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Success, Dilemma and Bildung of Model Minority: Political Implication in *Typical American*

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ABSTRACT

There has been fierce disputes on the political implications of the “model minority” since William Peterson proposed the concept in “Success Story: Japanese American Style”. The concept is advocated by some politicians since 1960s to publicize the hardworking and submissive nature of successful Asian Americans. However, Asian scholars questioned the legitimacy of the concept once it was brought up. Although it advertised the positive image of Asians, the concept characterized all the Asians into one type and concealed issues of racial discrimination. With reference to Allen Wu’s theory of model minority and Hardin James’s definition of bildung, this paper proposed the dilemmas of Asian American’s bildung and explores how the author, Gish Jen, deconstructs the model minority myth by studying protagonists’ experience of merging into the white society in *Typical American*.

Keywords: Gish Jen, Typical American, model minority, politics

Introduction

Typical American is the representative novel of the distinguished contemporary author, Gish Jen. Once published, the novel is much applauded by scholars and critics. The novel is regarded as “by far the best novel to illustrate the Asian American identity,” which “initiates a new direction in Asian American literature” (Flower 8; Shan and He 165). In the novel, Gish Jen depicts the difficulties that the Changs, the model minority family, met in the process of emerging into the mainstream American society. Different from the previous discourse singing highly of the successful Asian Americans, Gish Jen did not pay attention to how model Asian Americans distinguish themselves in the white society but illustrated their crisis of bildung, anxiety of existence and bewilderment of their identity.

In “Success Story: Japanese American Style,” Professor Petersen believed that Japanese American has successfully emerged into the mainstream American society, achieving great success in economics and academics. The same year, *U.S News & World Report* published articles listing a series of success that Asian Americans achieved and sang highly of their outstanding characteristics such as patience, perseverance and endurance. In 1960s, magazines and newspaper such as *Time*, *Fortune* and *People* reported the successful Asian American teenagers and more and more press started to pay attention to the Asian Americans and regarded them as the “model minority”. The model minority image changed how others see Asians in the American society. The white society began to see them as following the rules, hard-working, diligent, resilient and successful, and the minority group set an example for all the other minorities. In 1960s, America witnessed the rise of Civil Rights Movements. By setting up model minority as an example, the white society wished to discipline the other minority groups especially the

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black and ignore the racial inequality in the country. By publicizing the model minority, America establishes its image as a country of freedom and equality, a place where any hard-working individual could realize the dream despite their identity. However, once the concept was brought up, Asian scholars began to question its legitimacy. The concept not only reinforced the stock character of Asian Americans, which categorized more than 10 million Asians to one type and neglected the diversity of the individual, but also denied that Chinese Americans experienced racial discrimination and turned them into a racial threat (Wu 49). By revealing their dilemmas and depicting the environment where they grew up, Gish Jen deconstructed the political discourse of model minority.

The early Asian American literature tends to characterize the Asian American as diligent, frugal and obedient. Consciously or unconsciously, authors are influenced by the Orientalism and their writing reinforced the stereotypical image. In 1950s and 1960s, this characterization reversed the public impression of the Asian American, but it concealed within it the prevalent racial discrimination in the white society. Jade Snow's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and Pardee Lowe's *Father and Glorious Descendant* attributed protagonists' success to their own endeavor and understated the difficulties they encountered. Gish Jen deconstructed the model minority myth. After the family fell apart and the business went broke, Ralph realized that America is not the place where he could achieve all his dreams.

Typical American follows Ralph Chang's, Helen's and Teresa's growth from 1940s to 1950s. The book is divided into five parts and records Ralph's experience in America, from leaving China, becoming a Ph.D., earning the tenure to starting his own business. The Changs are successful both economically and socially and are the representatives of model minority. However, as the story unfolds, their dream vanished. The novel revealed the racial discrimination and dilemmas of the Asian Americans concealed by the model minority myth. Despite how hard Ralph tried, he could not change his status as the marginalized.

Scholars from both China and abroad examined the novel from the following perspectives. Extant research focuses on the identity of Asian Americans. Shuying Li and Zhengkun Yan analyzed Ralph Chang's immigrant identity as he pursued his American dream. Other scholars like Biyuan Hu and Elizabeth Eubanks explored the space and regarded the dilapidated buildings as symbols of the breakdown of Changs' American Dream. Some research on *Typical American* adopts methods drawn from an interdisciplinary matrix of fields such as feminism. Shuchun Li elaborated Helen's and Teresa's dilemma in the consumer culture. By far, no article has been found analyzing the bildung of model minority in the novel. By delving into the efforts, success, dilemmas and failures of the Changs, the paper aims to point out the political implications of the model minority myth and analyzed how Gish Jen deconstructed it.

