



BEYOND ASSIMILATION: REINTERPRETING ASIAN AMERICAN IDENTITY IN INTERIOR CHINATOWN AND CHINATOWN FAMILY

Author

Krishna Chauhan

M.A.-M.Ed.

Krishchauhanpln2002@gmail.com

Center of Education

Indian Institute of Teacher Education, Gandhinagar

ABSTRACT

By comparing *Chinatown Family* by Lin Yu-tang with *Interior Chinatown* by Charles Yu, this study investigates the evolving portrayal of Asian American identity. It tackles the issue of how societal structures, assimilation, and stereotypes have influenced identity throughout history. While integration is portrayed in earlier literature as a means of achieving acceptance, more recent works cast doubt on its efficacy and highlight more fundamental structural constraints. In order to comprehend how systemic racism and cultural representation impact identity, the study employs a qualitative methodology based on attentive textual analysis and utilizes Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Asian American Critical Race Studies (AACRS). The results demonstrate that, despite lacking full acceptance, *Chinatown Family* portrays integration as a positive process based on education, discipline, and family values. In contrast, *Interior Chinatown* emphasizes how Asian Americans are constrained by rigid social categories and depicts identity as being governed by stereotypes, especially through media roles. It is evident from the contrast that critical resistance has replaced adaptability. The study comes to the conclusion that assimilation is insufficient to address systemic injustices, and contemporary Asian American literature is increasingly challenging prevailing identity narratives. By demonstrating how literary texts both reflect and critique evolving forms of racial identity and representation, it advances current scholarship.

Index Terms - Asian American identity, Assimilation, Critical Race Theory, Racial Stereotypes, Representation, Cultural Identity, structural racism

INTRODUCTION

Asian American literature sheds light on racial inequity, migration, and identity concerns in the US. These literary works have mirrored shifting racial perceptions and societal realities over time. While more contemporary writings critically analyze power and representation systems, early representations frequently focused on survival and adaptation. Stereotypes like the "model minority" and the "perpetual foreigner," which continue to shape social perception and prevent complete integration, are one of the main issues in Asian American studies (Lee 40). These misconceptions demonstrate how racial identity is socially produced and sustained in addition to being personal.

Understanding how Asian American identity has changed throughout history from assimilation to critical opposition is the primary research challenge of this study. While earlier works, like Lin Yu-tang's *Chinatown Family*, offer assimilation as a potential route to acceptance via moral principles, education, and discipline, more recent works, like Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown*, question this notion by highlighting the ways in which media representation and systemic racism limit identity. Thus, this study's goal is to contrast these two pieces and examine how identity is created, negotiated, and portrayed in various social circumstances.

This study is important because it shows how contemporary Asian American literature challenges prevailing notions of identity and emphasizes the constraints of assimilation. This study offers a deeper understanding of how identity is shaped by both historical and cultural forces by utilizing Asian American Critical Race Studies, which focuses on the unique experiences of Asian Americans, and Critical Race Theory, which explains that racism is embedded in social structures (Delgado and Stefancic 8). By providing a comparative viewpoint that links early and modern literary representations, it also advances current studies.

This paper is divided into multiple sections. Important theoretical frameworks and earlier research on Asian American identity are covered in the literature review. The research strategy and analytical techniques employed in this work are described in the methodology section. The analysis section presents a detailed comparison of the two texts, focusing on themes of assimilation, stereotypes, and identity construction. A commentary that analyzes the results in light of theoretical ideas comes next. The conclusion concludes by summarizing the key points and making recommendations for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Racial portrayal, migration, and identity have all been extensively examined in Asian American literature. The impact of structural injustices and societal stereotypes on Asian Americans has been highlighted by academics. According to Erika Lee, Asian Americans' social standing and sense of belonging are impacted by restrictive stereotypes like the "model minority" and the "perpetual outsider" (Lee 40). In a similar vein, Mae Ngai talks on how, despite their legal or cultural assimilation, Asian immigrants have historically been viewed as outsiders in the country (Ngai 7). These studies demonstrate that identity is socially and historically created in addition to being individualistic.

