

Constructing “The Third Space” On *Eat a Bowl of Tea*

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Abstract

Identity construction is always the motif of Chinese American literature. Many critical theories are adopted to analyze this issue. Homi K. Bhabha's “the third space” is one of them. It refers to a place where it is not a combination of different positions, rather, it is “neither the One nor the Other but something else besides”. *Eat a Bowl of Tea* by Chinese American writer Louis Chu presents such Third Space. This paper first discusses the homogeneous old Chinatown culture which is patriarchal and impotent in *Eat a Bowl of Tea* and explains how Mei Oi causes the cultural split from this homogeneous culture by her independence and adultery. And then this paper discusses how the old Chinatown undergoes the cultural negotiation and finally realize its transformation. This paper points out that in this process of transformation, the characters construct their Third Space, which offers them hybrid identity and the sense of belonging.

Keywords: *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, the Third Space, hybrid identity, cultural negotiation

1. Introduction

Identity construction is always the motif of all Chinese American writings. Establishing distinct and consolidated identity in American society becomes the most salient theme of Chinese American literature. Critics, such as Elaine Kim, Lisa Lowe, Shirley Lim, E.San Juan and Cynthia Sau-ling Wong have already done many researches in this field. These researches try to identify Chinese American as Chinese, or American, or neither Chinese nor American and even both Chinese and American. However none of them succeeds in offering a definite meaning to Chinese American, especially to the Chinese immigrants after 1960s. If we turn to Homi K. Bhabha's theory of “the Third Space”, the identity problem becomes less complicated. “The Third Space” simply refers to a place where it is not a combination of different positions, rather, it is “neither the One nor the Other but something else besides” (Bhabha, 1994). It surpasses the binary disputes, avoids the thinking pattern of “to be or not to be” and offers another perspective to concern identity issue. In this perspective, Chinese American writer Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* presents how the characters construct their “third space”, in which their Chineseness and Americanness coexist in harmony and the combination of the two is not superficial and conflicting but balanced by compensation and mixing of each other. In “the Third Space” of *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, the characters create their own “imagined community”, which is defined by Benedict Anderson as “neither a fictional community nor the illusion manipulated by politicians, rather a psychological construction rooted with the change of history and culture” (Anderson, 2003). Louis Chu establishes “the Third Space” to construct the identity of Chinese American.

Jeffery Paul Chan praises Chu's work is “the first and perhaps the last portrayal that accurately dramatizes the life and times of Chinese- Americans with a consistency of language and sensibility” (Chan, 1993), Sau-ling Cynthia Wong holds that “it is perhaps the first American male writer to articulate the struggle for a new (masculine) Asian American identity” (Wong, 1999); Shirley Geok-Lin that it “marks the beginning of the tradition of realism in Asian American writing”, and “it deserves to be read as the first Chinese-American fiction to observe its sojourner society with a realistic eye” (Lim, 1986). Many critics notice its realistic writing, but few discuss its identity construction. Therefore this paper first discusses how Louis Chu portrays the homogeneous Chinatown which is the result of long time insulation from other culture and the serious distortion by American immigrant laws. And secondly, this paper analyzes how the younger generation in the novel break the homogeneous culture and undertake cultural negotiation and finally establish their hybrid identity. After they

fulfill their identity seeking, they have established their “Third Space”.

2. Homogeneous Old Chinatown Culture in *Eat a Bowl of Tea*

Chinese residents in Chinatown are not only sealed within the physical boundaries of their enclaves, but also in the ideological one. In the novel, the old men, having lived in United States for more than twenty years, do not accept American value. Instead, they still firmly stick to Chinese patriarchal traditions, which construct the homogeneous old Chinatown culture.

Wah Gay is no different than other “married bachelors”. He once visited prostitutes, often gambled and lived an idling life. For him, “what the twenty years of his ‘marriage’ means is separation from his wife and fathering the China-born son who joins him in New York at the age of seventeen” (Ling, 1995). In Chinese traditional culture, family education is emphasized and parents have obligation to educate children and arrange children’s career and marriage. Accordingly, Wah Gay is guilty of not fulfilling his paternal responsibility for his son, which he thinks too is vital and compelling. Therefore, upon his son, Ben Loy’s arrival in New York, he immediately assumes his parental control over him. He tries to shape his son’s personality and behavior according to traditional ideals he himself cannot live up to. Unconsciously identifying “evil influence” with New York Chinatown, he sends his son away from it to a small town in Connecticut. He hopes his son to behave well. On the new arrival in New York, even having no chance to know about the city and communicate with father, Ben Loy is blindly sent to a restaurant as a waiter. Actually, he has no right and opportunity to question his father. Under father’s supervision, what he could do is to completely obey.

