

NEGOTIATING A WAY THROUGH IDENTITIES IN DAVID HENRY HWANG'S FOB

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ABSTRACT

In their new homelands, immigrants often suffer what is generally known as "crisis of identity." Usually, those immigrants are offered three choices: either to stick to their original identities, or to assimilate into the new one, or to strike a balance between the two identities. Hwang's FOB is concerned with the politics of identity as negotiated by its two main characters Dale and Steve. It falls into three main sections of various lengths. While section one is an introduction to politics of identity on the Asian American stage, sections two and three deal with Hwang's attitude towards the question of identity, and the negotiation of identity in his play FOB.

KEYWORDS: Identity, Hwang, FOB, Asian American, and negotiating.

POLITICS OF IDENTITY ON THE ASIAN AMERICAN STAGE

Identity can be defined as "distinctive character belonging to any given individual or share by all members of a particular social category or group"(Rummens, 2001,3). The term is derived from the French word *ident'ite'* which has its linguistic roots in Latin noun *identitas-tatis*, which is also derived from the Latin adjective *idem* means "the same." (Ibid)

There are different types of identity, among these types; ethnic identity, national identity, and religious identity. Ethnic identity addresses issues such as cross-cultural contact, alienation, social isolation and the effect of social interaction, including discrimination and historical redress.(Ibid.,10). C.N. Le, however, suggests that ethnic identity has a close relationship with the process of assimilation, therefore there are different types of assimilation (Le, 2014,2). Among them are behavioral assimilation and structural or socioeconomic assimilation.(Ibid) Behavioral assimilation/acculturation occurs when a newcomer absorbs the host country's cultural standards, beliefs, behavior and patterns, either completely or partially. This may also involve learning English and/or becoming an American citizen. The second major type of assimilation, structural or socioeconomic assimilation, occurs when Asian Americans become integrated in the formal social, political, economic, and cultural institutions of the host country -- i.e., when they begin to participate as full members of American society.

Ethnic identity, however, affects religious identity. According to Social Identity Theory, when individuals of ethnic minority backgrounds feel as if their identity is threatened, they may

emphasize their other social identities as a means to maintain a positive self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 2001, 94-109). This idea is supported by the various studies that have shown higher levels of religious identity among ethnic minorities, particularly those from Latino and African American backgrounds, compared to European Americans (Wallace, et al., 2003, 98-125). In addition to those two groups, this idea may be applied to Asian Americans. Religious identity studies, however, focus on religious expression, and practice (Rummens, 2001, 12). National identity is concerned with citizenship and civic participation, as well as shared values. "(Ibid., 11) Asian American drama emerged from the identity politics and student radicalism of the 1960's and 1970's (Lee, 2006, 2). Identity Politics is, however, "a tendency for people of a particular religion, race, social background, etc., to form exclusive political alliances, moving away from traditional broad-based party politics." (Oxford Online Dictionary). For example, second generation immigrants have to choose between the identity of the country of their origin and the host country. These two identifications have different meanings for friendship networks, social and cultural activities and even marriage and family (Deaux, 2013, 3). An individual may keep a dual identification or may use the two sources of identity to form new bases of identification. (Ibid.)

According to Elaine Kim, Asian playwrights suggest four components of Asian American Identity: first, feelings of interdependence with family (Kim, 1982, 173) as in Philip Kan Gotanda's *Sisters' Mutsomoto*. Second, a sense of connectedness to heritage and tradition as in Hwang's *FOB* in which he uses Chinese mythical heroes such as, Gwan Gung, the Chinese god of war and arts, and Fu Mu Lan, the Chinese woman warrior. Third, a belief that achievement would reflect well on one's family and group generally (Ibid). Fourth, a deep awareness of structural barriers and racism. (Ibid) In addition to portraying sociological issues as assimilation, integration, and cultural identity in a Western context, Hwang, Gotanda, and Yamauchi have portrayed views of important historical events such as the construction of the railroads in the nineteenth century and the internment of Japanese Americans during Second World War (Ibid.). In fact, Asian American writers and critics, advocate the Asian American identity through their writings. Aiiieeeee! *An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, is a good example of these writings, which marks the beginnings of the Asian American identity discussion (Berner 2003, 19). Aiiieeeee! was published in 1974, and edited by Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusau Inada, and Shawn Wong. These authors were the first to deal with the issue of Asian American identity. In the "Preface" to the Mentor edition of Aiiieeeee! The writers state:

Before we can talk about our literature, we have to explain our sensibility. Before we can explain our sensibility, we have to outline our history. Before we can outline our history, we have to dispel our stereotypes, we have to prove the falsity of our stereotypes and the ignorance of easily accessible once well-known common history- as trying to teach forty-year-old illiterates the alphabet and Shakespeare in an hour and a half (Chin, Chan, & Inada, 1991, xxvi). Thus, Aiiieeeee!, is an attempt to remove stereotypes, clarify Asian American history and identity, and discuss Asian American literature (Berner, 2003, 19-20). As a result, Aiiieeeee! contains theatrical writings of Chin and others as well as the Asian American texts of novels, short stories, poetry and plays (Ibid, 20). According to Chin and others, Asian in the term "Asian American" refers to non-white American who can be part of the American culture without losing

his own heritage (Ibid.,21). This is how they define the Asian American identity. The stereotype, they were most distressed about, is the image of emasculated Asian American male:

The white stereotype of the acceptable and unacceptable Asian is utterly without manhood. At worst, the Asian American is contemptible because he is womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, and creating (Chin 1991, 14-15).

