chang to teach her daughter a lesson, drawing on the Chinese culture she feels they have left behind. As Mona retreats into herself after the scolding (she "poke[s] diffidently at a mop"), she finds herself caught between two worlds, much like Mr. Chang: the American society to which the Lardners belong, and the Chinese society from which her family

comes.



“So what else I should do?” My father threw up his hands. “Those are my boys.”

“Your boys!” exploded my mother. “What about your family? What about your wife?”

My father took a long sip of tea. “You know,” he said finally, “in the war my father sent our cook to the soldiers to use. He always said it—the province comes before the town, the town comes before the family.”

“A restaurant is not a town,” said my mother.

Related Characters: Mr. Ralph Chang, Mrs. Chang, Callie (speaker), Booker, Cedric

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Chang and Mrs. Chang argue about his next steps after Booker and Cedric are detained for working without the proper documentation. Because Mr. Chang kept his hiring of Booker and Cedric a secret from his wife, she is irate at learning that the restaurant might now be in peril. The subsequent argument pits Mr. Chang's loyalty to his employees against his loyalty to his wife and daughters. Mrs. Chang's question—“What about your family? What about your wife?”—compels Mr. Chang to choose between his workers' best interests and his family's.

It is notable that, in this moment of crisis, Mr. Chang falls back on the ways of his Chinese father. The situations are in no way identical, as Mrs. Chang is quick to point out. In the example Mr. Chang provides, his father is living through a war (likely World War II, based on the story's publication year and Mr. Chang's age) and decides to feed the town (which might have experienced starvation, as many Chinese provinces did during the 1942-43 famine that coincided with World War II). His father put the soldiers before his family—but in a time of dire need. When Mrs. Chang says, “A restaurant is not a town,” she is saying that Mr. Chang's own predicament—involving a pancake house in the American suburbs—does not warrant such a comparison. Once again, the story draws attention to the distinctions between American and Chinese societies and how those distinctions can pit competing loyalties against each other.



In the American Society Quotes


“Maybe this suit not fit me,” fretted my father.

“Just don’t take your jacket off,” said the salesgirl.

He gave her a tip before they left, but when he got home, he refused to remove the price tag.

Related Characters: Mr. Ralph Chang , Callie (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis


Before Jeremy Brothers’s bon voyage party, the Changs take Mr. Chang shopping, assuming that none of his clothes will be appropriate for the gathering. He ends up buying an ill-fitting suit and decides to keep on the price tag so that he can ask the tailor later about the size.

The suit jacket is a major symbol in the story, and its lack of fit on Mr. Chang represents the ways in which American society does not fit his values and preferences. Just as he’s uncomfortable with the suit jacket, he feels ambivalent about American life. He worries that it’s not right for him, but he still tries his best to make do with what he has. Much like the price tag is a sign that he might return the jacket eventually, so is his doggedness about Chinese values a sign that he might never fully buy into American life. In both cases, he wavers on the best path forward, illustrating the persistent problem of assimilation and suggesting that it might not be fully solvable.

“Of course, my father tried to eat a cracker full of shallots, and burned himself in an attempt to help Mr. Lardner turn the coals of the barbecue; but on the whole, he seemed to be doing all right. Not nearly so well as my mother, though, who had accepted an entire cupful of Mrs. Lardner’s magic punch and indeed seemed to be under some spell. [...] I watched my mother take off her shoes, laughing and laughing as a man with a beard regaled her with navy stories by the pool. Apparently he had been stationed in the Orient and remembered a few words of Chinese, which made my mother laugh still more.

Related Characters: Mr. Ralph Chang , Mrs. Chang, Callie , Mrs. Lardner

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

At Jeremy Brothers’s party, Mr. and Mrs. Chang both try to fit in, despite the fact that Mr. Chang ends up being overdressed in a suit. This description of the two Chang parents at the party shows the contrast between how easily Mrs. Chang is able to assimilate and how much her husband struggles. While he tries to “eat a cracker full of shallots,” and burns himself on the barbecue (and is still seen by Callie to be “doing all right”), Mrs. Chang charms the other guests and appears to fit right in. It’s possible that the alcoholic “magic punch” increases her social comfort, but regardless, she is excelling beyond Mr. Chang in her ability to integrate into the social setting.

