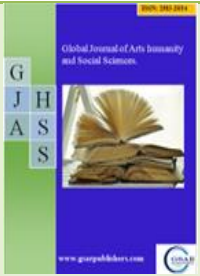
	<b>Global Journal of Arts Humanity and Social Sciences</b>			
	ISSN: 2583-2034			
	Abbreviated key title: Glob.J.Arts.Humanit.Soc.Sci			
	Frequency: Monthly			
	Published By GSAR Publishers			
Journal Homepage Link: <a href="https://gsarpublishers.com/journal-gjahss-home/">https://gsarpublishers.com/journal-gjahss-home/</a>				
Volume - 4	Issue - 1	Jan 2024	Total pages 11-14	DOI: <a href="https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10468104">10.5281/zenodo.10468104</a>

## Cultural Assimilation among Chinese Immigrants in 1950s America: A Multifaceted Exploration through the Lens of *Flower Drum Song*

BY

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### Abstract

Chin Yang Lee's seminal work, *Flower Drum Song* (1957), stands as a groundbreaking exploration of the intricate dynamics of cultural assimilation within the context of Chinese immigrants in 1950s America. Despite facing criticism for allegedly perpetuating stereotypes, this paper contends that the novel holds significant positive value in authentically portraying Chinese culture. By examining the novel's nuanced depictions, including the positive attributes of characters and the vivid portrayal of Chinese traditions, this study sheds light on the multifaceted experiences of Chinese immigrants in America. Furthermore, the paper delves into the intricate patterns of assimilation depicted in the novel, ranging from the traditionalist stance of Wang Chi-yang's passive acceptance to the active seeking and integration pursued by the younger generation, embodied by Wang Ta. Additionally, it explores the helpless adaptation of the underclass, exemplified by Old Man Li, providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and triumphs associated with cultural assimilation. This study offers valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of the immigrant experience, enriching the understanding of cultural adaptation in the complex tapestry of American society during the mid-20th century.

**Keywords:** Flower Drum Song; Cultural Assimilation; Chinese Immigrants; Cross-cultural Appreciation; Chinese-American Literature

### Article History

Received: 01- 01- 2024

Accepted: 15- 01- 2024

Published: 16- 01- 2024

Corresponding author

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### 1. Introduction

*The Flower Drum Song* (1957) is the masterpiece of Chin Yang Lee (1915-2018) (Li, 2013). With this novel, Chin Yang Lee was honored as the first Asian-American best-selling novelist in American history (Zhang, 2019). The novel presents the social situation of Chinatown in the 1950s, tells the conflict of Chinese tradition and American culture with a humorous narrative style, and composes the American dream of both old and new generations. The dramatic conflict between the two generations, the delightful love story, and the extensive portrayal of Chinatown made it a considerable success in the American market. *The Flower Drum Song* hit the New York Times bestseller list, and in the following year, the novel was adapted by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II into a musical of the same name and staged on Broadway (Cui, 2013). And in 1961 the novel was made into a movie by Hollywood. Both the musical and the movie were very

popular at the time. A new adaptation by David Henry Hwang was staged on Broadway in 2002, and the response was equally enthusiastic (Zhang, 2019).

However, the popularity of the novel has also attracted criticism from Chinese-Americans and a long-term of neglect and censure from the Chinese-American literary research community. Many accused Chin Yang Lee of deliberately writing with an American mentality, that the novel was a work to cater for Americans (Xiao, 2021).

For quite a long period of time, the *Flower Drum Song* has received mixed reviews from Chinese American scholars. The criticism like Elaine Kim accuses that the novel is "portraying the Chinese as comical and irrational, Chinatown has become a playground for wealthy exiles in the United States"; Frank Chin criticizes it "aims to make money" (Liu, 2017); King-Kok Cheung argues that the popularity of the *Flower Drum Song* came from its



"unashamed pandering to the conceptualized image of the white man's mind" (He, 2019). Contrary to this, David Henry Hwang believes that the reason why Asian Americans deliberately ignore this classic is entirely due to prejudice, and that the musical and movie are inauthentic and distort the image of Asian Americans, so people take it for granted that the novel is also inauthentic (Cui, 2013).