In Wah Gay’s minds, to perfect his son is to let him produce a child so as to continue their family line, which is desired but unable to accomplish by many aging men during their stranded years in the ghetto of New York Chinatown. Therefore, to arrange an appropriately respectable and worthy Chinese bride for Ben Loy is on the agenda. Subsequently Jung Shee and Lee Shee in China, go through to arrange Ben Loy’s match with a China-born girl, Mei Oi. Ben Loy tactfully refuses it by saying that “Next year. Wait till next year” (Chu, 1993, p. 42). Hearing it, Wah Gay shows “pained expression on face” and demands with severe and curt voice: “Regardless of how you feel, you must return home to get married... you would not want to break (your mother’s) heart by being a disobedient son” (Chu, 1993, p. 42). Knowing that “by tradition it was his responsibility to get married as it was his father’s duty to see that he did” (Chu, 1993, p. 42), and it is important that young man agree to be sent back to China to get married, because “it marks a solemn obligation dutifully discharged on the part of the parents” (Chu, 1993, p. 44), Ben Loy is forced to agree with this arrangement and accept father’s patriarchal order. Therefore, he is subject to father’s control and has no freedom at all.

After marriage, Ben Loy is found sexually impotent and cannot live a married life with Mei Oi. Unsatisfied with her husband and bored by the life in New York, Mei Oi commits adultery with Ah Song, an older man, a widely known womanizer of ill repute, and is pregnant by him. This affair is gradually revealed to everybody in Chinatown and all are gossiping about it. Losing face in front of the community and furious at Ah Song’s ill behavior, one night Wah Gay ambushes the supposed adulterer and slices his ear. In sharp contrast with Wah Gay’s “heroic” avenger, Ben Loy’s reaction to his wife’s infidelity appears coward. He is disturbed more by being forced into action than he is by the fact of Mei Oi’s adultery and subsequent pregnancy. Ben Loy then confronts his wife, and assaults her, but fails to confront the man with whom she is involved. Ironically, it is his father instead of Ben Loy who takes up this revenge on the adulterer. Therefore Wah Gay’s action on the supposed seducer of his daughter-in-law makes parental supervision reach its peak (Li, 1993). Patriarchal loyalty dictates that father do everything they can to protect children. In fact, in the whole marriage crisis, Ben Loy stands in shadow of father, in which he sinks deeper into inaction and becomes more susceptible to father’s maneuvering. Father’s overprotection emasculates his son and the patriarchal system in Chinatown cripples him as well.

Apart from patriarchal supervision on children, clan association is also the typical feature of patriarchal Chinatown. In Chinese traditional social structure, family clan occupies very important position. The famous Chinese philosopher Feng You Lan says that Chinese social system is essentially patriarchal clan system (Feng, 2004). To understand Chinese social condition, one must get to know the clan system, for it plays great role in social operation and dominates political and economic activities and serves as a primary tool for social control. This important social function has stayed for many centuries and has profound impact on Chinese people including the overseas. In Chinatown, there exist various clan surname associations, whose intricate power structure rules supreme in this insulated community and whose grip is relentless, judgment swift, and power unyielding. Under this system, the ruling patriarchs mete out rewards and punishments (Hsiao, 1992). On one hand, the associations organize well social activities and solve social problems, but on the other hand they demonstrate the patriarchal culture which is, however, a little bit different from original Chinese patriarchal

culture. In fact, the development of this organizational network is one of the direct results of discrimination against and neglect of the Chinese minority in the United States. To some degree it is a product of a cultural distortion which is an insulated and decaying patriarchal culture.

In Chinatown, the clan association serves as a substitute for family life for the old bachelors. They rely on this network more and more as their sojourn extended into decades. Since they enjoy few benefits, rights, or privileges under American law and social structure, they are more liable to turn to internal community regulation and direction. Bound together by their social status as a despise minority, tied by tradition and common benefits and interests, they “constructed a world based on social solidarity between families and clans to protect themselves in a cold or hostile environment” (Kim, 2006). *Eat a Bowl of Tea* similarly provides such a picture to show the patriarchal management of clan associations. In the novel, Wang clan association and Ping On Tong are the main collective organizations in Chinatown and they control the fates of protagonists in the story. Wang Chuck Ting, an elder Chinese immigrant and influential leader of Wang clan association for more than twenty years, is the incarnation of the two organizations. He was once the leader of Ping On Tong, so he is respectable and powerful in Chinatown. The adultery affair of Mei Oi and Ah Song is accordingly handled by Wang Chuck Ting and the two associations.

