

Acculturation and the Formation of Immigrant Identity in David Henry Hwang's *FOB*

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Abstract:

David Henry Hwang's *FOB* explores the complexities of acculturation and immigrant identity through the experiences of Chinese Americans navigating cultural duality. The play contrasts second-generation immigrants, represented by Dale, who has largely assimilated into American culture, with newly arrived FOBs (Fresh Off the Boat) like Steve, who maintain stronger ties to their Chinese heritage. Hwang examines the tension between assimilation and cultural preservation, highlighting how immigrant identities are often pressured both by mainstream society and within immigrant communities themselves. Drawing parallels to Berry's acculturation model, the characters use different strategies—Dale leans toward assimilation while Steve reflects separation, illustrating the psychological and social challenges of cultural adaptation. Through symbolism, dialogue, and inter-generational conflict, *FOB* critiques the marginalization of Chinese immigrants while celebrating the emergence of hybrid identities. Ultimately, Hwang suggests that immigrant identity is fluid, shaped by continuous negotiation between heritage and new cultural contexts. The play presents acculturation as a dynamic process, often contested experience that redefines what it means to be Chinese American.

Keywords: Acculturation, Immigrant Identity, Cultural Duality, Assimilation, David Henry Hwang

التثاقف وتشكيل هوية المهاجر في مسرحية (طازجة من القارب) لديفيد هنري هوانك

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تستكشف مسرحية (طازجة من القارب) لديفيد هنري هوانك تعقيدات التثاقف وهوية المهاجرين من خلال تجارب الأمريكيين الصينيين الذين يخوضون غمار الازدواجية الثقافية. تُقارن المسرحية بين المهاجرين من الجيل الثاني، الذين يُمثلهم ديل، الذي اندمج إلى حد كبير في الثقافة الأمريكية، والقادمين الجدد من أصول صينية مثل ستيف، الذي يحافظ بدوره على روابط أقوى بالتراث الصيني. يوضح هوانك التوتر بين الاندماج المجتمعي والحفاظ على الثقافة الاصلية، مُسلطاً الضوء على كيفية تعرض هويات المهاجرين لضغوط من المجتمع السائد وداخل مجتمعات المهاجرين نفسها. وبمقارنتها بنموذج التثاقف الذي وضعه بييري، تستخدم الشخصيات في المسرحية استراتيجيات مختلفة - يميل ديل نحو الاندماج المجتمعي مع المجتمع السائد بينما يعكس ستيف الانفصال، مُوضحاً التحديات النفسية والاجتماعية للتكيف الثقافي. من خلال الرمزية والحوار والصراع بين الأجيال، تنتقد المسرحية تهميش المهاجرين الصينيين، مُحثفةً بظهور هويات هجينة. في النهاية، يُشير هوانك إلى أن هوية المهاجرين تتشكل من خلال التفاعل المستمر بين التراث والسياقات الثقافية الجديدة. تقدم المسرحية التثاقف باعتباره عملية ديناميكية، وتجربة مثيرة للجدل في كثير من الأحيان، والتي تعيد تعريف ما يعنيه أن تكون أمريكيًا من أصل صيني.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التثاقف، هوية المهاجر، الازدواجية الثقافية، الاندماج، الشتات، ديفيد هنري هوانك.

1.1 Introduction

The United States of America is the home for many ethnic groups, each with a distinctive cultural background, who have immigrated from different parts of the globe to live and work in the new world. Warner Sollors (1996) states that the American culture is a melting pot of multiple ethnicities, races, and cultures. Therefore, America is a multicultural society with all the benefits and challenges of each contributing culture. These different cultures interact with one another and with the mainstream cultural beliefs, resulting in the process of acculturation, according to John W Berry (1992), in the different forms of assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. Oyserman and Sakamoto (1997) argue that "assimilation was assumed to be the goal attained by all who were willing to abandon allegiance to their culture of origin and take on the American characteristics of hard work and individuality based on striving achievements" (p.436). Others follow the path of separating

themselves from the mainstream culture (host culture) and struggle to keep their own culture, suffering a cultural conflict, i.e., acculturative stress.

