

Kai Ting's Growth in Honor and Duty from the Perspective of Trauma

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Abstract: Honor and Duty is the work of Chinese-American writer Gus Lee. It tells the story that Kai Ting, the hero, tries to escape from the bondage of his family and get rid of his trauma, but finally, he can heal his trauma through the help of others and self-exploration. The detailed description in the novel reveals Kai Ting's trauma and its influence on Kai Ting. The long-term traumatic experience made Kai Ting miserable. Fortunately, with the help of Uncle Shim, Kai Ting was redeemed and gained self-growth. Therefore, Kai Ting gradually found his self-worth and rebuilt his relationship with his family.

1. Introduction to *Honor and Duty*

Gus Lee, a second-generation Chinese American, published *Honor and Duty* in 1994. This book tells the story of a 17-year-old boy named Kai Ting who was traumatized in his family and had to flee from it, but finally returned to his family through self-exploration and the help of his relatives. The abnormal family relationship overwhelmed Kai Ting and he even lost himself, so he tried to escape from the bondage of his family to find himself. But even though he fled to West Point Military Academy, the shadow of family trauma still lingered. Fortunately, with the guidance and comfort of Uncle Shim, Kai Ting was comforted to a great extent and Kai Ting was helped out of the trauma.

At present, scholars at home and abroad mainly study *Honor and Duty* in terms of artistic characteristics, culture, ethnic identity, and post-colonialism. Few scholars have analyzed Kai Ting's trauma characterization and healing process from the perspective of trauma. Therefore, this paper will try to interpret Kai Ting's family trauma in *Honor and Duty* from the perspective of trauma theory.

2. Trauma characterization

2.1 Family Tension

In *Psychological Trauma and Research*, Zhao Dongmei, a trauma scholar, summarized the external reaction of psychological trauma into four levels: physiology, cognition, emotion, and behavior. Psychologically speaking, the injured person will have adverse reactions such as accelerated heartbeat, excessive fright, stomach pain, diarrhea, and headache. Cognitively, the victim will be in a state of excessive vigilance, often accompanied by nightmares, flashbacks, and other symptoms. At the same time, the injured person will become helpless and anxious emotionally, losing confidence and self-

esteem. In behavior, they will gradually escape from social relations and tend to stay away from others^[1]. In *Honor and Duty*, Kai Ting's suffering is a reflection of his trauma. Kai Ting lost his mother when he was young, and his stepmother Edna tyrannically ruled the whole family. All the family members live under the control of a culture, and Western etiquette must be strictly observed in dressing and eating. At the same time, Edna cruelly kicked Kai Ting's two sisters out of the house and did not allow the children to have memories related to China and their biological mother, nor to contact their biological mother's good friend Uncle Shim. Since childhood, Kai Ting has been subjected to domestic violence by her stepmother, who scolds her with her mouth and hits her with her hands. Even if the knife and fork are not placed in the right place, she may be beaten, while Kai Ting can only endure it silently. He dare not argue with her stepmother or shout at her. At the same time, Edna bullied and belittled Kai Ting for a long time, thinking that he didn't deserve girls' love. After being traumatized and degraded for a long time, Kai Ting had a series of painful hallucinations. He recalled, "I leaked blood from my brain and regretted my life. Her voice knifed into my brain, where it vibrated and keened painfully."^[2] She felt a burst of primitive fear at the mention of her stepmother, and unconsciously felt "Heart slugged, vision blurred, stomach soured, back ached, polio bloomed"^[2]. Whenever she argued with her stepmother.

No matter how Edna pressured Kai Ting, his father Ding Guofan always acquiesced in all atrocities and even imposed his wishes on Kai Ting, which led to the increasingly tense relationship between father and son. Ding Guofan was born in a feudal family and was once a highly regarded Kuomintang officer. After the defeat of the Kuomintang, he fled to the United States, hoping to realize his dream by pursuing the "American dream". However, contrary to his wishes, he hit a wall everywhere in the United States and his dignity was severely hit. So he turned to his son and hoped that his son would win glory for his father. The estranged father-son relationship made Kai Ting full of fear for his father. "Fear nothing in head or heart, he had said. Yet I feared him in head, heart, stomach, liver, ear canal, and pancreas"^[2]. Kai Ting knew in his heart that he was not fit to be a soldier, but to please his father, he was forced to accept his father's arrangement. This imposed wish invisibly aggravated his trauma.