While Mr. Chang’s Chinese identity becomes a hindrance—his eating a cracker of shallots would have been commonplace in China, but is seen as inappropriate in America—Mrs. Chang’s heritage becomes an asset. A guest who is a navy veteran, for instance, is happy to talk to her about “the Orient.” The situation is more complex than it seems, though, as Mrs. Chang also must withstand the casual racism of the navy veteran, who appears to pigeonhole her based on her race. Despite appearing to assimilate on the surface, then, the truth is that neither Mr. Chang nor Mrs. Chang feel a true sense of belonging, suggesting that the mere outward appearance of fitting in doesn’t mean someone has fully assimilated.

“Jeremy began to roar. ‘This is my party, my party, and I’ve never seen you before in my life.’ My father backed up as Jeremy came toward him. ‘Who are you? WHO ARE YOU?’”

Related Characters: Callie , Jeremy Brothers (speaker), Mr. Ralph Chang

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

In this climactic quotation, the drunk Jeremy Brothers confronts Mr. Chang and challenges his very presence at the party—though, of course, Mrs. Lardner has invited him and Mr. Chang has every right to be there. Aside from defining Jeremy Brothers’s character as drunk, belligerent,

and unpredictable, this charged interaction brings one of the story's questions to the surface. Who is Mr. Chang? Does he see himself as American? Chinese? Both? Jeremy Brothers does not intend the question to land this way, but readers can draw a parallel between Mr. Chang's ambivalence towards American society and the imperative that he find his identity in the U.S. He literally backs up as Jeremy approaches, representing the ways in which he otherwise feels backed into a corner in life: unable to get the restaurant back on track, betrayed by Booker and Cedric, unwilling to throw out his Chinese customs in the U.S. Jeremy's question becomes a turning point for Mr. Chang, who must now decide how to move forward in his life in light of these challenges.

☝ “Take off your shirt.”

“I do not taking orders like a servant,” announced my father stiffly.

“Take off your shirt, or I’m going to throw this jacket right into the pool, just right into this little pool here.” Jeremy held it over the water.


“Go ahead.”

“One hundred twelve-fifty,” taunted Jeremy. “One hundred twelve ...”

My father flung the polo shirt into the water with such force that part of it bounced back up into the air like a fluorescent fountain. Then it settled into a soft heap on top of the water.

Related Characters: Mr. Ralph Chang , Callie , Jeremy Brothers (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 130-131

Explanation and Analysis

After Mrs. Lardner intervenes in Jeremy Brothers's drunken scene, reassuring him that she invited Mr. Chang to his party, he exaggerates his apology. Jeremy offers unwanted help to get Mr. Chang more appropriate clothes, since Jeremy finds him overdressed. The insult soon worsens into a confrontation as Jeremy takes the offer too far, demanding that Mr. Chang take off his suit jacket and instead put on the polo shirt Jeremy is wearing.

This quote is important to the story because it marks Mr.


Chang's decision. While Jeremy mocks the price of his suit jacket, calling out, “One hundred twelve-fifty,” Mr. Chang must decide how to handle the attack. Rather than grin and bear it, he decides he will not stand for the rudeness and condescension. In a grand gesture representing his feelings not only towards Jeremy Brothers's offer, but towards American society in general, he throws “the polo shirt into the water with such force that part of it bounce[s] back up into the air.” By doing so, he vehemently, publicly rejects what American society is offering him—which, in this instance, is mockery.

Nonetheless, the way that the shirt “bounce[s] back up into the air” and then “settle[s] in a soft heap on top of the water” portends a less-than-victorious ending for Mr. Chang. He can fling away American society in the form of the polo shirt, but it will reemerge, unable to stay out of sight.

☝ “You girls are good swimmers,” he said finally. “Not like me.” Then his shirt started moving again, and we trooped up the hill after it, into the dark.

