

## THE CRISIS OF IDENTITY IN PURSUING THE AMERICAN DREAM IN *GIRL IN TRANSLATION* BY JEAN KWOK

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### ABSTRACT

The United States is a continent full of immigrants. Immigrants are always related to identity issues and cultural adaptation due to diverse backgrounds. The life of immigrants is remarkably interesting to discuss, especially the problems they faced and the process of accepting their lives in the host country. Therefore, this paper will discuss the identity crisis experienced by the main character in pursuing the American dream in *Girl in Translation*. There are two objectives to be achieved in this study. The first objective is to find out the identity crisis experienced by the main character in *Girl in Translation*. The second objective is to find out how the main character overcomes the problems she faced. To achieve the objectives of the study, the writer will use mimetic theory as an approach. The method that will be used is qualitative method. Based on the analysis, it can be found that the main character experiences the identity crisis through language, dwelling, food, clothes, lifestyle, and moral. To overcome the identity crisis, the main character uses hybrid identity. The mixed identities make the main character become a Chinese-American.

Keywords: main character; identity crisis; the American dream; Chinese immigrants; American culture.

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### INTRODUCTION

Humans are living beings who are never satisfied. Sometimes they do a lot of things to make their dreams come true. Some people think that life has a lot of wealth can make their life guaranteed and will make their life good. On the other hand, some people think that a good life is living life freely and not in vain with worldly interests (Mueller, 2020). As humans born in a country, not all of them will stay in that country. Sometimes they will move to another country and start a new life. People who move from one country to another are called immigrants. According to Perruchoud and Redpath-Cross in the *Glossary of Migration*, immigrants are non-national people who

move to a country for settlement. A book entitled *Multicultural America: An Encyclopedia of the Newest America* explains that immigrants have different backgrounds and reasons for migrating. Some reasons people migrate are because of education, decent living, political issues in a country, riots, and others (Bayor, 2011). Being an immigrant is not easy. Immigrants definitely meet new cultures. Besides bringing their own culture, they will also face some new cultures. The differences that exist are from habits, cultures, behavior, custom, and others. Therefore, they have to make adaptations and making adaptations is definitely not easy.

When discussing immigrants, there is one novel that is very interesting to discuss i.e. *Girl in Translation* by Jean Kwok in 2011. This novel tells the story of Kimberly, a first-generation immigrant. She and her mother move from Hong Kong to America to live a more prosperous life and escape from poverty. When Kimberly arrives in America, she cannot speak English, but over time, she is able to overcome it. Kimberly was educated in Chinese culture, but in America, she has to adapt herself for her future. This confuses her position. She confuses about interpreting herself. From the explanation, the topic of this paper is the identity crisis experienced by the main character of *Girl in Translation* in pursuing the American dream. The novel can reflect the real environment in society through literary works. The experience of the main character becomes a lesson from the reflection of real life.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this paper, the writers conducted research applying qualitative method. Qualitative method focuses on meaning, definition, symbol, and concept rather than measures or counts. The data of this paper is taken from conversation and sentences from *Girl in Translation* by Jean Kwok. There are several steps to collect the data: the writer read the novel, identifying sentence, selecting the data, and make a report from the data.

The data presented based on two research question about the crisis identity experienced by Kimberly and the way she overcome it. After the data is collected, the writers answer the research questions and make a conclusion. In analyzing, the writers use mimetic theory by Abrams. The writers also see from the author's experience and also Chinese and American culture.

## DISCUSSION

### 1. *Language*

Kimberly and her mother are from Hong Kong. The everyday language she uses is Chinese. Grandemange (2016) states that Chinese writing does not use the alphabet. In addition, Chinese is also a complicated language. When Kimberly arrived in Brooklyn, she experienced a language barrier. The United States generally speaks English. Kimberly has to try as much as possible to be able to speak English. When at home, Kimberly communicates with her mother using Chinese. Besides Chinese being her native language, her mother also cannot speak English.

“This is not to say that my education was always easy for me. When Ma and I moved to the U.S., I spoke only a few words of English, and for a very long time, I struggled.” (Kwok, 2011, pp. 5-6)

Kimberly has to try as much as possible to be able to speak English. She buys a dictionary and uses it to learn English. Her mother also cannot speak English. Because she only lives with her mother, she must seriously study English for her life in America.

