

Chinese Americans' Acculturation in Gish Jen's Typical American

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Abstract

Gish Jen's *Typical American* is a portrayal of Chinese immigrants' struggles in adapting to life in the United States of America (USA). The main characters, Ralph and his family start to live in the USA; they, however, are struggling in trying to maintain their Chinese values as well as embracing the new American culture. In the process of adjusting to this new culture, they have to cope with things that are not always suitable for their prior culture as Chinese. It is found that there are two dominant types of acculturation process presented by the characters in this novel: (1) separation when Ralph's family maintain their original culture through family reunification and Chinese women's role perpetuation in the family; and (2) assimilation shown by the rejections to maintain their original culture since the main characters have been influenced by American doctrines. This research also reveals a finding that in Gish Jen's *Typical American*, acculturation is one of the ways to cope with the culture shock that they experience as the first generation of Chinese immigrants in the USA. This research also reveals that cultural values are something fluid, although there are differences between Chinese and American cultures that affect one's belief, they are able to adapt to the new culture with some adjustments.

Keywords: immigrants, Chinese values, American values, adaptation, adjustment

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Gish Jen's *Typical American* was firstly published in 1991 the major characters of which are Ralph Chang who was born as Yifeng, Theresa (Ralph's Older Sister), Helen (Ralph's wife), and Mona and Callie (Ralph's daughters). Ralph got a fellowship to learn advanced engineering in the USA. The day when he is going to America, he sets many goals to have a better life in "the land of hope", one of which is to pursue his dream of being a successful engineer to make his family proud of him. His journey, however, is not always perfect. When he wants to go back to China, China collapses because the Communist movement takes over China in 1948. He does not have other choices except settling in America. Trying to embrace his identity as an American, he changes his name into an English name: Ralph (Jen, 2008). He, as the first generation of the Chinese immigrants in America, is confused about the culture he belongs to. He, however, is able to adjust to the new culture. Later, Ralph and his family are chasing not only freedom, equality, and happiness, but also dream of success, self-determination, and social acknowledgment. In the process of pursuing those dreams, Ralph and his family have been struggling between traditional Chinese and American values as their cultural identity.

Acculturation refers to cultural change that occurs as a result of contacts with the new culture (Birman & Addae, 2016; Lakey, 2003). The process of acculturation is a result of cultural interaction between immigrants and the new host countries they are immigrating to. In its process, someone builds a social contact which later on influences cultural adaptation with the new host culture. There are two kinds in positioning acculturations, which are by preserving the original cultural identity and by preserving the relationship with the host culture. In embracing the acculturation process, four possibilities might be implemented as follows: (1) assimilation in which someone chooses not to preserve his or her cultural identity but to adopt the new culture; (2) integration in which someone has a desire to preserve his cultural identity and at the same

time he is also interested to adopt the new culture; (3) separation in which someone chooses to preserve his cultural identity and there is no interest to adopt the host culture he is immigrating to; (4) and marginalization which is described as a kind of acculturation strategy in which someone preserves neither cultural identity nor host culture (Lakey, 2003).

From the historical point of view, the first intense Chinese immigrants arrived in the United States in the 1820s which resulted in the racist attitudes culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. During the Second World War, however, China became an important ally of the U.S. (Misiuna, 2019). Also, many Chinese men served in the American military. In August 1945, after the Second World War, the USA government rewarded Chinese men for their loyalty in the military service to go back to China, marry a Chinese woman, and re-enter the USA freely. Those people were then going back to the USA with their family and lived in Chinatown enriching American culture with their food, fashion, music, and even literature. Interestingly, even though they had lived in America for several years, most of them still preserved their cultural tradition (Hernandez & Bui, 2018; Martin & Midgley, 2006; Tsang, 2001).

The values of Confucianism become the core identity that must be maintained by the Chinese. One of the philosophies of Confucius is related to the belief in age and social hierarchy. As a result, it has played a dominant role in shaping the Chinese culture, sociopolitical systems, world views, ethics, education, religions, conventions, individual and community life, as well as scholarly traditions since the 6th – 5th century BC (Jun, 2009). Confucianism can be summed up in the five principles of benevolence, righteous, propriety, wisdom, and trust which can also be extended into (1) past time orientation which means that Chinese people have to follow their predecessors' advise; (2) respect for hierarchy which is the prominent principle of Chinese; (3) interdependence in which Chinese people believe that they feel obligated to return what they received and give a response by the feeling of affection, respect, or trust; (4) group orientation because Chinese people are well-known by living together with their family (Hu & Scott, 2014;

Misiuna, 2019).