The editors of Aiiieeeee! recognize that discrimination, rejection and racial stereotypes the Asian Americans encountered by the whites, make them feel inferior and believe that they do not have any heritage (Berner, 2003,21). Aiiieeeee!, thus, seeks to inspire the Asian Americans to deal with their culture, be proud of it and speak for their own interests (Ibid.,22).

In the same context, Edward Said states in his book *Orientalism*, that the orient is created by the West, as he puts it: "The Orient was almost a European invention and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories, and landscapes, remarkable experiences[and] has helped define Europe as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience (Said 1978,1).

Said also, examines the relationship between the Occident (the Western world) and the Orient. He says that this relation is a domineering one, in which the Occident is superior to the Orient (Ibid.,15). According to Said the Occident is the powerful and masculine and the Orient is the weak and feminine. This image is reflected in the white's literature and media (Ibid.). This image is widespread in media and in the white writings.

As a matter of fact, the West has created the oriental image and stick to it, and has no desire to change this image, because it goes with its own fantasy. In this respect, Chin, points out that a critic of his play *Chickencoop Chinaman*, which is concerned with the Chinese American's search for identity in a racially divided society, complained that "the protagonist doesn't talk or dress like an oriental." (Chin et al., 1974, viii; Kim, 1982,174). This explains why some publishing companies refused the book because it was "too ethnic" advising the editors to be more acquainted with the white writers (Chin et al., 1974, 1). According to Chin and Wong, Afro-American have been "[more] quicker to understand and appreciate the value of Asian American than whites," and the blacks are the first to take the Asian American writers seriously. This mutual understanding and identification between Asian Americans and Afro-Americans comes from a desire to reject assimilation according to white racist standards (Kim, 1982, 241). The two had the same experience of racism and discrimination in the dominating white society. In his endeavor to define the Asian American identity, Chin tries to differentiate Chinese and Chinese American identity encouraging the white Americans to accept the Chinese Americans as Americans (Chin et al., 1974, viii). Chin calls himself "Chinatown Cowboy" because he wants to emphasize Chinese roots in the American West (Kim, 1982,177). He wants Chinese Americans to be associated with the men who built the railroads across the United States (Ibid). It seems that, the quest for identity theme, is triggered by the Asian American stereotypes such as model minority, men castration, women passivism and submission as well as the injustice, racial

discrimination of the whites, besides the legal restrictions of the United States government against Asian Americans. These immigrants and their American-born children are considered sojourners regardless of their long periods of residence in this country. They are, also, portrayed as exotics and unassimilated heathens. In media, however, Asian American men are constantly being depicted as evil because being evil is unfavorable, socially unacceptable and deserves to either be isolated from the rest of society or just die out of existence. Non-Asian authors have a significant role in spreading this deformed picture. They, thus, repeat images of Asian Americans as distorted, exotic and unassimilated aliens (Berson, 1990,x).

Hence, Asian American playwrights try, through tackling the theme of identity, to improve this picture in their writings and illuminate their history and their role in building the United States, as it is illustrated above.

HWANG AND THE QUESTION OF WHO AM I?

Hwang is one of the most successful Chinese American playwrights. He is considered a first-generation Chinese American (Boles, 2013,2). He was born in 1957, in San Gabriel, California, a Los Angeles suburb (Torky, 2013,28). Hwang's father Henry Y. Hwang was born in Shanghai in China and immigrated to California in the late 1940s to study business in the University of Southern California, where he met his wife, Dorothy, who was studying classical music at the same university (Street, 1989, 8). Hwang's mother was born in Amoy in Southeast China but grew up in the Philippines (Torky, 2013,28). She was a brilliant musician from a prosperous family (Ibid). His father was the founder of the first Asian American bank in the United States (Ibid). In an interview for Hong Kong's South China Morning Post, Hwang states "My father came from Shanghai and my mother was Pilipino Chinese. They speak English in the home: they wanted to assimilate, and wanted their children to assimilate. Nevertheless, they were torn." (qtd. in Street, 1989,8). In this respect and in another interview Hwang says:

My father has always been interested in discarding the past. He's never much liked China, or the whole idea about China, or Chinese ways of thinking. He is always been much more attracted to American ways of thinking (qtd. in Gerard, 1988,88).