The historical presence of Asians in America dates back to the 16th century. Josephine Lee (1998) states that the second half of the 19th century witnessed the first major wave of Asian immigration to the States, attracted by economic opportunities provided by the western development and pushed by the famine and civil unrest in China. Voluntary and involuntary immigration to America from Asia went through due to economic hardships, prosecution, and political struggle. Some White Americans supported the flow of Asian immigrants due to their economic contribution while others felt threatened by their increasing numbers. To address such fears, several laws passed with the aim to minimize the number of Asians flowing to the country. Lisa Lowe (1996) confirms that the living conditions became far worse for Asians in America because of "immigration exclusion acts and laws against

naturalization in 1882, 1924, and 1934” (p.5). In her book *Immigrants Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996), she further explains that Asian immigration to the United States is a fundamental factor of the emergence of the country as a nation and as a capitalist power, but the history of the nation suggests contradictions regarding this fact. The discriminatory laws which excluded Asians from citizenship from 1790 until the 1940s show that race played a huge part in the cultural, economic, and political reality of Asians in America. Lowe (1996) notes that Asian American discussions on ethnicity and racial formation are neither unified nor consistent. These discussions encompass a range of perspectives, including (a) the desire for a cultural identity defined by fixed traits, and (b) numerous challenges to individualized conceptions of race. Thus, the formation of Asian American culture includes inherited, modified, and invented practices, in addition to practices related to the dominant culture treatment of Asians as “others.”

1.2 Asian American Representation in Theatre

Lee (1998) defines Asian American as an umbrella term encompassing diverse populations with varied ethnicities, national origins, and lived experiences. The 1980 U.S. Census categorized "Asian and Pacific Islander Americans" into six major groups: Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Asian Indian, Korean, and Vietnamese along with 22 smaller groups, reflecting the complexity of this demographic. However, Asian American literature and theater often oversimplify this diversity by focusing mainly on Chinese American experiences because they form the largest and oldest Asian American subgroup, with a history in the U.S. dating back to the 19th century, particularly during the California Gold Rush and the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. Asian Americans in general and Chinese Americans in particular have found ways to cope with their existence in America; one way of addressing these hardships and coping mechanism is ethnic theaters. David Krasner (2007) states that groups of settlers,

such as the French, Italians, and Chinese created theaters that served to create a social centre and evoke a sense of remembrance of homeland. Hind N. H. Ithawi (2018) claims that ethnic minorities always find themselves in a constant definition in terms of identity due to their unsettled position in society. So, ethnic theatre functions as a way for minorities to distinguish themselves from the American mainstream. Ethnic theatre reached its peak in the 20th century due to huge waves of immigration.

Asian American playwrights seek to define their identity away from that of the mainstream. They want to show an identity rooted in ethnic origin and cultural heritage, in addition to what influenced Asians to live in the States. Their desire is triggered by American literature and media distortion of the Asian American image. The best example of this distortion is 'Ah Sin: The Heathen Chinese' (1870) by Bret Harte. The poem reinforces the idea that Chinese people were godless, uncivilized, and morally inferior to white Christians.

Krasner (2007) states that the derogatory character of the "China-man" contributed to the negative stereotypes that later Asian American writers aimed to dissolve. Asian American theatre found success in preserving Asian identity (image) by resisting rejection and marginalization by the host culture. Edelma D. Huntley, in her chapter *Amy Tan and Asian American Literature* (2009), argues that Asian American theatre is a reaction to identity issues faced by Asian immigrants during 60s and the 70s. Writers, such as Frank Chin, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Gish Jen, and David Henry Hwang became known with their works that explore Chinese Americans' lives and struggles.

Esther Kim Lee (2011) discusses the establishment of four main Asian American theatre companies: the Los Angeles based East West Players, the San Francisco based Asian American Theatre Company, the Seattle based Northwest Asian American Theatre, and the New York based Pan Asian Repertory Theatre. They shared a common goal, creating a space

for Asian American theatre to express and develop. In addition, prioritizing staging of classics with major roles played by Asian American actors, provide training/employment for those actors and other production members. Asian American dramatists worked to find new ways to use themes of immigration, assimilation, and discrimination in order to convey their history. The 1982 performance *Paper Angels* by Genny Lim features actual poetry that inmates have scrawled on the walls of interned jailed immigrants at San Francisco's infamous Angel Island facility. Momoko Iko's *Gold Watch* (1970) and Wakako Yamauchi's *The Music Lessons* (1977) both depict Japanese farm laborers who endure persecution and struggle of assimilation.

Frank Chin and David Henry Hwang are the most notable among Asian Americans in theater. In the late 60s and early 70s, Chin co-founded the Asian American Theater Workshop in San Francisco, which later became the Asian American Theater Company. This was one of the first theater groups dedicated to

producing works by and about Asian Americans, providing a platform for emerging writers and actors (Huang, 2006). He is best known for his play *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972), which was the first Asian American drama to be produced on a major New York stage. The play, which explores themes of cultural identity and the struggle against racial stereotypes, established Chin as a leading voice in Asian American theatre. His other works include *The Year of the Dragon* (1974) and the collection of short stories *The Chinaman Pacific & Frisco R.R. Co.* (1988), which won the American Book Award. Chin's writing is characterized by confrontational style and critique of what he saw as the emasculation of Asian American men in mainstream culture (Huang, 2006).