To examine the political implication of model minority and elaborate how Gish Jen deconstructs the myth, the paper is divided into three parts. Firstly, the paper points out the hardworking, submissive and perseverant nature of Chinese American as implied in the concept model minority. These merits enable them to succeed quickly in every career they choose. However, their integration into American society is difficult. The second chapter analyzes the anxious and paradoxical bildung of Asian Americans. Although Ralph gains tenure and buys the big house for his family, anxious feeling always accompanies him. His "Americanization" process is characterized by the conflicts of two cultures: the consanguinity culture and the white culture. Asian Americans' bildung is distinctive from that of native Americans, which shows the cultural and identity crisis of the immigrants. After pointing out the racial discrimination and paradoxical dilemma that Asian Americans meet, the third chapter analyzes the political implications of the concept model

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minority and how Gish Jen explodes the myth. Other than the concept of model minority, Gish Jen's interviews and speeches will be examined in the paper for a better understanding of Asian Americans' dilemma.

The Paradigm Success of Model Minority

Model minority myth encourages millions of Chinese to pursue their dreams in the utopia. As the American Adams, they believe they could achieve anything in the idealized land. Besides, they are diligent, hard-working, obedient and united. They grow up fast and achieve success in the specialized area.

Faith and target play an important role in Asian American's growth. The goals inspire Ralph Chang to progress and achieve success in academics. When he first came to America, all he had is a pocket watch that his father gave him. Despite the poverty, he had the faith that through all the hard work, he could finally become rich and famous and win the respect from everyone around him. As the American Adam, he is the hero embarking on the new journey, all by himself, encouraging himself to confront all the difficulties ahead. Except bravery and outstanding qualities, the hero has nothing else (Lewis I). Before arriving at America, the hero Ralph set a goal for himself. He had to stand out, earn the doctoral degree and become the family glory. "He was going to be first in his class, and he was not going home until he had his doctorate rolled up to hand his father." (Typical 7) Poverty didn't affect him. He had the dream of glorify the family and the determination moved him as well as other Asian Americans to ignore the deteriorated environment and racial discrimination. Before establishing his own family, he made all the efforts to please his parents. After married Helen with two kids, he devoted to the fried chicken business so that his family could lead a wealthy life and move into a large house. Faith not only give him the courage, directs him to follow the right path but also eliminates all the fears and doubt, bestows him with confidence. Everyone else was studying the outer space, he persists his research on mechanics. This world will need mechanical study. The gear will make everything rotate. I am a mechanical engineer. It is my everything, I don't need to study anything else. (118) With the power of faith, he continued his research and believed that he would finally get the tenure by mechanical study. When confused whether he should start his own French fried business, he recited Norman Vincent Pier's poem "I believe I am always divinely guided. I believe I will always take the right turn of the road" (152). When he became bewildered, uncertain of the future and wanted to escape, the faith of success encouraged him to persevere. When he started the business, he pasted all the stickers written the belief of success on the wall, inspiring him to work hard and earn money. "What you can conceive, you can achieve." "You can never have riches in great quantity unless you work yourself into a white heat of desire for money." (160-161) With the faith, they believe that hard work will pay back. This faith shares similarity with American Adam's dream. They all believe that they will become a part of the upper class with diligence and patience. Besides faith, model minority's growth to success shows distinct Asian American characteristics.

Asian Americans are like the model students in the school, obedient, smart, united and making great efforts. "Asian American flourish because they are Asian American, and they continue to thrive only to the extent that they behave as archetypal Asian Americans." (Wu 45) Ralph gained the tenure, Chao became the director of the department and Teresa worked as a doctor after graduation. Their success illustrates the common traits shared by the model minority. Hard work is the key to success. Both Ralph and Chao devoted their whole hearts and soul to the work. "Whatever endeavor they pursue, Asian Americans are astonishing for their gung-ho enthusiasm." (42) The second distinctive characteristic is obedience. When Gulliver asked Chao why he was so lucky to be the director, Chao's

