



Beyond Binary Logics of Assimilation: Cultural Hybridity in Gish Jen's Novel Typical American

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Abstract: This paper will conduct an exploration of cultural hybridity through a study of Gish Jen's novel Typical American, which reconfigures the cultural identities of Chinese Americans as a dynamic, shifting and fluctuating process in the liminal and 'in-betweenness' space that Chinese Americans occupy in between Chinese culture and American dominant culture. Gish Jen's literary works would disintegrate literary Chinatown's us/other binary oppositions. This study is aimed at redefining the identity politics of diasporic Chinese Americans at the moment of crossing the geographical, cultural, political and social borderline in a postmodern and postcolonial scene as well as in the multicultural scene of the late 20th century.

Introduction

This paper will conduct an exploration of cultural hybridity through a study of Gish Jen's novel *Typical American* which reconfigures the identities of Chinese Americans as a dynamic and fluctuating process in the liminal and 'in-betweenness' space that Chinese Americans occupy in between Chinese culture and American dominant culture. In a way, Gish Jen's literary works could disintegrate the notion of fixed identities and subjectivities predicted upon Chinatown's us/other binary division.

In her novel, Gish Jen ironically probes into the conception of what it signifies to be a typical American and into what is the notion of Americanness highlighted in the very beginning line: "it's An American Story" (Jen ,G, 1991, p.3). Yet, what is in the very opening of the novel depicted is young YiFeng (Ralph)'s a long journey on a ship from China to the foreign and exotic land of the U.S.A. Apparently, Ralph is not a pure American, but a very typical Chinese from a Chinese traditional-based family with a higher status of notability and with characteristics of the uncoated form of racial yellow skin and Chinese cultural background. After a series of frustrations,

Ralph has suffered in America, by accident he encounters his sister Theresa one day in the park, who rescues him. Later on, he gets married to her closest friend Helen from the metropolitan city of Shanghai, China. Initially, Ding XiaLing (2012) notes that "they (Changs) form a family and weathers all storms together as one unit, using their Chinese cultural credentials to ward off evil American influences from the outside world" (p.141).

However, in an age where all things are always changing, Gish Jen ironically applies the title 'Typical American' to present the process of Americanization and Americanness of Chinese immigrants, in order to demonstrate to us the impossibility of essentialized identities and subjectivities. Thus, her novel could speak not about becoming typically American, but about the possibility of even beyond himself/herself. Gish Jen's novel moves beyond the essentialized and fixed identities and subjectivities in an opening-up of interstitial, negotiable and liminal socio-political and cultural spaces, among which the articulation of cultural hybridity provides the ground for reconstructing dynamic and fluctuating identities and subjectivities that deconstruct the national

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boundaries of binary division and cultural exclusion based upon racial, sexual, and cultural differences.

The Intertextual Dialogues In-between two Heterogeneous Cultures

It is unavoidable for diasporic Chinese American immigrants to exist in a "double gaze" taken by both American culture and Chinese culture so that they are doubly dominated and manipulated as they reside in the United States. On one side, Chinese American immigrants are either Chinese defined by Chinese cultural heritage and physical nature of yellow skin, or American with totally melting into American dominant mainstream in a fresh environment; on the contrary, it could be understood that Chinese American immigrants are neither Chinese there nor American here. In the novel *Typical American*, the Changs are forced to be confronted with this predicament of cultural identity as a familiar alien in "between worlds" (Amy Ling, 1990, P.105). Chinese American identity is "framed by two axes" (Stuart Hall, 1992). The first endow Chinese American immigrants with a continuity with the past history, it is exemplified in *Typical American* that Changs is rooted in Chinese traditional culture shaped by the past history while living in America. On the other hand, what they precisely experience is a discontinuity and rupture, for instance, Changs have to identify with the American mainstream while in America.

