
**CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY AMONG CHINESE AMERICAN THROUGH JEAN KWOK
NOVELS *MAMBO IN CHINATOWN*: POSTCOLONIAL STUDY**

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to see how Chinese American people as immigrants in America construct their identity while facing two different cultures in society. This research is a descriptive qualitative study and using postcolonial approach. This study used novel by Mambo in Chinatown by Jean Kwok as the main data. Another document, journal, and author's interview as the secondary data. Ambivalence by Homi K. Bhabha will used as the main theory of this research. The main data collected after the researcher goes through close reading of the novel. The result of this study show that ambivalence occur through this novel. This study also highlights that the struggle of the character in the novel reflect the reality life of Chinese American immigrant in America. Seen from their arrival in America and how the first-generation immigrant transferring Chinese culture and value to their children as the second-generation in America.

Keywords: *Chinese American; Identity; Immigrant; postcolonial*

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INTRODUCTION

Identity is a very important element for every individual to have. The existence of identity provides an opportunity for others to know who and how the individual is. Individual subjectivity which is displayed through their identity becomes the main basis in interacting in the social sphere. In the

social sphere, the concept of identity itself always refers to the position and role of an individual in a particular group. Which is defined by Hogg and Abrams and Jenkins in Eriyanti 2006 that identity is a concept about who and what an individual is, and how that individual correlates with other individuals. (Hogg and Abrams, 1988, p. 2). Identity refers to the style possessed by each

individual that makes them look different from other individuals in the social sphere. In addition, identity is not always about personal information inherent in each individual such as name and place of residence, but identity is an aspect that can be constructed. In other words, a person's identity can also be formed from the interactions that they make in their environment. Every individual has the right to choose what kind of identity they want. Concepts related to identity have been put forward by several theorists, among which several aspects have been defined in an individual including social identity, cultural identity, postcolonial identity, and other identities that can be created from interactions that occur in each individual's environment.

In the case of identity, it should be noted that the recognition of identity is something experienced in the real life of immigrants who position themselves in daily life and how those immigrants build a hybrid identity at the individual and collective levels. The existence of interactions that occur between historical, social, and cultural contexts is a necessity that has long occurred. The concept of identity can also be understood in different ways depending on how an individual or an ethnic group position themselves. Through the interactions that occur, it can finally be seen whether they claim to be China, America, or even both Chinese and American and not both at all. Based on the collective experiences experienced by different immigrants, it means that an identity can be said to be something relational. Besides, immigrants can identify themselves and their identity can be called a complex hybrid process that has never been delegated before. On the other hand, an identity will continue

to be defined and re-articulated in certain social and cultural contexts that have been shaped by interaction and power.

Meanwhile, the main issue raised in this research is the constructing of identity, which will look at individual identity collectively or through an ethnic basis. The existence of social relations between communities in this context becomes very important in shaping the construction of identity. Identity will be seen through how they understand themselves based on their surroundings. In addition, the presence of immigrants in the 'between space' shows the existence of conflicts and struggles of each individual and how this can affect the construction of their identity when faced with other cultures which will later open a new process to negotiate their new identity.

In addition, postcolonial studies not only see and criticize the domination of the colonialists but also participate in fighting abuses that betray a country. Self-identity is depicted through several forms of love for their native culture. Said in his book entitled *Orientalism* explores and discusses artificial lines, as well as the stereotypical lines created between the west and the east. Said saw how the colonizers saw themselves as "us", while those who were colonized as "others" (Said, 1978).

Meanwhile, Bhabha's view of postcolonialism is different from what some postcolonial thinkers have previously stated. After what Said said about postcolonial studies using the framework of 'binary opposition' to find out about the relationship between the colonized and the colonialists, Bhabha gives a different view that it is not just about "us" and "others". However, the

correlation between the two results in a space that is finally known as the third space, where there is a possibility of interaction between the colonized and the colonizer or commonly known as hybrid and ambivalent. Bhabha introduces to the world that postcolonialism is not just about fair and unfair, on the other hand Bhabha argues that postcolonialism can also be known as the domination of non-absolute rulers. Bhabha then saw that, when we trace the traces of postcolonialism, we will find the fact that the direct picture of the cultural mix is only ambivalent spaces and contradictory behavior (Bhabha, 1994, p. 38).

Bhabha's postcolonial theory makes clear three main points: hybridity, ambivalence and also mimicry. Where in this study, the author would discuss three of those points, which might clarify this research regarding individual identity in accordance with the research questions that have been previously stated.