Related Characters: Mr. Ralph Chang , Callie (speaker), Mona, Jeremy Brothers

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

In the final two lines of “In the American Society,” the Changs are discussing how to get back Mr. Chang's keys, which are still in his suit pocket in Jeremy Brothers's pool. On a deeper level, however, these lines show Mr. Chang contending with his daughters' level of assimilation into American life versus his own. Earlier in the story, Mr. Chang dismisses the notion that Callie could possibly understand America better than him. Now, after the incident at Jeremy Brothers's party, he not only accepts that Callie and Mona might be better “swimmers” than he is, literally—a sign of an affluent American childhood—but also hints that, on a deeper level, he knows his daughters will assimilate more successfully than he is able to do, and indeed already have.

When “his shirt start[s] moving again” and the family “troop[s] up the hill after it,” it becomes clear that the family unit is still intact, and that Mrs. Chang, Callie, and Mona will loyally follow their father wherever he goes. In that sense,

then, family loyalty emerges as more enduring and reliable for Mr. Chang than simple loyalty to fellow immigrants or

culture.



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.

HIS OWN SOCIETY

Mr. Chang takes over a pancake shop to save money for his daughters Callie and Mona's college tuition, though the girls are still in middle school. His business succeeds, and the family quickly gets rich. As his pancake shop continues thriving, Mr. Chang starts telling stories about his wealthy grandfather in China, who would help the poorer residents of his town, like the patriarch in the movie [The Godfather](#). In an effort to emulate his grandfather, Mr. Chang starts handing out extra paychecks to employees in need. His wife, Mrs. Chang, responds by sighing to her daughters and saying, "Your father thinks this is China," or by getting angry at his unnecessary spending and yelling, "But this here is the U—S—of—A!"

The family's newfound wealth enables Mrs. Chang to stop working at the supermarket, buy a station wagon, and develop a stronger American identity. She tells her daughters Callie and Mona that she might like to join the town country club. Mona encourages this idea and says her friend Annie's mother would write them a recommendation letter to the club. Mrs. Chang then writes off the country club idea, explaining, "Your father doesn't believe in joining the American society. He wants to have his own society." Callie sees that her mother's loyalty to her husband is more important than country club aspirations.

The story opens with Mr. Chang's ownership of the pancake shop, setting the stage for his business to become a major topic in the story. Right away, in describing the family's higher earnings and Mr. Chang's reliance on Chinese customs to manage his wealth, the story begins to explore the theme of success, race, and immigration—specifically implying that Mr. Chang's instant success and Chinese traditions might come into conflict later on. In conjunction, Mrs. Chang is portrayed in these first pages as vacillating between loyalty to her husband's ways and a desire to conform to American habits.



The country club represents the next strata of American assimilation for the Changs. Now that Mrs. Chang can afford to quit her job at the supermarket, she is becoming more like the white American housewives in her neighborhood, many of whom seem to belong to this country club, like Mona's friend Annie's family. A divide is also established between the sisters Callie and Mona. Mona believes that the family should join the country club, and that it won't be an issue to get a reference letter from Mrs. Lardner. Callie, on the other hand, stays mostly quiet at this point, letting readers wonder which parent, if any, she sympathizes with more. Meanwhile, Mrs. Chang's statement about Mr. Chang's beliefs on American society highlights the tension that exists between Chinese and American ways of life. Because the issue of the country club remains unresolved, the conversation also serves to increase suspense.



Having given generous paychecks to his employees, Mr. Chang expects their loyalty in return. He asks them to “fix radiators and trim hedges” at his home. When they complain, then quit, he calls them “robots.” Understaffed, the restaurant declines. Mona and Callie start working as busgirls and dishwashers at the pancake shop. They try to convince their father to hire more staff by stuffing the suggestion box full of fake complaints. Instead, Mr. Chang fires the busboy. After several failed attempts to find a replacement, he hires a Taiwanese man named Booker, who is running from the deportation authorities and doesn’t have the necessary documents to work in the U.S. Mr. Chang doesn’t tell his wife about Booker.

Differing expectations between Mr. Chang and his employees lead to conflicts at the pancake shop, complicating Mr. Chang’s earlier success. His inability to understand why his employees aren’t personally loyal to him (according to his Chinese-informed standards) illustrates the difficulties an entrepreneur might face working in a new culture; calling them “robots” suggests that Mr. Chang sees his employees as only concerned about their wages and not about him. Meanwhile, Mona believes she knows what is best in this situation, indicating that she believes her level of assimilation is superior to her father’s and will help him navigate his new society better. However, when her suggestion box plan backfires, the story hints that her confidence about the country club might also be unwarranted. Mr. Chang’s loyalty to fellow immigrant Booker coincides with a lack of honesty within his own marriage, suggesting that for Mr. Chang, loyalty to family and loyalty to culture don’t neatly harmonize at this point.