As the first generation of Chinese American immigrants, the Changs are grown up and were educated in China. When coming to America with Chinese traditional values, they have to be confronted with racial stereotypes and sexual bias from American whites. Thus, Changs deeply feels displaced and alienated from U.S. dominant society, in a way, the process of integration into America is a very difficult task, and Changs have to cope with a relationship between both an inclination to Chinese traditional cultures, Confucianism, and a strong feeling of being alienated and excluded from the host country. Simply, there are sharp comparisons between community identification with Chinese culture, suggesting that each individual to seriously comply with his/her already-made identity in the whole

social structure. (Xu XingYan, 2004), and the ideas of individualism in American culture.

In the novel, Ralph and his sister Theresa are all nurtured in a wealthy Chinese traditional family. Their parents have great expectations of them from a point of view: "Yidai qingqing, qidaihui", which means "one generation pure, the next good for nothing" (Gish, 1991, p.5). So, to his parents' expectation, Ralph comes to America for higher study with the purpose of acquiring a higher qualification to earn a bigger glory for the whole family. In terms of the view of Confucianism, Chinese people look at education as a more respectable approach to bringing great glory and honour to the whole family. Obviously, it embodies Chinese values of collectivist identification. Ralph decided to acquire a PhD. Engineering degree for accomplishing his filial piety to the ancestry and family.

Thus, stimulated by realizing his success, Ralph on the voyage to America designs some clear aims: 1. cultivate virtue; 2. bring honour to the family... (Gish, 1991, p.6). Ralph produces his own version of canonical doctrines as depicted in American literature, such as Ben Franklin's *Autobiography* (1791), where he writes down thirteen "Virtues" in the hope of acquiring his list of "Virtues". Therefore, he was rendered a literary imitation, a copy of a copy (Rachel. C. L, 1999). Such intertextuality might present Ralph's aspiration of achieving the American dream. As Chen AiMin (2003) suggests that Franklin recommends American-shaped individualism in his lists of "virtues", while Ralph's lists of habitudes represent Chinese-fashioned individualism imparted by Confucian: the first put emphasis upon individualist supremacy, limitless potential and autonomy, while the latter put an emphasis upon individual's social ability and nurturing an and one's collectivist spirit. Gish Jen attempts to display Ralph's lists of aims in different settings against Chinese traditional culture and American dominant culture, in a way that Jen reminds her readers of the symbolic meanings on the level of culture and identity. As a result, Ralph either chooses and identifies with Chinese culture, or with American dominant culture.

In reading *Typical American*, after having lived in America for three weeks, he is in love with Cammy, a secretary of the Overseas Students

Affairs Office, which leads to the neglect of his study. This interesting episode symbolizes his priming to assimilate into American dominant culture, implying his turning to Americanness predicted upon his own individual choice, which forebodes crossing and permeating the borders between two cultures.

Initially, "Typical American" is an ironical buzzword used to depict their building superintendent, Pete, an irresponsible man who would like to say "a man was what he made up his mind to be" (Jen, G, 1991, p.66), which shows a typical concept of individualism. Gish Jen emphasizes the Changs' imitation of some representative behaviour characteristically labelled as American, just as Ralph, Helen and Theresa make mimicry of Pete and demonstrate his representative words:

Ralph took to imitating Pete's walk. He'd slump, a finger cleaning his ear, only to have Theresa gamely cry out, "No, no like this," and add a shuffle, turning out her knees as Helen laughed. They studied the way Pete blew his nose...let me have some look-see," growled Theresa. "Typical Pete!" Ralph roared in approval "Typical, typical Pete" ...typical Pete" turned "typical American" turned typical American this, typical American that. (Jen, G, 1991, p. 66-67)

As a matter of fact, Pete is only an example of "typical American" codes of broader behaviour patterns that Changs have mimicking of. In a follow-up, the Changs wouldn't "become wild" (*ibid*, p.67) in free America in the absence of parents and ethics codes. However, with elapsing of time, American values and culture "seeps well inside" like "the language of outside the house. (*Ibid*, p.124), as instantiated that Ralph is imparted and absorbs some ideas of Grover's narration of individualism and the American dream from a book *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) presented by Pierce to him. Another, Pete's cliché has gradually entered into his mind as his basic doctrines like that "anything is possible. A man is what he makes up his mind to be." under such influences, Ralph seems to be a typical American.

