

# **Do I Have a Choice?: Amy Tan and Lee Smith on Marriage and Courtship Customs**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*For members of a folk community, the choices of who to marry and court, when and if to reproduce in the context of those relationships, and whether to divorce or separate are largely not up to the individual. Rather, community members often prominently influence relationships to which they are external, resulting in serious consequences for both married and courting people and the community as a whole. Through the lens of folkloric analysis, this paper juxtaposes Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* with Lee Smith's *Oral History*, focusing on the degree of marital and courtship choice enjoyed by characters Lindo Jong and Dory Cantrell respectively. Both authors, I conclude, use marriage and courtship customs to demonstrate that relationships are significantly manipulated by folk community members. In examining how revoked choice in marriage and courtship impacts these characters, their children, and their world, I hope to demonstrate that folkloric literature illustrates the risks of curtailing the agency of real people in relationships.*

Marriage and courtship relationships are not only unions between two individuals. Folkloric criticism investigates elements of culture from a framework of not-only-ness, first recognizing categorizable aspects of life within a folk community,<sup>1</sup> then expanding the conversation to consider what those aspects say about society. A normative relationship typically looks like two people partnering; however, the marriage and courtship customs at play in a folk group constitute an influence beyond the individuals in the relationship. Through these customs, a given folk community both transforms the people in the relationships and perpetuates circumstances within their community. By investigating literary examples of community influence on marriage and courtship, scholars can approach a better understanding of limitations on choice experienced by real people in relationships.

One illuminating example comes from Amy Tan, who incorporates Chinese marriage customs into *The Joy Luck Club* through Lindo Jong's experiences with and responses to those customs. Betrothed to another infant named Tyan-yu Huang at the age of two, Lindo is a Chinese woman born in the 1910s who navigates her way out of the marriage, remarries another Chinese immigrant in the United States, and narrates her story to her American-born Chinese daughter. Similar to Tan, Lee Smith incorporates Appalachian courtship customs into *Oral History* through Dory Cantrell's understanding of and struggle within the framework of those customs. Born in 1902, Dory is a young woman of the holler<sup>2</sup> who courts outsider Richard Burlage, becomes the single mother of their twin daughters once he leaves, remarries an Appalachian man, and dies an either accidental or self-inflicted death when her children are young. Both authors present their characters with the marriage and courtship customs of their respective communities and, in doing so, effectively convey that, as a member of a folk community, to court and to marry is to experience not an individualistic love story in isolation but a journey paved by external influence.

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1. With a conventional folkloric disciplinary understanding of the term "folk culture" as a set of elements including but not limited to values, traditions, customs, and art, I use the term "folk community" to mean a group of people who share a folk culture. Jan Harold Brunvand's *The Study of American Folklore* uses "folk group" instead of "folk community" in reference to sets of people who "may be identified for folklore purposes first by their distinctive folk speech and other traditions— the lingo and lore which set one group apart from others" (21). While I am writing about the same concept Brunvand calls "folk groups," I instead use the term "folk community" to emphasize that the people I am speaking about share a space.

2. The novel takes place in the fictional Hoot Owl Holler. Also called a "hollow," in the slang of the American South, especially Appalachia, a "holler" refers to a valley. The term also suggests that the area being described is particularly isolated ("hollow").

Marriage, courtship, and customs are definable terms useful in understanding Lindo's and Dory's interactions with traditional marriage. The American Psychological Association considers a marriage traditional "according to the historical norms of a given society, usually for the primary purpose of establishing a family," but "prenuptial customs vary in different cultures." While the use of words like "usually" and "primary" temper the definition as common rather than universal, those words also suggest a prescription of how the situation generally looks. Also, by this definition, marriage customs are "historical," meaning dictated by the generations who lived before, and their exigency is "establishing a family," in other words, the grouping into units of individuals who might parent more individuals who will also be easily recognizable as members of that unit. The term "marriage," used by Lindo herself, is the best descriptor for her relationship with Tyan-yu (Tan 51). Courtship constitutes a period leading up to the decision to marry and is a fitting term for Dory's relationship with Richard Burlage. Folkloric customs are practices for which there is "no questioning of why they were passed down, because that is disrespectful" and, in terms of adherence to those customs, there is "no rubric, but you better know the rules" (Gaitely). Tan and Smith use marriage, courtship, and customs as defined above to demonstrate that partnerships are often communally rather than individually orchestrated, assessed, and terminated.