Mrs. Lardner, the mother of Mona’s friend Annie, visits the Changs and announces to Mrs. Chang that she’d be “honored and delighted” to write her family a reference letter for the country club. Mrs. Chang deflects, saying she doesn’t want to be any trouble. Mrs. Lardner is insistent, revealing the “secret” of her own Jewish heritage. When Mrs. Lardner leaves, Mona is excited, until Mrs. Chang gets angry at her daughter for having mentioned the country club to the Lardners. Callie reveals that a Black family has been waiting so long for country club admission, they’re going to sue. Mrs. Chang decides not to tell her husband about the country club.

Mona’s diversion from family loyalty in seeking Mrs. Lardner’s letter-writing help causes an imbalance within the family that threatens to shake their social position and cause instability within their community. Mrs. Lardner’s blindness to the Changs’ real feelings—her insistence on writing the letter, even though Mrs. Chang appears uncomfortable—only underscores the lack of understanding between the Changs and their suburban neighbors. In disclosing a fact about her own heritage, Mrs. Lardner shows that “assimilation” can mean something different to people of varying backgrounds, and what’s more, that not everyone experiences the same kind or degree of discrimination in the process of assimilating. Mona’s transgression of privacy leads to more dishonesty within her family, as Mrs. Chang doesn’t tell Mr. Chang about the visit from Mrs. Lardner. Her silence suggests that she feels she’s been disloyal to her husband by considering the country club.



Booker is a hard worker who goes above and beyond to please his boss. When he gets sick, he sends over several undocumented friends to work in his place, most notably the talented Cedric. The head cook in the pancake shop, Fernando, believes Cedric to be a crook. The restaurant staff start initialing their cigarettes to make sure Cedric doesn’t steal them from the ashtrays. Soon after Mr. Chang hires Cedric full-time, Fernando is caught stealing steak from the kitchen and then punches Cedric. Mr. Chang fires Fernando.

Tension at the pancake shop continues to increase with the introduction of the Cedric/Fernando conflicts. Now, Mr. Chang is in a more precarious position, where he does not have the security of happy employees. Fernando’s theft reveals that Mr. Chang’s employees are behaving badly behind his back, sowing doubt in readers’ minds that even Booker or Cedric feel completely loyal to Mr. Chang.



The day before school starts for his daughters, Mr. Chang comes home and announces that Fernando called the police on Booker and Cedric, who are now in custody. He tells the full story to Mrs. Chang, who is angry at her husband for this turn of events. Mr. Chang posts his employees' bail and receives reassuring advice from the Immigration Department. The situation seems to calm down. Mr. Chang apologizes to his wife, and Mrs. Chang tells him about the country club.

The pancake shop is only in deeper trouble now that the police are onto Booker and Cedric. Fernando's betrayal of Booker, Cedric, and Mr. Chang not only depicts yet another challenge faced by immigrant workers; it also leads to a reconciliation between Mr. and Mrs. Chang. Mr. Chang is forced to reveal his shady hiring to his wife, she owns up about the country club, and as the restaurant is thrown into a state of chaos, the equilibrium in his marriage appears to be restored.



Mr. Chang wants to provide more help to Booker and Cedric, whom he now calls "my boys." He decides to talk to the judge for their case. Mrs. Chang thinks this is a bad idea, telling him, "This is not China." When he insists, she indignantly asks, "What about your family? What about your wife?" Mr. Chang counters that in China, his father put the town before the family, so his first priority should be helping his fellow Chinese immigrants—especially because he himself had to play "hide-and-seek" with the immigration police as a new arrival in the U.S. Callie suggests he go to a lawyer rather than the judge, but he dismisses her and concludes he needs a son instead of a fearful wife and daughter.