In Jen's novel *Typical American*, the Chinese traditional value of a family consists of the notion of group identification, different from than values of the American family embedded in the concept of individualism. In China, the Chinese traditional

value of family is essentially rooted in the family descent predicted by agricultural culture. A Chinese traditional family, constituted by four generations living under one roof and closely united based on blood descent, full of a family atmosphere and affection of an extended family, embodies the interpersonally collectivist spirit and ethic relations, just as one's honour/dishonour belongs to his or her whole family. In contrast, a family is made up of a "nuclear one" in America. Therefore, the very trope of family values predicted upon two cultures is demonstrated in terms of "In China, one lived in one's house. In America, one could always name whose house one was in" (Jen, G, 1991: 283).

In the novel, Ralph, his wife Helen and his sister Theresa three live together under one roof in America, so they together forge a kind of "family feeling, that tremendous, elemental solidarity" (Jen G, 1991, p.140). Theresa persists in the values of the Chinese traditional family though she considers herself an Americanized one, as she secretly maintains a household, inwardly saying, "once a Chang-kee, always a Chang-kee" (Jen, G, 1991, p.212), though in American cultural context. Obviously, for Theresa, a family appears a safe domestic space, though emerging as a conflicted one at home. Later on, Her temporal residing outside is a state of exile with unnatural life. Helen, Ralph's wife internalizes the cultural logic of patriarchal ideology as a typical Chinese woman, as an example to be taken, being forced to imitate Ralph's breathing technique under his tyranny when she plays a submissive and obedient role as his wife in the family. Helen does sacrifice herself for keeping familial unity, being a good wife associated with the traditional doctrines of Confucianism: "Three Obedience and Four Virtues", taking care of her family in America. Thus, individual values of an individual are ascribed to the communal spirit of Confucian humanism.

After years of hard experiences in America, Ralph finally acquires his doctorate to bring honour to the whole family as well as his parents, although he does not really like his major in engineering at all. "Ralph shook his hand with the president for a second time. 'I am sorry,' he said. 'I am just wish my father, mother, could be here'" (Jen, G, 1991,119), because he proves that he has succeeded in be already grown up his father's son. And when Helen makes his diploma hung on the

wall near their wedding photo in the living room, Ralph cries by calling out “father, mother” (Jen, G, 1991, p.119). Theresa also expressed that their parents might have felt very proud. In this sense, the Changs bring honour to the whole family. Then Helen hangs Ralph's parents' photo to worship them, “they thank their parents for whatever help they might have been” (Gish, 1991, p.120). Later, as Theresa has got her M.D., they do the same. The way they offer their worship to their parents' photo is similar to the way Chinese worship their ancestors. Later, with help of Theresa's lover Old Chao, Ralph acquires a tenured professorship position at the university. The notion of group identification is self-evident within the Chinese traditional family system. As Ding XiaLing (2012) notes, “the kind of sacrifices Theresa and Helen make for his sake, show the reciprocal commitment and communal spirit of Confucian humanism carried over from across the Pacific Ocean” (p.143). In the end, the Changs family, nine years after Ralph living in America, eventually advances their legal identity “from permanent resident to citizen” and becomes the Chang-kees” (Gish, 1991, p.123-127).

Claiming America: the Radical Transformation of Identity Politics

After Changs' long experiences culminate to some extent in the United States. things have to evolve into radical falling apart. Chinese-styled individualism would be gradually replaced by individualism, materialism and self-making spirit which are enshrined in American dominant culture as the leading principles in the mid of 20th century. All would intrude upon the Changs at a radical pace, especially after, on top of stable upward mobility, the Changs purchase “a top-quality house” (Gish, 1991, p.159), “split-level, with an attached garage” (Gish, 1991, p.156) in the suburban. However, the intrusion of Grover Ding into the Changs family brings about many troubles. Theresa who represents Confucian tradition is driven out of the house due to her sexual transgressive behaviour with Old Chao, Ralph's colleague.