Therefore, Hwang's knowledge of China and Chinese people has come from relatives and contact with other Chinese immigrants within the Evangelical Christian church. (Street 1989,9) Being raised up in the West, Hwang and other Chinese Americans think of themselves as "Caucasians." (South China Post, ii). But when new immigrants arrive, it makes them aware of the "Chinese side that we try to ignore." (qtd. in Ibid).

Unlike his father who is interested in business, Hwang is interested in arts and playwriting (Torky, 2013,28). John L' Heureux, the English professor, and the creative novelist at Stanford University, advised Hwang as follows: "The desire to write plays in a vacuum is not enough. One must become actively involved in the theatrical process to get a feeling for how plays are different from other prose forms." (qtd. in Street, 1989,10). In 1978, Hwang attended the first Pauda Hills Playwrights Festival workshops in Claremont, California, to study under Sam

Shepard and Maria Irene Fornes (Xu, 2012,113). In this period, the initial ideas for FOB rise to surface (Street, 1989,10-11).

NEGOTIATING A WAY THROUGH IDENTITIES IN HWANG'S FOB

FOB (1979) was Hwang's first play. It was performed in Okada House dorm in 1979. Hwang invited his parents and his father moved and cried. He decided to encourage and help Hwang (Stayton, 1983 qtd in Street 1989).

This play, however, won Obie award for best new play in 1981 (Xu, 2012,113). After that Hwang was chosen as a spokesman of the Asian American artists, but he disliked this task since it drew the critic's attention to his Asian roots (Torky 2013,28). Nevertheless, Hwang is still in the same position as a spokesman of the Asian Americans, but now he wants to be a spokesman of the Chinese Americans. (Ibid). Hwang suggests in the introduction to FOB and Other Plays that "America, ...must not restrict its 'ethnic ' writers to ethnic material, while assuming that white males can master any topic they do desire."(1990,xiii). By this Hwang wants minority writers to liberate themselves from narrow borders of their ethnicity.

In FOB Hwang mixes some realistic details of the Asian Americans' life in the United States with mythical story of his ancestors (Torky, 2013,126-127). "Because of the way he juxtaposes reality and myth. He is very conscious that there are links to our past and that we, as a country, have a "collective history." (qtd. in Boles, 2013; Savran, 1988; Kim, 2002). In the notes to FOB, Hwang states that the root of the play are "thoroughly American" and the myths in it exposes the pre-existence of the Asian American literary heritage:

Fa Mu Lan, the girl who takes her father's place in battle, from Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Gwan Gung, the god of fighters and writers, from Chin's *Gee , Pop!*

These books testify to the existence of an Asian-American literary tradition. Japanese-Americans, for instance, wrote plays in American concentration camps during World War II. Earlier, with the emergence of the railroads, came regular performances of Cantonese operas, featuring Gwan Gung, the adopted god of Chinese America (1983, 3).

Hwang in his Introduction to FOB confirms that the characters resemble him and his family. He asserts that they are never completely accepted in the American society as they are considered perpetual foreigners (Ibid.,x). He, thus, argues:

In attempting to define my place in America, I have evolved through different phases, and I imagined that many more lay ahead of me. Initially, we tend to be more motivated by the most childlike of needs: to be accepted, to belong. This leads to an assimilationist phase, the desire to be "out-white the white." The Asian child sees America defined as predominantly of one color. Wanting to be part of this land, he attempts to be the same[similar to what Dale does in FOB]. The difficulty is , of course, that this is not possible; our inability to become white at will

produce terrible self-loathing. My first play, FOB, dealt largely with this dilemma. Certainly the American-born character Dale loathes the "Fresh-off-the-Boat" Steve precisely because the latter represents all the identification Dale has spent a lifetime attempting to avoid (Ibid., xi).

Hwang here notes that an Asian American has a basic need to be accepted and belong in the white society. Eventually, he tries to assimilate, but is shocked by his inability to be white. As consequence, he develops self-loathing.

This is applied to Dale since he hates new comers and called them FOBs. FOB, the title of the play, is the abbreviation of, "Fresh off the Boat," which is, in fact, an insulting term for immigrant recent comers (Dong, 2010,106). That is why he hates Steve, the new comer, because the latter reminds him of everything that he strives to forget (Torky, 2013,135).

In the Prologue Dale puts it:

F-O-B. Fresh Off the Boat. FOB. What words can you think of that characterize the FOB? Clumsy, ugly, greasy FOB. Loud, stupid, four-eyed FOB? Big feet. Horny. Like Lenny in Of Mice and Men. Very good. A literary reference. High-water pants. Floods, to be exact. Someone you wouldn't want your sister to marry. If you are a sister, someone you wouldn't want to marry. That assumes we're talking about boy FOBs, of course. But girl FOBs aren't really as...FOBish. Boy FOBs are the worst, the ...pits. They are the sworn enemies of all ABC-oh, that's "American-Born Chinese"-of all ABC girls. Before an ABC girl will be seen on a Friday night with a boy FOB in Westwood. She would rather burn off her face.