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answer is obedience. "I just do what people tell me, and don't ask so many questions... When people tell you to hop to it, you hop, hop, hop... When people ask you question, you answer." (Typical 78) Due to submissiveness, they will finish the task in time without further doubt and question. They are the ideal servant, employee and citizen. But on the other side, the submissive nature obliges them to overlook the indecent treatment of others. When Gulliver roamed around in Chao's new car without getting his permission, Chao didn't protest (78). He even made excuses for Gulliver's reckless behavior. They never complain nor pick up troubles for the others. They choose to bear all the insults silently. When Changs found out that the base of the house that Gulliver sold them was not solid, they moved out and gave up the business instead of sued Gulliver nor confronted him (91). The last trait that make them successful is unity in the community. Ralph, Chao, Helen and Teresa are friends, looking out for each other. Chao made suggestions for Ralph's work. Teresa helped Chao with his medical problems and Helen took care of Teresa at home. Although they came to America with nothing, the precious qualities enable them to realize their dreams in this foreign land. With the distinctive Asian qualities, they could easily lead a middle-class life.

Model minority shares similarities with American Adam. They come with nothing but believe in the American dream. Besides, their bildung shows the distinctive characteristic of the ethnic minority. They follow the obedience, loyalty and unity, characters which are advocated in traditional Chinese culture. By singing highly of the precious qualities and the success of the Asian Americans, the white tries to conceal the discrimination and inequality among minorities. In the conflict of the native culture and the foreign culture, model minorities gradually realize the predicament of the American dream and grow into maturity.

The Predicament of Model Minority's Bildung

Model minority myth always neglects the social demands and identity bewilderment of the ethnic minority. Model minority grows up in the conflicts between the native culture and the foreign culture, anxiety and confusion always accompany them. They ask the question "who am I" but fail to get the answer in the complicated and hybrid American society.

Model minority is always anxious during their bildung. When he first arrived at America, Ralph felt he stood in anxious whitecaps (23). Ralph felt much pressure due to the change of the environment and the language barrier. The process of adapting to the new environment is accompanied with the feeling of anxiety, depression and marginalization (Sonnderegger and Barrett 341-356). Back in China, he was the lonely child in a well-off family. When he came to American, everything changed. He was marginalized and lived in poverty. He felt uneasy about the degrading life and the marginalized status. When he finally got the doctoral degree, he worried about the caress on the wall (Typical 52). The feeling of anxiety came from the unfair treatment he experienced. The tenant overlooked their demands since they were the Asians, who were on the edge of the society. The tenant's attitude made him realize his marginalized social status and he worried that he could never lead a stable and well-off life with his family. As the ethnic minority, he could never merge into the mainstream white society and win the social respect. Wong pointed out that "class is not solely determined by wealth or manners. Ethnic background is taken into consideration" (Huang 69). "American class system is highly racialized." (Bonacich 69) The emphasis on racial origin denies the possibility that Asian Americans like Ralph could enter the upper class through endeavor and struggle. "The deep-seated anxiety originates from the writer's confusion about his or her own predicament. The self-inquiry, self-introspection and self-critique about the problems that

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Ralph met are the problems that the writer confront. "Writer is not only the one that is anxious, but he is also the origination of the prevalent anxiety manifested in the novel. The feeling comes from his profound experience." (Zhou 53) As the descendent of the Asian Americans, Gish Jen experienced the same anxiety of identity and class. Ralph embodies the Jen's anxiety during her bildung. This feeling anxiety is closely related to the contradictory nature of Asian Americans' bildung.

Asian Americans' bildung is contradictory. They grow up in the conflicts of two cultures. They could neither feel the sense of belonging in the foreign land nor would they go back to their home country. Ralph missed his parents but he was not willing to go back to China. When he earned the doctoral degree, he exclaimed "Mama," "Papa," "they would have been so proud" (95). Despite the numerous letters his mother wrote him begging him to go home, he was reluctant to obey his parents' wishes. He liked the place, but he preferred the feeling of missing. (18) Hometown and parents inspired him to progress, but he didn't want to associate with that place anymore. As for America, although Ralph hated the place and detested American culture, this is his promised land. It is only in America could he achieve the ambition. "His home is in American and he would never join the American nationality...The typical American is amoral, they use force and are the center of everything." (19, 52) However, this attitude gradually changed and merging into the white society becomes the family wish. America is the symbol of nobility and the family wants to live in the big house with idyllic pastoral view (19, 54). The transition of their attitudes is the result of the manipulation of the mainstream white people.

