

## On Hybrid Identity and Relocation of Chinese Americans in *Tripmaster Monkey--- His Fake Book*

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Supported by 2016 National Social Science Foundation Project (16BWW040).

Received 20 July 2019; accepted 23 September 2019

Published online 26 October 2019

### Abstract

*Tripmaster Monkey---His Fake Book* is Maxine Hong Kingston's first real novel with focus on the Chinese American cultural identity. It has won many awards and attracted great attention since its publication. With Homi K. Bhabha's "Hybridity" strategy and "the Third Space" theory, this paper is to discuss how the construction of hybrid identity and middle space can make it possible for Chinese Americans to relocate their cultural identity, with the aim to emphasize the trend of multi-culturalism and the necessity of cultural inclusiveness.

**Key words:** Hybrid; The Third Space; Relocation; Cultural identity; Cultural inclusiveness

Chen, Y. Y. (2019). On Hybrid Identity and Relocation of Chinese Americans in *Tripmaster Monkey--- His Fake Book*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 19(2), 31-34. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/10107>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/10107>

### INTRODUCTION

*Tripmaster Monkey---His Fake Book*, as Kingston's first real novel with focus on the Chinese American cultural identity, won both the Pen USA West Award in Fiction and also the American Academy and Institution of Arts and Letters Award in 1990. The novel is set in San Francisco in the 1960s. And Wittman Ah Sing, the protagonist, is

a fifth-generation Chinese American, hippie, playwright director and poet. Because of his yellow skin, dark hair and other Chinese features, Ah Sing is regarded as "the Other", which pushes him into a quest for cultural identity.

### 1. HYBRID IDENTITY

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha defines hybridity in the following way, "Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverse the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority---its rules of recognition." (Bhabha, 1994, p.114) Mostly, hybridity results from mixture of different cultures, going beyond nations and it becomes one of the features of ethnicities in America. Chinese Americans exist as a minority ethnic group in American society. They live between Chinese culture and American mainstream culture, which is an "in-between" culture. Under this circumstance, their identity perplexity comes first in their list of problems.

In *Tripmaster Monkey---His Fake Book*, one of Maxine Hong Kingston's representative works, Kingston presents different images of hybrid identities in post-modern ways. The protagonist Wittman Ah Sing is a Chinese American, who is neither a typical American nor a traditional Chinese. Born and brought up in America, he is accustomed to American style of living with Americanized thinking, yet he feels excluded, thus distant from American mainstream society. Meanwhile, he is perplexed frequently because of his Chinese physical features with paradoxical feelings for both Chinese and Chinese culture. From time to time, he finds he cannot get clear of his ethnical features although he is the fifth generation Chinese American. For example, he once comments on a woman's behavior, saying that she should not leave her child to the care of a shop clerk like himself, at this point, Wittman seems to realize something, thinking

“this minding so much about justice must have to do with being Chinese.” (Kingston, 1989, p.53) As seen from the context, justice may be one of the positive features he can find in Chinese. But he tends to belittle his Chineseness in his in-between culture, as the text develops and the narrator goes, “His being so cheaply surprised—this being new at almost every dumb thing—must also have to do with being Chinese, or will it go away with age?” (Kingston, 1989, p.55) He is found expressing both his pride and his discontent for having something to do with Chineseness. Because of his features of hybrid cultural identity, he, like other characters such as Nanci and Judy in the novel, cannot correctly locate his identity. And a question occurs to their mind frequently, “What are they and who are they?”

With their special ethnical background, Chinese Americans are neither pure Americans nor traditional Chinese. Confronted with hybrid identity, they face the same dilemma: “Who are we? Where’s our name that shows that we aren’t from anywhere but America? We’re so out of it. It’s our fault they call us gook and chinky chinaman. We’ve been here all the time, before Columbus, and haven’t named ourselves.” (Kingston, 1989, p.326) In sum, according to Wang Yuechuan (1999, p.43), Chinese Americans are usually in a state of aphasia, feeling rootless when facing the West, and having a sense of superiority when facing the East.

What’s worse, they lack a sense of belongingness due to their hybrid identity. Chinese Americans are in an unstable state: they are not Chinese enough for their parents and ethnic community and not American enough to find a home among the white Americans. “There was no other of his ethnic kind here... as far as he knew, blackballed by Chinese. So where were the brothers? Where was fraternité? Wherever I go, I do the integrating.” (Kingston, 1989, p.57) They are in a state that Amy Ling (1990, p.105) calls as being “between worlds.” For one thing, Chinese Americans are discriminated and excluded by American mainstream society. For another, Chinese Americans look down upon themselves and even deny self-identification. It is quite clear that this situation is caused by hybrid identity of Chinese Americans but these are the features of hybrid identity.