Critical Race Theory (CRT), Asian American Critical Race Studies (AsianCrit/AACRS), and Lisa Lowe's notion of cultural politics serve as the foundation for this study's theoretical framework. According to CRT, racism is ingrained in institutional and social structures, influencing minority groups' daily experiences (Delgado and Stefancic 8). This theory is expanded by AsianCrit to particularly address Asian American identity, emphasizing ideas like racial triangulation and stereotype creation (Kim 105). Lisa Lowe goes on to say that although Asian Americans are economically integrated into society, they continue to be politically and culturally disenfranchised, which highlights the boundaries of assimilation (Lowe 6). These theoretical stances offer a solid basis for examining representation and identity in literary works.

Assimilation has been portrayed as a positive process in earlier studies on *Chinatown Family*, which have concentrated on themes of cultural adaptability, family values, and moral discipline. On the other hand, research on *Interior Chinatown* emphasizes its criticism of identity performance, media representation, and stereotypes (Yuan 44). Although these studies offer insightful information, they frequently look at the texts independently and do not provide a comparative study across various historical eras.

By combining early and modern Asian American texts to analyze how identity has changed over time, this study fills a vacuum in the body of literature. From a CRT and AsianCrit standpoint, it suggests a conceptual framework that links assimilation, stereotypes, and identity building. The study adds a fresh comparative insight to the area by illustrating how Asian American identity has changed from adaptation to critical opposition through a comparison of *Chinatown Family* and *Interior Chinatown*.

METHODOLOGY

The portrayal of Asian American identity in *Chinatown Family* by Lin Yu-tang and *Interior Chinatown* by Charles Yu is investigated in this study using a qualitative and interpretive research design. It takes a comparative literary approach, emphasizing how stereotypes, identity, and assimilation are created in various historical situations. The study is based on Lisa Lowe's notion of cultural politics, Asian American Critical Race Studies (AsianCrit/AACRS), and Critical Race Theory (CRT). According to CRT, racism is not just an individual issue but rather is ingrained in institutional and social systems (Delgado and Stefancic 8). While Lisa Lowe contends that Asian Americans are frequently involved economically but excluded politically and culturally, AsianCrit expands this paradigm to examine Asian American experiences, including racial triangulation and stereotype creation (Lowe 6).

The study gathers information by closely examining the main texts, paying particular attention to topics, language, characters, and narrative structure. Thematic analysis is used to identify important themes including assimilation, racial stereotypes, identity creation, and representation. The two novels' similarities and differences are also examined through comparative analysis, which emphasizes how Asian American identity changes from adaptation to critical resistance. Scholarly books and journal articles are examples of secondary sources that are used to support theoretical interpretation and offer academic background.

Despite being qualitative, the study structures the discussion using some analytical variables. These include stereotypes (identified by recurrent labels like "Generic Asian Man" in *Interior Chinatown* (Yu 15)), identity construction (analyzed through roles and self-

perception), assimilation (examined through characters' attempts to adapt through education and behavior), and representation (studied through narrative form and media portrayal). A greater knowledge of how Asian American identity is created, limited, and redefined within various literary and social contexts is made possible by the interpretation of these factors through textual evidence rather than numerical measurement.

FINDING OF COMPARATIVE ANALYZES

The results of a comparison between Lin Yu-tang's *Chinatown Family* and Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown* are presented in this study, which focuses on how Asian American identity, assimilation, and stereotypes are portrayed. The findings demonstrate a distinct shift in the two texts' conceptions of identity. Assimilation is shown in *Chinatown Family* as a positive and slow process. The Fong family feels that moral principles, discipline, and education will help them fit in with American culture. Nevertheless, they still face social isolation in spite of these attempts, which is a reflection of the enduring "perpetual foreigner" label (Ngai 7). This suggests that complete inclusion is not ensured by assimilation.

table 1: comparison of *chinatown family* and *interior chinatown*

Aspect	<i>Chinatown Family</i>	<i>Interior Chinatown</i>
Identity	Cultural and moral	Socially Constructed and Controlled
Assimilation	Positive and hopeful	Limited and illusory
Stereotypes	Present but subtle	Explicit and dominant
Representation	Realistic narrative	Media/script-based narrative
Outcome	Partials acceptance	Continued restriction

On the other hand, *Interior Chinatown* offers a more critical viewpoint, demonstrating how systemic factors, especially media representation, define and limit identity. Willis Wu, the main character, is confined to clichéd categories like "Generic Asian Man," illustrating how identity is forced rather than freely created (Yu 15). The book emphasizes how even seeming success stays under predetermined bounds, supporting the notion that institutional racism still controls identity.