In a reading of the novel, Grover Ding was born an American. Janis Chao represents Grover's “Americanness” by telling a long historical narration of his ancestors in America:

[Helen:] “What does he speak?”

“English,” said Janis. “This is America. His family has been here for so many generations..... He's rich.... [H]e has a maid, this one.” (Gish, 1991, p. 86)

As Rachel.C. Lee depicted Grover (1999) by indicating: “Grover's Americanness explicitly proceeds from both his wealth and his having lost touch with his Chinese origins.....from his having mastered American homeownership as a profit-making scheme” (p.54). namely, Grover regards himself as an official member of “we Americans”, with totally Americanized behaviour and mind. Grover calls himself a “Millionaire! Self-made man!”, and passes on about individualism and the ideas of the American dream to Ralph. In fact, under Grover Ding's influence, Ralph becomes victimized.

Besides, for the Changs, residing within a communal space under Confucian humanism, the concept of home meant reciprocal commitment, shared possession, and elemental solidarity, while in Grover's mind “home” is the American national narrative as part of capitalist production by home ownership. Hence, under the principle of individualism Grover acquire commercial buildings and houses for the purposes of investment, as he considers the family an asset or a liability. In this sense that “home” is a place where the capital is produced. According to C. B. Macpherson (1962), the foundation of American democracy is composed of several fundamental assumptions predicated upon individual subjectivity. First, an individual is autonomously able to sell her/his labour to society; second, for an individual, human relationship is predicated solely upon the principles of self-worth and self-interest; third, human relationships in society are conceptualized as a series of marketing relations. There is a factual dialogue between Ralph and Grover to illustrate this case:

Finally, Ralph asked, “so where are you from?”

“From?”

“Your hometown is where?”

“Hometown!” Grover laughed and instantly recovered. “You've been here how long? And still asking about people's hometown.... In our country, the question to ask is: ‘so what do you do for a living.’”(Gish, 1991, p.105)

Therefore, Grover makes it clear that the codes of Americanness are represented through an occupation under the principle of individualism, not through ancestral heritage under group identification of communal spirit.

Since Ralph's "hometown" is connected with the Chinese origin of their ancestors, called descent, this cultural consent is delimited in multi-ethnic America by descent background-- his racial or ethnic one. And "occupation" for Grover exposes the basic concepts of cultural consent. In this point, Rachel (1999) suggests that in Chinese protocol "hometown," the definition of one's identity remains inherited, stable, and locatable, while in American protocol occupation, one's identity is decided by marketing relations. A kind of cultural logic of free capitalist market economy is introduced to Ralph by Grover, in which a fluctuating and dynamic sense of self is not defined by one's cultural descent, but by multiple and fluid processes in terms of market relations. In terms of David LeiWei Li (1998), "precapitalist mode of production, in which kinship relations plays a major role, and...a capitalist mode of production, in which market relations dominate all forms of human relations" (p.104).

In one chapter *Grover: At The Wheel*, a typical bicultural dialogue takes place between Ralph's Chinese mind, and Grover's mind of an immoral capitalist:

Gover smiled enigmatically. He explained how he got his break--how he kept his eyes open until one day he met this guy who needed somebody he could trust. "We happened to get to talking, just like we're talking now...I'm a millionaire. A self-made man. (Grover)
"Millionaire! Self-made man!" (Ralph)
"Understand me, I was already the can-do type." (Grover)
"Doer type. I got you." (Ralph)
"Keep your eyes open." (Grover)
"Eyes open."
"Keep your ears open"
"Ears open" (Gish, 1991, p.107-108)

It is exemplified that having become a successful self-made millionaire by means of hard work yet evading taxes, he acquires hanky-panky wealth. Grover's presence, as an American Chinese immigrant, seems to disintegrate the myth of the model minority. According to Rachel (1999), Grover presents a rewriting of American individualism for immigrant types by mimicry of radical individualist doctrines. In his conversation with Grover Ding, Ralph has internalized the cultural logic of modern capitalist discourse by repetition and mimicry. since the Changs identify with their social class of Chinese nobility in the past history, naturally identifying themselves with

the American upper class and unwilling to accept the fate of being forsaken. Thus, they have to fight for achieving the possibility of upward mobility through acquiring economic achievement. Changs work hard "to stage a comeback" (*Dong Shan Zai Qi*) and "resurgence" (*Si Hui Fu Ran*): not only to recover their lost identities of nobility from China but also to liberate themselves from the lower position of "ethnic minority" (Li HongYan, 2014).

