

Student's name

Instructor's name

Course

Date



THE PROBLEM OF THE CHINESE IMMIGRANT'S CULTURAL IDENTITY

The native country always provides much more than its citizens' economic, political, and social rights' protection. It also protects the individuals' national and cultural identities. In this way, the native country preserves its citizens' cultural roots from any transformations. It means that when a person leaves the own state, he or she appears in some new society and either loses the cultural roots or does not achieve a new identity. It is a main point of most of immigrants' problems connected with cultural shock, discomfort, and psychological anxiety. Gus Lee in his *China Boy* provides a perfect illustration of this contradictory essence of immigration. Everyone has only one native land with its cultural specifics. Each immigrant forever stays a person with the identity's crisis. The reason is that his or her cultural roots cannot be transferred on some new ground. Kai Ting, the main character of Gus Lee, was born in the USA. However, his mother was a Chinese immigrant. Under her influence he was involved into the Chinese culture as well. Through the demonstration of Kai's relationship with his mother, the author proves the following multiculturalist thesis. The identity in a much higher degree depends on the conditions of socialization than on some genitive factors. The dualist



character of Kai Ting's personality metaphorically underlines the cultural ambivalence of any person who starts living in a new country and cannot both totally accept the new way of life and completely cast aside the former one.

Kai Ting and His Cultural Identity

One of the most interesting features of Gus Lee's book is that the narrator and the main character are the same persons. However, the teller is already a grown-up man when Kai Ting described in the book is seven years old only. This detail indirectly means that even after many years of living in the USA the narrator still has the problems with his identity (and tells about his childhood through this point of view). According to the book, the Mandarin family of Tings moved to the USA because of the calamitous political events in China. In this way, they started to live in San-Francisco (Lee). The characteristics of Kai's life in three main aspects (the relations with family and community, others, and strangers, as well as natural and domestic environments) allow providing an in-depth understanding of his personal situation in those conditions.

The family of Kai Ting changed through the narration (his mother died). Therefore, it is important to underline the difference between his mother Mah-mee and his stepmother Edna in their relation to the local community. The native one was a Chinese woman whose influence on her only son was total. In fact, she also had three elder daughters. However, they were born in China and their perception of immigration was different from that of Kai. In such a way, Kai's family was in some meaning a



surrogate of the Chinese country for him. He had never been there and was too young to remember some good Chinese past and have some deep nostalgic emotions. In contrast to most of immigrants, he knew that he did not belong to the American nation due to two factors. While the positive one was his mother's influence that had involved him into the Chinese culture, the negative impact came from the children of his school in ghetto. They considered that Kai did not belong to their nation and brutally humiliated him. One of those people was Kai's stepmother Edna. She also could not accept him as an American boy (Lee). That was the reason why Kai Ting decided to find himself in the YMCA where he became perceived (Lee). In this way, the relation between his family and community had shifted. While at first it was comfortable for Kai to be a Chinese boy while his Chinese mother was alive, then it became better to be an American when brutal Edna came to his family as his stepmother.

The relation between the immigrants and other settlers of the ghetto illustrates the problem of the narrator's cultural identity much better. The specifics of the local people's relation are clear just through the title of the book *China Boy*. People mostly called Kai in this manner. When Tony asked his name, he answered that it was *China boy* (Lee 220). In this way, he could not feel himself in the USA as a native citizen even despite being born there. Such a paradoxical situation allows understanding from a deeper side not only the problem of the immigrants' cultural shock, but also that one of their children. Such kids will not be able to become culturally belonging to the country where they were born in case when the local society does not accept them. It is clear that the only effective alternative to the natives' hostility are such organizations as the YMCA where "kids, even poor and unhappy ones, loved to sing, warbling the

purity of expression, the unsullied and miraculous of a child's honesty" (Lee 105). In this way, Kai felt himself humiliated as a part of the minority in contrast to others being in the absolute majority as the representatives of the ghetto's cultural atmosphere.

It is also important to contrast the natural specifics of the Chinese culture and the technically transformed landscape of the totally domesticated ghetto where Kai was living. For example, Kai's mother taught him that fighting could corrupt his karma. In this way, the author should live in the state of harmony with all creatures (Lee). She taught her son in the spirit of the Buddhist's doctrine, according to which all evil would return to the person committing it and propagating to make no violence. It should have been done in order to avoid such a cosmic revenge. Kai had many problems with that principle until he understood that there was no way to live in this ghetto except than changing of his peaceful worldview. After that, he went to the boxing section in order to get the skills needed for the self-defense. It is clear that Kai's mother propagated much more natural way of life based on harmony and compassion. Within that atmosphere, the violent people of ghetto were corrupted by the conditions in which they had lived. This example demonstrates the difference between two environments to which Kai partly belonged.

China Boy and My Personal Experience of Immigration

In my opinion, Lee's book rather vividly demonstrates the problems of Asian Americans who survive the cultural crisis. According to the Pew



Research Center, even today “many Asian Americans continue to feel a degree of cultural separation from other Americans” (“The Rise of Asian Americans”). It is clear that in the middle of the XX century this problem had a much higher actuality. The reason is related to the lack of multicultural policies provided by the American government and directed on the social and cultural proliferation of the immigrants’ adaptation. To some degree, I can understand Kai though I came to the USA at the age of 20. In all the spheres analyzed, the problems were close to those described by Gus Lee. Thus, at the American school, I could not feel myself belonging to the group. I was a stranger for them, and only my family symbolized some mention of home for me. The same issue concerns a local neighborhood where it is difficult to find a person who can understand my cultural ground. The difference between the environments in the USA and China did not shock me so much. The reason is that China today is very industrially developed and westernized in contrast to the times described in the book. In this way, an immigrant has only two alternatives, i.e. to lose his or her identity or be always a stranger. Unfortunately, it is impossible to achieve any of these alternatives. Some part always remains with the former identity when another one wants to accept the new one. I consider that the today’s immigrants need more programs and policies that will make the process of their assimilation easier and smoother. The American nation has become great because it relies on the progressive ideas of multiculturalism and all people’s equality. Through the American history, its minorities have achieved the rights for that. I may be grateful that now it is very important to help the USA become more attractive for those immigrants making some contribution to the American nation’s development. However, there are always some fears to move because of



danger of cultural shock. In fact, I do not feel myself an American or Chinese anymore as well as Kai. Due to cultural transformations I have passed through the experience of immigration. Besides, I believe that this problem may have a solution at least for the next Chinese immigrants.

Conclusion

Through the book *China Boy* by Gus Lee it is clear that the cultural identity depends primarily on the conditions of socialization. My own experience has proved this thesis. That is why, it is important to provide the conditions for immigrants to make their American socialization easier as well as proliferate their acceptance by Americans. It is needed in order to protect people from the cultural shock after which they lose their personality and do not belong to any culture anymore.