2.2 Low sense of self-worth

The confusion of cultural identity and belonging is a common theme in American Bildungsroman from the multicultural perspective. "The reason why the protagonist is confused about national cultural identity is that teenagers from marginal races have similar experiences and feelings in real life. They are placed in a distant and vague ethnic culture at home, and once they leave home, they are immersed in a completely different value system and code of conduct"^[3]. Due to the total blockade of Chinese culture by his parents, Kai Ting is extremely sensitive to his own identity. "I was Jook Sing and a fan toong, an American-born Chinese and a garbage can for rice."^[2] On the one hand, Kai Ting went to West Point Military Academy alone to inherit his father's wishes and win his father's favor, on the other hand, he was full of inferiority to his identity and wanted to westernize and become a real American.

Kai Ting often feels that he lacks talent and thinks that he is much worse than his father. I always have a sense of inferiority, feeling that "I lacked his willpower, his drive, his skills, his confidence"^[2]. In the face of Christine, the object of his admiration, he is always full of inferiority, and he is afraid to tell Christine about his Chinese identity or anything related to China. When he was at West Point Military Academy, he was stared at by his classmates because of his Chinese appearance. Other classmates called him "China Boy"^[2], and he suddenly felt inferior, even worse than other students. When you pass by the mirror in the cloakroom, you will look at the mirror and unconsciously start to belittle yourself. "You're an ugly piece a dark, squinty-eyed, fat-lip shit, and you're stupid thinkin' you could be with her."^[2]

3. Healing of trauma

3.1 Rebuild a sense of security

Herman pointed out that the first task of trauma recovery is to rebuild the sense of security, “Establishing safety begins by focusing on control of the body and gradually moves outward toward control of the environment.”^[4] Escape to West Point is the beginning of Kai Ting's rebuilding of security. After leaving home, Kai Ting was far away from his parents, who symbolized the source of pain. West Point had no violence or intimidation from his parents, and the school only cared about the Honor and Duty of the students. Kai Ting gradually forgot the past pain and stayed away from the painful traumatic memory in day-to-day training, so West Point was a safer environment for Kai Ting. In West Point, Kai Ting passed all kinds of inhuman training in the school through his efforts. His boss praised him and made many good friends, so he gradually became confident in himself, which also confirmed that Kai Ting gradually began to get rid of the shackles of his family, re-established his inner sense of security, and realized his own growth. As the most trusted and respected elder in Kai Ting, Uncle Shim's long-term teaching and comfort largely eased Kai Ting's anxiety, and at the same time gradually established a sense of security for Kai Ting, gaining Kai Ting's trust, which was the key link for Kai Ting's successful reunion with his family. Uncle Shim, a Confucian scholar, firmly believes in the Confucius-Mencius principle of self-denial and self-respect. He emphasized to Kai Ting that “There is no dreamy softness inside the heavy burden of shiao, of piety to parents. It is a huge rock. You can try all your life and never encircle this rock with your arms or with your life”^[2]. Kai Ting didn't fully agree with Uncle Shim's idea at first, but he also made a lot of progress under such exposure, which is also the key to Kai Ting's healing.

3.2 Rebuild contact with the outside world

According to Herman, traumatic events make people doubt the existing interpersonal relationships. “Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience.”^[4] Kai Ting couldn't get a sense of trust and security from his parents, and his sisters were kicked out of the house by his stepmother, so he didn't have any brothers to talk to each other, so he gradually closed his heart and buried his wounds in his heart, becoming numb. Uncle Shim's gradual guidance is the key for Kai Ting to open his heart, and it is also an opportunity for Kai Ting to re-establish contact with his family. As far as Uncle Shim is concerned, it is his duty to educate Kai Ting's old friends, so he regards Kai Ting as his own and tells Kai Ting many ethical stories about China, hoping to impress Kai Ting's numb and westernized heart. Kai Ting also got unprecedented care from Uncle Shim, and no longer closed his heart. Uncle Shim always insisted on finding the whereabouts of his sister Jenny for Kai Ting. After many efforts, he finally found Jenny. On the phone, Uncle Shim eagerly taught Kai Ting that You owe her the duty, dzeren, the relationship, the lun, of her only brother. A younger brother, and almost, of a son.”^[2] After this phone call, Kai Ting gradually recalled her sister's care and preference at home and gradually felt that she should shoulder the Duty of bringing the family back together. Therefore, Kai Ting finally met her sister with the help of Uncle Shim and restored the sister-brother relationship. At the same time, Kai Ting also magically found that his resistance to his stepmother was gradually disappearing, which was the result of a compromise between the two sides. In the face of Kai Ting, who has been away from home for a long time, her stepmother is not aggressive but kind. Kai Ting doesn't want to mention the past of childhood again but hopes that everything can start again. “I was eighteen, a grown-up. I had to give up my things of childhood”^[2]. This means that Kai Ting doesn't want to confront her stepmother, hoping to forget the

trauma and establish a harmonious family relationship.

