

CHIN4990 Chinese Culture Through Films

Final Paper

Gianna Quatromoni

Dr. Su-I Chen

The Gray Area

The Migration Policy Institute states that as of 2021, the roughly 2,380,000 Chinese immigrants made up 5% of the 45.3 million immigrants in the United States. The number of Chinese immigrants has nearly doubled every decade starting back from 1980. There is a great incentive for Chinese people to move to the United States. In the film, *On Happiness Road*, glorified day dreams of what it's like in the U.S. are shown - these dreams were almost fairytale-like. They portrayed the U.S. as a magical land with many opportunities. Also, in the film *The Farewell*, Billi was confronted by a man eager to know about her over-glorified experiences overseas. The U.S. is a magical place! Emma Lee, a Chinese American who moved to the U.S. during her college years said, "My first few years were filled with excitement and adventure". Although moving to the U.S. does come with good, it unfortunately also comes with the bad. Chinese Americans are faced with the common issues that come with being an immigrant on the daily. When in the U.S; poor english, racism, cultural awareness, and maintaining one's foreign identity all become a reality at a varying severity degree for each individual immigrant. One thing these challenges all have in common though, is that they will follow a Chinese immigrant back to China. Poor Chinese, cultural conflict, and maintaining one's foreign identity all become an alternate reality when returning to their home country. These inescapable challenges put many Chinese Americans in a so-called "gray area", also referred to

as “liminality” - meaning that they do not fully belong to either culture and find themselves in an uncomfortable middle ground. Through the analysis of language barriers, racism, cultural differences in individualism and collectivism, and people’s views of Chinese Americans in China and in America, this paper aims to discuss the contrast between western and eastern views and actions directed towards Chinese Americans in our society today.

Cultural differences between the U.S. and China lead to liminal issues within the Chinese American community. Rachel Abouras posted on the Medium website that the term “liminal” refers to the, “intermediate, or transitional stage that occurs during a rite of passage” (Abouras). She further explains that, “when individuals undergo such rites, they invariably reach a point where they must shed one status or identity without having fully entered into the next. These individuals thus become situated in between two identities” (Abouras). This concept can be further developed when delving into the true meaning of the film *The Farewell*. In the film the main character, Billi, returns to China with her family after many years to say her goodbyes to her grandmother, Nai Nai, who is dying of cancer. Upon returning Billi is told that the family will not be telling Nai Nai that she is dying. When Billi fights this decision and her mother explains that in Chinese culture it is said that, “when one has cancer it is not the illness that kills them, it is the fear and knowledge of having it that does” (The Farewell [Film]). With Billi living in the U.S. and the U.S. culture not adopting these beliefs, she still fights this and gets her father to take her side. When arguing Billi’s father exclaims, “We shouldn’t be doing this, it would be illegal in America” (The Farewell [Film]). In this situation it is clear that Billi is conflicted by her native culture’s values and the new ones she’s had to adopt amongst her move to the U.S. - causing her to feel pressure from both identities she’s trying to balance and integrate. On a lighter note, when interviewed Emma Lee, a Chinese teacher in Massachusetts, explained her

issues with food when she came over to the United States - she said, “Since I was afraid of artificial food coloring, I was horrified to see pasta swimming in a large tray of red watery sauce, no meat or sausage in it. All I could eat was steamed corn and peas until chicken legs were served on Friday. I told my then-boyfriend in Taiwan that I was constantly starving until I received a Tatung rice cooker and instant noodles and corn soup from my family”. When asked what she wished she had known before moving to America Lee answered, “If I had known, I would have learned to drive while I was in Taiwan and squeezed a lot of food/snacks in my suitcase before moving to America”. Although small, these cultural differences and disparities can add up and make Chinese Americans feel not welcome in a place that is their new home.

Language barriers and lack of language proficiency also leads to liminal conflict in many Chinese Americans. Emma Lee explains her experience with language conflict in an interview. She explained that, “One of the reasons that I left Taiwan was because I did not speak Sichuan dialect and my boyfriend's mother wanted to break up. Neither did I speak the Taiwanese Min-Nan dialect of the other boyfriends' families who opposed my background. I was not good at speaking my mother's tongue, Hakka dialect either. I had a hard time conversing with my mother's side of the family” (Lee). She then goes on to quote Confucius saying, “A gentleman is social but he does not belong to any party”. When coming to America, Lee explains that she had a hard time learning English, especially slang. She also said that when returning to Taiwan after many years in America, that she felt as though she was very out of touch and has yet to return since 2006. Zen Yen Wozniak wrote a short article explaining her experience, but with the issues that she faced in America. Wozniak explained how she spoke Mandarin until she was six - but lost it. Losing the skill of speaking her native language made her feel like a “bad Asian American”. She further explains how losing the language has caused a great disconnect between

her mother and her true Asian self. She says, “I worry that only knowing my mother in her second language is an incomplete knowing. And that as a mixed-race Asian American who doesn’t look Asian, I lost the only proof of my identity I ever had” (Wozniak). In all of the examples above it is clear to see that when trying to adapt their new culture they must lose a part of their old, which causes a disconnect from either their families or even themselves. Being in a state of liminality comes with feelings of guilt, as seen in Wozniak’s article. Simply put: Chinese culture is pulling at their left arm, while the U.S. is pulling at their right - causing them to be stuck in this “gray-area”, leaving them to question what part of their new culture they need to adapt and which part of their old culture they need to leave behind.