Ambivalence is one of the attitudes where an individual or group is in the middle between the colonizers or being colonized, or in other words, love, and hatred. The encounter between two cultures causes individuals or social groups confused about their identities. They adopt a more dominant culture, but they also still have their own culture and way of thinking. This condition is also known as ambivalence where the original culture is negotiated with a more dominant culture. The consequence that also arises from the meeting of indigenous and dominant cultures is that when these individuals face the uncertainty of identity, they tend not to recognize their original culture, because they have begun to be influenced by the more dominant culture.

The arrival of immigrants from west to east reads the colors and characteristics of their own colonies. Differences in culture, mindset, and habits are of particular interest to indigenous people. The existence of a state population in this world presents two social orders, superior and inferior. As a minority, immigrants often experience unfair treatment, because they are controlled by the colonial power who has the power and power. The term postcolonial is a study that focuses on the former colonial countries. The clashes experienced by minorities create doubts about their identity. China is known as a large country that has a long history of immigration, especially to the United States. Apart from being known as a great nation,

China is also known as the nation with the largest population distribution in the world. The population of Chinese Americans is the largest population in America where 23% of Asians live in America. In 1990, the number of Chinese Americans in the United States was approximately 1.6 million, or about 0.5% of the entire US population (US Bureau of the Census, 1992). Chinese people have come to America around 1820, so that the history of the Chinese people in America is called the ethnic group with the longest history among all Asian groups in America. which was when there was a gold rush in California. Most of the Chinese immigrants were known to be hard workers, especially in agriculture, railroad construction, and other menial jobs that white people did not want to do. They are also known as cheap labor, able to save from this very low income, and live very simply.

Chinese American is the largest Asian population in America with a total population of more than 2.5 million. At first, the arrival

of Chinese immigrants to America began in the 1850s, just like immigrants in general, most Chinese people came to America in search of a better life and work opportunities. Then at that time most of the Chinese population fled from the economic chaos that was going on in China, and also trying their luck at the gold rush in California. The Chinese immigration process is divided into three periods, namely:

The first period (1849-1882) began during the gold rush in California. Immigrants who came from China flocked to California to work. This first period ended with the existence of the Chinese exemption law in 1882. Until the end of this first period, the Chinese population in America was around 110,000 people. *In the second period (1882-1965)* only diplomats, merchants and students were allowed to travel to America. Meanwhile, the activities of other Chinese immigrants have been limited in line with the enactment of the Chinese exclusion. *The third period (1960s)* the civil rights laws of 1964 brought about a new period of Chinese American immigration. In 1965, Chinese immigration was turned into a basis of equality with other countries in the world. The US government sets an annual quota, whereby Chinese immigrants are allowed to enter America is limited to 20,000 people each year.

This study used one of novel by Chinese American author's entitle *Mambo in Chinatown*. This novel tells about a girl named Charlie Wong who lives and grows up in Chinatown New York. Charlie's father is a noodle maker at a restaurant in Chinatown, while her mother is a professional ballerina dancer. Her mother died when Charlie was little. Then, Pa (Charlie's father), and also her

sister Lisa lived in a small apartment in Chinatown. Charlie's father is a man who really loves Chinese culture. Even though they are surrounded by Americans, Charlie's father remains true to the Chinese culture he believes in. Meanwhile, Charlie who was born and raised in America secretly began to like western culture through ballerina dance where she's worked. This is where Charlie struggles to determine her identity. On one hand, she respects her father by still following the rules and customs that exist in Chinese culture. But on the other hand, she also began to be interested in western culture which was represented by the ballerina dance which she had hidden from her father and family. The objectives of this study are (1) to see how the identity of Chinese American portrait in Jean Kwok *Novels Mambo in Chinatown* and (2) to see how the struggle in the novels reflect the reality of identity of Chinese American Immigrant in America. As a result, this study will show the ambivalence of the Chinese American Immigrant in the United States.

DISCUSSION

The construction of identity will be seen through several aspects, the first is ambivalence, the second is hybridity, then the third is mimicry. These three aspects will be discussed separately in the discussion in each novel. *Mambo in Chinatown* is a novel set in Chinatown's New York, United States. Novel by Jean Kwok was released in 2014, tells the story of a girl named Charlie Wong. She is a second generations Chinese immigrant in America. Her father came from China before Charlie was born. This novel described about the family life, society, social interaction, and contrasting feelings between eastern and western cultures.