It can be said that the protagonist Wittman Ah Sing displays features both of western hippies and Chinese culture which are so different from each other. The hybrid identity renders it possible for the conflict and fusion of Chinese and American cultures, which is a common issue that all ethnic minority groups will encounter in American mainstream society.

## 2. RELOCATION OF CHINESE AMERICANS

Identity is the integrity and continuity of an individual’s personality, the values and modes of life an individual identifies with. (Wang, 2004, p.2) The pursuit of identity is the performance of human subjectivity. However,

identity confirmation is an inherent and unconscious behavior for everyone. “The construction of identity, personal and collective, is a pervasive and crucial aspect to social life.” (Hall, 1989, p.39) The desire for relocating identity is to attain the sense of security and belongingness psychologically. In *Tripmaster Monkey*, Wittman was asked repeatedly by white Americans where he came from and how long he had been in America and how he felt like in their country. Even during an interview, the interviewer regarded him as a Chinese immigrant and doubted his English ability.

Wittman once met one of the great American Beat writers. He asked Wittman, “What’s a good Chinese restaurant around here?” (Kingston, 1989, p.318), mistaking Wittman for a Chinese immigrant and associating Chinese with restaurants. As Wittman said, “They also ask, ‘How about saying something in Chinese?’ But if you think of something Chinese to say, and you say it, noise come out of you that are not part of this civilization.” (Kingston, 1989, p.318) As seen from the quotation above, Chinese Americans are excluded mainly because of their ethnic origin and skin color. The mainstream society even simplifies them as a sign of exoticism, covering them with a kind of mystery. Being located in two different cultures, Chinese Americans, if they are not able to seek for their own identity and relocate it, they would be lost in perplexity, cannot be respected and even linger out a feeble existence, not to mention discrimination from white Americans. “Racism is a matter of beliefs and attitudes, doctrines and discourse, which only then give rise to unequal and unjust practices and structures.” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p.74) As exemplified in the novel, the orientals, the Chinese-Americans were sitting together. They set up the section where they were all supposed to come and sit, which they’d done at the cafeteria of every school. At California University, they had their own rooting section within the rooting section. (Kingston, 1989, p.59) It can be seen that Chinese Americans are treated differently and even excluded by the mainstream society.

Chinese Americans live with a combination of two cultures. For one thing, they consider themselves as real Americans, the same as other white Americans. For another, they are treated as Chinese in the eyes of American mainstream society. Thus comes the complexity of their cultural identity. It can be seen that Chinese Americans are eager to find their own identity and status. However, this relocation is not easy for them in the American mainstream society. In an interview, Kingston said,

That word Chinese American---that’s brand-new. And he (Wittman) knows that to make a Chinese American you’d better do a lot. You’d better work out the politics, the art of being a Chinese American; what is the culture of a Chinese American? And then, of course, how do I as a human being become one?  
(Kingston, 1996, pp.149-150)

They are in an embarrassing position so that they must be cautious in the white-dominated society. However, with the development of multiculturalism, Chinese Americans are compelled to relocate their own cultural space and seek for their own identity, which makes it possible to inherit Chinese culture on the one hand and be accepted by the American mainstream culture on the other hand. As Wittman said, "We are not named, and we're disappearing already. We want a name we can take out in the street and on any occasion. We can't go by what we call ourselves when we're among ourselves." (Kingston, 1989, p.326)

The perplexity and troubles Chinese Americans encounter both in life and work arouse people's attention to the real situation of ethnic minorities in American mainstream society and the meditation to inclusiveness of culture. In this novel, Wittman's relocation of a new identity is urgent and inevitable.

Considering the necessity of reconstructing a new cultural identity, Kingston creates the image of Wittman Ah Sing who finds his own way of relocating his identity by creating, directing and performing his own plays. By subverting the stereotypes and discrimination imposed on Chinese Americans, Wittman expressed his desire to bridge and negotiate two cultures in his own plays. As can be seen in the above discussion, Ah Sing succeeded in the reconstruction of the new cultural identity. But reconstruction itself is not enough, what matters most is where the newly-reconstructed hybrid cultural identity can situate.

Homi K. Bhabha's "the Third Space" opens up a room for negotiation. According to Bhabha, this is a space for "elaborating strategies of selfhood singular or communal that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself." (Bhabha, 1994, p.2) As a segment of the multi-culture in America, Chinese Americans would establish a harmonious cultural atmosphere on the condition that they both reserve the tradition of Chinese culture and absorb the essence of American culture.

The precondition of relocation is understanding and accepting Chinese culture. Wittman Ah Sing seems to recognize his root of Chinese culture as a citizen of America as seen from the plays he produces. Ah Sing experienced the process from perplexity to pursuit of his cultural identity. And eventually he succeeded in relocating his hybrid identity.