Another issue experienced by Chinese Americans is Racism. In a later section of her article, Zen Yen Wozniak explains the pressures she faced as a child that forced her to abandon her Chinese identity to avoid scrutiny from her classmates. She would hear negative comments about the food she ate, jokes about her squinty eyes, people suggesting that she should eat dog, and was even given dirty looks when people would hear her family members speak their native language. All of this, she said, caused her to quickly assimilate to U.S. culture and abandon her old. It was not until later in life that she made the conscious choice to actively indulge herself back into her native culture and do it with pride and honor. Emma Lee, referred to in the previous paragraph, explained her experiences with racism in America. She stated that during her fifth year at Thayer Academy in Massachusetts her salary dropped nearly \$20,000 when the number of classes she taught had remained the same. The school had decided to pay her based on student count rather than class count. She also expressed, “In 2014, a class of six students had been shoveled to another storage room again as their new classroom. They complained that they were second class citizens at school. Upon hearing this, I could not help but cry because the Chinese

program and I had let my students down”. Amongst the adversity Emma Lee was faced with, she prevailed and referenced the proverb - “When life gives you lemons, you make lemonade”.

Shortly after being relocated to the storage room her and her students decorated it with students’ beautiful work and paintings. Lee may have been able to rise above the racism she experienced, but many cannot do the same. With more and more close minded people living in the U.S. today, it is hard for the minority groups to brush it off when it is their everyday reality.

Racism towards not only Chinese Americans, but Asian Americans as a whole has skyrocketed since the COVID-19 pandemic. Our president at the time, Donald Trump, was overcome with ignorance and chose to publicly call the virus the “China Virus”. It is not clear of the impact this comment had on Asian hate, but *The Harvard Gazette* goes into detail on how Covid affected Americans’ outlook on Asians as a whole. The article states that between March 2020 and February 2021, that nearly 3,800 asian hate crimes occurred. These crimes range from spitting on people to killing over ten people. The article also released the statistic that three in ten Asian Americans were victims of racial slurs or jokes after the widespread of COVID-19. On top of groups or individuals being oppressed, Chinatowns across the nation took a huge hit after the pandemic. Before getting into the data, it is important to understand what the meaning of Chinatown is. Kevin Hu, a Chinese American writer explained that overall, Chinatown is a “home away from home” for many Chinese Americans. It is where they can eat authentic food, speak their native languages, and be surrounded by people like them instead of the United States’ predominantly white population. Hu even said that his Chinatown in Chicago provided his parents with free English Second Language (ESL) classes and highlighted that without the classes, his parents would be “mute”. Now let's get into the data. CNN reported that, “Since mid-February (2020), merchants in Chinatown have reported sales drops of 30% to 80%”. With

98% of Chinatown businesses being small businesses, the drastic drop in sales takes a huge toll on the income of many families. CNN also stated that medical facilities in Chinese neighborhoods had lost 70-80% of business. Many clients of these clinics justified their resignation as a customer due to their fear of getting COVID-19 from the doctors. The Chinese population was struggling during the pandemic. Many protests occurred, but little progress was made. The U.S. is still facing a significant Asian-hate problem today.

To conclude, Chinese Americans may be multicultural, but they are not treated equally in both China and the United States. It is important to note that not all of these issues are put on every Chinese American, but even if 1 person struggles - it is worth talking about. Upon moving overseas to the U.S. many Chinese Americans are faced with the struggles of learning English, racism from not only the general population but our former president as well, the liminal emotions that come with indulging into a new culture. When returning back to their home country in China many are welcomed home with comments on their decline in language speaking. They also are conflicted by the old traditions they once practiced that clash with American values and sometimes law. Many of these issues come with guilt because like stated early, Chinese culture is pulling at their left arm, while the U.S. is pulling at their right - causing them to be stuck in this “gray-area” and forcing them to choose which identity to abandon and which to adapt. Emma Lee encountered most of these issues and prevailed - she was able to integrate both identities and express them with pride and confidence. Although it should be celebrated that Lee was able to overcome the issues she faced as a Chinese American, she never should have had to do it in the first place. At the end of her interview when asked what advice she would give to Chinese Americans coming over to the U.S, Lee said, “I will tell them to

prepare themselves with an open mind and a humble and grateful heart to learn as much as they can”.

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