The white culture presented the pastoral life to the minority, implying that only Americans could lead the perfect life and lured the minority to strive to be part of the white society. Under this circumstance, ethnic minority believed that the unfair treatment they experienced arose due to their non-American identity and becoming an American citizen would change the status quo. "Identifying with the American national identity has become the mainstream consciousness, which is accepted by every individual in the society. It also implies the infinite possibility for an ethnic minority to become a member of the white society." (Melchior 290) Gish Jen realized the hierocrat nature of American culture, underlying the fictionalized American dream is the advocacy of obedience and superiority of the white culture. "The culture only spoke highly of submissiveness. And it could only embrace me in the condition that I abandoned my native culture. In other words, I have to break off with the culture where I was born and gave up the best part in me. This is not the America that I know of and I could never forget my ancestors. The issue is complicated and I want to reflect the complicity to some extent." (Jen 3) The Changs could neither merge into the white society nor could they feel the sense of belonging in the Asian culture. At the end of the novel, Ralph is confused about his own identity. The uncertain and fluid identity is what Gish Jen wanted to explore. "In the melting pot of American culture, it is impossible to have one culture identity." (Shi 15) The contradictory nature will always accompany Asian Americans and their quest for a definite identity is futile.

Typical American: the Bildungsroman of Asian Americans

As bildungsroman, *Typical American* shares similarity with American bildungsroman but it also distinguishes from other bildungsroman novels in that it is Asian specific. "Bildungsroman is about the intellectual and social growth of the protagonists, telling characters' better understanding of himself and the society after experiencing success or failures after he enters the society." (Hardin xiii) Since Dilthey first used the word "bildung" in 1870, different scholars conducted comprehensive research in this area.

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Hardin points out that “bildung is closed related with culture” (xiii). By depicting characters’ bildung in *Typical American*, Gish Jen explored her dilemma as a writer.

Ralph is the typical bildungsroman protagonist. At the beginning, he left China and embarked on his journey to a brand-new land. With the dream of standing out in the white society, he experienced discrimination and inequality. He strived to become the member of the upper-class. When he became an expert in academics, he found out that he was trapped between two cultures, and he could never be a typical American. Ralph’s bildung exemplifies three traits of bildungsroman: leaving the hometown; experiencing the identity crisis; and making a compromise (Ho 35). Confused identity is a recurrent motif in European and American bildungsroman and *Typical American* followed this tradition. Like Pip and Goodman Brown, Ralph’s identity is ambiguous. But his confusion comes from his double identity, which is different from Pip’s class bewilderment and Brown’s religious uncertainty. The double identity is the unique character of Asian Americans’ bildung.

Double identity plays an important role in model minority’s bildung. Firstly, trapped in two cultures, Asians could not find the sense of belonging in a single culture. Although Ralph left the hometown at an early age, Chinese culture and spirit seep into every part of his life, which reminds him not to forget the past. However, the longing for American pastoral life and dissatisfaction with the hometown culture signified his determination to embrace the American culture. The background of two cultures prefigured “the ambiguous identity and the unstable circumstance” (Yee, Lin and Kuehn 130). Besides, Asian Americans are on the edge of society and they grow up in discrimination and predicament. After bullied by both the white and the other Asian Americans, Ralph came to realize that a man “was as doomed here as he was in China. Kan bu jian. Ting bu jian. A man was the sum of his limits; freedom only made him see how much so. America was no America.” (242). Thirdly, Asian American’s bildung is a process of Americanization. Although Jen wrote “it is the story of a typical American,” in the end, Ralph realized that he was always Asian American and it was impossible for him to be a member of the white community. Although multi-culturalism is prevalent and novelists claim to protest the writing which centered the white culture, characters in Maxine Hong Kingston’s and Amy Tan’s novels are still trying to find ways to grow up in integration and fail to be an ‘American’. Integration into the white society is a recurrent motif in Asian American literature.

Conclusion

Model Minority in *Typical American* experienced paradigm success but failed to integrate into the white society. Their bildung is unique, which represented the dilemma of Asian American with the double identity. Ralph’s anxiety is the reflection of the writer Gish Jen’s own troubled feelings. In writing the unique pattern of Asian model minorities’ growth, Jen deconstructs the model minority myth and elaborates the dilemmas that Asian Americans including Asian American writers meet in the white society.

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