

The problem of
assimilation in "the
dim sum of all things"



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With the increasing emphasis on cultural exchange in recent literature, writers have attempted to point out how difficult it was for the people to maintain their ethnic identity besides their national identity. Assimilation into the mainstream American culture seems to be a primordial way of surviving for Asian Americans, since they have been victims of many stereotypes that it would be natural to escape. This essay will therefore analyze how Asian Americans perceive their assimilation process, that is, whether it can be said that assimilation is primordial but can be used as a masquerade by focusing mostly on Kim Wong Keltner's novel *The Dim Sum of All Things*.

Keltner's novel deals with the issue of assimilation as a discursive process. Her protagonist Lindsey Owyang is a Chinese American girl in her early twenties, but she relates herself more to the white mainstream space. Her hybrid identity is further emphasized by her name. 'Lindsey' is more western and modern while 'Owyang' reflects her belonging to the Chinese Culture. A Chinese American named as Lindsey emphasizes on the importance of assimilation into the white mainstream culture. Already with a name such as 'Lindsey', she does not escape negative stereotypes concerning her belonging to the Chinese origin. As a child, she could not really figure out why she was unfairly treated but soon realized that all these "had to do with [her] being Chinese." Therefore, she grew far from her parents, except for Pau Pau, her grandmother. She is more identifiable with the white mainstream space rather than her belonging to the Chinese Culture.

From the beginning of the novel itself, her free-spirited mind shows that in order to deconstruct the stereotype of Chinese Americans being an '

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unassimilable entity', she had to adopt a Western lifestyle. She goes to clubs, she dates white guys and even thinks of her mother as being "old-fashioned". Keltner therefore, attempted to criticize the impact of negative stereotypes on a young adult trying to be a part of the decorum. Lindsey does not speak "Mandarin" or "Cantonese" but speaks in English. Whether complete assimilation has occurred remains an issue subject to debate because Lindsay is growing up being someone she was never supposed to be if seen from the perspective of her family.

In fact, during the visit to her family, her English is referred to as "Chinglish" which indicated that from time to time, she makes use of "Chinese words in her sentences." Although she claims to be a modern girl with "an ignorance of Chinese grammar", it can be said that traces of her belonging to a Chinese culture are indeed alive in her. The beauty of the Chinese culture that she was exposed to touched her heart and showed that being Chinese is not something wrong. Her visit made her realize that celebrating 'Chinese-ness' is not at all so outdated and old-fashioned. It was a culture like any other cultures. In presenting such a narrative, Keltner shows that the notion of "perpetual foreigner myth" brought forward by Claire Jean Kim is in fact what makes the Asian Americans feel that they are inferior on the American soil.

Now that Lindsey has discovered the beauty of her Chinese culture, the readers are eager to know whether she will give up living her western lifestyle or whether she will continue to live like before. The author soon puts an end to the suspense and shows that Lindsey accepted Micheal the way he is although the latter stated that being Chinese is a part of himself that he never gave much importance. To this reaction of Micheal, Lindsey does not
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feel sad that he has not yet discovered the " good things" of being Chinese one of which will be the " sense of belonging to Chinatown"/ but she does not impose what she has learnt during her visit to Micheal. Instead, she reflected upon it and hoped for the best. Also, when Micheal once asked her to explain to him " what does it mean to be Chinese?", she replies that it is definitely not a " guidebook" to explain. Alleast she is not the " culture guide" that Micheal called her.

Therefore, not fully adopting the Chinese lifestyle, through Lindsey, the author shows that the process of assimilation is indeed important but whether it can be used as a masquerade is a subject to debate. There is a part of her being born on the land of America while there is also a part of her belonging to the Chinese culture. A " masquerade" would suggest putting forward an identity which is not true to hide what we really are. but Lindsey, belongs to both cultures. She is a Chinese and she is an American. There is sincerity in her belonging to both cultures and she maintains her hybrid identity as good as she can once she has internalized that there was nothing wrong in being Chinese. She was wrong to identify herself with the negative stereotypes that she was faced to when she was a child because this led her to believe that being Chinese is wrong.

However, if since the beginning she behaved as a Chinese girl, she would possibly not be able to lead such a life. She was ashamed of bringing her friends home because of the soup that Pau Pau prepares. Pau Pau did maintain her Chinese culture very well but the stereotype that this could lead to shame made Lindsey adopt the Western lifestyle. Also, this novel shows the dichotomy between the cultures of the East and those of the
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West. They can barely ever be converged at one point of time. Therefore, the willingness or unwillingness to put the mask of being more American than Chinese seemed to be a good solution to tackle the issue. And this is the solution that Lindsey chose. Her character is more Western than Chinese but after her visit to her family, she became Chinese from her heart. She felt the change occurring inside her heart because the "experience" she got from her visit made her what she became at the end of the novel. Although Chinese from the heart, it was important for her to continue being the Lindsey she was for assimilation.

It can therefore be said that assimilating into the white mainstream space is primordial indeed and can be used as a masquerade to some extent.

Assimilation, after all, involves hiding our true identity behind something more important to the social world. Therefore, Lindsey's American identity will always be foregrounded instead of foregrounding her Chinese identity, be it for choosing between "Dim Sum" or the "pizza."