Ambivalent Portrayal through *Mambo in Chinatown*

Mambo in Chinatown is the second works of novelist Jean Kwok which was published in 2014. Kwok in several interviews he conducted said that the main idea of this novel was taken from her past experiences as second generation Chinese American immigrant in America. The depiction of Charlie Wong's life and her family as immigrants who came to America to improve their quality of life has been seen clearly even from the first chapter of this novel. This section will discuss about how immigrant and their struggle in facing ambivalence towards *Mambo in Chinatown* novel.

Being immigrants in a foreign country forces individuals to live a life that shows a mixture of cultures that may be foreign to them at first. Entering a new environment, they still face new rules and habits that follow from the dominant culture. Sometimes, adapting to a new culture will meet various challenges and pressures such as emotionally or through social life. Individual ambivalence is something experienced by immigrants in the novel *Mambo in Chinatown*. One of the situations that shows the ambivalence of the characters in the novel is as follows:

She pressed the red envelope in my hand.
“For good fortune.”
“Are you sure?”
“You must take it or it will be bad luck.”
“Thank you.” I bent over and kissed her cheek. (Kwok, 2014, p. 35)

Charlie is a second-generation immigrant who has lived in America since he was born. America's dominant culture enliven Charlie's life. Even so, the values of Chinese culture persist and are always

believed in Charlie's family. The effects caused by the dominance of different cultures that must be experienced by Charlie make Charlie in some situations ambivalent. He did not reject the values of Chinese culture that continued to develop through his family but also did not reject new systems and customs outside of his original culture. The data above shows two different situations that show two representations of Chinese and western culture. First, the situation shows how Godmother Yuan is very excited about hearing Charlie get a new job. He immediately took out a red envelope that was kept in his purse to save a few dollars and gave it to Charlie as a token of appreciation for his new job. The red envelope is synonymous with Chinese culture. Red in Chinese culture indicates happiness, success, and luck. While Charlie through one of his statements in the novel, it is shown that he is someone who does not believe in superstition or it can be said, for some situations, Charlie also doubts the authenticity of his culture. Yet he still accepted it and even thanked godmother Yuan. The second situation, Charlie expressed his gratitude to the godmother yuan. In Chinese and Western culture, the expression of 'thank you' or 'xiexie' has different meanings. For Americans, even for trivial things, they will say thank you as a polite or just to show gratitude. Different from American people, in Chinese, say 'thank you' or 'xiexie' meaning that shows the distance between the two speakers. Furthermore, Chinese people always refuse a thank you because it will look like they are strangers to each other.

With the meeting of two cultures in Charlie's family, in addition to influencing how they communicate with each other, it also indirectly affects other small actions that

are carried out either consciously or not. In this case, Charlie and her family experience ambivalence in their lives. Besides, another ambivalence situation seen through in *Mambo in Chinatown* novel show in the following statement:

“Take a look at this.” Lisa passed me a scrap she'd torn out of an English newspaper, probably from her school library. Pa only bought Chinese newspapers, which neither Lisa nor I could read.” (Kwok, 2014, p. 13)

Based on the text above, it is clear seen that in Charlie's small family, there are two different sides that can be seen through the choice of reading topics. As an American born Chinese, Lisa and Charlie are certainly more comfortable with news or information related to America. besides, Pa is a difference. He is a person who really loves Chinese culture, clearly seen from the way he chooses to read Chinese news. But despite all the differences that occur in Charlie's family, starting from their language and reading interests, they are still fine with it. There is no quarrel or incitement related to the existence of these differences. Apart from the way of communication, ambivalence can also be seen from the way they determine the names of their children and their families. In addition to the emergence of the use of two languages caused by the existence of families who have two different cultural angles, another impact that is also clearly visible is the small habits of doing activities in the house. However, the absence of problems that arise due to different habits because Charlie, Lisa, and also Pa did not take too much attention on it. Means that all three have shown ambivalence as a means to claim their identity. They still with their original culture, but the three of them do not reject the western culture that has entered their

family through differences in habits and preferences for small things. In fact, there is no rejection of the two cultures, on the contrary, they allow it to happen in their daily lives.