Both authors' presentations of their character indicates a situation where the relationship poses a challenge to the individual's will. Tan affords Lindo a voice through the first-person point of view, and Lindo uses her first words to introduce her marriage as the time "I once sacrificed my life to keep my parents' promise" (49). The strong verb of "sacrificed" in active voice paired with the first of many uses of the pronoun "I" in a chapter unified by the analogy that links Lindo's capacity to control others to "the power of the wind" seems to indicate Lindo's agency (58). However, this agency comes not from the marriage, but from Lindo's behaviors in spite of the marriage. She not only has to erase herself by accepting the invisibility of the wind, but also has to redefine the tangible objects that serve as metonyms for marriage. Her community dresses her in wedding clothes to celebrate marriage, "but what [Lindo] saw was even more valuable"; Lindo "draped the large embroidered scarf over [her] face" and turned the garment into a tool that "covered [her self-celebrating] thoughts up. But underneath the scarf [she] still knew who [she] was" (58). The contradicting conjunction "but" punctuates Lindo's narrative as she redefines cultural items by offering opposition to their customary meaning. Tan emphasizes that marriage is not a conduit to Lindo's agency but an obstacle to it by creating a clear dichotomy between culturally-defined symbols of marriage and what Lindo uses them to accomplish, between garments and "what was inside me" (59). Lindo

is presented in the novel in a manner that captures the question of her agency in the face of community intervention and orients her as an individual in opposition to the conventions of Chinese marriage.

Smith gives a much different window into Dory's courtship experience by characterizing her not from her own point of view, but from the points of view of community members. The structure of the novel ensures that readers get others' accounts of Dory's words, actions, and identity, but never learn how she perceives her own life. Eleven of the novel's chapters are named after characters, nine of them narrated by the named character from the first-person point of view, and the other two, the chapters named after Dory's parents, are narrated by a third-person limited narrator. Despite being mentioned in every one of these chapters, Dory does not have a named chapter. What results is other characters depicting Dory as if she is a power source within the community, while the narrative structure itself gives her no voice. For example, Sally, Dory's daughter, compares their family to a kaleidoscope "with Mama at the center, not doing anything particular but not having to either, and all the rest of us falling in place around" (Smith 238). Sally goes as far as to say it is not only the family that is enraptured by Dory, but that "the whole world just gets in line to help [her] out" (239) also. However, Sally's explanation betrays the pattern of paradoxically attributing power to Dory and making her the object of external influence. She describes how Dory often was "caught up in a waiting dream," the passive voice and idea of both waiting and dreaming suggesting factors beyond Dory's control influencing her behavior (239). Smith presents her audience with Dory, this character that intrigues the other characters, and in this presentation demonstrates the absurdity of attributing mysterious power to community members while simultaneously excluding their voices.

As for exclusionary orchestration of marriage, Tan creates a cultural context where people outside of the relationship impose marriage. She demonstrates this through word choice that emphasizes Lindo's disenfranchisement in the decision of her own marriage. Lindo calls Tyan-yu "the boy I would be forced to marry" and remembers that whenever she would cry over the arrangement, her mother would remind her "it's no use" because "we have made a contract" (50, 52). The word "forced" emphasizes Lindo's lack of choice, the finality of "it's no use" in response to Lindo's crying expresses that even her retroactive opposition to the arrangement will have no effect. The ambiguous "we" further begs the question of whether the mother is referring to herself and the other adults responsible for the arrangement or indicating that the decision was made by the familial unit as a whole regardless of having excluded Lindo's input. Tan crafts the clearest picture of how her character's experience fits within the novel's cultural context when Lindo explains the

marriage practices of her city, Taiyuan. She supports her assertion that “I had no choice, now or later” with the explanation that Taiyuan was “always the last to give up stupid old-fashioned customs,” while “in other cities, already, a man could choose his own wife” (51). Tan’s fictional cultural context seems representative of the actual cultural context of China, whose marriage reforms in the 1950s recognized a previously excessive external influence at play in the context of marriage. Lawmakers reformed the institution of marriage in China into a “voluntary contract grounded in free choice and the individual’s emotional fulfillment,” and the nation later “further privatized” marriage with reforms regarding individual property rights in the case of divorce (Yeung and Hu 448). The real-world China that followed what would have been Lindo’s generation, then, seems to be moving toward greater choice and individualism in terms of marriage, at least in the legal context.