It is supposed that Grover, as a totally "Americanized" Chinese American, has totally internalized American dominant culture, namely, be a typical representative of American colonizer, while Ralph might be regarded as similar American due to his own national descent, be an ethnic or racial representative of the colonized. From the perspective of postcolonial discourse, mimicry is a process by which the colonized/dominated is reproduced as 'almost the same, but not quite' (Bhabha, 1994, p.86). Namely, the process of assimilation exists in the covert shape of political and cultural colonization, even in America the concept of the "melting pot" myth appears to be disrupted in the "a nation of nations".

Thus, the demonstration of Ralph's mimic acts identifies with the fictional American dream of upward mobility and ideas of American individualism, which suggests that he goes beyond his original descent and cultural consent, and gradually integrates into the American mainstream. As Rachel (1995) points out that once meeting Grover, he indulges himself in the narratives of American individualism as a self-made person to claim unencumbered by an ancestral inheritance and self-originating. Another, Tang WeiMing (2010) indicates that Ralph is intertwined by a strong desire to "know what his limits were" (Gish, 1991, p.178) and to encounter the complete "legendary America" (Gish,1991, p.237) after his acquainting Grover Ding, an unscrupulous self-worth millionaire businessman.

In what the story follows up, Ralph makes himself away from reciprocal dependencies and communal spiritual space and abandons his tenured professorship in the university and due to her extramarital affair with Old Chao, his sister Theresa is removed and exiled from the family. As Rachel (1999) suggests that both the relationship with his sister and the position of the professorship is replaced by the impersonal form of money as a measurement of Ralph's self-worth.

Thus, profoundly influenced by individualism, materialism and the fabled American dream and in the process of integrating into American dominant culture, Ralph has been already primed to integrate into American dominant culture. Later on, under Grover's guidance, Ralph is induced into purchasing his falling fried chicken shop.

What is worst, behaviour of Ralph underreports he inflates profits and taxes is regarded as immoral in Chinese traditional culture, as the Chinese proverb goes that "one who loves money shall earn it by means of honourable. In another scene, Helen is indulged in a disgusting extramarital affair with Grover Ding, which shows that his self-made profit-making pushes Ralph into self-worth over familial relations of dependency. For this point, Ding XiaLing (2012) indicates that "Ralph's assimilation into American culture is less an abandonment of old cultural/political allegiances than a blind acceptance of new definitions of the self, determined by market relationship—the hallmark of modern capitalism" (p.142).

After Ralph's restaurant becoming into Ralph's Chicken Palace by adding one floor under a shrewd scheme by Grover, he feels his business "going up, up, up!" (Gish, 1991, p.236). However, unfortunately, the entire structure of his palace begins to collapse, and goes to the destruction, which forbodes the myth of the limitlessness of the fabled American dream of upward mobility, ideas of materialism, and individualism at this radical point. Actually, those misguide him to American cultural single-faceted in the context of the melting-pot assimilationist model of that time. And on the other side, surrounded by the social forces of popular cultures manipulating in the 1950s, such as having adventurous entrepreneurship and possessing a house by a suburban, Ralph plunges into money-making, like this slogan: "that is what you are in this country, if you got no dough, a singing Chinaman (Gish, 1991, p.106). Ralph subconsciously integrates into American culture by conforming to social norms. Even though his sister Theresa agrees: "to be nonwhite in this society was indeed to need education, accomplishment... A white person was by definition somebody." (Jen G, 1991, p.200). As David Li (1998) indicated that Gish Jen's these keywords such as country, dough, and chinaman

present "the interrelations of nation, class, and race in the determination of her protagonist's Americanization" (p.105). Thus, this suggests that there is an intricate connection between identity, class and race. In other words, individual American consent is unavoidably limited by racial descent as well as by racial discrimination, this is the reason why the Changs decide to eliminate this racial discrimination and realize the integration of Chinese American immigrants into the American dominant culture by a strategy of "claiming America".