David Henry Hwang, born on 11th August 1957, is widely viewed as one of the greatest contemporary Asian American writers. When he was 10, he wrote a 90-page novella about his family's heritage in the Philippine. This novella shows that his quest for identity is formed in the early years of his

life. Hwang received a bachelor's degree in English from Stanford University. In an interview with Marty Moss-Coane and John Timpane (1996), Hwang talked about how assimilation affected him since childhood:

We were raised pretty much as white European Americans in terms of the things we celebrated. There's an old confluence in my family between a father who decided to turn away from things Chinese and a mother whose family had been converted to Christianity in China several generations back. Consequently, between the two of them there was no particular desire for us to speak Chinese or celebrate Chinese holidays at all. (p.284)

Hwang's plays explore issues of cultural identity, religion, ideology, and East and West relationship. His play *M. Butterfly* (1988) is perhaps his most famous work, it examines themes of gender, race, and imperialism. In 2007, he wrote *Yellow Face*, a semi-autobiographical satire addressing racial stereotypes and identity in the entertainment

industry. *Chinglish* (2011) is a comedic play that delves into cultural misunderstandings and language barriers, set in the context of Chinese American business relations. Lastly, *Kung Fu* (2014) is a biographical play inspired by the life of Bruce Lee, blending drama, martial arts, and music to explore Lee's struggles and legacy. Together, these works showcase Hwang's versatility in addressing cultural issues in theatre. Hwang, in many interviews, talked about his plays as an attempt to explore human issues without denying his skin color. His interest in his Asian identity develops gradually because he has experienced racism when he settles in New York (Boles, 2013). Since then his identity exploration moves from observation to careful examination. Watching the typical Asian character on TV presented by Hollywood forces him to feel embarrassed. Thus, this has given him a motif to create more authentic Asian characters.

Hwang's character is shaped by his parents' complete assimilation into the American culture. He considered the assimilation of his parents as

the main drive of his progress and career. William Boles (2013) quotes Hwang's on the matter: "my whole personal political development is largely a reaction to the fact that my parents did assimilate. If they had been more traditional and tied to the root culture, I would have probably been a completely different person" (p.2). Between his early life assimilation and his experience as writer, Boles (2013) argues that the theme of cultural identity takes an impactful interest in Hwang's life and work. Being a first-generation immigrant, Hwang is aware of the complications surrounding Asian American identity. In his plays, Hwang uses stereotypes in order to dissolve them, he also embraces the dual ethnicity when it is related to national identity and ethnic heritage, meaning that he embraces his American identity as well as his Chinese heritage.

Hwang presents the personal and cultural dilemma of Chinese American identity in *FOB* (1980). FOB, "Fresh Off the Boat," is a derogatory term used to describe Chinese immigrants who just arrived at the States. Through the

interactions of three characters: Dale, Steve, and Grace, all of whom are young Chinese Americans, the Chinese American immigration experience is represented by stereotypes, perspectives, and cultural identity. Steve embodies the term FOB "Fresh Off the Boat", while Dale represents the ABC (American-Born Chinese) identity. On the other hand, Grace finds herself in between the two. Hwang navigates the play beyond a shallow ABC vs FOB to a more complex social and cultural dialogue. In the play's notes Hwang (2000) talks about the influence of Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston:

The roots of FOB are thoroughly American. The play began when a sketch I was writing about a limousine trip through westwood, California, was invaded by two figures from American literature: 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 frank Chin's *Gee, Pop!* (p.3)

Both writers are important figures in Chinese American

literature, and both used Chinese mythology to express the Chinese American experience. Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976) published as an autobiography, with the inclusion of Chinese mythology like the stories of Fa Mu Lan. Frank Chin's play *Gee, Pop!... A Real Cartoon* (1977) featured Gwan Gung as a god who protected Chinese immigrants through history (Lee, 2015, pp 12-14). Asian American writers have effectively utilized mythology, cultural heritage, and socio-political narratives to redefine their racial identity in theatre. Frank Chin and Hwang have reinterpreted Asian myths as a tool of resistance, enabling them to reconstruct identity, bridge generational gaps, and assert agency in a historically exclusionary industry.

1.3 Acculturation and the Making of Asian American Identity In FOB

Mark Chae (2001) argues that Asian Americans may face conflict regarding their acculturation when exposed to the norms and values of the dominant culture. Individuals navigate the tension between

conflicting cultural perspectives—their own and those of the dominant culture—which can affect them in profound and varied ways. Thus, acculturation is the behavioral shifts occurring from the interaction between two cultures/ethnic groups. Such interaction manifest itself in four different ways, assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization (Berry, 1992).