The same criticism is also occurred in China, compared with other Chinese American writers, the public are not familiar with Chin Y. Lee and his novel *the Flower Drum Song*. Nowadays, many literary critics and researchers still have great prejudice against *the Flower Drum Song*. Most of the articles hold negative views towards Lee and *the Flower Drum Song*. They believe that Lee distorts the image of Chinese and reinforces the stereotype of Chinese in the mainstream American society (Wang, 2015).

This paper argues that, because both the musical and the film are the secondary processing of the novel, and in order to achieve market orientation and entertainment commercialization, the original text is inevitably modified accordingly. From the musical to the movie, the novel is diluted again and again (Liu, 2017). Especially when placed in the mode of Hollywood film, it is difficult to fully restore the novel, let alone to present the true face of the Chinese community.

It also argues that the novel holds two positive significances. On one hand, it portrays a favorable image of Chinese culture and its people, challenging and reversing the stereotypical perceptions that Westerners may hold about the East. On the other hand, it depicts the active assimilation efforts of Chinese individuals into American society amid anti-Chinese sentiments, shedding light on the challenges and diverse patterns involved in seeking cultural assimilation and identity. This contributes to a better understanding of the survival conditions faced by Chinese immigrants.

## 2. Positive Descriptions in the Novel

Compared with the version of musical and film, the novel has many positive descriptions. In addition, the display of Chinese traditional culture and the description of Chinese family life in the novel also help American readers to have a preliminary understanding of China.

### 2.1 Authenticity

The author uses his own experience and feeling to truly describe the life of early Chinese immigrants in the United States. Through the character of Wang Chi-yang, Lee shows readers the difficult journey of a stubborn old Chinese immigrant who, under the influence of realistic circumstances, gradually gets rid of the deep-rooted old ideas, begins to accept new things, and gradually integrates into modern American society. Wang Chi-yang's change may seem subtle and slow, but it demonstrates the irreversible fact that Chinese immigrants adapt to life in immigrant countries. Therefore, the image of Wang Chi-yang is a strong reversal of the stereotype that "Chinese people cannot be assimilated" in mainstream American society (Xu, 2011). In addition to Wang Chi-yang, the novel also focuses on Wang Ta's upbringing in

American society. He gradually grows from a young master of a big Chinese family to an independent young man full of personality in American society. The description of this process is authentic and vivid, showing the living conditions of Chinese immigrants.

### 2.2 Chinese Elements

The description of Chinese elements shows author's deep concern for Chinese culture. The first thing to mention is the cultural symbol of Chinese- Chinatown. Congregations and gangs have a long history in American Chinatown and are an unavoidable part of the history of Chinatown. As a result, in mainstream American culture, Chinatown is both a place of incessant gang scuffles and a symbol of danger and violence. This pernicious impression remained in the 1980s (Xu, 2015). In *Flower Drum Song*, Chinatown brings Wang Chi-yang a state of relaxation and comfort. Chinatown is a spiritual "refuge" for the older generation of immigrant Chinese, a realistic basis for their homesickness. Although Chinese have taken root in the United States, they have always been filled with a sense of rootlessness (Ying, 2015). Chinatown is the place that brings a sense of belonging to these immigrant Chinese in a foreign land. Chinese immigrants live in Chinatown and rely on it to continue their cultural life. They can gain a sense of security in the place full of Chinese elements they have created. Through the author's descriptions, Chinatown has become a symbol of warmth and comfort.

The novel also mentions many Chinese folk arts, such as dragon dances, flower drum songs, introduces Chinese calligraphy and Chinese medical theory, and describes Hunan cuisine, one of the important cuisines in Chinese diet. The author also makes a point of illustrating the Chinese festival atmosphere in Chinatown when the Chinese New Year arrives - Cantonese opera, southern folk songs, Spring Festival couplets, and light decorations. These descriptions will spread Chinese culture and help to attract readers to pay attention to and be interested in Chinese culture.