Effects of Disillusioned Americanization

In a reading of *Typical American*, before Helen Chang and Theresa Chang, the two female main characters, immigrated to America around the 1940s, they had been fostered in an upper-class family in China, the family subject to their parents and husbands under Confucian teachings of the patriarchal system. However, living in materialism and the fabled American dream, Helen and Theresa gradually change themselves from the submissive image of typical Chinese women to an independent image of being Americanized. In sharp contrast with Grover, Theresa Chang is described as dedicating herself to the grace of the family by persisting in the faith of Confucianism, as she adds "once a Chang-kee, always a Chang-kee (Gish, 1991, p.140) and "a woman wedded to her family" (Gish 1991, p.155).

Theresa fulfilled "her duty" of offering mortgage payment for Ralph and Helen's new house suburban, as well as on the edge of bankruptcy of the fried chicken shop that Ralph faces, Theresa has to return home and rescue their family, although she is exiled out the house because of her sexual transgressiveness with Old Chao. Theresa told to herself:

It was her duty...She was in many ways Americanized, but in this respect, she was Chinese still---when family marched, she fell in step. And wasn't this what she'd longed for? Reunification, that Chinese ideal, she could not eat an orange without reciting to herself, as she did at New Year's, *quan jia tuan yuan*—the whole family together. Her exile was over. (Gish, 1991, p.265)

Actually, Theresa transforms herself a lot into being Americanized. Her brother Ralph blamed

her sexual violation, which is considered a dishonour to their family in terms of traditional Chinese culture. And Theresa's acceptance of her extramarital affair with Old Chao suggests her desire to rupture from Confucianist restrictions. In the United States, individualist freedom, of which extramarital affairs is one part, is generally seen as justifiable by the women at that time. Thus, it proves that Theresa assimilates into the American mainstream and diverges away from the rootedness in the Confucianist patriarchal structure. In this sense, from a psychological perspective, Theresa strides at the borderline of two conflicting cultures. Similarly, subordinating to deep-rootedness in the Confucian patriarchal system, as well as catering to her husband Ralph's needs, Helen resisted American culture in the early period when living in America. However, with time elapsing, Helen's integration into American individualism and consumerism is shown in the novel by her being intoxicated with Americanized life. For example, to be upward mobility of middle-class housewives in America. As Xue YuFeng (2007) points out that her American identity is fundamentally shaped by mass media. Helen spends a lot of time studying English, and listening to the broadcasting news and reading magazines, advertisements. Just as Helen is talking to her sister-in-law Theresa:

"Today Janice took me to this house with a winding walkway. Really darling! However, it was very overpriced, they are going to have trouble selling it for anything near what they are asking. And yesterday I saw a breakfast nook with beautiful built-in-benches" (Jen, G, 1991, p.152).

Gish Jen presents the unfamiliarity of real-estate vocabulary by italicizing the Chinese language in her speaking and foregrounding English words in regular font. Helen uses real-estate terms: "winding walkway", "darling", "overpriced", "breakfast nook", and "beautiful", "built-in-benches", as she collects them from advertisement of real-estate. It suggests that she has been integrated into American dominant culture through her internalizing these terms of advertisement, magazines, etc. Under influence of American individualism, she imaginatively purses a typical American romantic love during her dating with Grover Ding, as she "felt herself to be someone else, someone much prettier. A

commanding presence. What power in pliancy!" (Gish, 1991, p.214). Compared with the early period, Helen goes beyond being obedient to the Confucian patriarchal teaching and shows no reluctant submission to her husband Ralph. Such divergence is revealed that her adultery with Grover shows her disillusioned Americanization. Finally, she was severely beaten by Ralph and admitted to the hospital. For this point, Tang WeiMing (2020) indicates, "her upward Americanization culminated in her finding some sort of imagined self-fulfilment in the guilt of her adultery with the self-made millionaire Grover." (p.215). Furthermore, with the bankruptcy of Ralph's fried chicken shop, Helen has the consciousness of harsh reality in the ward of hospital by being aware of how fallacious and naïve her previous cognition about what America is. Helen's waking up demonstrates to us that in the process of Americanization there are somewhat clashes between Chinese traditional culture and American dominant culture.

