

Identity Crisis of James in *Everything I Never Told You*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the identity crisis of the protagonist James in *Everything I Never Told You*, explores the contributing factors to his failure to blend in American mainstream society and examines the aftermath of his failure.

Keywords: Identity crisis, Chinese immigrant.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Everything I Never Told You is the debut novel by Celeste Ng in 2014. The novel achieved great success as soon as it was published and won the Amazon Book of the Year Award in 2014. The novel, which is set in the 1970s, centers on the tragic death of the middle daughter Lydia of James's family---a mixed-race Chinese-American family and reveals their family life bit by bit to the readers in the process of seeking the truth about Lydia's death. This essay focuses on the identity crisis of Chinese immigrants in America in the novel, represented by the protagonist James, who is a US-born second-generation Chinese immigrant.

All through his life, James has been trying very hard to get rid of the influence of Chinese culture, to look like an American and to "blend in" American main stream society. Outside, it seems James "blend in" quite well and he is nothing different from the Americans. He speaks standard English without accent. Marilyn who later becomes his wife is amazed by his standard English when they first meet. "He sounded nothing like what she's been told Chinamen sounded like: so solly, no washee." (Celeste Ng, 32) In the fifth grade he had stopped speaking Chinese to his parents "afraid of tinting his English with an accent" (Celeste Ng, 48). Unlike his parents, the first-generation immigrants, uneducated and poor, James is well-educated and has a decent and respectable job. He is a professor of history after he gets a doctorate degree from one of the most prestigious universities---Harvard University. For his graduate study, he chooses "cowboys" as his research topic for he thinks it is "the

most quintessentially American subject he could find" (Celeste Ng, 45). He adopts an American lifestyle and drinks coffee instead of tea which is preferred by most Chinese people. He "took a sip" from "a mug of coffee" (Celeste Ng, 34). For his family, he married an American wife and has a typical American middle-class family with three kids living in a middle-class neighborhood.

II. FAILURE TO BLEND IN

However, no matter how hard he tries, he has never truly become one of them nor feels at home in America. He has always been the "other" of American mainstream society. "He spent twelve years at Lloyd and never felt at home." (Celeste Ng, 44) "He (James) had never felt he belonged here, even though he'd been born on American soil, even though he had never set foot anywhere else." (Celeste Ng, 40) He is even bullied because of his Chinese ancestry and called racial slur "chink" in face. Various and complicated factors contribute to his failure, both societal and personal, which will be elaborated on in the essay respectively.

Firstly, James' Chinese descent

The novel is set in the 1970s. China was economically underdeveloped and comparatively backward before China implemented the reform and opening up policy in 1978. At that time. Chinese immigration to the United States is mainly coolies, low-waged and unskilled laborers. "In the mines, on the railroads and ranches, in laundries, in certain manufactories, in hotels and family kitchens, as cooks

and domestic servants, the Chinese proved good workers.”(Mildred Wellborn,1912-1913) “James remembered only the man’s teeth, more crooked even than his father’s, one tooth turned sideways, like a silver of rice waiting to be toothpicked out.”(Celeste Ng, 42) The author emphasized the terrible dental conditions of the Chinese immigration, which shows their low socioeconomic status in American society. “You saw it in the sign at the Peking Express-----a cartoon with a coolie hat, slant eyes, buckteeth, and chopsticks.”(Celeste Ng, 193)The sign here deliberately degrades Chinese immigration, from which we can see the hostile environment of American society, their unfriendly attitude to and disrespect for Chinese people.

Meantime, China is almost in semi-close situation in the 1970s and lags behind the west in terms of international communication with the world. So China remained a mysterious country and was still little known to the world. James is the first Oriental boy to attend Lloyd and his black eyes arouse curiosity from his classmates. Marilyn is surprised to find her professor with the surname Lee is an oriental rather than an American. This is the first time she meets an oriental in person. “She had never seen one in person before.”

Moreover, the illegal status of James’s parents. In the novel, James’s father comes to the United States as “a paper son”. The phenomenon of “paper sons” is the result of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. The Chinese Exclusion Act was implemented from 1882 to 1943, which stipulates that he/she cannot immigrate to the United States unless the applicant is a businessman, diplomat, student, or the son or daughter of a U.S. citizen. In 1906, a San Francisco earthquake caused a major fire in San Francisco, which burned down the city council and destroyed all the files. This incident gave the Chinese who have been discriminated against for a long time under the Chinese Exclusion Act a glimmer of hope for immigrating to the United States. Therefore, many Chinese people pretended to be the sons and daughters of Chinese-Americans to apply for immigration to the United States. Those who entered the United States with these forged ID cards are called “paper sons”. In this way, James’ s parents manage to come to the Unites States.