Traditionally, in clan associations, an individual’s reputation is his family’s reputation and one’s personal affairs could not be strictly one’s own. Therefore, when Mei Oi’s adultery with Ah Song is made public, the two clan associations feel it obligatory to settle this scandal. With the aid of Wang Chuck Ting, Ho Song, the president of Ping On Tong, holds a formal meeting on this case. Based on Chinese traditional morals, the case is peacefully but unfairly settled: Ah Song is ostracized for a period of five years and he must withdraw the charges he files against Wang Wah Gay with the police department. Viewed from the presentist perspective, this solution is obviously oppressive. In the case, only Ah Song gets punished; no single word is mentioned about Mei Oi; and Wah Gay doesn’t need to pay any price for his criminal behavior. Ah Song is clearly biased in the judgment. As matter of fact, the whole case is completely manipulated by Wang Chuck Ting and in the favor of Wang clan association. In Chinatown community, an unwritten rule is observed that every independent clan association should try to protect their own interest from other clan associations. There exists a division among clan associations. When conflicts arise, all members are unanimously hostile to the others. In the novel, Wang surname occupies large portion of population and naturally Wah Gay gets stronger support from his fellow members. And Ah Song’s family name is Jo, which is “so insignificant few in number” (Chu, 1993, p. 179) that he nearly gets no support from anybody. Traditionally, “clan association is for members and families of only one surname as, for instance, Lee or Wang clans. Members of small clans may reside in a given small Chinatown but cannot join the associations and occupy a lower social status” (Lee, 1949). In the face of powerful Wang clan association, Ah Song is helpless and isolated. It is understandable that he is ill treated.

Moreover, another underlying and inferential factor is often ignored when explaining Ah Song’s case. According to Jing Qi Ling, in Chinatown, for the old men, the cohesion of community is their primary concern. They attach great importance to cohesive relationship among the network. “The members of the association must try to strengthen the primordial ties in an ethnic enclave that must be cohesive enough to resist racial hostility from the outside” (Ling, 1995) and also must maintain such internal cohesion. Therefore, when the old men confront with Mei Oi’s case, they feel a threat to their internal cohesion and try to channel the potentially explosive internal dispute through this familial network in order to achieve a peaceful resolution and keep their community relationship unbroken. Ah Song’s sentence is made under such complicated condition. It is well known that Ah Song is a notorious seducer of other men’s wives. He is regarded as pollution to the Chinatown culture. Most people avoid any contact with him, especially for the old men, who even want to drive him out of Chinatown so as to reduce dispute and disrupt in Chinatown and keep their environment peaceful and relationship cohesive. When dealing with the issue of Mei Oi and Ah Song, they consider it a good chance to clean the “evil” out of their community. Therefore they draw an unfair sentence to Ah Song. Ah Song’s case quite satisfies Chinese notion that the realization of collective’s interest is often at the expenses of individual’s, which is typical ideology in Chinese patriarchal culture. Ah Song is actually at the mercy of collective decisions. Therefore, it can be inferred that Ah Song is the victim of this patriarchal concern.

Generally, although Ah Song is deserved punishment and it meets the immense satisfaction of most people, but it exposes the hidden patriarchal corruption in the clan association, which is essentially a complete patriarchal agent. By such patriarchal manipulation, clan association eventually builds up patriarchal walls around Chinatown to protect itself, prevent external interference and ensure its political survival.

Louis Chu presents the decayed New York Chinatown in which the old generation wields the patriarchal power over the whole Chinatown. This patriarchal culture lasts for decades and forms the homogeneous Chinatown

culture. However, with the coming of new generation the homogeneous culture is broken.