Chinese people living in America might still embrace those Confucius' values. Therefore, America, as the setting of Gish Jen's *Typical American*, can be represented by "melting pot" because it is one of the largest countries with a population coming from various countries bringing their race, ethnics, and culture (Alba, 2019; Paul, 2014). In general, people living in America, regardless their places of origin, embrace common values known as the American values (Bonazzi & Lipset, 1997; Doran & Littrell, 2013; Romagnoli & Pagnucci, 2013) which are divided into (1) individual freedom and self-reliance, which enable Americans to express their desire and the right of the individual as his or her behalf. It is the desire and the right of all individuals to control their destiny, such as to act, to think, and to share without being interfered with by the government. This belief continues in self-reliance which means achieving both financial and emotional independence as early as possible. Americans should stand on their own feet in facing problems; (2) equality of opportunity and competition in which everyone should have an equal chance. Being a successful person is not just because he or she was born as a wealthy person; and (3) material wealth and hard work because the United States of America is a land where millions of people can come to seek their fortunes and to improve their standard of living. Material wealth becomes a value to the American people because it is a reward of being hard to work.

It is interesting, then, to figure out the practice of American values in Gish Jen's *Typical American*. Thus, it is significant to analyze characters and characterization in this novel because characters are presented as the portrayal of human life in general. Through characters, the readers can know the perception of the story. Round character denotes anyone who has complex personality traits. Whereas, a flat character is a kind of figure that displays only one dominant character trait (Koivisto, 2016; Krippendorff, 2005). Thereby, this concept is used as a perspective in the process of analyzing the characters in the novel. In presenting a figure, there

are two possible ways applied in identifying showing (dramatic method) and telling (narration). In the show, the author simply presents the personality of the characters itself playing in the literary text. Meanwhile, in the telling, the author reveals authoritatively to describe, and often to evaluate, the motives and dispositional qualities of the characters (Khaghaninejad, 2015; Mcgee, n.d.). The analysis of characters and characterization is very important in figuring out the American values embraced by the characters.

Methods

This research is a qualitative research in which the data were taken from Gish Jen's novel entitled *Typical American* with the following steps of data collection: (1) Gish Jen's *Typical American* chosen as the object of the study was analyzed using sociological approach as the underlying concept to see how society construct the characters in the novel; (2) the characters and the characterization were analyzed to see the acculturation strategies undergone by each character in the novel. In this step, the definitions of both Chinese and American values were significant to understand the motives of each character in every action; (3) a conclusion was then drawn to highlight whether the problems are answered in this study.

Result

The As stated previously, Gish Jen's *Typical American* is thought-provoking to study because this novel presents Chinese immigrants' life in America who have to face the new environment which is surely different from their origin's. In facing those differences, the characters do several ways in adapting to the new environment which is discussed as follows:

Separation

China and America do not have the same value orientation (Misiuna, 2019; Tsang, 2001); therefore, Chinese immigrants in the USA might experience many obstacles in the process of adjusting between two different cultures. This is also shown by the main characters

of Gish Jen's Typical American.

One of the examples is when Ralph, Helen, and Theresa decide to live in a group instead of living individually as most Americans do. "That's like us, and our family," says Theresa agreeing when they decide to live together even in Ralph and Helen's newlywed's period (Jen, 2008). That they decide to live together is a common thing in China because the Chinese think that by living in a group, they can keep maintaining their family bond (Hu & Scott, 2014). This is in contrast to Americans who believe that they have to live independently after being adults. This condition is then considered as a separation in which the immigrants are reluctant to the new value of the host culture, instead, they tend to hold on their culture of the country of origin tightly.

Another proof of separation is when Ralph believes that he should have many children because having many children, especially boys, in China is important to keep their identity. In traditional Chinese culture, the oldest son replaces the father's position in the family. If a wife cannot give a son, she must allow her husband to have more wives until he gets sons. (Hu & Scott, 2014; Misiuna, 2019). Ralph's idea of having many children proves that Ralph still holds the Chinese value firmly even when he is no longer in China. This is viewed as separation because this value contradicts what Americans believe, that having more children or having no children has nothing to do with keeping up one's identity. After all, Americans have the value of individual freedom meaning that everybody might have their own choices as long as it does not hurt others, which is also applicable in one's decision of having large or small or even no family at all.