Mr. Chang mistakes the U.S. legal system for China's legal customs, showing he hasn't yet assimilated fully into American society—and that his family members, who question his wisdom here, are ahead of him in this regard. The situation also pits Mr. Chang's family against his employees, raising the question of who deserves ultimate loyalty: one's wife and children, or one's countrymen and workers. This passage explores the idea that sticking together makes life easier for immigrants; while it might be true, the story suggests that a person's loyalty to countrymen may end up costing others close to them. It also showcases Mr. Chang's latent sexism against his wife and daughters, as he equates realism about the social system with fear and assumes a son would be more helpful.



Mr. Chang and Callie spend the next day waiting to speak to the judge. Instead, they get an unsympathetic clerk. After some flattery, she responds that she doubts anything will happen to Booker and Cedric. Mr. Chang asks if she could "perhaps put in a good word with the judge." She yawns and says that they'll get a fair trial. At home, Booker and Cedric are overjoyed and compliment Mr. Chang on his savvy. Mr. Chang takes the entire family out to dinner to celebrate.

Mr. Chang acts inappropriately, talking to a judge's clerk, though that's not how the legal system works in the U.S. He misinterprets the clerk's boilerplate comment about a fair trial, believing that he has achieved some good result because of his savvy. The focus on Booker and Cedric's appreciation, and Mr. Chang's desire to celebrate, indicates that Mr. Chang feels he has scored a victory and is irrationally happy with the result. This sequence of events underscores the fact that Mr. Chang's assimilation into U.S. society isn't as complete as he believes it is.



Shortly after the celebratory dinner, Mr. Chang receives a letter from Booker and Cedric informing him that they are running away to avoid trial. They pay him back \$140, but they don't have enough to fully reimburse him for their bail—although they vow to pay it back with interest. Despondent, Mr. Chang starts spending more time in the house. Concurrently, the Changs learn that their application to the country club has been rejected.

The letter comes as a blow to Mr. Chang, who went out of his way to help his employees, only to be abandoned and lose more money in the process. The takeaway appears to be that prioritizing work interests or loyalty to unrelated immigrants—especially when naive about how one's new society works—can be costly for immigrant business owners like Mr. Chang. Likewise, his retreat into the house implies that loyalty to family is his real comfort zone. The rejection from the country club only punctuates the difficulties of assimilation, validating Mrs. Chang's concerns and revealing that Mona was overly confident about their application prospects.



IN THE AMERICAN SOCIETY

Mrs. Lardner invites the Changs to a “bon voyage bash” for her friend Jeremy Brothers before his trip to Greece. She implies that the Changs will meet other country club members at the party, which will help their application the following year. The family is hesitant to accept but ultimately agrees to attend. Mrs. Chang takes Mr. Chang shopping for new clothes, as she worries that summer clothes aren’t appropriate to wear after Labor Day. The new **suit** doesn’t fit well, and Mr. Chang keeps on the price tag, muttering that he wants to ask the tailor about the size.

When the Changs arrive at the party everyone is wearing the kind of summer clothes Mrs. Chang thought would be inappropriate for September. Mr. Chang struggles to socialize, but Mrs. Chang drinks some punch and more successfully mingles with a navy veteran who speaks about “the Orient” and with women who compliment her complexion. Mrs. Lardner approaches Callie and asks her to help hand out hors d’oeuvres to guests. When Callie reaches her father with the platter, a drunk Jeremy Brothers comes up to introduce himself.

Drunken Jeremy Brothers tries to persuade Mr. Chang to “have a word” with his empty wine bottle. Mr. Chang doesn’t know how to respond, and Jeremy starts to incoherently ramble. Before walking away, he turns around and asks if Mr. Chang speaks Chinese, then pulls out a handkerchief with some Chinese characters. He wants to know if the handkerchief, a gift from his daughter, contains a “secret message.” Mr. Chang tells Jeremy the characters mean “long life,” but Jeremy suspects he’s being made fun of and starts to lose his temper. Finally, he explodes, “This is my party, *my party*, and I’ve never seen you before in my life. [...] *Who are you? WHO ARE YOU?*”

Mrs. Lardner continues to misunderstand the Changs, inviting them to a party where they will not feel comfortable, as evidenced by their initial hesitation to accept and the stress of shopping for new clothes. Mr. Chang’s decision to leave the price tag on his suit represents the ambivalence he feels about joining American society; Mr. Chang neither fully invests in the suit nor leaves it behind on the rack, much like he neither fully participates in nor totally writes off American culture. His outfit, like American society, doesn’t fit properly—but he halfheartedly wears it anyway.