Overall, the findings show that critical awareness has significantly replaced assimilation. Modern literature reveals the constraints of integration and emphasizes systemic control over identity, whereas earlier literature focused on adaptability and acceptance. These results lend credence to the idea that larger societal and institutional factors, in addition to personal effort, influence Asian American identity.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study demonstrate that larger societal and structural factors, rather than just personal effort, determine Asian American identity. This bolsters the main tenet of Critical Race Theory, which describes how racism is ingrained in social structures (Delgado and Stefancic 8). Assimilation is shown in *Chinatown Family* as a promising tactic, but the Fong family's ongoing marginalization implies that acceptance is not a given. This illustrates the notion that, despite their attempts to assimilate into society, Asian Americans are frequently viewed as outsiders.

Interior Chinatown, on the other hand, offers a more critical viewpoint by illustrating how preconceptions and media depiction form and restrict identity. The book emphasizes how Asian Americans are restricted to predetermined positions, which bolsters the claim that identity is socially manufactured rather than freely choose. This transition from assimilation to critique is indicative of a larger movement in Asian American writing, as authors are now challenging the system rather than pursuing acceptance.

This research offers a better grasp of how identity has changed throughout time when compared to earlier studies. While *Interior Chinatown* is examined in terms of stereotypes and identity performance, previous research frequently looks at *Chinatown Family* as a story of cultural adaptation (Yuan 44). Nonetheless, our analysis unifies the two texts and demonstrates a shift from adaptation to resistance. Additionally, it bolsters Lisa Lowe's claim that although Asian Americans may be integrated economically, they are nevertheless disenfranchised politically and culturally, which restricts their ability to truly belong (Lowe 6).

This study has important ramifications for comprehending the evolution of Asian American literature. It demonstrates how identity is dynamic and shifts in response to social and historical contexts. The transition from assimilation to resistance emphasizes how literature can subvert prevailing narratives. Nevertheless, there are some limitations to this study. It employs qualitative analysis, which may entail subjective interpretation, and concentrates on just two texts.

This study can be expanded in the future by incorporating additional literature from various eras and backgrounds. It can also investigate the ways in which contemporary media shapes representation and identity. All things considered, this study advances knowledge of how Asian American identity continues to change and adapt to shifting societal conditions.

CONCLUSION

By comparing *Chinatown Family* by Lin Yu-tang with *Interior Chinatown* by Charles Yu, this study investigated the evolving portrayal of Asian American identity. The results show a distinct transition from assimilation to critical opposition. The idea that integration can result in acceptance though this acceptance is still restricted is shown in *Chinatown Family*, where identity is formed via education, discipline, and cultural values. *Interior Chinatown*, on the other hand, illustrates how social institutions and stereotypes dominate identity, demonstrating that assimilation does not ensure equality or freedom. This study is important because it shows how Asian American identity is shaped by social and historical circumstances, as well as how systemic factors and cultural representation affect personal experiences.

By providing a comparative viewpoint that links early and modern Asian American literature and illustrates a shift from adaptation to critique, this work advances the field. It highlights how literature may be used to expose racial inequity and challenge prevailing narratives. In conclusion, Asian American identity is still changing in response to shifting socioeconomic circumstances, and contemporary literature is increasingly challenging the structures that define and restrict identity. By incorporating a greater variety of texts, utilizing other theoretical frameworks, and investigating the impact of digital media on identity development, future study can broaden this work and improve our knowledge of identity in modern society.

REFERENCES

- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–99.
- Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. 3rd ed., NYU Press, 2017.
- Kim, Claire Jean. *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City*. Yale UP, 2000.
- Lee, Erika. *The Making of Asian America: A History*. Simon & Schuster, 2015.
- Lin, Yu-tang. *Chinatown Family*. John Day Company, 1948.
- Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Duke UP, 1996.
- Ngai, Mae M. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Princeton UP, 2004.
- Yu, Charles. *Interior Chinatown*. Pantheon Books, 2020.
- Yuan, Yao. "The Unrealizable American Dream: On Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown*." *Ostrava Journal of English Philology*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2023, pp. 43–54.