Another Chinese value that is completely different from American's is gender equality. Ralph maintains Chinese culture by forbidding Helen to earn money because, in Chinese values, women's role is at home, taking care of children and household necessities (Hu & Scott, 2014). Ralph believes that earning money is his job as a man. This is different from what is believed by Americans in which everybody is equal, regardless of their race, status, or gender (Doran &

Littrell, 2013). In this case, Helen is obedient to Ralph. She is also a good wife and a good mother. Therefore, she does not go to work outside the house. Helen follows the Chinese tradition and provides great care to her husband. Even when they have financial problems and Helen tries to earn money, it is rejected by Ralph. This condition is clear evidence of the separation in which Chinese immigrants still preserve their Chinese values and do not want to embrace in the American values.

Theresa's mother also embraces the Chinese values firmly, especially those related to how a Chinese girl should behave by doing something that is somehow extreme and might not be acceptable in the American values. In China, a girl should be protected in order to be proper to marry. Therefore, Theresa's mother insists Theresa use sun protection everywhere she goes to protect Theresa's complexion. "...Theresa strolls down a path some hundred feet away, carrying a parasol... to protect her complexion from the sun. Their mother held firm, and as it would be unreasonable to expect a girl to take risks with her complexion,". Furthermore, a Chinese girl should wear shoes with the smaller size to form their feet because they believe that the smaller feet a girl has, the more beautiful they are. "...a new pair of silk shoes, a size too small, the idea being not so much to make her feet more acceptable..." What has been done by Theresa's mother is different from what Americans believe as individual freedom, in which Americans have free choices as long as they do not hurt others. Americans do not highlight the points that they should be in pain to make them acceptable in others' eyes. Therefore, what Theresa's mother does can be seen as separation in which they are reluctant to embrace the American values.

Assimilation

Chinese and Americans have different characteristics based on the cultural background they have (Doran & Littrell, 2013; Hu & Scott, 2014). It is also reflected by Grover Ding who is the second generation of Chinese-American immigrants. He is an example of a Chinese

American who lives the American dream. One of the American dreams lets people pursue their own decision instead of relying on their fate upon others (Kohls, 1984). It can be shown through the conversation between Ding and Ralph:

“I’ll tell you who you remind me of.” Ralph waited.

“Myself. You remind me of myself, back when I was nobody.’ Slouching again, Ralph twiddled his spoon.

"You know, back then, I worked every lousy job in town, you name it. I was a jack-of-all-trades. I painted houses. I drove a cab . . ."

No wonder he drove so well! Thought Ralph.

". . . I washed the dishes. I even sang in a music show, get that." (Jen, 2008)

Ding does everything as long as it makes money, as one of the pieces of evidence of the American dream of material wealth. This proves that Ding is able to adapt to American life, to work hard to achieve his goals.

Another example of the shift between different values leading people to experience assimilation strategies is proven by Ralph, Helen, and Theresa who have changed their names into English names because their Chinese names are not common for Americans. “As Ralph, who back then was not Ralph yet, but still Yifeng.” (Jen, 2008). Interestingly, it was not Yifeng himself who changed his name into an English name: Ralph, but it was the Foreign Students Affairs’ secretary who named him Ralph,

“I-give-you-a-name?”

“Sure. You give.” ...

“Ralph,” she said finally. (Jen, 2008)

This shows that it is not Yifeng’s pure willingness to change his name into an English name. He does it because he has to do it and he does not have any other choices. Name changing is also done by Hailan who changes name into Helen as the English name. However, in this case, what he does can be categorized as the assimilation in which he embraces the new

culture and gets rid of his previous culture.

Also, Theresa decides to leave Ralph's house because she realizes that she must not depend on Ralph's family. She has a tendency to follow the host culture instead of staying at Ralph's house since she has been influenced by American ways of life.

“Like bamboo, they bent but did not break, agreeing as they did that, despite their difficulties, they were the luckiest people in the world, having each other, and the children – a family anyone would envy, even if there were no boys,” (Jen, 2008). This excerpt is the evidence of the assimilation in which Ralph finally embraces the American values that no boys in a family is not a problem at all. This is in contrast with the Chinese idea that boys play more important roles in the family. In this monologue, Ralph shows that he is more “American” who believes in gender equality.