Dory, on the other hand, lives in a community trending in the opposite direction of the real-world China of the early-to-mid twentieth century; in Smith’s Appalachia, the decision of whether or not to legally marry is traditionally the choice of the courting individuals, but community members begin challenging that tradition. Granny Younger, a respected elder within the community, explains that “young folks just gets them a roof and moves under it and when the circuit rider comes around he makes it legal by saying the words, or they don’t fool with it one way or another. It’s nothing but words, what I say” (62). By delivering these lines through a character representative of the traditional wisdom of the folk community and having her equate legal marriage to “words” that can be “fool[ed]” with or not, Smith suggests that the Appalachian community is traditionally hands-off in terms of marriage. However, Granny’s account of the marriage between Dory’s father and mother, Almarine and Pricey Jane, is a mockery of outside imposition of marriage turned eerie in the context of the novel as a whole. Miss Lucille Aston, a townspeople and outsider in that she “would up and die rather set foot in the hollers,” insists that the couple “come right along with me” before declaring to her brother, a judge “I want you to marry them” (61-3). The scene’s tone is comical, with Almarine “a-waving to folks along the way like he’s one big parade” and the judge lying in bed in a dark room (62). However, the event takes on a dark cast when Granny reveals that although “ain’t nobody heard of him marrying folks before,” the reason the judge officiated the marriage was because “he’s scared of his sister” (63). Dory is born from parents who were coerced into marriage on the basis of the “want” and fear of two people outside of their relationship, the forced marriage easily serving as a metaphor for the Appalachian community itself that will by the end of the novel be turned into a theme park called “Ghostland” by a descendant whose desire for profit finds opportunity in a common fear that the holler is haunted (285).

Whether a relationship ends, in Tan's and Smith's worlds, is also primarily influenced by community members. Specifically, the in-laws are the primary reason both relationships must be dissolved. Huang Taitai, Lindo's mother-in-law, is the antagonist in the chapter of the novel that is concerned with Lindo's arranged marriage.<sup>3</sup> At the initial matchmaking session, when Huang Taitai expresses concern that the two-year-old Lindo "had an unusually bad temper," the matchmaker reassured Huang Taitai that Lindo "will grow up to be a hard worker who serves you well in your old age" (50). The matchmaker, the mouthpiece for marriage customs in Tan's cultural context, addresses how Lindo's personality will impact not the man she is marrying, but the in-law whose family she is marrying into. The marriage ultimately hinges upon this issue of serving Huang Taitai; when Lindo fails to bear grandchildren for the mother-in-law, Huang Taitai "flew into another kind of rage" and "became a little crazy," at which point Lindo begins planning her exit from the marriage (62). Lindo's feelings about and compatibility with her husband are secondary to her usefulness to this person who is external to the marital relationship.

In Dory's case, Richard recounts two conversations with individuals external to the relationship suggesting that the courtship relationship must end on the account of in-laws regardless of his or Dory's feelings. First, after Richard confides in Reverend Aldous Rife about his courtship with Dory, Aldous proclaims to Richard that because of the family Dory belongs to, "you have no choice" but to end the relationship (134). The inclusion of the word "choice" paired with the urgent and imperative statements "you must forget her" and "you must break this attachment, Richard, and break it at once" suggest that Aldous, someone external to the relationship, has the authority and insight to demand it be ended (134). Claiming that Dory's "father is a dangerous man, a criminal" for moonshining during the Prohibition era, Aldous appeals to the impact of familism on individuals (Smith 134).

In a study about Appalachia, Hal Seth Baron argues that Appalachians emerged from other Americans as a distinct folk community during "the period of isolation" spanning from 1840 to 1900 (210). A major feature that distinguished Appalachians as a folk community, he adds, is familism, which he defines as an economic structure divided equally between neighboring families with each family financially supporting its own members whenever necessary but discouraging individuals from prospering at the community's expense. By pointing to Dory's father's occupation as a reason Richard should not be involved with her, Aldous is making an appeal to familism. The second interaction is with Ora Mae, Dory's older sister, who admits later in the novel to having not given Dory the letter from Richard inviting her to return with him to his hometown

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3. This is the third chapter of *The Joy Luck Club*, titled "The Red Candle."