### 2.3 Good Qualities

There are many characters. Some of them have good qualities. Old man Li and May Li are the representatives of hard-working laborers. In the novel, "The Song of the Hoe" (Li, 2013), with lyrics by Tao Xingzhi (a prestigious scholar in China), celebrates the hard work of farmers. Lee chose this flower drum song in the novel to combine the plot of the novel with the original intention of the "Song of Hoe" (Xu, 2015). When Old Man Li and May Li arrived at Wang's house, Wang Chi-yang's pipe lit up and the garden in the backyard became tidy. These show that Old Man Li and May Li are hard workers.

May Li's character is conveyed in the flower drum song of Hoe: hardworking, straightforward, and brave to face the life of poverty. Besides, May Li is pure and innocent, has her own view of love, and will not be swayed by love or marriage. This image is very different from other Chinese women portrayed in the novel.

Chinese Confucian philosophy emphasizes the concept of family and interpersonal ethics. It advocates filial piety, fraternal loyalty, propriety, justice, integrity, benevolence, and equality (Ying,



2015). It occupies a high position in classical Chinese culture and is also highly respected and perpetuated by the Chinese. Chinese people have long been influenced by Confucianism, and old Chinese immigrants like Wang Chi-yang and Old Man Li, even in the United States, still adhere to these traditional concepts and abide by them in real life (Cao, 2018).

Old man Li also maintains the traditional Chinese concept of "be thankful for what you get from others" and is grateful to General White and family Wang. After accepting Wang's employment, he works hard and keeps to his duties. When the Wang family suspected him and his daughter of stealing something, he protested strongly: "We are not here to steal. It is a great insult to inspect a person's package. We are poor, but we also have dignity." (Li, 2013) When the so-called "stolen goods" found in May Li's package and Li were expelled by Master Wang, the old man Li showed the temperament of "poor people also have dignity", "We will never come near this city again, even if you carry a palanquin and set off firecrackers to invite us, we will not come back ..... let's go" (Li, 2013).

### 3. Assimilation of American Culture

Although some Chinese scholars do not recognize the catering and assimilation of American culture in this novel. But At that time, Americanization or assimilation is encouraged and appreciated (Zheng, 2019).

The background of the novel is during the "melting pot" period (refers to ethnic relations from 1930s in US). For a considerable period of time, American society was considered a "melting pot", i.e., different countries, different ethnicities, different values, and cultures merged into a new complex cultural system. It was a fusion of different nationalities, races, and cultures (Zhang, 2019).

Besides, under the influence of the "Chinese Exclusion Act", Chinese immigrants were discriminated seriously that they were deprived of many legitimate rights. Therefore, Chinese immigrants at that time regarded assimilation as the best way for their life. They longed to be accepted by American mainstream of society (Cui, 2013). Their explorations of new cultural identities can be divided into three types:

#### 3.1 Old-school's Passive Acceptance

Wang Chi-yang in the novel exudes a traditional Chinese flavor, which can be regarded as "a symbol of Chinese culture" in American society. In the mainstream society of Americans, "as a weak minority, it is inevitable to resist and filter the strong culture." Jin Xuepin believes that under the strong cultural pressure of white people, it is normal and inevitable for vulnerable ethnic minorities to adopt cultural resistance and filtering behavior (Wang, 2015). As a representative of the old-school landlords, Wang Chi-yang insisted on the so-called pure Chinese culture and turned a blind eye to the new cultural reality. Although he lived in a "racial island", he lived happily. He only wears a robe and refuses to wear a suit. He must wear a robe to die and be buried. In the education of his two sons, he also strictly followed the family education model in Confucian culture. He tried to find a Chinese

wife for Wang Ta, and tried to save Wang Shan from the "danger of degeneration" with Confucianism. He even has his own financial logic. In his opinion, "money is like a man's wife. How can it be handed over to a stranger to take care of her" (Li, 2013).