In fact, Helen and Theresa's joint effort underpinning both the Confucian patriarchal system ideologically at home and the newly economic-type American household continuously pushes Ralph's self-aggrandizing of self-making at the price of two women. As Rachel C. Lee (1999) suggests that the national trope of self-worth is actually male self-making. In this sense, Gish Jen exposes the emotional and psychological expense maintained by Helen and Theresa in terms of male-centered oppression, and racial and sexual discrimination, which let them be pushed into the contorted and distorted process of Americanization. Nevertheless, Ralph's male self-worth shows a radical response to racial stereotypes and biases and a desire for upward mobility in American society but presents absolute neglect of Theresa and Helen's reciprocal commitment to him and their family. At the end of the novel, due to the collapse of chicken Palace, and the upset with Helen's adultery, Ralph's driving leads to Theresa's near-death. All these things smash his ill-conceived American dream:

"What escape was possible?" he thinks. It seems to him at that moment...that a man was as doomed here as he was in China. Kan bu jian. Ting bu jian. He could not always see, could not always hear. He was not what he made up his mind to be. A man was the sum of his limits; freedom

only made him see how much so. America is no America” (Jen, G. 1991, p.296).

Becoming or Beyond: Problematizing Cultural Identity

“American is no America” dismantles the pure pursuit of the Typical American, and Ralph’s epiphany obviously makes him trapped in ambivalence and fluctuation at the borderline between two cultures. In this novel, Jen explores a new model out of ambivalence between representations of two heterogeneous cultures: no Chineseness, nor Americanness. In a word, the narratives of Gish Jen’s *Typical American* are not on ‘becoming’ a typical American, but on “beyond” one/another monolithic culture.

This paper presents to us that becoming American” is neither physically the signifier “American”, nor the signified “American”, but goes ‘beyond’ the borderline of our times-- “throws into relief the temporal and social difference that interrupt our collusive sense of cultural contemporaneity” (Bhabha 1994, p.4). Suffice it to say, it is unavoidable for the Changs to stride beyond the borderline of two cultures to explore a new model of cultural identity.

Exploration of Cultural Hybridity at Borderline

Referred to the above textual analysis, Gish Jen clearly presents her probing into the concept of cultural hybridity that reconstructs and reconfigures diasporic Chinese American immigrants as a fluctuating and dynamic process of disintegrating the formative narratives of essentialized literary Chinatown us/other binary division between American culture and Chinese culture. In addition, it is mistakenly supposed that living in-between two different cultures appear to make a choice "predicated upon the stasis of two extremes, that is, the Chinese culture and American culture are fixed and whole and hybridity describes the melding of the two essences” (Harold Bloom, 2009, p.179). In this novel *Typical American*, the Changs, as diasporic Chinese American immigrants, have sustained ambivalent and fluctuating feelings towards either culture before reshaping their new identities in the host country of America.