The same thing is also experienced by the author *Girl in Translation*. Kwok came to America with language difficulties. In the interview (Chung, 2010), Kwok said that she had language difficulties. She should try as much as possible to be able to speak English. She felt sad to see her siblings and parents having difficulty learning English. According to her, it is because adults are more difficult to understand than young people. Kwok, who was the youngest at that time, could understand English faster rather than her siblings. Day by day she is able to speak English.

Kimberly is able to improve her skill. This makes her feel comfortable speaking in English. But when she is at home, she realizes her mother cannot speak English. She uses Chinese to communicate with her mother. This makes her dilemma and confused. Should she continue to use English because she is in America or uses Chinese considering she is Chinese. Her English is getting fluent but her mother is not. To overcome her confusion, Kimberly decides to use both English and Chinese.

“Mr. Ho was blinking at me. Even though we were speaking Chinese, I could tell he hadn’t understood a word.” (Kwok, 2011, p. 308)  
“Hey, where are you going? I asked in Chinese.

I've got a baseball practice! Mom, I'm going to be late.  
His Chinese, although not quite as perfect as his English, was excellent."  
(Kwok, 2011, p. 321)

She is fluent in English, but she does not forget Chinese as her native language. She teaches her son Chinese and English to communicate. In addition, she also speaks Chinese in the American environment even though the other person does not understand it. She develops the culture she brings. She is not ashamed to show her original culture. Even though she lives in America, she does not forget her original culture.

## **2. Dwelling**

Kimberly lives in a cramped apartment. The apartment is provided by her aunt and uncle. But the condition is very sad. When entering the apartment, a lot of dust ticks. She thinks her aunt does this on purpose. With this uncomfortable condition, she wants to go home to Hong Kong. She pays attention to the arrangement of the existing room. The arrangement of the rooms is very different from the types of houses in Hong Kong. In Chinese culture, they believe in feng shui.

"The bathroom was in the kitchen and its door directly faced the stove, which any child know is terrible feng shui. (Kwok, 2011, p. 10)

Feng shui refers to the heaven and the earth or the patterns of the land and the taboos in making when choosing a building location (Hongmei, 2014). Chinese people believe in feng shui. Kimberly's family does the same thing. When she sees the arrangement of the rooms in her apartment, she thinks the arrangement is bad and not according to Feng shui.

Kimberly has a close friend named Annette. Kimberly always hides her apartment due to its poor condition of the apartment. Several times Annette wants to visit Kimberly's apartment, but Kimberly always refuses her. The apartment that Kwok lived in was also like Kimberly's. Her apartment was infested with rats and cockroaches (Chung, 2010). Kwok and Kimberly both have uncomfortable feelings. They are ashamed to show their lives. They live in America but they do not live like Americans. Therefore, Kimberly questioned herself. She lives in America but does not live like Americans. Kimberly is faced with the choice of living like an American or not. While according to Annette, Americans also do not live like Kimberly's current condition.

"I knew you didn't have a lot of money but this is ridiculous. No one in America lives like this." (Kwok, 2011, p. 273)

"I remember ma would run her hands over the surfaces of the furniture, the walls, the kitchen appliances in a sort of dazed surprise. I too was amazed that the walls and floor were clean and intact, ..." (Kwok, 2011, p. 324)

Kimberly finally decides to move to a new apartment. She will not miss the chance and choose an apartment that has better conditions than her own. Thus, she lives like an American. Furthermore, some Americans believe in feng shui. Feng shui cultural icons make an impact on Americans. Several public places in America are already using feng shui rules. Feng shui is not a threat, but an interesting phenomenon (Mills, 1999).

### **3. Food**

As a Chinese, Kimberly makes rice as a staple food. Chinese people's daily calories come from rice (Li & Hsieh, 2004). When Kimberly lives in America, her food certainly changed. Western and Chinese food is different. Chinese people's appetite has a sharp taste.

"The rest of the food was interesting, although there was no rice, so I felt as if I hadn't really eaten." (Kwok, 2011, p. 31)

"The white kids brought sandwiches in brown paper bags." (Kwok, 2011, p. 65)

American culture tends to eat things that are fried or baked. For example, fried chicken, toast, meat, fish and chips, etc. They also eat salads, yogurts, and cheeses. They serve food that looks easier and faster than Chinese food. Even though she does not eat rice at school, Kimberly still finds American food interesting. In that way, she looks like the kids in her school who eat some kind of bread, milk, salad, and other.