From the start of the party, Mr. Chang—dressed too formally—doesn’t appear to fit in. The difference in his assimilation level vs. Mrs. Chang’s also becomes quickly apparent, as she is able to chit-chat with guests more easily than he is. The casual racism of Mrs. Lardner, who ropes Callie into a catering role, reveals the extent to which the Changs are not considered “real” party guests, in the way other neighbors are. When the recipient of the party, Jeremy Brothers, approaches, he is drunk and in a state of exaggerated comfort and good cheer—a stark contrast to Mr. Chang’s isolation and Callie’s forced servility. This uncomfortable contrast creates suspense.



In this climactic scene of the story, American society—as represented by the quintessential American man, Jeremy Brothers—is revealed to be unreliable, superficial, and even perilous for an immigrant like Mr. Chang. Not only does Jeremy immediately typecast Mr. Chang by presumptuously asking him about Chinese characters; he also insult and endangers Mr. Chang by questioning his presence at the party and all but declaring him an imposter. His accusation makes Mr. Chang’s lack of belonging all the more explicit.



Mrs. Lardner rushes over to reason with Jeremy and introduce him to Mr. Chang. Jeremy apologizes and wants to make up for his behavior, suggesting he buy Mr. Chang tickets to casino night or dinner at a restaurant. Mr. Chang declines. Then Jeremy proposes buying Mr. Chang sports clothes, telling him he looks “rather overdressed” and removing his own polo shirt for Mr. Chang to wear. Jeremy tries to persuade Mr. Chang to remove his own shirt and put on the polo instead, but Mr. Chang refuses. In response, Jeremy takes off Mr. Chang’s **suit jacket** and sees the price tag. Harping on the \$112.50 on-sale price, he starts making fun of his guest and threatens to drop the jacket into the pool. Fed up, Mr. Chang throws Jeremy’s polo shirt into the water, and the Changs abruptly leave the party.

Outside, Mona and Callie compliment their father’s response to Jeremy. Mrs. Chang worries that the incident was all her fault. In high spirits, Mr. Chang tells the family that his car keys are inside his jacket, which he dropped in the pool after Jeremy handed it back. Not wanting to re-enter the house, they decide to walk to the pancake shop and stay there until the party ends. Mona remarks that someone will have to dive for Mr. Chang’s keys. He stops for a moment, then comments that his daughters are “good swimmers [...] Not like me.”

Mrs. Lardner’s feeble attempt to smooth over the tension mirrors her earlier, equally futile offer to write the Changs a reference letter for the country club. Rather than help the situation, Mrs. Lardner only makes it worse. Now, Jeremy only mocks Mr. Chang further in a botched attempt to save face. When Jeremy pulls off Mr. Chang’s suit jacket, he might as well be removing Mr. Chang’s American identity, as though it were an ill-fitting costume that Mr. Chang should no longer wear. The reversal at the end of the passage, in which Mr. Chang throws Jeremy’s polo shirt into the pool, gives Mr. Chang the last word. Ultimately, he takes a symbol of American country club life—the polo shirt—and hurls it away from him. The action symbolizes his now-intensified disregard for American society.



In the final scene of the story, family loyalty reigns supreme as Mr. Chang, Mrs. Chang, Mona, and Callie unite and leave the party. The daughters’ praise for Mr. Chang’s outburst shows that they value their father’s dignity over fitting into American society, as does Mrs. Chang’s apology for her role in the incident. Mr. Chang’s comment about Mona and Callie’s swimming is a nod to his appreciation of their assimilative abilities; he sees them as more American than him, but he’s not upset about it. In fact, he sounds proud, though perhaps rueful as well, indirectly acknowledging that his daughters will ultimately be more successful in American society (better “swimmers”) than he can hope to be. The realization of the Changs’ lost keys casts a humorous air over the party debacle, and it’s only natural that the Changs end up where the story began: back at the pancake house, the site of the family business.





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