The nature of the Asian culture and values encourages interdependence among family members, meaning that the collective interest of the family overshadows that of the individual (Chae, 2001). Kim (1994) claims that Asian parents often consider their kids as extension of themselves, this behavior exists because parents want their children to “fulfill their own dreams and goals vicariously through their children” (p.35). Park (1997) states that cultural conflicts emerge between first and later generations and school system due to the language barrier, as many of the first-generation immigrants cannot fully communicate in English. Another important aspect of

Asian American acculturation process is fear of shame. Wang & Marsh (1992) assert that Asians attempt to avoid shame upon their families, acting in way that refrain themselves from being expressive about anything that may bring shame to the family

Hwang's *FOB* projects the experience of three Asian Americans attempt at acculturation into the American cultural landscape. Set in the 80s, *FOB* takes place in the backroom of a Chinese restaurant in California. The restaurant functions as a micro-world of Chinese America. Both real and imagined space, the restaurant offers the multiple ways in which acculturation plays. Hwang's choice to set the play in the back room instead of the front hall signifies his interest to showing what is behind the scenes physically as well as metaphorically. The back room also functions as a liminal space in which Chinese American identity is formulated and contested through the process of acculturation. For Dale, Steve, and Grace, the room is a space where they question their place as Chinese

Americans in the larger American societal landscape (Lee, 2015).

Throughout the play, the characters' actions are shaped by their acculturation strategies, which influence how they behave and interact with each other. Dale's assimilation strategy drives him to avoid and mock his Chinese heritage, leaving him isolated despite his efforts to assimilate into the dominant culture. Grace's integration allows her to bridge cultural divides and foster some cultural healing. Steve's separation underscores his struggle with marginalization and resistance to assimilation. Together, their journeys reveal the complexities of acculturation, illustrating how identity and belonging are shaped by the interplay of cultural heritage and contemporary realities.

Dale demonstrates assimilation strategy by fully embracing and embodying American cultural values, often dismissing or ridiculing other cultural orientations in the process. According to Berry (1992), assimilation is when individuals distance themselves from their cultural identity and

seek to identify/interact with the host culture. Dale begins the play with a prologue, performed like a lecture in which he goes on a rant about FOBs calling them "...Clumsy, ugly, greasy FOB. Loud, stupid, four-eyed FOB. Big feet. Horny. Like Lenny in *Of Mice and Men*" (Hwang, 2000, p.4). Dale's humor, sarcasm, insults, and tone is a form of didactic humor to shed the light on general stereotypes and an indication of Dale's assimilation into American culture. Taha (2018) argues that the American culture is a melting pot of many ethnic groups, suggesting that in order to assimilate new comers have to adopt new values and let go of others. Dale takes this notion to the extreme; he not only abandoned his heritage completely but also underwent a complete psychological overhaul against it.

For instance, he openly mocks Steve's choice of a limousine, commenting, "You wanna ride in that black thing? People will think we're dead" (p.20). His mockery highlights his view of the car as excessive and out of place in his cultural context, suggesting to Steve

that he is as an FOB who is out of place. Dale's unwillingness to comprehend the significance of Steve's choices reflects his mainstream American norms that trivialize respecting cultural diversity. Furthermore, Dale's impersonation of Steve's father shows his reductive traditional American attitudes toward newcomers:

....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. Diversify. Franchise. Sell—ah—Hong Kong X-ray glasses at tourist shop at Buckingham Palace. You know—ah—"See da Queen?" (p.22)

Delivered in a mock Hong Kong accent, Dale aims to reduce Steve's cultural identity to stereotypes. This moment reveals Dale's tendency to relegate aspects of other cultures, reinforcing his American belief in the superiority of the American way of life. Dale suggests that Steve will eventually assimilate into American society:

You'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. Before you're trying real hard to be just like the rest of us—go dinner go movie, go motel, bang-bang (p.23)

This interaction reveals that assimilation for Steve is both inevitable and desirable. His humor fused with dismissal of alternative ways of life underscores Dale's strong identification with American culture and his expectation that others should adapt to it. David L. Sam & John w. Berry (1996) suggest that cultural distancing is a main factor in cultural adaptation, meaning that the more distanced an immigrant from his or her culture the higher chance of successful assimilation. Dale takes his cultural distancing to high level, he mocks Steve's choice of food: "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?" (p.26). Not only Dale mocks the choice of food, but he calls him a savage. Then he goes to generalize and include all Asian immigrants under the

FOBs umbrella in racist manner, criticizing their look, culture, and behavior "...look, Grace, he's eating that! He's amazing! A freak! What a cannibal" (p.27).

