



**Wong, Lindsay. (2019). The Woo Woo: How I Survived Ice Hockey, Drug Raids, Demons and My Crazy Chinese Family. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.**

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In Lindsay Wong's memoir, "The Woo Woo", the author tells a harrowing reality of her formative years growing up as a daughter of Chinese immigrants, haunted by generations of untreated mental illness. In particular, Wong shares how her family dynamic influenced how she behaved in her intimate relationships, friendships, and most importantly, how she saw herself. The reader is introduced to the key influences in Wong's life; these being her Father, Mother, Aunt, and Grandmother. Her intimate family dynamic orbited around her mother's mental health resulting in sibling rifts, a lack of empathy and inability to communicate in anything other than callous comments and swears. Wong explores the challenges of growing up in traditional Chinese culture, with a focus on her family's experience with the Woo-Woo, her family's name for foul moods, psychotic breaks, and chaotic episodes. The reader later learns that the Woo-Woo is merely the outcome of untreated mental illness in Wong's family, consequently never treated due to the shame of even being inflicted by the Woo-Woo. Furthermore, she provides readers an honest perspective of her experience living with mental illness and its radiating effect on every aspect of her life. Wong grows to realize that she is more than a reflection of the adults around her. By analyzing her familial ties, friendships, and culture, she explores how the Woo-Woo defined her sense of self, and acceptance of reality.

When told to describe the role of a mother in a family, most people suggest a role similarly found in a nuclear family, a mother who is caring, loving, capable of cooking, and entrusted to keep the house in order. This poses a drastic parallel between Wong's family. Although, Wong's mother was the primary care giver in her life, she felt her mother "had failed at being maternal" and "forced [her to be] own mother and parent" (p. 215). Wong notes that her mother's inability to care for her was a result of her mother's own disheartening childhood and continued haunting by the Woo-Woo, that would later reveal to be untreated schizophrenia. Evident by the Woo-Woo causing Wong's mother to run away and return weeks later with no recollection of her departure, this event, and many others show the hardships faced by Wong as she was pushed to suppress her own feelings as her mother's episodes continually took centre stage. Despite her mother's hysteric behaviour, "to the world, she managed an exceptionally thriving immigrant family." (p. 218). This strong disconnect between reality and appearances created an unstable environment causing uncertainty about where Wong was meant to fit in.

Wong's mother found peace in unusual places centered around American establishments with brightly light spaces, bustling with people. With many RV vacations, copious evenings at the mall, and plenty of fast food, Wong's mother was never able to outrun the Woo-Woo. As Wong ages, she adopts many of the escapism techniques used by her mother to suppress the reality like the rest of her family as the Woo-Woo may be lurking within herself. By escaping to Hawaii, and eventually pursuing school in New York, Wong finds brief peace from her family. But like her mother's experience of escaping, the peace was short lived, and her unmanaged trauma and undiagnosed sickness returned.

Throughout the book, Wong looks to her family to understand her own peculiarities. The key adults in her life such as her mother, father, and aunt commonly utilized each other as pillars of comparison to seemingly reassure themselves of their own downfalls. Her father, an engineer, prided himself on his intelligence and stoic manner. Wong states that her father frequently reminded her to be like him and less like her mother, who he deemed “so emotional.” Wong later understands that her father’s constant blaming of her mother’s in-laws for all familial problems was a way to reject his own possible shortcomings. Using dark humour, and callous comments her father tried to scare, encourage and push his children to be less like their mother. Although he had good intentions, young Wong could only comprehend his words, and not the humour or pain behind them. This continued rejection of her mother internalized within Wong created more turmoil and anxiety as she tried to please her parents. It is not until adulthood Wong comes to realize her father used his “jokes” to survive his experience in the family.

Her father’s advice deeply affected how she saw relationships and therefore, her ability to make friends. When in school, Wong struggled to fit in due to her unmaintained appearance, stubborn attitude, and harsh personality. With the advice of her father, Wong saw friendships as capital, only pursuing a friendship if she could personally gain. This was encouraged by her father incentivizing her to make a friend to earn some cash: “I could show my father that I had quickly made a friend. It wasn’t as if we had to even like each other [...] and would earn me an easy \$10.99” (p. 59). Not until her later adolescence does Wong realize that once she kept a level of civility with those around her, she understood what it is like to be treated with kindness instead of

mockery. This external reassurance allowed Wong to realize her harsh demeanor was not solely her fault but was the result of her familial culture of suppressing emotions to deal with her pain.

The pressure to conform to Western culture as a daughter of immigrants caused Wong to feel unsure as to where to fit into her household and society. Alone and isolated, Wong's father enrolled her and her siblings into hockey due to the belief it "was also supposed to make [her] family assimilate faster into North American culture" (p. 81). Wong's father gleefully praised Wong when she would dominate on the ice to the point where she broke an opponent's leg. Although Wong felt uncertainty about her guilt surrounding the incident, she suppressed her emotions in order to keep her father's "parental respect." Wong's need for reassurance led her to continuously attempts to meet her parent's expectations of what a Chinese Canadian should be.

Her parent's high expectations of what Wong should accomplish eventually led Wong to become a failure in her parents' eyes, even after an acceptance into Columbian University. At Columbian, Wong experienced a roommate's schizophrenic episode. While her roommate violently attempted to enter their apartment, Wong had a moment of introspection. Aware of her own possible sickness she vowed to seek out a diagnosis if she survived her roommate's episode. Having had an opportunity to explore a "dull and unexciting life" in New York, Wong wished to continue down this path of normalcy (p. 426). Therefore, Wong realized it was important she managed her own mental health, before it escalated into a dangerous or violent event. Garnering a new perspective on her family through her own diagnosis, Wong is able to determine that the Woo-Woo that has haunted her was the result of disabling vertigo, and a tumultuous upbringing. Having to temporarily return home to adjust to her diagnosis, once again she ran into her father's harsh

expectations and desire for a better future for his child. “You fail piano, and now you fail the Columbian University. You think you can’t function even if you are Woo? Fake it until you make it” (p. 445). In this defining moment Wong collects her one-way ticket and returns to school to complete her degree and continue to build a life for herself.

I believe “The Woo-Woo” delivers an honest look into the complex relationships of a family. Coupled with cultural and familial expectations as well untreated mental illness, the everyday chaos of a family dynamic can be overwhelming and suffocating for those involved. The academic audience of this book would be students interested in the psychology and sociology of mental illness, and its impacts on the family. As well young adults who’ve felt like outsiders to their environments will enjoy the truthful recount of Wong’s journey of self-discovery. She leaves us with the unknowing of what is to come but reassurance that she is moving forward with a much kinder view of herself and her family. I found Wong’s book a joy to read. Her comedic voice and vivid descriptions allowed me to truly imagine the gawky oddball family she lived with and all the adventures she lived through. Although most won’t have much in common with the day-to-day life of Wong’s, many readers will understand her emotional withdrawal and connect with her feelings of inadequacy. “The Woo-Woo” is a story unlike most showing the generational effects of cultural beliefs on one’s sense of self and acceptance of reality.