First and foremost, Ah Sing did not acknowledge he was an orient, instead he declared himself as an American citizen:

Once and for all: I am not oriental. An oriental is antipodal. I am a human being standing right here on land which I belong to and which belongs to me. I am not an oriental antipode...Without a born-and-belong-in-the-U.S.A. name, they can't praise us correctly.

Sojourners no more but... You not be Overseas Chinese. You be here. You've here to stay... And my mother and father are indigenous, and most of my grandparents and great-grandparents, indigenous... the entire U.S.A.—ours.

(Kingston, 1989, p.327)

Thus, Ah Sing's self-location of cultural identity is clear here. Chinese Americans are in the "intermediary culture", dissociating between Chinese culture and American culture. So they will be detached from two kinds of cultural identities and from another level to examine their own cultural identity with the inherent diversification, heterogeneity and hybridity.

The Third Space is established for not only Wittman himself but also for other Chinese Americans. For a long time, Chinese Americans have been marginalized in America. Their demand and discourse have been ignored. In order to change this situation and subvert the stereotypes, Wittman broke silence by creating his own plays embedded into Chinese elements, mixing two cultures together to create a new culture, so that a Third Space was established where he found his new identity. That is, Chinese Americans with the features of both Chinese and Americans, can relocate a new space. Through the strategy of Hybridity and the Third Space theory, it can be seen that Wittman found an effective way to solve the identity problems that all Chinese Americans are confronted with.

In *Tripmaster Monkey*, Wittman's embarrassing identity makes it urgent for Chinese Americans to make every effort to relocate their cultural identity. In the Pear Garden in the west, there is a Third Space where no racial discrimination exists and everyone has an equal role. It advocates equality, communication and negotiation. Besides, the Third Space can create a new cultural implication and representation instead of original unity and fixity. Wittman, as a Chinese American, "he was defining a community... Community is not built once-for-all; people have to imagine, practice, and re-create it." (Kingston, 1989, p.306) Admittedly, everything in the world is changing, so is identity. Zhou Xian (2006, p.11) points out that identity is a dynamic, changing and unfinished process with openness and constructiveness. Wittman finally performed his play and established a new space with his efforts. What's more, he persisted in creating his hybrid community. According to Homi K. Bhabha (1994, p.73), "For identification, identity is never a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality." Besides, Stuart Hall's 'becoming' and 'being' also display dynamic process:

Cultural identity is a matter of "'becoming' as well as 'being'...It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, culture...Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power.

(Hall, Stuart, 1989, pp.223-225)

Identity is unstable. It is a social construction, easily conditioned by economic, political, intellectual elements. In light of this dynamic, the Third Space can constantly realize the association, hybridization and negotiation of different cultures, races, and genders. Thus, the relocation of cultural identity in the Third Space can solve Chinese Americans' identity perplexity.

Having made so much efforts, Wittman Ah Sing succeeded in the end. When Michele Janette asked Kingston whether Wittman succeeded in the end, Kingston answered, "His life isn't over yet. Actually, he reappears in my next book. There he's older, and he gives more of a push to change the world...but I know he's going to succeed. He has to." (Kingston, 1996, p.149) Just as Wittman said, "It's the business of a playwright to bring thoughts into reality. They come out of my head and into the world...A playwright is nothing if not realistic." (Kingston, 1989, p.240) He was determined to make his dream come true. And then he served as a figure of the author, pulling everyone he knew into an improvisational community performance. He revived a Chinese theatrical tradition in San Francisco to create a Pear Garden in the West. (Kingston & Janette, 1996, p.142) Chinese culture has been presented in his play and becomes one part of American culture. According to Kingston in an interview with Michele Janette (1996, p.146), the meaning of Wittman's ethnicity and gender lies in trying to figure out someone else's ethnicity or someone else's identity. Finally, the protagonist Wittman answered these two questions by creating, directing and performing his own plays. And Wittman stuck to his rebellious actions that would make him into what he wanted to be. It can be found out that in his plays, Wittman pioneers a new space for Chinese Americans, that is the Third Space, which solves the problems of ethnicity and identity.

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## CONCLUSION

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From Ah Sing's successful relocation, it can be seen that it is not desirable to over-emphasize the origin of one's ethnic identity, nor desirable to cater to the mainstream culture at the cost of alienating or even distorting home country culture. The development of Chinese and American culture is not a clash of opposites, but a combination of two cultures and an equal coexistence. With Homi K. Bhabha's "Hybridity" strategy and "the Third Space" theory, Chinese Americans can find their way out of perplexity by reconstructing and relocating their cultural identity.

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