Throughout Act 2, Dale continues to resist engagement with his cultural roots:

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. (p.30)

Dale's tone tends to shift from the comic style to a more serious tone, highlighting his discomfort with his cultural roots and also his preference to be just American. He shows the desire to be part of the dominant cultural group by embodying all the negative stereotypes about his race, to be acceptable from the other side of the isle. He tells Steve "I'm trying to help you!, TO MAKE YOU LIKE JOHN TRAVOLTA!" (p.31). This shows that being normal is when Steve assimilates, to be like John Travolta (an

American actor) is what he should seek to do. Dale's refusal to shake Steve's hand near the end extends his rejection of any meaningful connection with his cultural heritage. His character underscores the cost of assimilation when it leads to a loss of self and connection, even as it grants a superficial sense of belonging. Dale's assimilation strategy ultimately leaves him isolated and detached from his cultural roots; his mocking tone towards Steve highlights the erasure of self and community in pursuit of acceptance (assimilation). Yet, Dale's final monologue on "FOB" reveals a growing self-awareness, suggesting that assimilation's promise of belonging does not resolve inner conflicts. Dale shows assimilation as a path that of external acceptance over internal reconciliation, leaving him disconnected from relationships that could anchor his cultural identity.

According to Berry (1992), acculturative stress is the psychological strain resulting from adapting a new culture. It affects each character in *FOB* differently based on their

chosen acculturation strategy. Dale, Grace, and Steve experience varying levels of conflict, alienation, and psychological struggles, which shape their interactions and overall emotional states throughout the play. Dale's acculturative stress stems from his relentless attempt to assimilate into American society by rejecting his Chinese heritage. His internalized racism and mockery of Steve as an "FOB" reveal deep-seated anxiety about being associated with his immigrant background. Dale feels the burden of proving himself American enough. By rejecting his Chinese roots, he seeks acceptance but ultimately experiences cultural dissonance, as he neither fully belongs to dominant culture nor connects with his heritage.

Steve's character reflects separation strategy. According to Berry (1992) separation is when an individual from a nondominant group chooses to hold onto their culture and wishes to navigate away from the dominant culture. This strategy is evident in Steve's speech, behavior, and the choice of language. He

symbolizes the conflict with Dale's assimilated worldview. For example, Steve's insistence on using his limousine, regardless of Dale's objections, shows his commitment to presenting himself in a manner aligned with his cultural understanding. He repeatedly emphasizes, "Please—allow me to provide car" (p.19) which reflects his resistance to being overshadowed by Dale's Americanized preferences.

Steve's shift of language depending on the situation demonstrates what Berry (1992) states about language as one of the acculturation strategies: a member of a marginalized culture works through separation and assimilation through language. When he enters the restaurant and meets Grace he speaks Chinese, despite her speaking to him in English, but when Dale comes, he switches to English. He realizes that his conversation in English with Dale shows him the position he is in as an FOB, creating an even bigger desire to separate from the dominant culture. Boles (2013) says that Hwang's parents did not encourage their children to speak Chinese,

fearing that it would disrupt their English studies. Thus, in the presence of Dale as a fully assimilated Chinese American Steve talks in English, but in the presence of Grace who keeps part of her heritage he speaks in Chinese. Hwang, in fact, uses this interaction to shed light on Chinese immigrants who choose not to engage with their language in the presence of members of the dominant culture. Therefore, Hwang creates Steve's alter ego Gwan Gung from Chinese mythology.

Steve names himself Gwan Gung, claiming to be "God of warriors, writers and prostitutes" (p.8). By this, he wants to show his attachment to his ethnic background, creating a dual identity to deal with his position in the US. First, Gwan Gung is an Americanized Chinese hero, re-imagining him as a hyper masculine hero who challenges racist stereotypes of Asian male passivity. Gwan Gung becomes a Chinatown folk hero reflecting on their diasporic struggle. Secondly, Steve's impersonation of Gwan Gung shows the feeling of separation and hostility from the dominant culture; as if he is

on a mission to avenge the humiliated FOBs, Chinese who suffered poverty, hunger, and discrimination in America. In one of his monologues, as Gwan Gung, Steve complains about America's failure in accepting him, thus his failure to assimilate:

I tell north, south, northeast, southwest, west, east, north-northeast, south-southwest, east-east-south—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. (pp.17-18)

Steve's speech about his struggles to assimilate into America signals his feelings towards a society that has marginalized him while also serving as a land of opportunity: “...All America wants Chinamen go home” (p.46). His decision to maintain a distinct cultural identity, even in the face of ridicule, shows his desire of separation. Such

desire comes with a feeling of defeat; Steve remarks, “There are no gods that travel. Only warriors travel” (p.47). He hits a climax point which changes him from Gwan Gung who wishes to fight his way through assimilation to a mere warrior, wishing only to scatter away.