However, cultural identity is open and the result of multicultural negotiation. Once two different cultures meet, it will inevitably involve the issue of identity change (Zhang, 2019). The stubborn Wang Chi-yang can not escape from the fate. In the novel, with the intensification of the conflict between himself and his son and the continuous influence of Madam Tang, Wang Chi-yang finally realized that "this is the world of the young generation. Everything is changing. Although the process is slow, it is irreversible"(Lee, 2013). He began to change himself and finally deposited the huge amount of cash in the bank. In order to make it easy to fill in checks, he changed his old habit of writing only with a brush and learned to fill in checks with a ball pen and English. Seeing that Wang Ta bravely followed May Li away from home, Wang Chi-yang even tacitly accepted the marriage. Wang Chi-yang realized that the world belongs to the young generation. It is best for him to live here as a polite guest, make compromises and concessions, and get used to everything ready-made. If you stick to the old, you will only make yourself marginalized (Xiao, 2021).

#### 3.2 Younger Generation's Active Seeking and Integration

Wang Ta is a representative of the younger generation of Chinese Americans. He grew up in China when he was young and was deeply influenced by traditional culture. When he grew up, he went to the United States to complete his studies. Wang Ta grew up in a Chinese family that believed in Confucian culture. After studying in the United States, he accepted more Americanized ideas, such as "self-independence". Influenced by the American independent culture, Wang Ta felt ashamed to continue to accept his father's financial support after graduation. Besides, Wang Ta dares to challenge and escape patriarchy. Wang Chi-yang hopes that his son will honestly adhere to the traditional Chinese style, maintain a pure ethnic identity, and choose a Chinese bride. But Wang Ta boldly pursues love, such as chasing for American girls. Later, in order to follow May Li, he ran away from home.

Chang, a friend of Wang Ta, is also a representative of actively adapting to American society. Although he has a Doctoral degree, he prefer small business. He knows how to better adapt to American society.

Madam Tang is an immigrant who actively integrates into American society. She not only seriously studied the American language and complied with the norms of American society, but also tried to accept new things. Both Wang Chi-yang and Madam Tang are Chinese immigrants of the older generation. However, their acceptance of American culture is different. On the one hand, social and cultural factors have imperceptibly influenced them. On the other hand, they also try to change themselves, actively integrate into the mainstream society, and accept and integrate with each other in the collision of Chinese and American cultures.

#### 3.3 Underclass's Helpless Adaptation



Old Man Li is the representative of the underclass Chinese in Chinatown. In the United States, most underclass Chinese are engaged in jobs such as laundrymen, servants, restaurant attendants, cleaners, etc. Scholars call such people "grassroots" vividly (Xu, 2011). Like most "grassroots" Chinese, Old Man Li has his own "American Dream". Old Man Li wants to open the best Beijing-style restaurant in the United States, but due to limited economic conditions, he can only temporarily go to Wang Chi-yang's house as a servant to solve the livelihood. Old Man Li won the admiration of the Wang family by his hard work. He hopes to open a restaurant in the future and become his own boss. Old Man Li's second wish in the United States is to find a decent man for his daughter. The standard is that he should be a learned man with the ambition of becoming an ambassador. Old Man Li had this idea because he had a deep understanding of the sense of helplessness and powerlessness of the "grass-roots" class in the white society and their own ethnic groups. He believes that marriage should be a good choice to get rid of the "grass-roots" class and reposition his identity.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Chin Yang Lee's novel, *Flower Drum Song*, provides a nuanced portrayal of cultural assimilation among Chinese immigrants in America during the 1950s. Despite the criticism it has faced, the novel carries positive significance in challenging stereotypes and presenting authentic aspects of Chinese culture. It also highlights the richness of Chinese culture, fostering cross-cultural appreciation.

In essence, *Flower Drum Song* offers readers insights into the struggles, triumphs, and complexities faced by Chinese immigrants striving to find their place in American society. The characters, particularly Wang Chi-yang and his family, embody different approaches to assimilation, reflecting the complex dynamics of cultural adaptation in the face of evolving societal norms.

This paper explores various patterns of assimilation into American culture. Wang Chi-yang's initially passive acceptance, the active seeking and integration by the younger generation represented by Wang Ta, and the helpless adaptation of the underclass, as exemplified by Old Man Li, illustrate the diverse experiences of Chinese immigrants navigating the complex landscape of American society. This study contributes to a richer understanding of the multifaceted nature of culture assimilation.

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