Another trivial thing yet funny is when Ralph has a crush with a girl, but he does not dare to say the truth. Instead, Ralph sneaks around the girl until the girl's father gets angry with him, “If you want to sneak around, you should go back to China. Here in America, what we have is morals,” (Jen, 2008). This shows that Ralph is still in his phase of adaptation. He does not know the right and wrong, dos, and don'ts in America. He does what he believes as something good in his home country. He does not do any research to live appropriately in the USA. However, he "gave himself up to the country, and dreamt," (Jen, 2008) which means that he finally undergoes the assimilation process. He is willing to be an “American”.

From Gish Jen's *Typical American*, it is found that in the process of adjusting with a new culture in its surroundings, the main characters (Ralph and his family) mostly tend to preserve their cultural identity as Chinese at the beginning of the process. In other words, Ralph does the separation more than the assimilation. This might happen because Ralph is the head of a Chinese family, he feels like he has the obligation to preserve his cultural identity as a Chinese person. One of the shreds of evidence is related to Confucianism because it becomes one of the reasons why he believes that a woman should obey what her husband commands which then

triggers a conflict between him and Helen, his wife.

As seen in Gish Jen's *Typical American*, the main characters find it difficult to shift their Chinese paradigm into the new culture as Americans. This process is not a stress-free thing to do because they have embraced their Chinese culture a long time ago since they were born. Therefore, supports from the closest circle are really important in the assimilation process. When Helen wants to be financially independent to help their family cope with the financial problem, which is then not supported by Ralph, it causes difficulty for Helen in doing the assimilation process. Fortunately, in the end, Ralph and Helen agree to let go of some of their previous Chinese values to be able to survive in the USA. One of the examples is shown when Ralph, Helen, and Theresa change their Chinese names into English names to be easier to mingle with the Americans.

Furthermore, there are not a few differences between American and Chinese values. One of them is how they view the position of women in society. In Chinese culture, women are seen as inferior compared to men. Therefore, as seen in Gish Jen's *Typical American*, Chinese women have to be willing to suffer from being shaped to be beautiful to be a proper wife. This shows that in Chinese culture, women are seen as the object instead of the subject who have the free will. Chinese women have to be willing to satisfy men and Chinese society's views on them. Another problem is that because Chinese women are seen to be number two in the family, they are not allowed to earn money. Moreover, Chinese daughters are seen as less precious than sons. In America, those ideas are not acceptable because Americans believe in gender equality, in which women and men have the same role and rights in society. These different values become one of the obstacles for Ralph and his family in the assimilation process in the USA.

On the other hand, it is found that the assimilation process is more easily embraced by the second generation of Chinese-Americans depicted by Grover Ding who thinks that in the United States of America, people have the individual freedom to do everything. In Gish Jen's *Typical America*, the culture shock is experienced by the main characters because it is not easy

to live between two different cultures. As Chinese, they have to live in the USA which is known as the melting pot society, populated by people from different races, colors, religions, social classes, etc. They, however, are able to survive because they practice the assimilation process to get rid of their ego and previous belief as Chinese. At the end of Gish Jen's *Typical American*, it is told that Ralph, without any objection, is willing to embrace the American values. He finally sees that the value of equality is really important to live in the USA. Therefore, it is okay for him to have daughters. He no longer insists on having sons because he finally believes that both daughters and sons have the same position in the family.

Conclusion

Based on Gish Jen's *Typical American*, it portrays that American values are dynamic. Although the main characters are Chinese who live in America, they have to embrace American values. *Typical American* also highlights that we have to be able to adapt to the new place we live in. This moral value is depicted through the efforts of the main characters to survive in the USA. Through acculturation, someone can gain a more extensive relationship between two groups – his or her former culture and the new one. At last, multicultural society teaches someone to respect others who are different from him or her. The ways Chinese immigrants cope with American values, however, are various. One of the factors is whether they are first or the second generation of immigrants. The first generation immigrants, depicted by Ralph, Teresa, Helen, are more problematic in the assimilation process. While the second-generation immigrants are portrayed to be easier in handling new values. First-generation immigrants, as told in *Typical American*, moreover, tend to do separation in their early period in America. They, however, at the end are willing to assimilate with the new culture. Although the issue of assimilation is not a brand-new issue in the literary work, *Typical American* is an excellent product of art that crystalizes the real condition of Chinese immigrants in America. This novel, however, also offers a study on the psychological things related to the way Chinese immigrants cope with culture shock in the USA.

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