Steve's desire for separation, symbolized by his resistance to external influences, is both empowering and limiting. His portrayal as Gwan Gung, the warrior-god, embodies his desire to reclaim a lost dignity in a foreign land. While separation preserves cultural identity, it risks alienation and stagnation. Steve's acculturative stress is rooted in his separation strategy, which isolates him from the dominant culture while reinforcing his Chinese identity. His experience as an FOB exposes him to direct discrimination and exclusion, as reflected in his monologue about being unwanted in America yet unable to return to China. Unlike Dale, who internalizes his stress and turns it into mockery, Steve externalizes his by clinging to traditional mindset. However, this resistance to assimilate

pushes him to remain an outsider, unable to connect with Dale and Grace on equal footing.

Berry (1992) argues that integration occurs when there is an interest in participation in the root culture and the host culture with confidence at both. Grace embodies integration strategy by navigating a middle ground between her American context and her cultural heritage. She works to bridge the gap between Dale's assimilated perspective and Steve's cultural separation, displaying an understanding of both positions. She is positioned as an assimilated American student who is fully aware of American culture and views as well as having a Chinese ethnic background due to her study of Chinese American history at UCLA. She understands the racial differentiation of ethnic eating habits when she met Steve who asks her to get him a bing (a traditional Chinese food), "If the customer's Chinese, you insult them by giving forks. If the customer's Anglo, you starve them by not giving forks" (p.7). She points out to Steve the norms and values of

the American culture, "Look – if you're going to have any kinds of relationships with women in this county, you better learn to give us some respect" (p.13). She tells Steve to give "us" respect, meaning she is at least comfortable integrating with feminine part of the dominant culture and embraces its values. On the other hand, she is familiar with Chinese immigrants (especially females) struggle to assimilate and find a better life for their families, "He (Dale's father) was educated. Here. In America. When Mom came over, she couldn't just quit 'cause she was mad at her employer. It was work or starve" (p.25).

Just like Steve, Grace uses mythology, Fa Mu Lan stories, to negotiate her position between her ethnic and cultural identities. Being born outside the US., Grace could probably understand Steve's predicament better than Dale could. On a personal note, she speaks about her own marginalization experience in America:

There were a few Chinese girls in the fourth grade, but they were American born, so they wouldn't even talk to me.

They'd just stay with themselves and compare how much clothes they all had, and make fun of the way we all talked. I figured I had a better chance of getting in with the white kids than with them, 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. After a while, I knew what beach was gonna be good on any given day, and I could tell who was coming just by his van. But the American-born Chinese, it didn't matter to them. They just giggled and went to their own dances. (p.27)

This anecdote sheds light on the discrimination she has felt among Asians born in America (ABC) and Asian immigrants. American born Chinese kids do not accept her despite being from the same race and treats her as an outsider. She also decides to go through a process of physical appealing by bleaching her hair just to fit or be desirable among the 'white kids', i.e., the dominant culture. According to Berry (1992), individuals seeking acceptance in new cultures undergo behavioral and physical shifts

which denote a psychological change. Such shifts may include a change in dialect, attitudes, food, and fashion and grooming which are indicative of individuals' struggle in host cultures. Her experience drives her to protect Steve as a member of her ethnic group. Thus, she attempts at debunking Dale's negative stereotypes about China: "People are dressing really well now—and the whole place has become really stylish—well, certainly not everybody, but the people who are well-off enough to send their kids to American colleges—they're really kinda classy" (p.35).

However, she also feels that the new immigrant is not in the same league as the old immigrant, meaning that the new immigrant has to assimilate into the dominant culture to shed off negative stereotypes. Grace, as the mediator of integration, navigates both cultural worlds which allows her to facilitate connection between Dale and Steve. However, Grace's role is not without its struggles, as her attempts to reconcile opposing strategies come at personal

cost, reflected in her moments of frustration and vulnerability.

The group story serves as a symbolic device, reflecting the characters' psychological states in terms of their acculturation and cultural struggles. It begins as a seemingly lighthearted activity initiated by Grace, who uses it as a tool to unify Dale and Steve, creating a shared imaginative space. However, it transforms into a charged ritual that reveals the characters' hidden tensions and cultural conflicts. It operates as a collaborative exercise where each character builds upon the other's contributions. This process mirrors the dynamics of acculturation strategies: it highlights Hwang's efforts to break away from the conventional three-generation narrative and introduce a new vision of Asian American identity (Rychyk, 2021). Dale begins a tale about three bears, the youngest of whom decides to seek treatment for cancer at "the new Cedar Sinai Hospital" (p.40). Grace picks up the story, shifting the setting to a mythic version of China, where the baby bear encounters Gwan Gung, impersonated by Steve. The warrior god confronts the

bear, "One-legged bear, what are you doing on my land? You are from America, are you not?" (p.40). Gwan Gung condemns its presence in his homeland and its detachment from the suffering and injustices faced by his people in America, "When I came to America, did you lick my wounds? When I came to America, did you cure my sickness?" (p.41). Just as the god prepares to strike the bear with his sword, Fa Mu Lan, the Woman Warrior, arrives to defend the bear, "She stood between him and the bear, drawing out her own sword" (p.41). She reveals to Gwan Gung the devastation and loss caused by his misguided, vengeful rage:

DALE: That night, Gwan Gung had a large banquet, at which there was plenty, even for the slaves. But Fa Mu Lan ate nothing. She waited until midnight, till Gwan Gung and the gods were full of wine and empty of sense. Sneaking behind him, she pulled out the tablecloth, waving it above her head.