As is indicated in *Typical American*, it is unfavourable that the Changs completely integrated into the American mainstream by their forsaking Chinese traditional culture. Ding XiaLing (2012) takes on the essence of the so-called myth of self-making by suggesting: “oftentimes, influenced by a binary mindset, people continue to believe that assimilation into the American mainstream demands the forsaking of Chinese culture, much as a snake sheds its old skin, whereas the preservation of Chinese traditions precludes the prospect of successful assimilation”. (p.147). Actually, Jen deconstructs the concept of assimilation in the context of a melting pot, where absolute assimilation into the American mainstream can be mirrored in the binary logic of (neo-)colonial discourse. It is assumed that in Ralph’s mind the materialistic self-making is based upon the total abandoning of Chinese cultural heritage and absolutely integrating into the American mainstream. As Bhabha (1994) suggests that the representation of difference shall not be hastily seen as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the essentialized tablet of tradition and fixed difference, which, from a minority perspective, is a complex, continuous negotiation that explores to authorize cultural hybridities that appear in the moment of historical transition and transformation. In this sense, the concept of cultural hybridity subverts the fixed notion of binary oppositions in the context of (neo-)colonialism to reshape cultural identity in between and liminal spaces. Harold (2009) suggests that in Bhabha’s view, hybridity is labelled by the ‘interstitiality’, ‘in-betweenness’ and ‘liminality’ invoked by continuous compromising negotiation between the foreign and the familiar in terms of recognizing the cultural difference and heterogeneity. Gish Jen in the novel *Typical American* explores a newer area than a cultural essence for cross-cultural negotiation between two cultures on the part of cultural identity, which is represented in the naming of the main character Ralph Chang, Chinese surname ‘Chang’ and American ‘Yankees’ constituted of ‘Chang-kees’, foreboding a process of hybridization of cultural identity. In this sense, Gish Jen tries their best to challenge the essentialist divide between Americans and Chineseness. In my exploration of the strategy of cultural hybridity, Gish Jen presents

to us that the Changs' hybrid cultural identity disintegrates the assimilationist mode of thinking: both the loss of one cultural essence and the gain of another one predicted upon binary fixity between two cultures. Instead, Changs' hybrid identity is more inclined to the integrationist strategy: "substantial degrees of social, political and economic participation, but not assimilation and...maintaining some of the ethnic cultural features" (Gabriel Sheffer, 2003, p.164). Suffice it to say, it is realistic for diasporic Chinese American immigrants to reshape a new cultural identity by going beyond two essences based on binary logic in a negotiable and liminal space, in which cultural difference leads to shifting the emphasis from ethnic 'essence' to cultural hybridity (Lisa Lowe, 1996, p.33).

In the context of postcolonial discourse, as Bhabha (1994) suggest that cultural heterogeneity aims at disrupting the essentialist divide between American dominant cultures and stereotyped diasporic/ethnic minorities such as Chinese American immigrants, then to make cultural identity politics into the dynamic and mutable process of cultural hybridization at culture integration/assimilation "in-between" space or at the historic moment of border-crossings. The narratives of Jen's *Typical American* are not related to becoming essentialized typical American identity, but crossing 'beyond' essentialist binary logic into the fluctuating and dynamic process of cultural hybridity. In terms of Bhabha's (1994) theory of cultural hybridity, "identity will develop into a hybrid state as long as the identity-seekers are in the process of searching for their reconstruction of cultural identities" (p.175).

Conclusion

At the historical moment of transformation and border-crossings, the Changs are forced to reconfigure their identity by acknowledging their own opportunities and constraints when faced with the cultural dilemma of identity politics: ideally becoming a typical American doesn't exist realistically and are there opportunities to go beyond narrowly binary logics of stereotyped literary Chinatown.

The novel's title *Typical American* has been provocatively deconstructed by the contemporary Chinese American writer Gish Jen, "who clearly engages with these postmodern articulations of ethnicity" (Bloom, 2009, p. 173). This research paper offers the groundwork for further study to emphasize the reshaping of Chinese American identity through a dynamic and fragmented process of cultural hybridization, predicated upon acknowledging the nature of heterogeneity between two cultures in the multi-ethnic and multicultural American society. Gish Jen intends to pose an answer to the issue of the cultural dilemma that diasporic Chinese American immigrants are confronted with: an 'American' identity of ethnicity is reconstructed out of heterogeneity instead of homogeneity (Margaret Chon, 1997). To conclude, diasporic Chinese American identity, as indicated in *Typical American* is a fluctuating, dynamic process of cultural hybridization that is riddled with negation, negotiation, mixture, as well as invention, memory, and imagination to subvert the stereotyped image of literary China town's binary division.

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