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# 'The Family Chao' is a riveting story of identity and belonging

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A storm is brewing in Haven, Wisconsin, at the of Lan Samantha Chang

Haven is the home of the Fine Chao restaurant, now run solely by Leo Chao, whose wife, Winnie, has decamped to the Spiritual House, a Buddhist temple located in a defunct school gymnasium. It's nearly Christmas when the story starts, and the Chaos' eldest son, Dagou, who's been living in Haven for the last six years, working at the restaurant and living above it, is planning an extravagant Christmas party. The middle son, Ming, has been trying to separate himself from the family for years and is only in town for a couple days due to his mother's explicit request.

James, the youngest, is on his way back from his freshman year in college when he's stopped by an elderly Chinese man trying to figure out which train to take. While James can recognize the man's speech, he doesn't understand it, having "lost his Mandarin, forgotten the language

as a toddler with two older brothers teaching, loving, and tormenting him exclusively in English." Still, they figure out together where the man is heading, and James begins to lead him to the train. When the man falls down a set of stairs and dies, James winds up with his blue carpetbag, which the EMTs neglect to take with them. The man's tragic death, as well as his luggage, haunt the rest of the novel in unexpected ways.

Although not a strict retelling of *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky by any means, there are notable and clearly intentional parallels such as the three brothers, of course, the contentious relationship between them and their domineering father, and also a meeting at a holy place to try to deal with a monetary dispute.

This last is the reason Winnie requested that Ming come home. Dagou has sponsored a luncheon at the Spiritual House, hoping that in the presence of his mother, his brother, the nuns, and the abbess, Gu Ling Zhu Chi, he'll be able to convince his father to make him a partner of Fine Chao. But Leo isn't a man to be shamed into giving anything away, even to his own child. In fact, one of his notorious traits is his shamelessness in his desires. Sitting amidst the Buddhist

vegetarians and the meal they've prepared, Leo asks, "Why no meat? Why 'cessation from desire'? [...] I love my desires. They belong to me, and so I listen to them, I believe them... I want them to flourish and multiply."

Leo Chao's desires have steered him in ways that hurt his family; he's a philanderer, tells crude jokes loudly in polite company, and has a way of belittling his sons that amuses him — if no one else — greatly. His desires are also what spurred him to immigrate to the U.S., find a woman who would work by his side and help him sire children, found a restaurant in a small and mostly white Midwestern town and turn it into a thriving and beloved local institution. Even when Leo is at his most misogynist and cruel, his comfort in his own skin is palpable on the page. When contrasted with his sons and their varied insecurities, it's hard to be entirely immune to the patriarch's charisma.

In the slow buildup toward Dagou's Christmas party, Chang plumbs the family dynamics, whether acknowledged by its members or not. James tries to play peacekeeper, but can't help beginning to recognize that he has inherited some part of his father's desirous nature; he finally

asks out his longtime crush, Alice Wa. Ming, clenched with the effort to keep his cool, tries to stay above the fray but can't help his fury when he sees his brother's ex-fiancée, Katherine, who was adopted by white parents from an orphanage in China, continue to ingratiate herself with the Chaos. But much as Ming might disdain her for it, it's achingly clear that Katherine has found, in this family, a connection to a history and context that she's been denied. Dagou is enthusiastic in both his anger at his father and his love for a new girlfriend, Brenda, who claims she wishes to marry for money. Knowing this, Dagou tries to prove that he has some by cooking the most lavish, decadent, and generous Christmas dinner he can imagine.

About half the novel is dedicated to the build-up to that dinner, and then there's a turn — and the second half of the novel deals with the aftermath. James, the most idealistic of the brothers and the one who formerly felt most secure in the love of his parents, begins to ask himself tougher and sadder questions: "How have they been damaged, raised by Leo, who took his sons along the back alleys of Haven on errands of philandering? [...] Their father, the immigrant success story.

Longtime owner of his own business. What did it mean to all of them, to be raised in this country, promised a life of American achievement, by a man who exploited their labor?"

The Chao brothers are caught in a bind: they are not white, so white people see them as interlopers; they are not Chinese, having never lived in the place their parents migrated from. They are American-born, yes, but James only started eating "American" food — burgers and fries, for instance — in college, which felt exciting and exotic to him. Chang renders the brothers' varied relationships to their family, their racial identity, and Haven's Chinese American community as specific and unique to their particular dispositions: They alternately resent the need to consider their "model minority" status, try to ignore it entirely, or believe that the need to consider it is paranoid. All are fair reactions to a culture of racism that they are not responsible for, and the book treats each of them — foibles, complexities, charms, wishes, regrets and all — with empathy and respect.

The Family Chao is a riveting character-driven novel that delves beautifully into human psychology; Dostoevsky himself would surely approve.

Ilana Masad is a fiction writer, book critic, and author of the novel *All My Mother's Lovers*.



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