GRACE (Ripping the tablecloth from the table): "Gwan Gung, you foolish boy.

This thing you have used tonight as a tablecloth—it is the stretched and dried skins of my fathers. My fathers, whom you slew—for sport! And you have been eating the sins—you ate them!”

STEVE: “No. I was blindfolded. I did not know.”

DALE: Fa Mu Lan waved the skin before Gwan Gung’s face. It smelled suddenly of death.

GRACE: “Remember the day you played? Remember? Well, eat that day, Gwan Gung.”

STEVE: “I am not responsible. No. No.” (p.42)

According to Salem (2021), Hwang showcases Chinese Americans ethnic challenges and struggles in the United States, through the group story, he includes Eastern culture and mythology in a play targeted for Westerners. Westerners, therefore juxtaposing past and present. Parts of the monologue speaks of a man who failed to immigrate to the States five times, he keeps trying due to financial difficulties in his home. Meaning, many Chinese immigrants are economically displaced throughout time, chasing a better life in the

States, enduring all kinds of struggles. Salem (2021) adds that Hwang raises the question of identity through different generations and categories of Chinese and Chinese Americans, creating conflict between the ABCs, such as Dale, and FOBs, such as Steve. The battle in the group story symbolizes the social conflict between the generations, forcing the characters to face their inner conflict, eventually resulting of them learning that they are merely different small factions in a larger group and what they need is to seal gaps between them. Dale’s loneliness at the end is proof that racism fails acculturation, and differences in Chinese Americans should be embraced and not disgraced.

Grace experiences acculturative stress in a different manner. She actively embraces both her Chinese heritage and American identity, but this duality comes with its own emotional strain. Her ability to move between cultural narratives suggests adaptability, but also an internal conflict about where she truly belongs. Unlike Dale, Grace does not outright reject her

heritage, yet she is also not fully aligned with Steve's traditionalist perspective. The stress of maintaining this balance may explain her moments of assertiveness and frustration, such as when she engages in the symbolic sword fight with Steve, expressing deeper unresolved tensions regarding identity and belonging.

Berry's strategies offer an exploration arrogated on the basis of individual feelings in the dominant culture and what those emotions results in terms of acculturation outcome. Sam & Berry (1997) shed the light on variables that affects the acculturation experience, such as society of origin; society of settlement; group acculturation; factors prior to acculturation; factors arising during acculturation, and the level of psychological adaptation. Boles (2013) states that Hwang succeed in portraying the problems faced by the oriental minatory in the United States. Many of the problems facing immigrants stems from the psychological and cultural environment in the host country, meaning that the level of difficulty in the host country

determiners the path of acculturation for groups and individuals. We can argue that if the host culture is open and acceptable, the majority of immigrants will go on the path of assimilation.

Causadias & Korous (2019) claim that "racism is a cultural system of values, symbols, and institutions which claims White racial superiority and uses this assertion to subordinate minorities, which are considered inferior" (p.147). Such beliefs create a feeling of inferiority in the minds of immigrants, which affects their psychological state. Hwang's *FOB* offers a glance at this racist system through different characters' interaction and with the very opening of the play, Dale's prologue sets the cultural narrative of the host culture against the Chinese minority:

DALE: 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 (p.4).

As discussed earlier, Dale aligns himself with the host culture narrative against his own race, he speaks the minds of the supposed superior race and culture. He does this because he wants to assimilate completely into the American culture. According to Al-Sammarraie & Ismael (2022), assimilation is a radical process since "certain or all the cultural traits of a certain group are replaced by their equivalents from the hosting culture" (p. 38). Lawrence (2020) states that Lennie from the very beginning of Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men* is depicted as "other," he is introduced like an animal, contradicting the smart and civilized George (The

white American man). Thus, the description of Chinese immigrants like Lennie sets an unhealthy atmosphere for a new immigrant like Steve, resulting in an almost impossible situation for him to assimilate unless he accepts that he is inferior and follow Dale's steps by disregarding his own race and culture. The description of Chinese women is different, they "aren't really as... FOBish," meaning that women are somewhat more acceptable than men due to gender stereotypes that dominate the American culture. Grace was able to adapt integration because she is a woman that may be treated less harshly than Steve as the play also suggests. In the play, Dale focuses all of his negative energy against Steve, making him uncomfortable in his own skin because he is "sworn enemies of all ABC."