After taking the first step to mend family relations, Kai Ting gained courage and confidence, consciously shouldered the Duty of paying attention to family ethics and family harmony, and made up his mind to find Uncle Shim to adjust the contradiction between himself and his father. Uncle Shim arranged a party for the father and son. The father and son at the table were full of embarrassment, but Uncle Shim kept an active atmosphere and encouraged Kai Ting, “Able Student, I find you looking very round, very full, and very lucky. Someday, you will be a strong credit to your family”^[2], which directly made Kai Ting gradually put down his hanging heart. Uncle Shim’s encouragement directly led Kai Ting to get up the courage to go home and have a long talk with his father. In the end, Ding Guofan finally let go of his bad feelings about Kai Ting’s dropping out of school, hugged Kai Ting and said, “Study, your choice. You are my son. I am proud of you. I always proud.....How can you have dream when Father in your shoes, try take your heart?”^[2]. Kai Ting finally put down his sense of self-frustration and debt to his father and reconciled with himself and his father.

3.3 Reconstruction of self-worth

“By exposing trauma and mourning for trauma, the injured need to get out of their previous lives, start a new life, explore new meaning of life, build more lasting beliefs and build a new world. These two include two ways: the establishment of psychological strength and the enhancement of physical endurance”^[5]. For Kai Ting, the establishment of psychological strength is manifested through the two processes of choosing a spouse and reading the letter from his biological mother. Uncle Shim questioned Kai Ting’s view of love, emphasizing that Christine, the first object of Kai Ting’s love, must be “Do not know the San-gahng, the Three Bonds, the Wu-ch’ang, Five Constant Virtues, the Three Followings, and the Four Female Virtues”^[2]. At the same time, she has no feelings for Kai Ting and is unwilling to learn from China’s traditional morality. Under the teaching of Uncle Shim and his own awakening, Kai Ting finally realized that Christine was an unreachable dream for him. He never mentioned China culture in front of Christine, and even didn’t want to mention his beloved biological mother. He wanted to become a real American by graduating from West Point Military Academy and marrying an American wife, but both West Point Military Academy and this American girl rejected him. Later, he met Pearl, a girl from China, at a party, and they fell in love at first sight. The image of Pearl completely fits in with the image of Kai Ting’s perfect companion in Uncle Shim’s mind. She not only has the blood of China, but also understands the traditional morality and perfect love concept in China culture—one heart and one mind. Different from the inferiority complex in the face of Christine, in the face of pearls, things with China elements that often haunt my heart are finally freely expressed. At that time, he finally woke up. This awakening is a signal that Kai Ting reconnected with China tradition, and it is also the core embodiment of his self-confidence and enhanced psychological strength under the guidance of Uncle Shim. Christine and Pearl represent girls of two countries and races, and also represent that Kai Ting has experienced a cultural turn under the long-term guidance of Uncle Shim, and gradually accepted her identity. Under the guidance and instruction of Uncle Shim, Kai Ting can gradually accept his China attributes, feel his own value, and no longer feel inferior because of his appearance and identity. Secondly, after being expelled from West Point Military Academy, Kai Ting decided to seek the help of Uncle Shim and regain his spiritual belief under the inspiration of his mother’s letter. When Kai Ting was lonely, Uncle Shim handed over the letter written to Kai Ting by Kai Ting’s mother before her death. In the letter, his mother emphasized that “Uncle has taught you in my place, balancing your father. Your father does not wish you to be Chinese. Uncle joins me in not wishing you to be American”^[2]. Inspired by his mother’s suicide note, he realized the part of China culture that made him feel inferior, and at the

same time he felt that he was not alone, “I heard the baying of patriarchs, the clarion bugle calls of the Academy, the heart-stirring crescendo of the West Point march, a distant call to war and to duty beyond family.”^[2]. At this point, Kai Ting finally stopped feeling inferior and hesitant and was full of confidence and yearning for the future.

In the process of growing up, Kai Ting gradually opened his heart and took the initiative to seek help. With the help of Uncle Shim, he got rid of his past insecurity and successfully healed his wounds. Not only did I find my sense of family connection, but I also rebuilt my sense of self-worth and opened up a bright road for my future.

4. Conclusions

In *Honor and Duty*, Gus Lee told an unforgettable memory through Kai Ting, recounting the traumatic and healing process of a Chinese teenager, showing Kai's rich emotional experience and the healing role of a mentor. Gus Lee's story also tries to tell us that Kai Ting is not a case, and that young people like Kai Ting deserve more attention from families and society. Gus Lee writes this story without expecting anything in return, but underneath the story there is a great energy that can burst out. Lee's work reflects a view of cultural integration that is in line with the trend of globalisation of the world economy, which not only provides a useful reference for the development of Chinese culture, but also makes us look forward to the prospect of working together to build a better future.

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