(LIGHTS FADE to black. We hear American Pop music. Preferably in the funk—rhythm & blues or disco (FOB 7-8)

Dale's abusive speech echoes the insolvable dilemma of both the new immigrants and the Asian Americans in the United States (Torky, 2013,129). Dale's words shed light on the stereotypes that imposed on the new-arrived Chinese to the United States (Ibid).

Dale's description of the FOBs is similar to that of the distorted image of the colonizer attributed to the Negro in the American eyes. As Fanon states:

The Negroe's clothes smell of Negro; the Negro has white teeth; the Negro has big feet; the Negro has a broad chest. I slip into the corners; I keep silent; all I want to be anonymous, to be forgotten. Look, I agree to everything, on the condition I go unnoticed! [...]Negroes are savages, mores, and illiterates (2008, 96).

Thus, it is clear that the image of all people of colour in the Western thought is limited to fixed stereotyped images, "which they unable to go beyond or get free from"(Torky, 2013,130).

Dale participates in circulating such false supposition (Ibid). He thinks by spreading distorted image of his race he will be accepted in the supremacist culture.(Ibid) For him, the Oriental new

arrivals are "physically, emotionally, culturally, and intellectually different from them- the same image the Western man sticks to and attempts to fix." Fanon calls the people like Dale 'social climbers,' those who think they are arrived. And opposite to them, those who keep the notion of their origins[as Steve]" (Fanon, 2008, 20).

Unlike Steve, Dale is proud of his assimilation. Dale's assimilation is structural or socioeconomic assimilation. This type of assimilation occurs when Asian Americans become integrated in the formal social, political, economic, and cultural institutions of the host country -- i.e., when they begin to participate as full members of American society (Le, 2014, 2). Dale's identity as a "pure American" is self-created and self-suppressed, evidence of his diligence in obliterating his Chinese qualities (Boles 2013,21). "I have had to work real hard-real hard- to be myself. To not be Chinese, a yellow, a slant, a gook. To be just a human being, like everyone else"(FOB, 33) For Dale a Chinese is not a human being, that is why he tries to remove his ethnic identity. He also, hates his own ethnicity and turns that hate upon new Chinese faces, like Steve's. Upon Steve's arrival at the restaurant, Dale adopts the stereotypical pidgin English of Chinese immigrants to communicate with the FOB: " Your fad-dah tink he sending you here so you get yo' M.B.A., den go back and covuh da world wit' trinkets and beads." (Ibid., 26). Dale tries to convince Steve that after graduation he will never come back to China because the attractiveness of the United States will prevent him from returning home (Boles, 2013,21). He says, " You gonna jump the boat. You're gonna decide you like us ... You're gonna decide to become an American." (FOB, 27). Ironically, though Dale separated himself from the Chinese American community, he is not accepted into the non-Chinese American community. He continues to suffer the identity crisis belonging to no country as Hwang believes.

After Dale's prologue, Act one starts with Steve, the FOB, and Grace in the back room of a Chinese restaurant in Torrance, southern California where she works in her family's restaurant. The setting of the first act in the Chinese restaurant refers to the significant role of these restaurant in the life of the Asian immigrants (Torky, 2013,130). This also, signifies the importance of the Chinese food as a means for identity. According to Sylow and Holm, "Food can be seen as a socio-cultural product with a meaning of importance far beyond its nutritional and calorific content."(Sylow & Holm, 2009; Stead., et al, 2011). Moreover, Fischler thinks that the way a group eats confirms their diversity, organization, hierarchy, and oneness (Fischler 1988, 276). In the restaurant Grace describes to Steve the behavior of the Chinese new comers, and how this reflects their identity: "If the customer's Chinese, you insult them by giving them forks. If the customer's Anglo, you starve them by not giving them forks." (FOB 10). This is also, obvious in the food competition between Dale and Steve:

Steve (Picking up hot sauce, to Dale): Hot. You want some?

(Pause)

Dale: Well, yeah. Okay. Sure.

(Steve puts hot sauce on Dale's food.)

Hey, isn't that kinda a lot?

Grace: See, Steve's family comes from Shanghai.

Dale: Hmmm. Well, I'll try it. (He takes a gulp, then puts down his food)

Grace: I think perhaps that was too much for him.

Dale: No.

Grace: Want some water?

Dale: Yes.

(Grace exists.)

You like hot sauce? You like your food hot? All right-

here. (He dumps the contents of the jar on Steve's plate,

Stirs) Fucking savage. Don't you ever worry about your intestines falling out?

(Grace enters, gives water to Dale. Steve sits, shocked.)

[...]

What-? Look, Grace, he's eating that! He's amazing!