3. Cultural Split from Homogeneous Chinatown

“Chu’s greatest achievement lies in his exploitation of the complication created by women who are not prostitutes in the ‘bachelor society’ of Chinatown” (Hsiao, 1992, p. 158). The presence of women brings out Chinatown’s most decaying characters—impotency and patriarchy, and at the same time subverts the order of Chinatown. They satirize the “bachelor society’s” hollow show of authority. Mei Oi is one of these women. She is the most disruptive force in the marriage as site for hopes and her behavior is instrumental in revealing both her husband and then the entire bachelor’s moral flaws implicated in their social impotence. Mei Oi is rather a rebellion and challenge to the old Chinatown culture than a victim of this patriarchal society.

Louis Chu portrays Mei Oi as an independent new woman. She receives education in Middle school. She knows a little English. Her attitude to family life is quite opposite to the popular thought of Chinese men in Chinatown that Chinese wives are sympathetic and understanding for immigrant husbands and they are willing to stay at home and keep economically dependent. Mei Oi’s attitude is a denial of the patriarchal belief among Chinese immigrants in Chinatown. After marriage with Ben Loy, Mei Oi finds a corrupted Chinatown: “New York Chinatown is a hostile and lonely environment where old men play mahjong and joke about sex” (Kim, 2006, p. 113). Ben Loy is found sexual impotent and Mei Oi has to live an empty life. She is thus confronted with a lack of physical and emotional gratification in her new role as wife. She does not want to be confined in the community. She wants to be independent and participate in social works as American women do. Such a sense of restless, loneliness, frustration and consequent request for independence on one hand underscore Mei Oi’s awakening that she wants to be a real woman, and on the other hand “promote the one conscious subversion of cultural/community expectations that spawns a series of further subversions that ultimately lead to what can perhaps be best described as freedom through destruction” (Kain, 2001, p. 189). Such gender specific portrayals of Mei Oi potently defy the hunger for “woman at home” that the immigrants so desperately seek. Thus from the very beginning of her impending journey to United States, Mei Oi reveals her potential power to undermine the old patriarchal Chinatown.

Chu also portrays Mei Oi as adulterous. Such adulterous image of Mei Oi similarly causes cultural split from old Chinatown. Ben Loy and Mei Oi’s wedding is celebrated twice—in the “new generation” style back in Sunwei village and then at a banquet given in New York’s Chinatown. In China, in the 1940s and 1950s, westernization China was going through and the inroads missionaries had made into Chinese hamlets and villages. Old village was blown by western culture and many traditions were altered, including the wedding custom. Ben Loy and Mei Oi’s wedding is the product of this westernization. It is a combination between East and West: a Christian minister officiates on a day picked by an astrologer (Hsiao, 1992, p. 155). And the wedding is held in a church instead of at home. Naturally, the bride and groom occupy the center of attention and receive their benediction. On the contrary, the wedding in Chinatown is a pure traditional one: Wang Chuck Ting, as president and elder statesman, takes over as host and introduces the officers of the organization. This wedding serves Wah Gay’s need to curry their favor rather than celebrating the marriage of his son and daughter—in-law. So the “respected old men” rather than the bride and groom should be the center of wedding. Moreover the whole procedure of wedding strictly follows old Chinese wedding custom and keeps with the feudalistic social network of clan association. It is rather an emblematic of Chinatown’s anachronism. Cut from mainstream American society, old men tightly preserves this ethnic culture in the insulated ghetto of cosmopolitan New York City.

The sharp contrast of the two weddings shows how the ossified Chinese traditions have survived and flourished in American Chinatown and how the old men adhere to them. However, despite the great efforts the old men make to keep the tradition, Mei Oi’s presence at the wedding causes great panic among these old men. “The seating of the bridal couple created a babble among the guests as they whispered comments on the bride’s beauty” (Chu, 1993, p. 70). Traditionally, at wedding, “hardly anyone talked to the bride; they all talked to parents; and the bride “was merely a sort of decorative, noneating, nondrinking, nonspeaking accessory to the wedding celebration” (Wang, 1995). But at this wedding, Mei Oi untraditionally attracts attention from the old men. Her “soft, clear skin was without blemish, smooth like ivory....her eyebrows were like the crescent of the new moon. Her full lips, forming a small mouth, were cherry red. Her nose was straight and delicate, perfect as a distant star” (Chu, 1993, p. 50). Her innocent culturally sanctioned beauty stands in sharp contrast to the old bachelor’s lewd talk about prostitutes in their womanless life and to Ben Loy’s foolish impetuous, stupid past. “It is externalized and amplified into a collection panic among the bachelors in New York Chinatown as the react to Mei Oi’s presence in a world in which the category wife is necessary distinguished from the category of sexual partner” (Ling, 1995, p. 43). Mei Oi’s centeredness at wedding thus both subverts Chinatown patriarchal tradition and more importantly yields a starting point for cultural split and transformation in Chinatown community.

