“Living and Laughing by the Chopsticks-Fork Principle” Lecture

“None of it has been painful, all of it has been fun, except the cooking.”

-Bao Bean

On Monday, January 31, 2011 the East Asia Institute and the Bicultural-Bilingual Studies welcomed author Cathy Bao Bean who gave a lecture entitled “Living and Laughing by the Chopsticks-Fork Principle” at UTSA. More than 80 people attended the talk.

At the beginning of the lecture, Cathy Bao Bean gave the audience an abridged history of her cultural journey. She was born in Guilin, China in 1942 and immigrated to the United States in 1946. At the time of her arrival, public schools were not offering ESL (English Second Language) classes, making it a challenge to learn English. Bean even had to repeat kindergarten since she could not speak a word of English. She went to college in the early 60s where she majored in History and Government. Not soon after Bean met her husband who was shocked to find out that she was not Japanese. A little bit later, she states that everyone is at least bi-cultural, whether it is by race, gender or nationality. "None of it has been painful, all of it has been fun, except the cooking." -Bao Bean

Cathy Bao Bean

Author of “The Chopsticks-Fork Principle, A Memoir and Manual” is a daughter, mother, wife, friend, sister, aerobics instructor, business manager, and board member of the Claremont Graduate University School of the Arts and Humanities, the NJ Council for the Humanities and Society for Values in Higher Education.
For the sake of the lecture, Bean divided the world into two groups based on stereotypes. She did so because everyone learns by stereotypes first. The two groups were Modern, which represents the United States, and Traditional, which represents the eastern cultures, specifically China in her case. Each group has characteristics that make them vastly different from one another. Their unique attributes are as follow:

In the Modern group, every institution makes a pyramid. This is represented by a triangle filled with dots. This pyramid only allows one person, being, or deity to be on the top and everyone at the bottom. Everything in the group is measured in a quantitative way. After all, up is the best direction to go. Bao Bean jokes by saying, “you can give away your kids, and you can divorce your parents, but the only reason you have relationships is because you agree to them.” This is taken to mean that each person is individualistic and tends to look out for only one self, which actually reflects a lot of people in United States. Additionally, since people tend to focus more on the individual, it is possible for that individual to be the last person in the world to find out who he/she truly is. This type of world favors nature vs. nurture, and everything is taken personally.

In this humorous and poignant memoir, the author, an immigrant from China, recounts how she figured out how to be herself, as well as raise a son whose artist father did things like paint the lawn. As Cathy Bao Bean attempts to satisfy disparate cultural norms, she provides us with a unique window into the experience of a bicultural family.
A Traditional group on the other hand is a world where an individual is at the center. A web like structure represents this. This is a world where everyone must participate. After all, besides the family, the people who he/she interacts with provide his/her identities, which is actually what binds people together. Since everyone practically provides one’s identity, an individual always knows who he/she is at all times. Unlike the modern groups, everything is measured by qualitative over quantitative. In this world, the glass that is empty is better than the one that is filled because it shows that a person is open to all things. This type of world favors nurture over nature, and nothing is taking personally.

Instead of having one true self, Bean states that everyone has many selves. She brought up an anecdote that provided a clear example of this principle. She told the audience that when her mother was in her Chinese role, her mother hated Bean since she did not follow the role she was supposed to do. Although, when her mother was in her American role, she respected her daughter for going and doing what she wanted to do. Even though people may have many roles, they cannot be all of them at the same time. Instead, people can become fast at switching between the two.

For this she showed the audience a picture that looked like
both a rabbit and a duck. This was referred to as the Duck-Rabbit Metaphor. A person can see a duck, and a person can see a rabbit, but the human mind cannot see the two animals at the same time. The mind can however, quickly switch between the two animals. This metaphor ties in very well with what she was explaining about the roles. The most important part is for a person to be comfortable no matter what role that person may choose.

Bean concluded the lecture talking about the fine distinctive line of dysfunctional stereotypes vs. functional generalization. She said the best way to navigate the line is to just ask for help. Modern groups have a liner line of logic, a sense of individualism, and a define expression of punctuality, while Traditional groups are almost the exact polar opposite.

Among the 80 people in attendance was UTSA Psychology and Japanese studies student Thomas Alvarado. “I think a lecture on a matter such as this is important because it allows a person to get perspective from both sides of the looking glass,” said Alvarado. “Bean gave a lot of information that leads to a better understanding and a deeper appreciation about the vast differences between the two cultures. As a psychology student I was ecstatic to find out how personal psychology almost did not apply to eastern societies.”