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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

Conflict in the Home

Tan Kheng Yeang
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"This was the age of the clash of cultures." *Conflict in the Home* illuminates turmoil in a household when Western ideas begin to flourish in the Far East. Siu Kam is hit with a "thunderbolt" of love when he sees Wai Hing, a beautiful girl in a Hong Kong teahouse. His traditional parents want him to marry a dutiful girl, bring her to live in the ancestral home, with both observing the ancient ways. Siu Kam's sister, Silver Moon, is a model of respect: she keeps her opinions to herself, will marry whoever is picked for her, tends to her flowers, and sits quietly with needlework. She cannot drive or swim, and never goes outside of the house unless it is with her parents. The conflict heats up quickly since Wai Hing believes she can do as she pleases, party with friends, shop, speak her mind, and choose her own husband.

Tan Kheng Yeang sets up discussions of opposing values in China during its transition from a closed-off society to modern Western invention and thought. Each chapter is a venue to explain various morals, occupations, and philosophies. Discussion ranges from types of weddings, different kinds of dragons and their symbols to various religions, and if they still matter. Reading at times like a food magazine or a travelogue, the author describes how one man eats a dumpling, then spends two and a half pages writing on tea. While this type of information is entertaining, a description of the heat in a room is overly ambitious: "All the tables possessed their full quota of patrons, and the moment a seat was vacated it was promptly reoccupied so that the quantity of heat, scientifically described as molecular motion it absorbed, considerably exceeded what it emitted, with the net result that its colossal hordes of unfortunate molecules were in a chronic state of extraordinary commotion."

Tan is better at creating characters: they are symbols for thought. The lawyer is all for material advances, and against pretense; an ignorant gardener buries his savings in the ground; a merchant doesn't condemn the past but thinks it's imperfect. Traditionalists revere the elderly, are interested in legends and old customs, astrological charts and pre-destination. Women are considered inferior to men. Blame is placed on them for not producing boy children and for the corrupt morals of youth. Modern thought gives freedom to women, youth is idolized, and each gender is allowed his or her own choice of a mate.

The author's overblown phrasing can be annoying, yet there are many things to admire, such as a discussion of beauty between a father and son: "…the evening star, a bird roosting on a leafy twig, a soaring pagoda, or an ancient ornament of jade." Proverbs fill the pages, often profound: "Leisure, lasting a whole day, makes a man an immortal for that day," and "The more diversified the experience the richer the memory becomes." Armchair travelers and lovers of good debate will find delight in this fast-moving book.

MARY POPHAM (March 17, 2011)

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