As Mei Oi snugly fitted satin gown which is appropriately red for a wedding portends, she is probably bordering on the behavior of a scarlet woman. Soon after the wedding, Mei Oi commits adultery with Ah Song. Since then, the “innocent” image of Mei Oi no longer exists in the bachelors’ minds. Mei Oi is no longer the ideal one as they imagined. Her transformation from innocent and virtuous wife to the seductive female thus causes further panic among these old men. The village girl they idealize turns out to be a flesh and blood woman with needs and thoughts of her own. She is no different from the jook girls “who are seen as sources of moral pollution in Chinatown that threaten the sexual and cultural mores to which the bachelor society pays lip service” (Ling, 1995, p. 43). Again, Mei Oi’s betrayal action undermines their idealized image of wife and challenges their patriarchal perspective about women. At the same time, it exposes old men’s hypocrisy and self deception and awakens these old men into being realistic about their impotent and decaying Chinatown which seems to be a carefree community, but in fact a lonely and predatory one.

Mei Oi’s adultery itself parks off a series of revolutionary concepts which bring up more fundamental challenges to the bachelor society. And moreover these concepts further pose a threat to the political order of Chinatown by challenging patriarchal concepts at both familial and social levels. In fact, when adultery is revealed, Mei Oi is actually not guilty of it. Confronted by Ben Loy, she counterattacks: “what kind of a husband have you been?” she declares that: “I didn’t do anything wrong...but it turns out that I’ve married an old man... and old man who’s too old to make love to me” (Chu, 1993, p. 50). According to Yong Song’s description of the traditional wife, being a traditional Asian women means that “one has no voice, no other option but to tolerate hardships silently during marriage...a virtuous woman should silently weather the hardships, tribulations and pains of married life. She should be passive and quiet” (Kain, 2001). But, here, Mei Oi boldly challenges this concept. Her retorts defy traditional social conventions and expectations about women’s relations to male authority. She must gain the equal position and rights as men. By answering back Ben Loy, Mei Oi positions herself to renegotiate her relationship with her husband. Furthermore, when Ben Loy accuses Mei Oi of “knitted a green hat” for him, Mei Oi refuses to admit it. She thinks she should not be responsible for the whole matter and her husband is blameful too. Therefore, her denial once again challenges the ideal that “a woman is more blamable than her male lover in an affair” and declares that she “will not submit to a male discourse that constitutes the meaning of her behavior solely in terms of its relation to her husband’s pride” (Ling, 1995, p. 44). When arguing with Eng Shee about having illegitimate child, Mei Oi states “(a husband) cannot force...his wife to stay with him if she doesn’t want to ...because of sometimes the husband is in error too” (Chu, 1993, pp. 167-168). Mei Oi’s argument is a significant rejection to the bachelors’ gender role assumptions and their double standard: “husbands are different...they can go out and sleep with another woman and ...women folks cannot do anything about it. It’s different with a woman”. (Chu, 1993, p. 168). Her contestatory position undermines the binary relationship between male and female and strengthens her own voice and power. Generally, Mei Oi’s rebellious power not only lies in adultery itself but also in its subsequent revolutionary concepts which cause bombard disturbance in Chinatown.

Mei Oi is the primary agent for culture change in Chinatown community. She brings different cultures to Chinatown and changes the cycle of this community. Her presence in Chinatown causes cultural split from old one and paves the way for cultural transformation.

4. Cultural Negotiation and Transformation

Bhabah says in *The Location of Culture*:

Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2)

Eat a Bowl of Tea provides an example of transformation from a homogeneous cultural to hybrid one.