A freak! What a cannibal! (FOB 29-30)

Thus, and in many cultures and groups, rejecting or choosing certain kinds of food are linked with identity, image, social belonging and status (Fox & Word, 2008; Tivadar & Luthar, 2005; Stead., et al, 2011).

Steve comes from a rich family in Shanghai. He does not suffer from the "inferiority complex" nor is he fascinated by "lactification." (Torky, 2013, 131-132). By presenting the image of Steve as rich, educated, Hwang is trying to change the image of the Chinese immigrants in the West, i.e., they are not poor, uneducated, or uncivilized (Ibid.). Thus, Wong in his book *Reading Asian American Literatures* says:

The FOB of the title, Steve, is a very different type of immigrant from either the working-class Issei in the Japanese American tales or the Cantonese old timers of *The Woman Warrior* and *No Man's Land*. "He is from a well-to-do Shanghainese businessman's family, grew up in the British colony of Hong Kong, listens to American pop music, and studies at UCLA; he does not live in the isolation and squalor of an ethnic ghetto (1993, 107).

Thus, Hwang by presenting immigrant as rich, educated, tries to challenge the racist stereotyped picture that constructed about the Asians (Torky 2013, 132).

Steve is proud of his civilization; he does not imagine that people in the United States know nothing about the Asian myths. He criticizes the West ignorance of the Asian American mythical heroes. In the following exchange between Steve and Grace, the former criticizes his own people ignorance of their mythical heroes:

Steve: I refuse- I don't believe you- your stories. You're just angry at me for treating you like a servant. You're trying to sap my faith. The people- the people outside- they know me- they know the deeds of Gwan Gung.

Grace: Check it out yourself. (FOB, 14-15)

By using figures from the Chinese heritage, Hwang attempts to negotiate and challenge the Western stereotype. Gwan Gung is a Chinese popular hero that wins many battles (Torky, 2013;

Agha, 2007). Steve imagines himself as the folk hero leading all the fights bravely and successfully (Torky2013,133). Therefore, Steve has to fight to maintain his identity as a Chinese immigrant (Street 1989, 15) He has to animate Gwan Gung as Grace says to him that Gwan Gung "is dead." In this way, "the distorted image of the weak effeminate Asian man is questioned , countered, and altered."(Ibid).

Being moved by Steve's acting out of a Gwan Gung story, Grace decides to show Steve that there are also important female warriors in Chinese legends (Torky, 2013,133). She identifies herself with Fa Mu Lan, an Asian female warrior, in the Asian American literary tradition. (Ibid)Grace here fights for her father's identity (Street, 1989,17). So, Grace attempts to alter the stereotyped image of the Asian woman as being obedient, meek, and submissive all the time (Torky 2013,133). However, Steve and Grace find their ethnic relation through the use of legends (Lee, 1997,180). Illustrating the integration of some" mythical ghost" tales in FOB, Hwang says:

I read Maxine's book and felt immediately excited by the possibility that you could interweave the hyper realistic details of contemporary American life with the larger, mythical ghost story in the background" (qtd. in Gerard ,44).

Thus, Hwang is inspired by the Asian American novelist Kingston's book *The Woman Warrior*, in combining mythical tales with American contemporary life tales in FOB. Interestingly, Kingston while watching Hwang's FOB states:

There- on the stage, in public-were our gestures, our voices, our accents, our own faces. It isn't sad scenes that bring the tears, but a realization of how isolated we've been, and a wonder that our private Chinese lives and secret language can be communally understood....

One of the happiest moments I have ever had at a theatre was watching the young men in FOB pour hot sauce on their food and gulp it down in an eating contest. I myself had just written a scene about an eating race. To have a fellow writer who works an ocean and a continent away meet me at an intersection reassures me that there is a place called Chinese America and that I am seeing it with an authentic vision (Kingston, 1983,vii-viii).

Kingston here observes the authenticity of Hwang's play and its representation of the Chinese American community. She even praises the way of Chinese eating. After recognizing that the West lacks knowledge of his culture, and misrepresents it, Steve, " imagines himself is in front a panel of judges defending his race and uncovering the injuries and unfair practices his parents and grandparents have been subjected to in the mainstream culture."(Torky, 2013, 134). He screams:

No! Please! Listen to me! This is filth time I come here. ... I tell the north , south, northeast, southeast, west, east, north- northeast, south-southwaest, east-eastsouth- Why will you not let me enter in America? I come here five times- I raise lifetime fortune five times. Five times, I first come here, you say to me I am illegal, you return me on boat to fathers and uncles with no gold,

no treasure, no fortune, no rice. I only want to come to America- come to "Mountain of Gold." And I hate Mountain and I hate America and I hate you!(pause) But this year you call 1914-very bad for China (FOB, 21-22).

Steve here is recounting the experiences of the early Chinese immigrants who migrated to the United States and dreamt of equality, stability and luxurious life (Torky, 2013,134). They played a crucial role in building the transcontinental railroad and developing California's agriculture, as well as contributed to the development of America in meaningful ways" (Dong, 2010,108). Despite all these efforts they were treated in unfair way and were presented according to the West assumed knowledge of them- as threatening "other." (Ibid).