(Smith 216). Immediately after Richard internally monologs “Oh, how I wanted Dory!” Ora Mae informs him “she ain’t comin’ now, and she ain’t comin’ later, and she ain’t never comin’” (165). One could argue in Ora’s favor, that she was right to have called off the relationship given that, in this scene, she has just walked in on Richard preparing to have sex with another woman. However, that argument erroneously places the responsibility for ending a relationship in the hands of people external to the relationship. Although unlike Lindo’s situation in that the disruptive behavior of the inlaws is in opposition rather than in support of the relationship, Dory’s situation similarly presents an instance where in-laws make it difficult for the individuals to want to remain in the relationship.

Another area in which both authors depict community intervention in unions between two people is over the issue of conception. Tan juxtaposes Lindo’s character, who has not conceived within a forced marriage, with the character of an unnamed servant, who has conceived within an unsanctioned courtship. Her juxtaposition appears most clearly through the words she uses to describe these two characters’ bodies and the actions the characters take in response to their conception circumstance. Ignorant of the reason that the couple have not conceived—Tyan-yu has never consented to have sex with Lindo—Huang Taitai expresses anger that Lindo’s “stomach and breasts remained small and flat” (62). This physical description is nearly the opposite of that of the servant girl when Lindo observes “her eyes grow bigger and her teasing voice become smaller whenever the handsome delivery man arrive[s]” while “her stomach grow[s] rounder and her face become[s] longer with fear and worry” (65). Tan uses these opposite physical descriptions to set up Lindo’s solution to the issue, which she devises not for herself, but to “escape this marriage without breaking [her] promise to [her] family” (63). Once Lindo convinces the family that the servant is Tyan-yu’s true match, the servant is “so struck with this miracle of marrying Tyan-yu” that she arranges for her ancestors’ graves to be swept “not just once a year, but once a day,” an exaggerated practice of custom (65). External intervention determines the light in which these women’s bodies are cast, and each responds by turning to the generation that came before them. Tan’s depiction of these two characters suggests that, within the cultural context she constructs in the novel, when language prizes or belittles bodies based on pregnancy and relationship status, that language not only harms the people described, but also complicates their relationship with foregoing generations.

Dory is no stranger to belittling words in reference to conception. While Lindo was shamed for having not conceived while partnered, Dory is shamed for having conceived and being unpartnered. After Richard leaves town at the behest of Aldous and Ora Mae, Dory is apparently pregnant, and the community responds with language

that regards her pregnancy as a shameful joke. Little Luther Wade, the man who will eventually marry Dory, expresses anger at his mother calling Dory “ruint” a dialect form of the passive verb “ruined” that objectifies Dory as something changed for the worse by conception (171). Luther adds that another community member commented that “he wouldn’t take no man’s leftovers,” language that reduces Dory to a consumable (171). Ora Mae blames Dory for the pregnancy and equates her babies, too, to consumables, arguing that Dory engaged in courtship “and I said not to, and look where it got her. Two loaves of bread in the oven, I said, and the cook is out to lunch. Ha!” (211). This backhanded joke reveals both the extent to which Ora Mae believes that her external influence should have altered Dory’s choice to engage in a courtship relationship and a dehumanization of the resulting unborn children. In both circumstances, the community discounts the woman’s own feelings about conception while amplifying an external social pressure.

Tan and Smith also situate both women in a cultural context where marriage is a given after an initial failed marriage or courtship. On the basis of choice, Lindo contrasts her marriage to Tyan-yu to her remarriage to Tin Jong, the father of her American-born Chinese children, including her daughter Waverly. Addressing Waverly in the narrative, she explains that her marriage to Tin Jong “was not like my first marriage, where everything was arranged. I had a choice. I could choose to marry your father, or I could choose not to marry him and go back to China” (Tan 262-3). Her verbally ironic tone highlights that while yes, she could choose not to remarry, the circumstances surrounding her membership in her folk community of Chinese immigrants in America meant that choice would have sent her back to the country from where she had fled. Dory, like Lindo, does not remain single after the departure of Richard, recoupling with Luther, whom the community allows to extend symbolic paternity to her out-of-wedlock babies. In the family tree that lists Dory and Richard’s twin daughters, Richard is not named in the diagram, the twins instead listed under Luther’s name (231). Richard’s paternity is further erased when he returns to the holler ten years after his departure, and a community member tells him “she’s a wife now, with a husband better than most, and children” (221). As a result of the conversation, when Richard eventually sees the twins, he does not know they are his. Both Lindo and Dory remarry without fanfare in a recoupling that serves as somewhat of a social replacement of the previous marriage.