According to different life styles of Chinese immigrant in Chinatown, the history of Chinese immigrant in American can be roughly divided into three phases: from 1849 to 1943, it is the period in which families of Chinese immigrants experience cultural split and Chinatown is called “bachelor society”; from 1943 to 1965, it is the period of transformation from a “bachelor society” to a family society, and Chinese in Chinatown are called post-war immigrants; after 1965, it is the period in which Chinese family society is formed and Chinese there are called “new immigrants”. *Eat a Bowl of Tea* depicts the life both in the late time of first period and the early stage of second period. It spans two historical stages of development and thus presents two kinds of different cultures: one is the homogeneous culture, the other is hybrid one. In the second period, discrimination

against Chinese by the larger American society decreased. Many forbidden laws were lifted and Chinese immigrants' life began to change. American legislation can help to block the healthy development of Chinese community as well as ironically can objectively yield the effect to recover the vitality and reunite Chinese families in Chinatown and at meantime accelerate the decline of old Chinatown. Almost after World War II, change in old Chinatown took place and its homogeneous culture was disturbed. *Eat a Bowl of Tea* is set in this critical transformation period. On one hand, the old generation as Wah Gay, Lee Gong, and Wang Chuck Ting represents the homogeneous old Chinatown culture; on the other hand, the younger generation as Mei Oi and Ben Loy, splits from this old Chinatown culture and establishes their own hybrid one. In this process, they serve as a medium to bridge the two different cultures and fulfill the historical transformation. Ben Loy and Mei Oi cause culture change in Chinatown and they objectively attribute to culture transformation in this community. In Chinatown, the culture change and transformation are completed with a series of comprises and negotiations among the protagonists in the novel.

After the scandal, both Ben Loy and Mei Oi undertake painful negotiation to keep their marriage and their family as well unbroken. At first, both blame for the other, but they should face the reality: all in Chinatown are aware of this affair and they are gossiping about it. There is no room for them to stand. Ben Loy reconsiders the whole matter, and in his deep heart, he is sorry to Mei Oi for his sexual impotence, so he does not want to divorce Mei Oi. Tired of playing the role of a dutiful son, of keeping silent while his father tells him what to do and intending to solve his own problem by himself, he finally brings Mei Oi to leave New York Chinatown. "The mere thought of going away with Mei Oi had given him new hope. He saw on the horizon a chance for a new beginning." (Kim, 2006: 240). He has forgiven the past and accepted his own mistakes, his wife's mistakes and the child, although illegitimate. He is anticipating a brand new life. By moving to San Francisco, "they avoid being destroyed by the same illusions that cursed their predecessors, both in America and in China, and recognize and accept reality in place of the fantasy and self-deception to which their father have been clinging" (Kim, 2006: 117). Clearly, the couple's willingness to begin a family life on their own illustrates their willing to distance from the traditional extended family in favor of greater individualism and the more Western model of the independent nuclear family. The couple now is free from the stern parental eye and enjoys emancipation and they assert their independence from the patriarchal New York Chinatown.

In San Francisco, the couple continues their gender negotiations. "Ben Loy does recognize that a relationship with his wife demand that he acknowledge and respond to Mei Oi's voice, rights and sexual needs" (Ling, 1995: 48). For the first time, Ben Loy "had willingly and without ill feelings or reluctance, discussed his physical condition with Mei Oi. He no longer felt self-conscious" (Chu, 1993, p. 242). He gives up his patriarchal self-esteem and authority and treats Mei Oi as an equal partner. Mei Oi makes similar adjustment in her bargaining with Ben Loy. Also for the first time, Mei Oi "felt both a desire and a responsibility of sharing her husband's problems." (Chu, 1993, p. 242). For both of them, the ugly episode in New York has served to strengthen the bond between them rather as a reminder of past mistakes. The impotence is now framed as a common issue and the marriage relationship ceases to be a static given and becomes a construct that both parties build between them, in recognition of their past behaviors, assumptions, and the pain they have caused one another (Ling, 1995, p. 49).

Through negotiation, Ben Loy's impotence is cured and the couple happily accepts the illegitimate child. In Mei Oi's minds, the child will be the tie of the family and between parents and children there exists affection which has not existed before among Chinese in America. With the new concept and later child's coming into this world, eventually, Ben Loy and Mei Oi establish their own family, which unambiguously signifies "the crumbling of the old bachelor order, increased freedom for the new generation, and the beginning, in the restoration of sexual relations and birth of the son, of Chinese American community in the United States built around family and children" (Ling, 1995, p. 46). This Chinese American community supplants the bachelor society and breaks away from the insular community with its insistent parody of traditional social structures and rigid gender roles.