Kimberly's mom will cook her Chinese food with rice at home. Her mother shops in Chinatown and she can still cook Chinese food. Her mother always tries to create an atmosphere like she is in Hong Kong. The food provided at home is food that is often encountered when in Hong Kong. As a first-generation immigrant, Kimberly's mom always tries to stick to her original culture. Kwok also feels the same way as Kimberly. She and her family often eat food that they bought in Chinatown (Chao, 2014). While at school, it provides food with American culture. Both Kimberly and Kwok feel a sense of dilemma. Kimberly is faced with a choice between Chinese and American food.

"Everyone eats at the cafeteria here, it's a part of the tuition." (Kwok, 2011, p. 140)

"I used my spoon to skim off a few scallions floating on top and poured them into my mouth. "It has been so long since I've had this." (Kwok, 2011, p. 293)

She will eat American food at school because lunch is a part of her tuition. In that way, she does not have to spend money to buy food. Although at school she eats western food, she can enjoy Chinese food at home. By doing these actions, she can still preserve her original culture. She becomes part of American culture but also still part of Chinese culture.

#### **4. Clothes**

Kimberly's friends have different panties and bras than hers. She feels embarrassed when she sees the difference. All her clothes are sewn by her mother. She feels her mother's sewn is not neat. After seeing her friends' panties and bras, she asks her mother to give her new bras and panties.

"I didn't have panties like other girls did." (Kwok, 2011, p. 61)

"Everything under my clothes had been made by Ma and thus was badly sewn: a pair of thick cotton shorts unevenly trimmed in red for good luck, a stained and pilling long-sleeved undershirt." (Kwok, 2011, p. 142)

"I grabbed the box, Ma and I paid fast, and we left." (Kwok, 2011, p. 155)

Kwok also had clothing differences from her American friends. All her clothes were sewn by her mother. Some of the stitches were even one-sided or not neat (Kraft R. , 2019). Both Kimberly and Kwok, inside their heart, want the same thing as their friends. Bra is a symbol to express one's social identity, especially for women (Li Z. , 2021). By having the same clothes as Americans, Kimberly and Kwok feel part of them. Finally, Kimberly decides to buy the same panties as her friends.

#### **5. Lifestyle**

Kimberly and her mother go to work in the factory to earn income. Her mother will go to the factory every day along with Kimberly who will go to school. After school ends, she will go straight to the factory and work. Annette often invites her to go out to play or come to a party. But Kimberly always refuses. She has priority to work in the factory. Kimberly's mother also forbade her to hang out with her friends. Her mother looks like she is putting a limit on her.

"Ma didn't want me to socialize too much, but any sort of school assignment was sacrosanct, and so I was given permission to go." (Kwok, 2011, p. 73)

"...I'm giving you a party. Can you come?" (Kwok, 2011, p. 249)

In America, especially during school, parties have become popular (Trachtenberg, 2019). Many students are interested to follow the party. By attending parties, they will socialize, meet new friends, dance, and have fun. Thus, parties can be said to be a common thing for students in America to do. But Kimberly cannot attend the event.

She follows her mother's word. Good Chinese children are those who listen and do what their parents say.

Since Kimberly's neighborhood is dominated by American culture, she naturally wants to join the party. She feels confused. She wants to join the party but she does not want to break her mother's rules. She lies to her mother and joins the party.

"I constantly had to lie to Ma when I did social things with Annette, because Ma found non-school things to be unimportant and she was afraid that something dangerous would happen to me when I was out." (Kwok, 2011, p. 206)

Kimberly lies to her mother and she can still socialize with her friends. She does this to look like an American who seeks pleasure by going to parties. She gets lots of party invitations, but she does not always come. By refusing her friend's advances, she becomes obedient to her mother. But when she comes to the party, she becomes a typical American teenager. She does these all and she can look like her friends. She wants to do what Americans do.

While living in America, Kwok had similar experiences with Kimberly. She and her family members worked in the factory (Kraft R. , 2019). Every day after school, she would go to the factory to work there. They worked in the factory to survive in America. When she grew up, her social life must also develop. While in college, she felt a free life and dared to do whatever she wanted to do. Kwok also went to parties and clubs.

#### **6. Moral**

Kimberly is able to get to America because she is helped by her uncle and aunt. They provide an important role for Kimberly while in America. According to the book *Custom of the World* (2013), Chinese people attach great importance to family. They view themselves as prioritizing relationships with others. Therefore, Kimberly and her mother view the kindness of her uncle and aunt as a debt of gratitude.