Due to the above-mentioned reasons, James has always been ashamed of his Chinese ancestry. When James is a kid, he is unwilling to talk about his family to the class. Once he pretends to forget the family tree project assignment rather than draw his own complicated diagram. He prays silently the teacher don’t ask him questions about his family in the class. Long before fifth grade, he has “stopped speaking with his parents at school at all” (Celeste Ng, 48). He doesn’t want his classmates to see the connection between him and his parents. When he is dating Marilyn, he tells her

in very brief words that his parents both died after he started college. This is all the information he wants Marilyn to know about his parents.

Secondly, a lack of masculinity

James is portrayed as a man lacking masculinity in terms of his physical appearance and personal character. As John M. Kang (1997) noted, “[M]any contemporary stereotypes of Asian American men embody an emasculated image, and unlike the hyper-masculinized image and perceived menacing sexual threats associated with the Black male body, Asian American males are viewed as effeminate, asexual and passive.”

As for physical appearance, James is a “little man”: youngish, thin, and short (“five foot nine at most”) in Marilyn’s eyes when she first meets him in the classroom. She notices his neck is “slender” and his cheeks are “smooth”. He is not mature enough in her viewpoint. “He looked like a little boy playing dress-up.” (Celeste Ng, 32) Similarly, when Marilyn’s mother first meets him, her primary impression about him is “skinny”. We can see perceived femininity here from words like “little”, “youngish”, “thin”, “slender”, “smooth” and “skinny”. As a result, Marilyn doubts James’s capability to teach cowboys for a cowboy is a symbol of masculinity which he obviously lacks. And Marilyn is not the only student in her class with the doubt. “Every minute or two another few students left.” (Celeste Ng, 32) Finally only nine students are left in the classroom and the lecture hall is “nearly empty”.

As for his personal character, James is passive since his childhood. Words like “quiet” and “silent” are frequently associated with him. After he takes the entrance exam to Lloyd at six years’ old, the examiner notices that he is “so quiet”. In the class, he prays “silently” the teacher don’t ask him any questions. “At best, girls smiled silently at him in the hallway.” (Celeste Ng, 44) As he gets older, he does not attend school activities, such as the dances, the pep rallies, or the junior or senior proms.” Marilyn instantly notices something different from him and thinks “James had a seriousness, a reserve, unlike anyone she had met before”. This is also the overall American impression of Chinese people. James’s parents are offered a job of doing groundwork and maintenance in Lloyd for the school administrators feel Chinese people are “quiet”, “hardworking” and “clean”. Marilyn uses “sweet, quite docile” to describe Louisa Chan, the Chinese graduate student with whom James has an affair. In great pain after Lydia’s death, Marilyn accuses James of kowtowing to the police. In traditional China, kowtow means kneeling and knocking the head to the floor. Here James’ wife ridicules that he acts in an excessively subservient manner.

Because of his emasculated image, James himself is not confident about his masculine power and

sexual attraction. He thinks that it is “too much luck” for him to win the favor of Marilyn, therefore he lives in constant fear that Marilyn might leave him someday.

Thirdly, the influence of Chinese culture

Though his great efforts to deny his Chinese heritage, it is utterly impossible for James to cut ties with Chinese culture. Chinese customs and tradition are deeply rooted in his blood and shown in every minute detail of his life unconsciously, no matter he wants it or not.

Chinese nation has been a diligent nation since ancient times. There is a famous saying that “God reward hard work” in ancient Chinese culture. One of the greatest poets of Tang dynasty Han Yu once wrote that “Achievement is founded on diligence and wasted upon recklessness”. There are countless anecdotes about diligent people in Chinese history. Chinese people’s diligence is widely recognized in modern times as well. When Chinese immigration flocked to the US in 1950s, they were well received. One of the reasons is their industry. “In reporting to the Legislature of ’65, Mr. Stanford said that the Chinese were peaceable, industrious and economical, apt to learn and quite as efficient as white laborers” (Mildred Wellborn, 1912-1913).

Quite like Chinese nation, James is hardworking since he is a little boy. He takes the entrance exam to Lloyd at six years’ old, which is extremely difficult for a six-year-old kid. So they don’t expect James to pass it, taking his family background into consideration. However, he does succeed. The main reason is his personal efforts: He seizes every opportunity to learn as a kid. “He had read every newspaper he could get his hands on; he had read all the books his father had bought, a nickle a bag, at library book sales.” Consequently, in this way, he is able to enjoy the excellent educational resources in America. It is also because of his diligence that he finally gets a doctorate degree and becomes a professor in college. In his growing process, James’ family help to shape his quality of diligence. His parents come to the United States with almost nothing, but they work hard and manage to support the family. “Years had passed, but he still remembered his mother rising early each morning and donning her uniform” (Celeste Ng, 79).