According to Sam & Berry (1997) variables of acculturation, Dale's, as an ABC, assimilation is formulated in society of settlement, meaning that his adaptation of the host culture came to be due to his settlement in that culture from the

beginning of his life, but his negative look upon his root culture emerged from his unwillingness to be treated like other FOBs or Chinese immigrants. Dale's assimilation is not a process of acceptance and diversity, its fear of being treated like an outsider. Boles (2013) adds that Dale's identity as a pure American is self-created and self-suppressed, indication of his determination to erase his Chinese roots, "I've 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" (p. 30). His desire to disown his ethnic identity highlights his adopted prejudices. He hates his own race and culture, and he turns that hate upon new Chinese faces, like Steve's.

Steve's choice of separation is based on two variable factors of acculturation, the experience of Chinese immigrants prior to acculturation (immigration) and the experience during acculturation. Steve's resembles the struggle of Chinese immigrants, as an FOB from Honk Kong, he is already under a negative stereotype of being the "worst" and "yellow

ghost." Such implementation puts immigrants like Steve in a hard position from the start, even before their attempt to assimilate. His experience in the United States falls under the prerequisite stereotypes about people like him: "I tell north, south, northeast, southwest,...why will you not let me enter in America?" (p.17). Boles (2013) mentions that Steve's character is a representation of the history of the Chinese immigrants that is not acknowledged, especially by the White theater audience and possibly also by the play's Chinese American audience. Steve's choice of separation appears as a defense mechanism and a comfort zone away from discrimination and hatred. Thus, the variable actors of acculturation narrow down the choice of acculturation strategy on the basis of already established cultural, political, and economical facts.

Grace's integration is the outcome of her internal fight to settle in a psychological state that she is comfortable with. Boles (2013) argues that her comfort with herself explains the embodiment of Fa Mu Lan, who, like her, discovered her

own sense of self in a world where her past identity no longer exist. Fa Mu Lan's family was killed in an attack, she was no longer a child. Instead, she became a warrior, seeking justice against the murderer of her family. Fa Mu Lan adapted to her situation, embracing the change that she had to make rather than fight against it. Grace, like her alter ego, eventually learned to do, finding a proper balance that enables her to exist. Her integration appears to be a result of multifaceted adaptation process that resulted in her finding the balance between her root culture and the host culture. Grace, through psychological adaptation, learned through experience that the best outcome for her is to embrace both cultures: "If the customer's Chinese, you insult them by giving forks. If the customer's Anglo, you starve them by not giving forks" (p.7).

Sam & Berry (1997) argues that for most individuals, after a period of time, some sort of adaptation takes place, depending on a variety of factors. Adaptation can take many different forms. Assimilation or integration are

feasible when the host cultures are accepting while separation appears when the "fit" cannot be achieved due to any variable factor. Dale, Steve, and Grace find themselves in different scenarios, despite that they all share the root culture as they are described as Chinese, each of them confronts a different variable factor that determines his/her place in the host culture. Dale is a victim of prejudice and discrimination, though he acts racist, he is just trying to avoid being in the same place. Steve falls under the assumption of the settlement society and what Sam & Berry (1997) specifies as attitudes towards immigration/specific immigrant group, such attitude and assumption pushed him to separation and segregation. Grace's identity consolation and psychological adaptation enabled her integration to a degree of success despite her early life acculturation stress. Berry (2009) explains that acculturation strategies are linked with the freedom of choice, meaning that integration works when the dominant group is open to accept the culture of an immigrant, and each strategy follows multiple

variation factors regarding attitude, culture, religion, and individual choices.

Conclusion

Hwang's *FOB* provides a refined exploration of Asian American identity struggle and the challenges of acculturation in the United States. Through the interactions of its three central characters, the play highlights the tensions between first-generation immigrants and American born Chinese individuals, illustrating the complexities of cultural assimilation and heritage preservation. Hwang uses linguistic shifts, cultural references, and character dynamics to depict the varying degrees of acceptance and resistance to Americanization, revealing the psychological toll and social conflicts that arise from negotiating identity. By portraying the internalized prejudices within the Chinese American community and the broader societal prejudice imposed by the dominant American culture, *FOB* offers a critical commentary on the acculturation experience. The play challenges stereotypes and encourages a deeper understanding of what it takes

to overwrite them. Hwang underscores the struggle for self-definition in a multicultural society, making *FOB* a significant contribution to Asian American theater. According to Johnson (2017), Hwang was able to find a recipe for staging identity in general, and a hybrid formulation to the Asian American narrative that would ultimately become his signature. Unlike several of his other early plays, he did not revise *FOB*. Additionally, Hwang acknowledges that he is unsure of how that play functions and that he would not be able to produce something like it today.

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