Thus, Dale makes fun of Steve's car as he says: " Getting out of a limo in the middle of Westwood? People staring, thinking we're from 'SC? Wouldn't you feel like dirt? (FOB, 24). And he says to Steve a "fucking savage"(FOB, 29). According to Je lee Steve is Dale "racial shadow,"(Lee 1997,175) who reminds him of his Asian descent, which the latter strives to get rid of "(Torky, 2013,135). By attacking Steve, Dale is attacking the undesirable part of himself. He is like the black man who falsely thinks that "the more he rejects his blackness and the bush, the whiter he will become"(Fanon 2008, 2-3).

Second reason for Dale' hatred of Steve is that the latter is an epitome of a new model of the Chinese immigrants who is – " an image of Asian who is rich and well-cultured. Dale could not believe that this image exists; especially that Dale's parents are poor and uneducated" (Dong, 2010,107). Dale also, makes fun of Steve's English accent and tries to convince him that he would long Americanization in the future:

Dale : So, how do you like American?

Steve: Very nice.

Dale: "Very nice." Good, colorful Hong Kong English.

English-how much of it you got down anyway?

Steve: Oh-very little.

Dale: Honest. (Pause) You feel you're an American? Don't tell me. Lemme guess. 'Your fa-datink he sending you here so you get yo' M.B.A.den go back and covuh da world wit' trinkets and beads. Diversity. Franchise. Sell-ah-Hong-Kong X-Ray glasses at tourist shop at Buckingham Palace. ... He's you're American education's gonna create an empire of defective goods and breakable merchandise. Yoy're gonna decide to become an American. Yeah, don't deny it-it happens to the best of us. You can't hold out-you're no different. You won't even know it's coming before it has you (FOB, 26-27).

This exchange describes the false representations of some minorities and the role they play in driving them to accept the humiliation and resent their own descent and race (Torky, 2013,136). Josephine Lee in her book *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity On the Contemporary Stage* notes that many Asian American plays do not take place in the past, but "the past inserts

itself as a lesson taught to audience." The immigrants stories in FOB are examples of this (Lee,1997,148). In FOB the image of individual success has its costs: dissolving of family and other important people relationships besides the personal dissatisfaction (Ibid.,175). Dale is the best example in the play.

Dale's dilemma is not the superficiality of his material success, but his inability to liberate himself from "Chinese-ness." (Ibid.,177). Throughout the play, the reader observes that the characters are tied to their past and to their ethnic people (Ibid). Josephine Lee asserts that Dale's hatred of Steve is attributed to his " suppression of a shameful family history." (Ibid). Dale is obsessed of his father's betrayal of his grandfather's trust, which led him to the humiliation of racism (Ibid). He also calls his parents "yellow ghosts," and in fact, Dale is himself the ghost since he has no definite identity (Street, 1988,16).

Grace's accounts of poverty and exclusion distinguish her from the two young people (Lee, 1997,179). The stories she tells of Fa Mu Lan, stories of endurance and determination, come in part out of her lower class upbringing (Ibid). Grace's symbolic defeat of Steve, as well her gentle rejection of Dale, suggests that these class hierarchies must give way to something else. "What emerges from their symbolic battles is the lesson Steve and Dale must learn: that past and present racism against Asian Americans effects a leveling on the basis of skin color that no amount of wealth or years of assimilation can atone for" (Ibid).

The use of myth evokes a shared tradition that holds uncertain value in America (Ibid,180). Steve is doubtful about the reception of Gwan Gung in America:

One man- Chinaman-wearing a leisure suit-green! I ask him, " You know Gwan Gung" He says, "Hong Kong?" I say, "No, no. Gwan Gung." He says, "Yeah. They got sixty thousand people living on four acres. Went there last year." I say, "No, no. Gwan Gung." He says, "Ooooh! Gwan Gung!" I say, "Yes, yes, Gwan Gung." I say, " Yes, yes, Gwan Gung." He says, "I never been there before" (FOB,15).

Since they are obscure in the United States, these myths exist in a space outside the area of American leisure-suit experience (Lee, 1997,180).

Ban Wang notes that "Much of Steve's estrangement comes from the realization that Gwan Gung is irrelevant here in the United States and that Chinese immigrants are too preoccupied with learning the professional skills needed for survival to care for their own history" (qtd in Boles, 2013,19). What Steve discovers is that much of the Chinese Americans have embraced the " American cultural totems, such as night clubs, the Bee Gees, and the films of John Travolta. These items have replaced the stories and myths of their homeland" (Ibid).

Grace also relates her suffering as a Chinese immigrant in the United States. She was ignored by both the whites and "the American-born Chinese girls she grew up with, who were distanced from her both by their wealth and by their superior English" (Lee, 1997; Boles, 2013). She

attempts to conceal her true identity through changing her own physical appearance by bleaching her hair. In this sense, Grace tries to find a means to be attached to the supremacist culture.

