



Family Devotions

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The Work

Family Devotions was written when David Henry Hwang was primarily interested in writing for and about the identity of Asian Americans. The play is autobiographical in that Hwang was raised an evangelical Christian; *Family Devotions* advocates casting off the Western mythology imposed upon Asian cultures.

The play is set in an idealized house with an enclosed patio and tennis court, representing a shallow, materialistic American Dream. The extended families of Ama and Popo, first-generation Chinese Americans, are awaiting the arrival of Di-Gou, their brother whom they have not seen for thirty years and who is arriving from Communist China. As they anticipate Di-Gou's arrival, the women discuss the atrocities of the Communists, whose evil rule they are certain Di-Gou will be grateful to escape. The family descended from the great Chinese Christian evangelist See-goh-poo, and, as a boy, Di-Gou witnessed her miracles, so Ama and Popo anticipate hearing Di-Gou repeat his fervent testimony. When he arrives, however, Di-Gou quietly disavows ever being Christian. Di-Gou confides to Popo's grandson, Chester, that to establish a true American identity, he must believe the stories "written on his face," and these stories reflect many generations.

In act 2 the sisters organize a family devotional and invite Di-Gou to witness for Christ, but a family squabble erupts. Di-Gou is left with the women, who physically force him to submit before their neon cross. They implore him to remember See-goh-poo's miracles. Chester rushes in to rescue Di-Gou, and the scene transforms into a kind of Chinese opera. Di-Gou rises up speaking in tongues, the gas grill bursts into flame, and Chester interprets the revelation: Di-Gou witnessed See-goh-poo give birth out of wedlock, claiming evangelicalism to deceive her family. Di-Gou proclaims that because they now know the truth, their stories are meaningless. The old sisters collapse, dead, and Di-Gou realizes that "No one leaves America." The play ends with Chester standing where Di-Gou first stood, and the "shape of his face begins to change," a metaphor for the beginning acceptance of his Chinese heritage.

Family Devotions is an allegory depicting a cultural awakening of the individual. The world is reversed; "civilized" Christians behave as heathens, and the "heathen" Asian offers wisdom, solace, and love. Hwang calls for Asian Americans to embrace their Asian heritage.

Suggested Readings

Gerard, Jeremy. "David Hwang: Riding the Hyphen." *The New York Times Magazine*, March 13, 1988, 44, 88-89.

Hwang, David Henry. Introduction to *FOB and Other Plays*. New York: Plume, 1990.

Street, Douglas. *David Henry Hwang*. Boise, Idaho: Boise State University Press, 1989.

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