A history of external pressure to remarry in the folk communities Tan and Smith depict in their novels, first published in 1989 and 1983 respectively, is supported by sociological scholarship on real-world China and Appalachia. In the twenty-first century, long-term singleness after a marriage or courtship situation is becoming less stigmatized in Chinese and Appalachian folk communities. Social pressure is a factor that has

traditionally pushed Chinese women to marry in the first place and remarry if divorced, but Chinese gender discourse is beginning to push back. Hannah Feldshuh deconstructs the term 剩女, romanized as shèngnǚ, which translates to “leftover girl” and pejoratively refers to educated single women over the age of twenty-seven (39). She argues that this term points not to a concerning or humorous demographic, but to a societal shaming of women outside of the structure of marriage that does not consider the women’s own sense of success and fulfillment. Her deconstruction pushes against the pressure to remarry and the belittling language suffered by the fictional Lindo. Finding a similar disconnect as Feldshuh between stigma and reality, after interviewing divorced Chinese women between 1998 to 2018, Suet Lin Hung shares that although “dominant Chinese cultural discourse” privileges the married over the single lifestyle for women, plenty of divorcees share a vision of post-divorce femininity characterized by strength and independence that deters them from remarrying (10). Such a vision is not expressed by twentieth-century Lindo, whose previously-explored comment about having a choice to marry or return to China connects the idea of marital status to maintaining a standard of living rather than to femininity or self-image.

A similar trend as recognized by Feldshuh and Hung of questioning stigmatizing language about marriage has emerged within Appalachian culture. In 2010, Janis Evelyn Rezek interviewed eight West Virginian adolescent moms. Perhaps suggestive of social pressures within their folk community to be married as a mother, only one participant was single. Still, Rezek’s research resulted in findings indicative of a movement in literature towards condemning those who call adolescent motherhood a “social problem” in order to implement “social control” that often comes in the form of imposing marriage (131, 16). Members are growing more tolerant towards young, unmarried mothers in the community described by Rezek than in Dory’s community where a young pregnant woman is “ruined” until marriage. Conducted twenty-to-thirty years after the novels, all three of these studies offer useful perspectives on how remarriage customs are developing during the twenty-first century in folk communities similar to those portrayed in Tan’s and Smith’s fictional worlds. A cultural shift towards destigmatizing singleness, while positive for both Chinese and Appalachian women, further exemplifies that whether an individual is shamed or respected for their marital status is a community issue.

The consequences of external interference extend to each woman’s daughter, who recount the resulting intergenerational trauma from their own points of view. As soon as Lindo’s family arranged her betrothal, her mother “began treating [her] as if [she] belonged to somebody else,” calling her “Huang Taitai’s daughter” (Tan 51). As a result, once Lindo has a daughter, Waverly, she “would proudly walk with [her],” telling

“whoever looked her way” that “this is my daughter Wave-ly Jong” (99). Waverly feels embarrassed by her mother frequently claiming her, and when she tells her mother “I wish you wouldn’t do that, telling everybody I’m your daughter,” she awakens her mother’s woundedness at being disowned by her own mother (99). Dory’s daughter, Sally, experiences a similar trauma passed down from her mother’s negative experiences with courtship. Starting over her storytelling several times as she struggles with the subject matter, Sally recounts the evening when her mother left and was found decapitated by a train. She explains that her mother frequently wandered off to the train tracks, the greater context of the novel establishing the implication that she returns to that location since those are the tracks that brought Richard out of the holler. After Dory’s death, “folks came from all around to stare at [the family] house, and the family was “a tourist attraction” (Smith 245). Through their intervention with the courtship situation, the community is complicit in Dory’s death before proceeding to treat the family in a manner that traumatizes Dory’s children. Tan and Smith both present contexts where people outside of relationships treat individuals differently as a consequence of the relationship, and the resulting harm extends to still other people outside of the relationship.

Studying marriage and courtship within Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* and Lee Smith’s *Oral History* through a folkloric lens illuminates how there is much beyond the individual that is responsible for the quality of and potential fallout from relationships. In both novels, particularly in their discussion of courtship and marriage, a theme recurs of the people in relationships being led to believe by their folk community’s members or circumstances that they have no choice. With this understanding, people can proceed with caution when navigating both literary and actual cultural contexts and check themselves when tempted to hypocritically support external encroachment on relationships while placing all blame on people in relationships. Considering the ways in which marriage and courtship customs are not only practiced by individuals in relationships, but often heavily influenced by community members, the folkloric orientation of not-only-ness serves to depict more fairly the institution of marriage in general.

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