These are her words:

...so in junior high I started bleaching my hair and hanging out at the beach-you know, Chinese hair looks pretty lousy when you bleach it... Until my senior year in high school- that's how it took for me to get over this whole thing. One night I took Dad's car and drove on Hollywood Boulevard, all the way from downtown to Beverly Hills, then back on sunset. I was looking and listening – all the time with the window down, just so I like to feel like I was part of the city. And that Friday, it was-I guess-I said, "I'm lonely. And I don't like it. I don't like being alone." And that was all (FOB, 30-31).

Grace here feels lonely and she wants to belong, she has the "identity crisis." Some researchers suggest that some young people reject their ethnic identity but by time they start to embrace their parents' "national origin as their own ethnic identity." (Arriagada 2007,16). Just like Grace here. She wants to belong. She takes her ancestor's car or a means of transportation to downtown to be with others. She listens to them and looks at them as if she wants to say, I am part of this country, just like you.

Not only Grace suffers from the dominant white society , but Dale as well (Torky, 2013, 138). Street affirms this idea, as he says: "Dale too", suffers from being seen and treated as "an outsider", an "ABC" in an Anglo land (Street, 1988,14). That is why he resorts to cut himself off the "yellow ghosts" of his past in order to be accepted in the white West (Torky, 2013,138). He blames his race, generally, and his parents, particularly:

My parents- they don't know nothing about the world, about watching Benson at the Roxy, about ordering hors' d'oeuvres at Scandia's, downshifting onto the Ventura Freeway at midnight. They're yellow ghosts and they've tried to cage me up with Chinese-ness when all the time we were in America. (Pause) So, I've had to work real hard-real hard-to be myself. To not be a Chinese, a yellow, a slant, a gook. To be just a human being, like everyone else, (Pause) I've paid my dues. And that's why I am much better now. I'm making it, you know? I'm making it in America (FOB, 33).

Apparently, Dale believes deeply in "whitening" as the only solution to transcend the burdens of Western preconceptions (Torky, 2013,139). in fact, it is not an easy task to sever one from his ethnic roots. Mohamed Agha in his Dissertation " A Study of Selected Plays by David Henry Hwang" argues:

Dale is mistaken when he declares that his parents attempt to cage him up with his Chineseness. He is facing a dilemma. Despite his Americanization, he is not accepted as a white member. He is unable to solve this dilemma by identifying with Chinese cultural traditions symbolized by Steve, and at the same time adopting American values (Agha 2007,79). Thus, the sufferings of Grace, in her adolescence, and Dale point out to their identity crisis.

Dale considers the American actor John Travolta a symbol of manhood and power, "which the Asians have always been accused of lacking" (Torky, 2013,140). Dale asks Steve to take Travolta as a perfect example of manhood being unaware of "Travolta's long-rumored homosexuality" (Park, 2006,114-115). The following exchange between Dale and Steve illustrates Dale's naïve fascination with Travolta:

Dale: ... You ever see *Saturday Night Fever*?

Steve: Oh. *Saturday*...

Dale: Yeah.

Steve: Oh. *Saturday Night Fever*. Disco.

Dale: That's it. Okay. You know...

Steve: John Travolta.

Dale: Right. John Travolta. Now, maybe I you could be a little more like him.

[...]

Dale: I'm trying to help you!

Steve: Also John Travolta?

Dale: I'm trying to get you normal!

[...]

Dale: WILL YOU SHUT UP? I'M TRYING TO HELP

YOU! I'M TRYING ...

[...]

Dale: ... TO MAKE YOU LIKE JOHN TRAVOLTA![...] (FOB ,34)

Dale's obsession of John Travolta reflects his "inferiority complex" and his yearning for "whiteness" (Torky, 2013,141). He advises Steve to wear the "white mask," and escape the negative image of his race (Ibid).

In the following speech Steve addresses the audience as if they were his family. He uncovers the true image of the white America and the false promises of equality, richness, and freedom.

Yes. I will go to America[...] The white ghosts came into the harbor today. They promised that they would bring us to America, and that in America we would never want for anything. One white ghost told how the streets are paved with diamonds, how the land is so rich that pieces of gold lie on the road, and the worker-devils consider them too insignificant even to bend down for. They told us of a land where there are no storms, no snow, but sunshine and warmth all year round, where a man could live out in the open and feel not discomfort from the nature around him- a workers' paradise.[...] (FOB, 37).

Steve's words expose the disappointment of his ancestor's dreams and hopes by the dominant society (Torky, 2013,142). They, also, reflect the picture of the whites in the eyes of the Asians. "It is not the Asians who are cunning, threatening, and demonic; rather it is the white man." (Ibid,143).