Then, another data that shows ambivalence situations in the novel shown in the following statement:

“I'd always suspected that Uncle's own desire for a boy was the reason my Chinese name, Cha Lan, meaning “beautiful orchid,” had been turned into Charlie in English. Everyone knew it was easier to be accepted with an American name, so after choosing a Chinese name for a child, many parents would ask English-speaking friends and family for suggestions for an American equivalent.” (Kwok, 2014, p. 26)

The choice of name was carefully considered by Charlie's family, considering they live in the Chinatown neighborhood in America, where western culture dominates their lives. Giving names in English was decided considering the dominant culture would complicate the future success of the immigrant children in the future. Furthermore, giving American names after their Chinese names, shows that they are worried about their children futures. The dilemma that is created is not only related to the naming of America, but also covers Charlie and Lisa's true identity as children of Chinese blood. The naming also shows that they are indirectly given an American name but are still constrained by the Chinese culture that is applied in the family. The existence of clashes between cultures that they have to face, creates a stigma of emphasis that raises the indecision that is felt by Charlie and Lisa.

“As the train went uptown, the number of Chinese people in the car decreased. They were replaced by men and women in long black coats,

reading their cell phones” (Kwok, 2014, p. 66)

The text above shows how Charlie is dominated by western culture, both in the work environment and when she is in public places. This situation then positions Charlie in two different points of view. The acceptance of two cultures by Charlie presents a contrasting feeling to society. Ambivalence basically does not only represent differences in thoughts that appear simultaneously, but can also represent opposing feelings felt by individuals or groups of an ethnicity (Larsen, 2007: 1 in dharma 2013). Race groups and other social groups largely represent the colonizer and colonized. The ambivalence of the colonized race or group occurs towards the colonizers because of the differences in stereotypes and attitudes between them. The colonialist's prejudice against the colonized caused the colonized to hate them but the colonized even admired the colonizer because of the great power of the colonizer. Bhabha also states that the implications between colonizer and colonized are ambivalent. It can be concluded that the relationship between the colonizer and colonized is ambivalent (Bhabha, 1994). Furthermore, the ambivalence between colonizer and colonized can be attributed to hybridization. This condition can be associated with hybridization because the ambivalence of delegation of authority from one's position of power, authority can also be hybridized when placed in the colonial context is found.

The Struggle of Immigrant Reflects the Reality Life of Immigrant in America

Identity is a very broad concept if it has to be described one by one. Identity can be seen based on several dimensions such as general self-identity, race, culture, gender,

socioeconomic, religion, and roles that may be related to one's life. This is because the purpose of this research is to see how the constructing of identity is, in which the contents of the novel are about immigrants who face two different cultures. Do the characters in it remain loyal to their original culture, or will they be more dominant in the culture that dominates their social environment, or will they choose both? Such points can be categorized in post-colonial identity by looking at the identity of the character based on three aspects (ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity). In the process of forming this identity, immigrants certainly have different struggles. In a decision about identity, some individuals express a commitment based on the choice of their parents, not from their own choice or not from self-exploration. Furthermore, some individuals are in a situation where he is personally trying to find a middle ground with what his parents want for him, what society demands of him, and what he is capable of doing for himself. After going through this stage, the individual realizes the ego identity that is achieved. People realized that they had a higher self-esteem and a set of realistic expectations”. The interaction that occurs between individuals in their family environment as well as in their social environment also affects the process of forming individual identities. Moreover, the interaction will produce two different responses, namely acknowledgment and rejection from the environment around the individual.

Charlie's family in the novel consists of her immediate family (father and younger brother) as well as her father's brother, Uncle Henry and Aunt Monica. As a twenty-two years old girl, Charlie is required to become a

person who no longer troubles her father. But behind it all, Charlie also has several shortcomings including she is weak in terms of education, is not able to speak Chinese like her father, she also lacks confidence when in public places. Charlie's family life in Chinatown is really far from their expectations. They really have to fight to survive in America, even though they live in Chinatown, an area dominated by Chinese people and culture. Even the place where they live in Chinatown is very deplorable. They only have one bed, and when night falls, she and Lisa will sleep on the sofa and the rollaway bed in the living room.