Ironically, Ah Song's defeat by the Wang clan association and his subsequent banishment from New York Chinatown are not signs of the persistence of Chinatown community's tradition, but the early indication of Chinatown's collapse, for his leaving is followed by a series of departures—not only of Ben Loy and Mei Oi, but also of Wah Gay and Lee Gong, who finally bring the end of cycle of Chinatown life. Wah Gay sells the Money Come Club, which has been a haven for the downtrodden, homeless and aging bachelors, and returns to the drudgery of restaurant labor; Lee Gong, having nowhere to go after the mahjong club is closed down, leaves New York to go to work at his cousin's poultry market. Both men negotiate the past and have to come to terms with the reality. Old Chinatown can no longer tolerate them and they have to take a departure, which symbolizes the disintegration of the old way of life in New York Chinatown, and meanwhile marks that their awkward,

formalized relations with their children come to an end. However, their leaving away from New York Chinatown that they previously regard as their home does not mean they are homeless again. Their eventual family status of grandfather is promised through Ben Loy's regained strength. Ben Loy and Mei Oi will invite their fathers to their second baby's hair cutting party. Thus in the end, the whole family will be reunited and a new community will be built around the acceptance of realities and new orientation that arises from the possibility of setting down healthier Chinese roots in America. All family members help to realize old Chinatown's transformation by negotiation.

5. Conclusion: Hybrid Identity and "the Third Space"

According to Zhang Long Hai, a scholar of Chinese American literature, "there are three stages for the identity-seeking—the complete conformity stage, the awareness stage, and the articulation stage" (Zhang, 2006). Identity seeking in this novel is in the second stage, which usually does not come until Chinese immigrants are mature enough to understand their social status in American reality. Louis Chu is conscious of the situation of Chinese immigrants. Totally indulged in old Chinatown culture and insulated from American mainstream is not a promising way to live in American and it only leads to declining of Chinese immigrants. Chinese immigrants should face the reality in American. In order to live in America, they must do some changes and reestablish their identity differently. Therefore, Louis Chu portrays Mei Oi as a rebellion figure to cause split from old Chinatown culture. Mei Oi is a prime agency indicating the Chinese immigrant's awareness of their identity. She not only awakens them from decaying Chinatown culture and but also makes them realize that it is the unshakable racism of the dominant culture that distorts their culture and renders their identity seeking frustrated. They must seek independent identity different from Chinese and American. They should undergo transformation: from self-contempt to self-esteem, and to self-retrieval and obtain active subjectivity out of passive objectivity. By cultural negotiation, Ben Loy, Mei Oi and fathers leave old Chinatown, establish their family and realize their transformation from homogeneous culture to hybrid one.

Continually identity seeking reaches the third stage —articulation stage. Although the novel doesn't tell the later life of this family in America, it can be imagined that they negotiate Chinese culture and American one. With time passing by, they will be accustomed to American life style and at the same time stick to part of Chinese one. They include the two cultures without favoring either one, for the positive attributes of the dominant discourse are consistent with values of Chinese ethnic group. So they remain independent with their subjectivity which in return renews the dominant culture and makes it ready for the future. When seeking identity with a new cultural awakening and rising political consciousness, they are building Chinese American culture unconsciously. This constructing of Chinese American culture embodies its characteristics—hybridity. When Ben Loy, Mei Oi and the two fathers are constructing their family outside Chinatown, they are forming their hybrid identity. In this process, the hybrid identity of Ben Loy and Mei Oi's son is also formed. He is an ethnic Chinese and at the same time an American citizen. He receives American education but cannot get rid of his Chineseness. Edward Said points out: "these circumstances certainly made it possible for me to feel as if I belonged to more than one history and more than one group" (Said, 1993). The son of Ben Loy does not simply belong to Chinese culture or American one, but something beyond—the unique identity that is the hybrid product of Chinese tradition and Euro-American values. Thus in the novel the characters have fulfilled the three stages and completed the circle—from negation to negotiation and to hybridity.

The novel ends with a note of optimism because of the negotiations made both by the young and the old. By drinking deep from the source of one's ethnic origins while also forging and celebrating a new identity in this newly discovered home, they articulate the cultural difference and authorize their hybridities. "To be true to self one must learn to be a little untrue, out-of-joint with the signification of cultural generalizability" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 137). Being a little untrue is a strategy to keep the characters' subjectivity. Therefore, after undertaking cultural negation, negotiation, and hybridity, their true selves (a little untrue) come into being. And this true self is in the condition of uncertainty and interstices which open the "third Space" for them to articulate their identities (Lu, 2006, p. 61). So the process of identity quest is also the process of establishing their "Third Space". After fulfilling their identity search, they have established their "Third Space". They are preparing for altering the course of Chinese American community life in the future.

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