Moreover, James’s way of parenting is profoundly influenced by traditional Chinese culture. “The three cardinal guides” were strongly advocated by the Confucian ethic principles and promoted by the feudal rulers with great effort. One of the cardinal guides is that “the father should guide the son”. As we can see, in Confucian culture the father and the son are not equal. The father is dominant while the son is in subordinate position in their relationship. They want absolute obedience from their sons all the time. Therefore, in order to maintain his authority, the father

is always quite serious in front of his son and seldom reveals his true feelings. One classical father figure in ancient Chinese literature is Jia Zheng, the father of the protagonist Jia Baoyu in *A Dream in Red Mansions*. When the poems written by Jia Baoyu are highly praised by the subordinates of his father, Jia Zheng hides his true feelings and scolds his son instead of expressing his appreciation for his son’s talent. Once Jia Zheng beats his son relentlessly for disobeying him and making friends with a Beijing opera singer.

In *Everything I Never Told You*, we can see a father who resembles Jia Zheng tremendously. In the relationship between James and his son Nath, he is not good at expressing his feelings as well. When he learns that Nath has been admitted to Harvard University, he says “Not bad” instead of complimenting on his son’s achievement and congratulating him. “He smiled, as if half-embarrassed.” He must be very proud of his son’s achievement deep in his heart, but he gives people the false impression that he is “half-embarrassed”. (Celeste Ng, 170) What’s more, he is a controlling and authoritarian father. Nath, the son of James, starts to develop interests in exploring the space and launching the satellite. However, when he tells his father that he wants to become an astronaut, James doesn’t talk with his son and hear his son’s voice equally. He shows absolute approval of his son’s decision, gets extremely furious and hit his son hard. “James slapped him, so hard Nath’s teeth rattled.” (Celeste Ng, 134) Therefore, though born and raised in the United States, we can say that James is still a traditional Chinese authoritarian father: always serious before the son, dominant and controlling.

III. CONCLUSION

James has experienced severe identity crisis in the novel. He is trying very hard to “blend in” American society, but he couldn’t. On the other hand, he is so ashamed of his Chinese heritage and is eager to get rid of it; however, he is unconsciously influenced by traditional Chinese culture in a profound way no matter he likes it or nor. He strongly feels the lack of sense of belonging in America though he is born and raised there. “This feeling of being caught between cultures, of belonging to neither rather than to both, of finding oneself arrested in a psychological limbo that results not merely from individual psychological disorder but from the cultural displacement within which one lives, is referred to by Homi Bhaba and others as unhomeliness” (Lois Tyson, 403).

Because of the identity crisis, James amplifies the adverse effect of racial problems in his life and blames everything that goes wrong in his life to his skin color, turning a blind eye to other existing problems. Lydia, his elder daughter and their favorite kid, tragically commits suicide and drowns herself in the lake. Multiple reasons lead to Lydia’s death. Racial problem is of course one of them, but not the only

reason nor the most important one. Firstly, the trauma brought by her mom's leaving home when she is five years old has influenced her in her whole life. When her mother leaves home, she promises in her heart that if her mother ever comes back home, she will do everything her mother tells her to do. "Everything her mother wanted" (Celeste Ng, 137). During the following years, the family do not talk about it nor mention it. "But it lingered, like a bad smell. It had suffused them so deeply it could never wash out." (Celeste Ng, 123) Furthermore, Lydia is unsociable without friends. Her father blames it on her race. But actually, their way of parenting has played a vital role for this. Lydia once thought that "[i]f her mother let her go out like the other girls", "it might not matter what she looked like" (Celeste Ng, 227). A girl named Jackie Harper with one blue eye and one green has been voted Most Social in her school. Lastly, her parents have always wanted her to become someone she doesn't want to be. Her father James gives her a necklace to cheer her up and she thinks it is just a normal necklace initially. She seems relieved and excited. "At last, a present that was a present---not a book, not a hint---something she wanted, not something they wanted for her." Even for a simple present, her parents choose it based on their will and ignores her will. Her mom wants her to fulfill her dreams and studies science. Though she doesn't like science and fails in the science subjects at school, she doesn't have courage to reveal her true feelings to them.

However, James doesn't reflect on their way of parenting at all. On the contrary, he attributes it entirely to their skin color. "If she were a white girl," he says, "one of these would ever have happened." "If she'd been a white girl. If I'd been a white man. She would have fit in" (Celeste Ng, 203).

James's identity crisis of being caught between cultures has multi-faceted reasons in the novel and has devastating aftermath. It is undeniably worth noting and exploring.

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