“Every night, after saying good night to Pa as he retired to his tiny closet of a room, Lisa and I folded up the plastic table in the living room and put it in the corner. My mattress, with the sheets hanging off it, always leaned by the wall. We squeezed that in between the sofa and the pile of three little televisions stacked against the other wall” (Kwok, 2014, p. 12)

The statement above shows how the life that Charlie and her little family had to live at the beginning of their arrival in America. Chinatown became the choice of place to live for them where the difficult situation of their life at that time forced Charlie to keep working hard to help their lives. Charlie was aware of the limitations of her abilities, so he could only give up working as a dishwasher, even though the job was not really what she wanted. Spending time as a dishwasher for almost half her current age has changed nothing in Charlie's life. She worked all day in the laundry room of a chili restaurant imagining that she could find a better job. Some differences are shown when immigrants decide to leave a place and come to a new place. Some of them came with the hope of getting an education and a better life, but some of

them had to fight for financial and economic opportunities, even as slaves. This of course will affect other people's views on the immigration process and will question the way they are assimilated into the new culture in their environment (Lazarevic, 2012, p. 2).

Cultural differences will bring ambivalent feelings to individuals. The indecision created by the encounter of native culture and the dominant culture in your life often leaves them confused about who they are. Even though they are surrounded by people, they still feel alone. When they are at home, they don't feel really at home. Who they really are, they don't even know that. An American Chinese immigrant also said the same thing that the existence of a bicultural family sometimes made him feel ambivalent about his own identity. In the YouTube video that she uploaded in May 2021, Emily Chen (YouTube username) shares her life story about her bicultural identity.

“However, for us Asian Americans who were born in the U.S., or came here when we were very young, we don't exactly have a clear-cut original home culture that's fundamentally a part of us, and a brand new separate culture that our immigrant family members encounter when they come to the U.S. Instead, we are bicultural, in that we live in two cultures from the very start the dominant American culture, and the heritage culture that we encounter at home with family. So, we acculturate to the American culture that surrounds us, and enculturate to our heritage culture. And for me, that's Taiwanese Chinese culture. And it turns out that acculturation and enculturation aren't mutually exclusive like I used to believe. When my college counsellor told me this, it blew my mind and opened up my world, because it helped me realize that I don't have to choose between

American western culture, or Taiwanese Chinese Asian culture.”

Based on Emily's statement above, it is clear that families who immigrated to America also value togetherness. In a situation where first and second-generation immigrants are brought together in a family, it is certain that there will be two different cultural beliefs. The second generation comes with two identities and lives a double life. They grew up with the original culture in their homes but were met with other cultures at school or other outside community environments. The existence of cultural differences that are accepted in the home environment and elsewhere will place individuals in a double bond (Quinones-Mayo & Dempsey in Augustin 2012). If the two cultures have very different values, it will be difficult for immigrants to unite the two cultures. The existence of bicultural family immigrants in America will find difficulties due to acculturation in the family whose application in the family system is different. Besides, the two cultures have many differences. Immigrant children position themselves between the two cultures, or even fully assimilate following the dominant mainstream culture, while their parents will still hold on to their original cultural values. Through the novel *Mambo in Chinatown*, it is also shown how Charlie and her father have different perspectives on beliefs about cultural values. Both belief in two different cultures caused by their bicultural family. Which ultimately makes Charlie ambivalent about her own identity. He is very interested in the dominant western culture but does not want to directly let go of their original culture which is still very strong in their family environment.

CONCLUSION

This novel discusses the struggle of poverty in life, as well as the struggle of Chinese American immigrants in determining their identity. Inadequate life and the influence of a bicultural family when facing two different cultures also hinder the characters in this novel from determining their identity. Therefore, the researcher conducted a study to see the identity construction of Chinese American immigrants through postcolonial studies from Homi K. Bhabha focuses on three points, ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity. Meanwhile, those three aspects seen through this novel. Ambivalence in this study occurs in three forms. First, individual ambivalence, it can be seen from how immigrants position themselves in the middle between two different cultures, there is neither domination nor rejection of the two cultures. Second, ambivalence toward family, indicated by the existence of a bicultural family where there are representations of two different cultures in a family, where parents play an important role in the formation of their children's self-identity. Also, there are different feelings when they are at home and in their social environment. Third, the ambivalence toward society is indicated by the existence of social interactions between immigrants and the dominant social environment, thus creating doubts among immigrants whether to follow the dominant culture or stick to their original cultural values.

At the end, the struggle of Chinese American immigrant in the novel describes the same experience experienced by Chinese immigrants in real life. Starting from the initial arrival of the immigrants to America, it was decorated with difficulties and unworthy lives that they experienced. Therefore, immigrants come to America to change their lives for the

better. Furthermore, most immigrant parents really believe in their native culture. Language is one of the ways used by first-generation Chinese American immigrants to maintain and preserve their original culture.

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