"And our debt to her, then? She brought us here, ah-Kim. She spent the money to cure me, ... (Kwok, 2011, p. 95)

"We were still paying off our debt to her, which left little money to spare."  
(Kwok, 2011, p. 225)

The goodness they have received is considered a debt. Family relation is very important in the Chinese family. It is called filial piety. Filial piety is the young respect the old and obeys their parents or members who are elderly (Kwan, 2000). Therefore, the custom of Chinese people really values relationships with other people. The

kindness they receive will mean a lot to them but they also feel the need to return the favor.

In addition, when deciding something, Chinese culture also tends to ask their families about it. They will jointly decide the opinion. As already mentioned, Chinese culture tends to be collectivist. A collectivist society will make decisions based not solely on the sibling, parents, or husband and wife (Livermore, 2013, p. 21).

“I signed a legal document guaranteeing the both of you when I brought you here. I am responsible for you, and you are living in one of my apartments and working at my factory. You are not supposed to take on step without telling me.” (Kwok, 2011, p. 286)

“Older sister, you’ve helped us a great deal, but maybe it’s time we stopped depending on you so much.” (Kwok, 2011, p. 288)

As time goes by, Kimberly understands many things. It includes kindness is not always considered as debt. She also considers the decision she will take does not need the opinion of others. Kimberly realizes that life in America is very different from Hong Kong. Americans tend to be individualistic. They will easily express their opinion and decide what they want. Kimberly is faced with a choice. If she follows Chinese culture, she will forever be in debt and unable to determine her life path. If she follows American culture, she can determine her dream freely but it can be considered impolite.

To solve the problem, Kimberly expresses her intentions and goals with the help of her mother. They say politely to the eldest but still express their opinion. Kimberly only needs her mother’s decision to continue her school. Kimberly’s mom also helps her to talk to her aunt. In that way, Kimberly can express her opinion and wishes. She can make decisions about her life but remains dutiful by telling her aunt. Kwok’s family certainly does the same thing as Kimberly’s family. They both come from Chinese families. Kwok’s mother wanted her daughter to do everything according to Chinese rules, but Kwok chose her way of life. Her mother wanted her to become a lawyer but Kwok decided to become a writer. Kwok decided what she wanted and what she did not.

In pursuing the American dream, Kimberly and Kwok experience challenges, especially with their identity. They have the identity crisis because they have to learn a new culture but their families also stick to the original culture. They are confused to choose, whether they follow the original culture or follow the host country’s culture.

According to Erikson (1968), the identity crisis can occur in the identity and role confusion phases. It occurs at the age of adolescence or around 12 to 18 years old. Thus, Kimberly and Kwok experience the identity crisis while in America. Identity crisis occurs because of the need to make choices. For example, immigrants. They try to maintain the original culture while participating in adopting the new culture.

In pursuing the American dream, Kimberly has the identity crisis, but in the end, she manages to realize her American dream. Kimberly manages to get Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. She manages to choose her own way of life for her future freely. She can decide whatever she wants. Furthermore, she is able in pursuing her happiness by having a new apartment with better conditions. She also gets scholarships and she takes this good chance. The American dream inspires Kimberly to realize it by working hard and seizing opportunities to improve her life for the better. Through the discussion above, Kimberly shows that she has the identity crisis and to overcome her problem she uses hybrid identity. She is involved in American culture and values, but still preserves Chinese culture. Even though she has the identity crisis, she is able to overcome the problem. Thus, Kimberly has Chinese and American identities. She is a Chinese who has Chinese blood, but she is also an American who creates her hybrid identity to become Chinese-American.

## **CONCLUSION**

The writers found the identity crisis experienced by Kimberly. In America, she experiences the cultural differences between Chinese and American cultures. She struggles to position herself. She is faced with a choice between Chinese culture as her original culture or American culture. It is common in children aged adolescents and immigrants. Immigrants are faced with the decision to maintain the original culture and adapt to the new culture.

The writers conclude that the identity crisis experienced by Kimberly is shown through language, dwelling, food, clothes, lifestyle, and moral. In determining her identity, Kimberly feels confused and dilemma. In overcoming her identity crisis, Kimberly uses hybrid identity. It combines two cultures between Chinese and American cultures. These can be seen in using Chinese and English, living in a nice apartment like Americans, eating Chinese and American food, buying the same clothes as Americans,

living freely but still obeying her mother, and the last is making her own choices but still being polite to others and the old one. Kimberly has both Chinese and American identities. She is a native Chinese but also an American who creates a hybrid identity to be Chinese-American.

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