Steve Winn, in his article "Hwang's 'FOB' Probes Asian Assimilation," states: "Steve stirs something in Grace, a race memory she has gone a long way toward forgetting." (qtd.in Ibid.). Grace tries to motivate Dale to perceive Steve as a "different kind of Asian immigrant, from a Hong Kong upper-class family that is well-off enough to send their kids to 'American colleges', 'kinda classy,' and 'already real Westernized.'" (Lee, 1997, 178).

The following scene between Grace and Dale explains the way each one regards the Chinese new arrivals to the American West:

Grace: All I'm saying is that the people who are coming in now- a lot of them are different- they're already Westernized. They don't act like they're fresh off the boat.

Dale: May be . But they're still FOBS (FOB, 39).

In act two, Steve recalls various stories of immigrant past as he moves toward a position of increasing humility; these stories are not the echo of Dale's father or Grace's mother histories, but the desperate tales of poverty and sacrifice of the first immigrant families to the United States (Lee, 1997,181). According to Josephine Lee, Steve is reborn after Grace's Fa Mu Lan stabs him in the heart with an imaginary sword, Steve becomes his final persona, "the Chinese immigrant who, close to starvation, appeals to the white woman for work and food." (Ibid). It is only after that, Grace gives him bing. Symbolically, Steve has been made aware of his position, and more significant his blood ties to other immigrants, "for whom food is a dear necessity." (Ibid,182). Bing is a "type of Chinese pancake, a Northern Chinese appetizer often made with dough and scallions, with a consistency similar to that of pita bread" (Hwang, 1983,6). Grace says to Steve "you are in the U.S. in 1980, just like the rest of us." (FOB, 17). "Steve must taste death and humiliation in order to work collectively to break down class barriers in favor of the racial community of Asian America" (Lee, 1997,182).

Kimberly Jew argues" Through the character of Steve, Hwang reveals the condition of a splintered and multiplicitous Asian American identity, one that is ruptured by the process of historical immigration."(qtd. in Boles, 2013,20).

In spite of Steve's awareness of the Chinese experience and its history, he learns from Grace to find a balance between the Chinese American community in southern California and his own connection to China (Boles, 2013,20). In act one Steve searches for bing, and he continues to seek for it. At the end Grace gives bing to Steve which is a symbol of a Chinese food. She tells him:

Eat the bing. Hold it to your hands. Your hands...are beautiful. Lift it to your mouth. Your mouth... is beautiful. Bite it with your teeth. Your teeth are beautiful. Crush it with your tongue. Your tongue ...is beautiful. Slide it down your throat. Your throat ... is beautiful.

Steve: Our hands are beautiful (FOB, 49-50).

Grace here draws Steve's attention to external and internal beauty of the self (Boles, 2013,21). She gives large importance to his ethnic heritage; there is equally important recognition of one's

individuality, which is a western concept. (Ibid.,21) In this sense, Grace succeeds in helping Steve to discover identity balance as he uses the pronoun "our." Jew notes that "Steve's ability to embody and articulate a new identity represents a broader and more diverse vision of an emerging Chinese American identity coming into focus" (Jew, 2005, 201).

Regarding the theme of identity, Hwang comments:

In a lot of my plays, from FOB to M. Butterfly, people become other people... To what degree do you have an inherited identity, and to what degree is your personality shaped by the influences and environment around you?(qtd. in Berson, 1994, 94).

In an interview in Los Angeles by the Herald Examiner's Richard Styton, Hwang noted that he felt the uniqueness of his identity, he recalled:

We have to figure out what our identity is. We're not quite white Americans and we're not quite Asian-Asians so we must be a third identity. And if you're in the states all the time you think it's a unique concern (qtd. in Street, 1989,17).

Hwang in this interview confirms that his identity as an American –born of Asian descent, is a combination of the two. This is what he attempts to advocate throughout his play FOB.

Dale separated himself from the Chinese American community, but he is not accepted into the non-Chinese American community. "He exists in limbo between the two cultures." (Boles 2013,21) At the end Dale is left alone, humble and uncertain, repeating the same words of the prologue. While Steve and Grace enjoy the happiness of their community and identity (Ibid.,23). It seems that Hwang has left the end open perhaps he wants the reader to realize that the "fixity" of the stereotype is negotiable and can be altered. Consequently the Chinese American identity is changed according to this change.

In FOB, Hwang tries to explain that the complete assimilation is to belong to no country. Such individual suffers from isolation and loneliness. While, the blending of the two cultures is the safest way to preserve the psychological balance of the individual. Hwang, in order to expose the Asian American identity, resorts to tradition and heritage as he uses traditional heroes in order to challenge the Western concept of 'fixity,' and false assumptions and stereotypes that afflict his own race. Hwang, therefore, uses mythical heroes of Asian American literature such as Gwan Gung, the god of war and arts, and Fa Mu Lan, the woman warrior, who takes her father's role in the battle to save her village, and functions them in contemporary American life.

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